

A FINE RAVING MADNESS

The images, the dreams, the terrible nightmares just won't go away. Even after 20 years I still wake up some nights running away from death and the fleeting wraiths of the jungles of Viet Nam, the acrid taste of burnt gunpowder and hot brass on my tongue, the smell of napalm and diesel fuel, soaked with sweat, crying out, eyes wide with fear. No matter what I do from now on until I die, the dreams are not going to go away.

And behind it all... the memory of billions of dollars in counterfeit U. S. currency.



A FINE RAVING MADNESS • William Kern

Time To Live...
Time To Die...

A high-contrast, black and white photograph of a man wearing a fedora and sunglasses. He is holding a human skull in his right hand, with a cigarette in his mouth. The background is dark and smoky.

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William Kern

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by

William Clifford: Kern

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For Jane

INTRODUCTION

WHEN DALLAS CALHOUN REVEALED THE CONTENTS OF THE REPORT, RICHARD CONSTABLE KNEW HIS LIFE WASN'T WORTH THE PRICE OF A MASHED CAT.

"Hood was with DIA," Calhoun said. "But someone got to him after the operation began and enlisted his help so they could find out where several billion dollars of their money got off to. As a reward they may have promised he could come home a millionaire. Oh, he had you guys burn some of it now and then so it would look like he was doing his job if any of you made it back, which you weren't supposed to. But we think the plan was to go back and bring out as much of that money as he could sometime after the south fell to the Communists."

"Have you checked to see if Hood was in DIA's Ghost Files? If someone recruited him to help steal that money, it had to be Air America. He might have been a member of one of their Shadow Companies."

He sipped the Canadian and sat the glass down on a paper napkin.

"We did and he wasn't. But he was reporting to CIA. I think they had a pretty good idea none of you would make it back because so much of that area was controlled by hostile forces. If he had, I imagine they would have killed him anyway just to keep the locations of the money se-

cure.”

“So his only purpose for being there was to locate the money and report it back to his agency? That’s it?”

“That’s exactly it. We believe someone was going to bring it out after the new Communist government was in power. But things went sour, as they often do in wartime, and Hood got himself killed in a firefight that wasn’t supposed to happen. Instead, you survived and brought out the maps.

“If Hood hadn’t got dusted by a bunch of uninformed rice farmers, he would have killed you guys off one by one so only he would have the maps to those stores of money. The rest of you would have been listed as KHA or MIA. Your only purpose was to protect him until he was in sight of an American base.”

He took a long drink of the Canadian and stared at me while I sat there with my glass poised halfway to my mouth, gaping at him in a state of shock.

· Fifty-four billion dollars of perfect counterfeit Federal Reserve Notes was hidden somewhere in the Pacific Northwest and every federal intelligence agency concerned was looking for it.

· But only one man knew how to find it.

· Richard Constable returns to duty at D.I.C.E. for the biggest and most dangerous operation of his career.

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ONE

The images, the dreams, the terrible nightmares just won't go away. Even after 20 years I still wake up some nights running away from death and the fleeting wraiths of the jungles of Viet Nam, the acrid taste of burnt gunpowder and hot brass on my tongue, the smell of napalm and diesel fuel, soaked with sweat, crying out, eyes wide with fear. No matter what I do from now on until I die, the dreams are not going to go away.

"You a journalist?" the kid asked quietly.

"Yeah, Why?" I lied.

"The uniform. Never saw one quite like that."

Thud. Boom. A mortar shell hit a few meters away and a yard of dirt fell on us from the ceiling. I put my arms over my head like that was going to keep the dirt out of my hair and off my face, but the kid just sat there like he was enjoying it all. My ears were ringing from the explosion and I could hardly hear what he was saying.

"I bet you're Special Team," he said. "Long Range Patrol. What're you doin' here?"

"Just passing through."

"Picked a hell of a time to come visiting, I'd say," he said, guessing the truth of the matter.

"I reckon so."

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He sat for awhile staring at me while I rested my chin on the backs of my arms.

"Me and six other guys were pinned down in a bunker like this one not far from here," he said suddenly. "Charlie was all around us. Hundreds of them. It's really hard to see the little bastards in the dark until they are right on top of you." He took his helmet off, perched it on his right knee and let his M-16 fall in the dirt.

"Know what I mean?"

I allowed as how I did and he bobbed his head up and down like he was approving of my answer.

"Maybe I got no right," he said after awhile, "but I got to tell somebody what happened up there. It wasn't my fault like everybody thinks. I just reacted, like a reflex, you know?"

I didn't answer so I guess he took that for a signal that it was okay with me if he confessed whatever sin he committed, so he began talking in a low voice that sounded strained and far away like it was coming through a pipe.

"We was pinned down and we knew there was no way out except dead and they kept getting closer and closer all the time and nobody from the rear could get up to help us. We'd get a few and there would pop up out of the ground a dozen where they fell and just keep coming.

"Suddenly I hear this sound like a piece bangs into the side of the bunker and I turn around to find this old man standing there kinda grinning at me in the doorway. He pulls the pin on a grenade and tosses it at my feet then he's gone, like he just vanished. I don't know, maybe I'm too interested in the grenade to see where he went, but all of a sudden I realize there's this grenade laying there and the seconds are ticking away. It was just a reflex. I kicked the grenade into the middle of the room and ducked out the door behind the old man."

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He got quiet and stared into the space somewhere between here and there remembering the scene the way it played out in his mind.

“Boom,” he said softly, opening his fingers like the petals of a flower.

“When I have enough sense to realize where I am, I roll back and look in the bunker and six guys are laying there. Pieces. Lots of blood and meat.” He pursed his lips and shook his head.

“I’ve lain awake for a thousand years wishing I could go back to that night and change it. Do something different.” His eyes were hollow, his face empty of emotion like it had all drained away from him.

The sergeant came over and tapped the helmet on his knee.

“On your head, Lawson,” he said gently like a man telling his grandson how to cast his first lure.

Lawson sat the helmet on his head, got his piece out of the dirt, and stood up.

“I just wanted to tell somebody in case I don’t make it. You know.”

Yeah, I knew. If he went home in a body bag I could tell his story the way he saw it happen. He drifted away like the smoke and dust and I stood up to stretch the kinks out of my legs when I was startled from the nightmare by someone pounding on my front door.

“Get up, Constable,” a man’s voice yelled. “Hey, you in there? Constable, wake up!”

“I’m awake!” I yelled at him and stumbled out of bed to open the door. The scowling face, as serious as if he had been observing a homicide, belonged to Steve Dansforth, an agent for D.I.C.E. My first thought was to take a swing at him, but he might have unholstered his pistol and shot me.

I backed away from the door, cursing and mumbling

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incoherently and did my best to get cleaned up and dressed. It wasn't all that easy to do because part of me was still in Vietnam and I had a lot of trouble getting my thoughts together so I could remember which parts of me needed to be straightened up. After awhile I decided to hell with it, slipped into my jeans, and went into the kitchen to start some coffee to perking.

One thing I always liked about Steve Dansforth, this special agent for the Department of Intelligence and Counter Espionage, is that he doesn't ask a lot of stupid, embarrassing questions. He knows I am screwed up and he lets it go at that because he realizes that he and his colleagues are partially to blame for a lot of my nightmares.

He reached into his coat pocket and whipped out an envelope, holding it out for me. I shoved my hands into my hip pockets and when he saw that I wasn't going to take the envelope he dropped it onto the table.

"You're a piss-poor excuse for a human being, Richard," he said straight-faced, "What are you doing 'way up here by yourself?"

I looked around at the cabin then I looked down at myself and shrugged.

"I think it should be obvious. I'm hiding from people like you. And if you don't like the way I look you can jump in the car and leave." I made a point of not looking at the envelope.

"I must have had lapse of memory," I added bluntly, "because I don't remember asking you to come visiting."

"I'm not here to visit," he said, looking at the envelope again like I knew he would. "I came up here to ask you to do us a favor."

By 'us', he meant the Department of Intelligence, et cetera, and by favor he meant that he wanted me to do some dirty work for him which I didn't feel like doing,

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and I told him so.

“You are in no position to ask favors of me, and I am in no condition to give them so why don't you take the Chrysler and the envelope back down the mountain and leave me alone?”

“Can't, Richard.” He shook his head with his lips tight. “I promised Halsey I'd come up to talk to you.”

By 'talk to you' he meant talk me into doing whatever it is that he, meaning Halsey, wanted me to do.

I had encountered Halsey at Ton Son Nhut airbase in Vietnam and he had kept me locked up in an isolation ward at the Dispensary for months while he made up his mind what he was going to do with the intelligence data I had brought back from a little trip I made with twelve other guys along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

He was real interested in me at the time because I was the only one who made it back and I always got the feeling that he thought I should have got myself killed, too, just so he wouldn't have to file a report. Halsey was an annoying jerk.

“Well,” I said after awhile, “you talked and I refused. Bye.”

I started to walk away but Dansforth, who is half a foot taller and forty pounds heavier than me, not to mention ten years younger, stepped in front of me so I settled back against the table. He didn't ask stupid questions, but he didn't take any lip, either. He was trying real hard not to come unwound but I could see he was having a tough time of it.

There is a sad truth in the inner circle that one may retire from the intelligence service but one may never quit. When they want you, they simply pick up the phone and call. Active or retired, when an agent is assigned an operation, that agent is not given the option of refusing.

If your name gets into their computer, it is there for-

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ever and when someone wants you, they know where to find you. They never lose track. When they hand you a briefcase and point to a far hill, you get yourself cleaned up, drop your bottle of Canadian blend into a trash basket, check your sidearm, and go.

I stayed out of their reports and thoughts for nearly ten years. But Dansforth's brief, almost urgent visit on that bright, crisp Thursday afternoon in August of 1987 changed my life forever.

"Okay," I said. What's up?"

He sniffed at me. "You been smoking pot, Richard?" he asked.

"What I do in my home is none of your business. What's so important you have to annoy me again?"

"Plenty. I want you to watch a video interrogation and tell me if you know anything about it." He snapped open the briefcase and withdrew a laptop computer, placed it on the lid of the briefcase, inserted a disk and punched a button.

A man identified himself as Ron West, an agent for the Treasury Department, gave a time and date and stated he was interviewing a man named Louis Walter Canby, Major, United States Marine Corps, retired.

"Major Canby, where were you stationed while you were in Vietnam?" West asked.

"About three months at Chu Lai then with a Special Operations Group near the Plain of Jars in Cambodia."

"How long were you with the SOG in Cambodia?"

"Twenty-one months."

"Do you remember the dates?"

"January, 1973 until September, 1974."

"What other military or civilian groups were at the same base during that period?" West asked.

"Well, it was a secret CIA base so there were a lot of Central Intelligence Agency people coming and going.

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Pilots and crews for Air America. Military or paramilitary types working for CIA. Some were military; some were civilians. They had special uniforms but some of them were civilians. They called themselves advisors but they were rather more like mercenaries.”

“Did you ever question why military personnel were working for the CIA?”

“Yes. But I was informed that my questions were inappropriate and it was suggested that I keep myself and my troops away from their operations. They were quite adamant about that.”

“Did you ever discover the purpose of their mission or their reasons for being there?”

“Yes. After I returned to the States I received a document while stationed at Camp Pendleton, California from someone who claimed the military types were members of CIA’s Shadow Companies. This person stated in the letter that most, if not all, the military types had been recruited by CIA to carry out covert operations against both the North Vietnamese and U.S. Armed Forces to prolong the war. They were listed as KHA or MIA after recruitment so they could operate with impunity in Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand.”

“You say these groups, the Shadow Companies, were conducting operations against American Armed Forces. In what way?”

“The document claimed that the CIA people were instructed to kill American soldiers to protect certain CIA interests during the conduct of the war.”

“And what CIA interest was this particular unit instructed to protect?”

“Billions of dollars in counterfeit American money,” Canby said.

“Did you believe the contents of the document were based on facts? Did you believe it was true?”

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“Yes. I was skeptical at first and then I began to remember things that happened during that time. I was certain the information was basically true.”

“What specific events did you remember that convinced you the writer of this document was telling the truth?”

“Activity I observed in August and September of 1974, immediately prior to my return to the United States.”

“Tell me, please, what you observed during late August and early September of 1974.”

“Air America began flying in a number of their unmarked C-46s and assembling men for working parties...ummm... to load cargo onto the aircraft. C-46s are World War Two type piston-engine aircraft. Tail draggers. They were generally loaded by manpower rather than with hoists or forklifts because the cargo doors on the port side were not particularly suitable for loading by heavy gear. The person who wrote the letter knew that. He knew about the C-46s which are not well-known aircraft, and he described the crates, the cargo. Seemed to me that he had been there.”

“What did the author of the letter claim was in the crates?”

“Twenty-two billion dollars in counterfeit American one-hundred dollar bills,” Canby said.

“Did the author of the letter suggest what CIA was going to do with the money?”

“He said it was to finance CIA’s future wars.”

“They weren’t going to destroy it?”

“No. They were going to deposit it into secret bank accounts to finance their future covert operations. He claimed it was one of the reasons CIA prolonged the war; so China could print the money and they could smuggle it into Vietnam where CIA could gather it up and claim it.”

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“Did the author reveal his name?”

“Yes. Richard Constable.”

Dansforth clicked off the computer and turned toward me. “Well, Richard,” he said, “that’s you. Can you explain what we just heard?”

“I didn’t write a letter to Major Canby or anyone else. It must be some other Richard Constable.” I said.

“No, no. There’s thirty minutes more information on this disk. It’s you alright. He knows who you are, what you did in Vietnam, where you live and what you’re doing now. We have copies of the letter. Your signature is on it. Now I’d appreciate it if you would explain your involvement in this thing. We can do it here, as friends, or we can escort you to the Federal Building and I’ll have you do it officially. You know what that means.”

It meant hours in an interrogation room with unfriendly agents. It meant I’d be followed every time I left home and it meant agents would be prying into my private affairs and getting in my face anytime I wanted to go somewhere. As unattractive as that seemed, I could only deny what I’d heard in the interview.

Dansforth considered my denial for a time, then nodded. “Okay,” he said. “For now I believe you. But whether it was you or someone else, this letter, this revelation, has caused a real stink for us, Treasury and CIA. If word of this gets out to the news media we’ll have a hell of a time trying to explain or justify what this Major has revealed.”

I stared at the blank computer screen. The information was true. If CIA hadn’t actually sanctioned the printing of those billions of dollars, if they hadn’t provided the plates and prolonged the war until China had printed all the money they thought CIA could use for the next twenty years, they had most certainly flown the money out of Cambodia and used it to finance the Iran/Iraq war

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and the covert wars in Nicaragua and El Salvador. And they had their own private army in Vietnam, recruited by Air America to fight with the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. They had provided the NVA and VC with intelligence data and they had withheld important information that could have helped America fight a better war. The CIA Shadow Companies had killed American troops. Thousands of them. I worked for an intelligence gathering unit during the Vietnam conflict and I'd seen the reports. We even had a code name for the Shadow Companies: Nightshade.

Surviving members of those covert armies are still in Southeast Asia and many of them are still working for CIA. They were listed as KHA or MIA and the Central Intelligence Agency even arranged for a few bones to be shipped back home to prove their sub rosa agents had been killed. That's why the government ignores the pleas of American families seeking information about their missing sons. They don't want to reveal their complicity in the adventure and CIA doesn't want to jeopardize the lives of the agents who are still over there living in the jungles or those reassigned to other areas of the world.

And that's why Americans will never know what happened to the men listed as KHA or MIA in Vietnam. Political careers would be ruined overnight. Politicians fear that if the American public and military units knew the truth of Vietnam, they would probably overthrow the government by violence. The politicians and intelligence agencies would not have control of the armed forces so they would die. The revelation of that information is their greatest nightmare.

But I hadn't written the letter. Until I'd heard the interview, I hadn't given much thought to that part of the war or the money or the missing American soldiers. Dansforth and I discussed the interview for several min-

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utes, during which time I realized he knew a great deal about my activities while I was in Southeast Asia.

"We know your team found some of that money in tunnels along the Ho Chi Minh Trail," he said. "And we know you brought back maps showing the locations of those tunnels. Do you remember the man who debriefed you while you were in the hospital at Ton Son Nuht?"

"Yes," I said. "Spenser Halsey."

"Right. Well, he's our Director now. We have a complete dossier on you, Richard. We know everything you did over there for three years. Now as far as we're concerned, you're about the only person alive who could have written that letter. You say you didn't and I'll take your word for that until I find out differently."

He pointed to the manila envelope.

"Dallas Calhoun will be in town tomorrow," he said. "He will contact you and arrange a meeting. Give him this information and follow his instructions. But keep all this to yourself." He locked the computer inside the briefcase and I followed him outside.

"For your security and mine," he said, "I didn't talk to you today. Understand?"

Now, Calhoun, Dansforth, me, and a few others I won't mention, have known one another for about ten years, that is to say since June of 1985, and of the lot, I'm the only one who didn't or doesn't work for D.I.C.E. They just recruited me to do a special job for them once because I was convenient and, even though I knew he was lying at the time, Dansforth promised me they would never bother me again once that was finished. Well, it had been finished for more than a decade and here he was back again just like I knew he would be someday.

"So," Dansforth was saying, "we want you to take the motorhome and deliver the information to Calhoun when he calls."

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“Neverthegoddamless,” I answered firmly, “You already know that I’m not interested in Calhoun or you or Halsey or that envelope, so you can take it back to the agency and tell Halsey to put it where the sun doesn’t shine.”

Dansforth cleared his throat and shuffled his feet, kind of getting himself set up for a shot at me, and took a deep breath.

“Look at yourself, Richard. You’re fifty years old and you haven’t done anything with your life worth writing home about. You’re hair is getting grey, you’re ten or fifteen pounds overweight, you’re not eating properly, and you’ve probably abandoned your efforts to write your book. You’re a physical and emotional wreck. You hide out here in the tules feeling sorry for yourself, your wife has left you... .”

“...temporarily.”

“...and you sit around looking like a pig trying to make a recluse of yourself when what you really need to cleanse your mind is some action.”

“I prefer to think of it as cultural suicide,” I said.

“You might really screw up and get well out there on the road,” he continued, still using the same wind he started with. “I’ll bet you haven’t been well a day since you got back to civilization.”

“And besides,” I muttered, still locked into my own private dialog, “what right do you knotheads have to tell me how to live my life?”

But I knew in the back of my mind that he was right about being afflicted with civilization.

There was a long silence while he looked at me and I looked at the trees and two minutes, maybe, went by before he gave an exasperated groan. He opened the door of the Chrysler, fished the keys out of his pocket, climbed in and started the engine, shaking his head like

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I was a little kid he just caught in the cookie jar.

He levered the transmission into gear and backed down the driveway.

“Wait a minute! Take this goddam envelope with you,” I yelled but he already had the car turned around and was roaring down the dirt road. I shook my head.

“And you can tell Halsey to go piss up a rope because I don’t work for him,” I screamed at the car which was by then just a black speck in the distance. “I’m not going!”

I’m not sure, but I thought I heard Dansforth laughing although it could have been a Whiskeyjack up in the pines somewhere.

I wandered back into the house and began gathering up what I’d need for the trip back to San Diego.

Damn the bastards. They got me again.

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TWO

The next morning Calhoun called and I drove to Seaport Village in San Diego, parked the motor home and walked along the Embarcadero until I found him leaning on the quay wall watching the afternoon crowd.

A role model for the agency's dress code and protocol, Calhoun was tall and powerfully built, had ruddy complexion, hazel eyes and red hair. Normally he would be cleanly shaven and shorn, and he would have been dressed in a white shirt, a dark business suit, and hundred dollar shoes. But the Calhoun beside me now had a full beard, ragged hair down to his collar, and was dressed in patched jeans, T-shirt, and sneakers.

More my style than his.

"You're late, Constable," he said, not bothering to look at me.

"You look terrible, Calhoun. What are you up to?"

"I'm hiding, Richard. All kinds of people are after me. Hell, I haven't been home for nearly three months, and they've got Helen and the kids in a safe house somewhere." He chewed on a pistachio nut, spit the shell into the brackish water.

"Who's after you?"

"Don't know, really," he answered. "A few months ago I noticed some people following me around. That's when

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I was here at the San Diego station. I reported it to the Division Chief and they assigned an agent to spot for me now and then, but they never have found out who it was.

“The guy’s a pro; every time they try to follow him, he vanishes into thin air. The Department Head suggested I take a vacation, a leave of absence, really, and lay low for awhile.”

He pulled at his hair and beard, shook his ragged shirt.

“So, here I am, a fugitive from the real world, waiting for the agency to tell me it’s okay to come in, So far, nothing.”

“Why did you call me?” I asked.

“Let’s go somewhere else, Richard, I feel like talking.”

I headed for the nearest restaurant, but he grabbed my arm and dragged me toward the parking lot.

“Too many people in there, and I don’t trust any of them,” he said. “Where’s your car?”

“I brought the motorhome.”

“Good. I need to relax.”

He got comfortable on the couch while I got two glasses, a tray of ice, and an unopened bottle of Canadian blended whiskey.

“Where’s Brandy?” he asked.

“She’s visiting her folks in Portland. But if you’ve been watching me for more than five minutes you already know that.”

“Yes. When is she coming home?”

“I’m going up next week to get her and we’re going on a short vacation.”

He nodded briefly. I had a feeling he was about to change our plans.

“Dansforth let me hear a tape yesterday afternoon and he thinks I wrote some kind of letter to Treasury about

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that counterfeit money CIA had printed in China during the Vietnam war. What's up?"

"Well, Richard, I don't think he believes you wrote the letter; he just wants to get things cleared up before it comes back to haunt us."

"No, he thinks I wrote the letter or I wouldn't be down here talking to you today. Why not clue me in so we can start pulling on the same end of the rope."

I got the drinks fixed and slid one to Calhoun. He stirred it with his finger and began telling me all he thought I should know of the operation.

"In 1975, when we were certain Saigon would fall to the north, a group of officers and enlisted men were assigned the task of destroying all the American currency we could round up. It was several hundred million dollars. It was counted, catalogued, checked, itemized, and accounted for down to the last dollar, then checked and double-checked to make sure none of it was missing before we took it to the furnaces. The problem is that none of it got burned. Not a single bill.

"To make matters worse, we discovered about ten years earlier that billions of dollars in counterfeit American money was being printed in China, smuggled into South Vietnam, and hidden in tunnels along the Ho Chi Minh Trail."

"I know," I said. "I was with one of the patrols that located some of that money."

Calhoun held his glass up to the light, turned it to study the color, then tasted it critically.

"Right. Well, you thought you went out there to get intelligence on troop movements and staging areas, and to report on how many North Vietnamese Regulars had infiltrated the southern provinces, but that was a bunch of crap," he said.

"Your Officer-in-charge, Willis Hood, was the only

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one who really knew why he was there, which was to find and pinpoint as many of those caches of bogus money as he could.

“That money was perfect, Richard; printed on Chinese presses and consecutively numbered. No one could tell it from the money printed at the Treasury Department. Everyone thought it had been printed to play hell with our economy after the war. Washington wanted it destroyed, so they got your team together, and sent you out there to locate it. The problem was that the money belonged to CIA and they not only didn’t want you guys out there screwing around with it, they were perfectly willing to kill anyone who found it, including a lot of American GIs.”

“Hood,” I said. “I never knew his name. Who was he? I-Corps? CIA?”

“No. Actually, Hood was with DIA. But someone got to him after the operation began and enlisted his help so they could find out where several billion dollars of their money got off to. As a reward they may have promised he could come home a millionaire. Oh, he had you guys burn some of it now and then so it would look like he was doing his job if any of you made it back, which you weren’t supposed to. But we think the plan was to go back and bring out as much of that money as he could sometime after the south fell to the Communists.”

“Have you checked to see if Hood was in DIA’s Ghost Files? If someone recruited him to help steal that money, it had to be Air America. He might have been a member of one of their Shadow Companies.”

He sipped the Canadian and sat the glass down on a paper napkin. “We did and he wasn’t. But he was reporting to CIA. I think they had a pretty good idea none of you would make it back because so much of that area was controlled by hostile forces. If he had, I imagine they

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would have killed him anyway just to keep the locations of the money secure.”

“So his only purpose for being there was to locate the money and report it back to his agency? That’s it?”

“That’s exactly it. We believe someone was going to bring it out after the new Communist government was in power. But things went sour, as they often do in wartime, and Hood got himself killed in a firefight that wasn’t supposed to happen. Instead, you survived and brought out the maps.

“If Hood hadn’t got dusted by a bunch of uninformed rice farmers, he would have killed you guys off one by one so only he would have the maps to those stores of money. The rest of you would have been listed as KHA or MIA. Your only purpose was to protect him until he was in sight of an American base.”

He took a long drink of the Canadian and stared at me while I sat there with my glass poised halfway to my mouth, gaping at him in wide-eyed shock.

“You’re bullshitting me,” I mumbled.

“Not for a minute. And one other thing I want to tell you, because you deserve to know the truth, is that from the time you left your dead and dying comrades out there in the jungle, some VC, led by members of CIA’s Nightshade Company, followed you all the way back to Cam Rahn Bay just to make sure you didn’t get lost or die.

“Didn’t you ever wonder how you made it back? I mean, you went into villages that were totally controlled by the Viet Cong, and they fed you, nursed you, and pointed you always in the right direction. Nightshade Company guided you from the sidelines, all the way from Duc Lac to the coast just to make certain those maps got back to the people who would eventually smuggle the money out.

“See, by that time their snafu had been cleared up.

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Some of the Americans in the Shadow Companies who were fighting with the NVA and VC probably got down there and realized their man had been killed and that you were holding the bag. They had to protect you at any cost. Hell, the NVA was killing their own people just so you wouldn't get shot by some six-year old kid with an AK-47."

"And the CIA Shadow Companies were killing American kids to clear a path for me, is that it?"

He looked away and shook his head. "It was easier and quicker than trying to let everyone know you were coming, Richard. How could they have explained why they wanted you so badly?"

"If they wanted the maps and locations so much they were killing our own soldiers, why not just kill me and take them? What was the point of letting me go through all that just to deliver a bag full of paper?"

"The information had to go in the proper direction and be delivered to the right person but with no link between him and the Shadow Companies. You became the non-link, see?"

I slid my empty glass across the table and stared at the floor. "Christ Jesus," I said, "so many kids, so many people killed. Just to save a canvas bag full of paper."

"Well, it happened and what's done is done. What we have to do now is stay alive long enough to figure out where the money is."

"I don't care where the money is, Dallas. I'm not going to help you do this. I don't work for the agency."

"Our Director, Spenser Halsey, saved your butt over there, Richard. He knew Hood's people were looking for you. That's why he kept you locked up at the hospital until he could get an agency plane, with people he trusted, into the country to smuggle you out. Did you notice, when you mustered out of the Navy, that the entire history of

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your tours in Vietnam were missing?"

It took me a minute to answer because I was still out there crawling through the stink and mud and elephant grass, thinking I was evading an unseen enemy; an enemy who was actually helping me make it home. All of a sudden I hated a whole bunch of people.

"Sure," I said. "I thought that was for security."

"Crap. Halsey killed you, made a false service jacket, and let it be known you'd died from half a dozen illnesses you got out there in the muck so Hood's people would quit waiting for you to be released from the Dispensary."

He poured another drink, sipped it slowly and continued.

"When you resumed your duties here in the States, you were a different Richard Constable than the guy who went to Vietnam. Halsey didn't want to lose you; he actually took a liking to you. I think it's because you're the only person who ever talked back to him. It made him grind his teeth, but he admired you for it.

"He gave you a new identity, Richard, and gave them the original. We even sent your body home, and everyone quit looking for you. You've worked for us since you left Vietnam; you'll always work for us."

I smacked the table with the flat of my hand. "No I won't," I said. "I'm not going to be one of your ghosts. I'm not going to help you find the money and I'm not going to kill anyone."

"Get it through your head," he said. "The Richard you used to be is dead. The agency put you on their list twenty years ago. If they hadn't, you would really be dead."

"Then how have these other people found me, Calhoun, if I'm supposed to be dead?"

"Beats me. Maybe they started looking for all the Richard Constables in America. They've had twenty years to work on it. It isn't like they don't know how to find

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people, man.”

“Why didn’t somebody tell me all this after I came back from Vietnam?”

“What you didn’t know wouldn’t hurt you.” He shrugged.

“But that doesn’t make any sense, Calhoun. If they had really wanted to find me, they could have asked my parents, and they would have innocently told them I was alive.”

“Halsey was banking on it, so before he conveniently let them steal your service record, he created a whole new background for you. Family, friends, parents, even a new hometown complete with records at the courthouse.”

All those months in the hospital at Ton Son Nuht; that was so they could destroy my past and create a new Richard Constable. They killed me to keep me from being killed. All those months, isolated from the rest of the world, imprisoned without knowing why.

The room had been austere and cold and there were bars on the window. I didn’t know what month it was, didn’t know what day or what time it was. All I could do was pace from the door to the window, or lay on the bed counting ceiling tiles. For weeks, the only people I saw were nurses and orderlies, then a psychiatrist had come to interrogate me for hours on end until I finally quit answering her inordinately stupid questions.

No one had talked about the war, about napalm, or saturation bombing, or firefights. They didn’t talk about the fear, the terror waiting in the darkness, the unspeakable horror stuck inside our heads, the fearsome images of butchered children. I could hear men crying, others screaming at night, saw hallow, empty faces trudging endlessly past my cage, walking, walking, plodding to nowhere and back again, an endless line of faceless,

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nameless zombies.

Some went home, some went back to the war, and a few went quietly insane, were pushed away in wheelchairs like mashed little images of real people, around corners, and into obscurity. We never saw them again, never asked where they were because we saw our faces in their faces, heard our cries echoing down the long, white corridors, knew we were all too near to being what they were. We feared that knowing where they went and what happened to them would be more than we could bear, would be more than we could understand, and would push us, too, into the anonymous world of the incurably insane.

I counted the tiles on the floor. There were sixty three full pieces, and seventeen half pieces. I counted the ceiling tiles, then counted the holes in each tile. I looked out the window, registering nothing, while I tugged at the bars, hoping they would miraculously fall away so I could escape.

To where?

I stared at the door, willing it to open, or be opened, revealing someone who would have me sign a piece of paper that would release me forever from that cold, sterile, empty, awful room.

I made secret promises to God as I squatted in the corner at night. I made secret promises to Jesus, then I made promises to Krishna, to Odin, to Hertha, to my mother and father, my brothers, my wife and children, and to friends. I invented new gods and made promises to them with tears streaming down my face. And I made promises to myself, oh yes, as I rocked back and forth in the darkness beside the locked door.

I don't recall that I kept many of the promises, so they became lies, pigeonholed in some dark well of my mind where I couldn't find them, ever, again.

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A man with sandy hair and piercing blue eyes had arrived one day to ask about the men who hadn't returned, wanted to know where they were, if they were really dead, wanted me to tell him about the patrol, and about the money.

His name was Spenser Halsey.

He showed me pictures of the team, and asked me to show him on a map where they had been killed or left behind, checked them off with quick strokes of a pen.

Like everyone else, he was interested only in knowing how much money I thought we'd found out there on the trail.

Then they killed me, listed me as missing in action and made me one of their anonymous ghosts.

Calhoun, assessing my morose silence, fetched a cup from the cabinet above the sink and asked if I wanted some coffee. I shook my head and pushed the cup away.

"Give me the Canadian," I said, wagging a finger at the bottle. "Coffee isn't going to take care of this."

He slid it to me, then sat down. After a moment, he sniffed at me.

"Uh, have you... ." he began.

"Not your business, Calhoun, so erase it. Why does the agency find it necessary to tell me all this crap now?" I asked.

"Because, for the first time since the war, you're in danger. People are looking for you, and when they find you, they're going to kill you, that's why. We're trying to protect you."

"But, dammit, Calhoun, why me? I don't know anything about that money. I haven't thought about it for years, and I couldn't cause these jokers any problems. Why are they looking for me?"

"Same reason as me. I know about the real money, you know about the counterfeit money, so they want us

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out of their business. Dead, kaput, gone. They're getting all that money collected into one big pile and they're afraid we're going to screw up their scheme."

"Only one thing wrong with that. I didn't know about any scheme until this very moment."

"They don't know that. You brought out the bag, remember? You hid out for months, and that alone would give them cause to worry. I mean, why would Spenser Halsey keep you hidden if you didn't know anything? You came back in our 727, went to a two-month debriefing at the farm. They think you know, man, and they want you dead."

"Well, all that means nothing. I didn't care about the money when I was on the patrol and I don't care about it now. Besides, I didn't go to any two-month debriefing anywhere after I got back. I went directly to my next duty station."

I tilted the Canadian and took a long drink.

"When was that?" he asked.

"When was what?"

"When were you assigned to that duty station?"

I had to think for a moment. It had been over twenty years.

"It was March, 1967," I said.

"And you left Vietnam on the eve of the TET Offensive in January, 1967." He looked away, watched a crowd of youngsters strolling along the Embarcadero.

Two months of my life I couldn't remember? But Calhoun was right; somewhere I had lost nearly eight weeks of my life between the time I'd been flown out of Vietnam and the time I arrived at my duty station in El Centro, California. Why could I not remember it? I asked Calhoun.

"You were debriefed, Richard. Deprogrammed might be a better word if we were permitted to utter it. Things

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were erased. Other things were reinforced. What do you remember most vividly?"

"Hospital."

"And of the patrol?"

"Finding the money."

"Returning to Cam Rahn?"

I had been near death from disease and starvation. I couldn't remember because I had been delirious, feverish, physically and emotionally ill. Who could be expected to remember anything under such conditions?

"Well, you see, then," he said, understanding my bewildered silence. "You were, indeed, debriefed and a lot of people out there want to find out why. They want to know what Halsey locked away inside your thick skull."

"You keep saying they, Calhoun. Who the hell is they?"

"Oh, any number of scoundrels. Politicians, military people, civilians, arms dealers from nearly every country in the world, maybe even some of the President's advisors. Most of them are small fry. We can pick them up any time we want; it's the organizer, the number one guy, we want."

I dropped some ice into my whiskey and pushed the missing two months into a pigeonhole, determined I could deal with it more rationally after Calhoun was gone.

"How close are you to finding him?" I asked.

He held up a finger and measured it off to the first digit with his thumb. "About that close," he said. "I've got a line on some organization called Casablanca Air Freight about a month ago, just about the time someone started following me around. Little by little, I'm finding out the names of most of the important people inside. The big cheese, though... ." He clicked his tongue and shook his head. "He's a smart one, Richard, well hidden, buried out there somewhere. I came up with the name Cap-

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ricorn; ran across several references to it. Operation Capricorn, or a code name; I don't know which. But I'll get him someday."

"Any idea what they're up to?"

He looked out the window, across the bay toward the aircraft carriers at the piers on Coronado Island, and shrugged his shoulders.

"We're not sure. We know that very little of the money is being openly circulated; so little, in fact, that we believe it's being circulated as a diversion, a plan to keep us looking in the wrong direction.

"At first we thought it might have been a plot to demoralize our currency, buy our gold. But now, well, if what I'm picking up has any merit, it looks like they're using it to purchase vast amounts of military weapons and supplies."

"Why? Are they planning to overthrow the government?"

Calhoun rubbed his eyes and sighed. "No, not by military force, Richard. But there are many ways to topple a government, not the least of which is devising ways to make the citizens lose faith in their President and his Cabinet. This country has had a lot of political scandals recently and people are beginning to think very cynically about the government and all its intelligence agencies."

"You think they're scheming to embarrass the President, then? Seems an expensive way to remove someone from office."

"The word 'expensive' is meaningless when you have that much money; especially if it isn't yours. And the problem is that it might not be the President they're after; it could be they're trying to gain complete control of all the intelligence agencies. Think about that for a minute."

He pulled an envelope from his pocket, and dropped

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it onto the table.

“Read this and meet me here tomorrow. We’ll hash it over and see what we can come up with.”

I folded my arms across my chest, refused to pick up the envelope. “I haven’t agreed to work on this, Calhoun. In the first place, the whole thing sounds stupid to me. How could someone outside the government get control of the intelligence agencies”

“If you think they can’t you’re pretty naive, Richard. They’ll insure their people get appointed by eliminating the opposition if necessary. Even if they don’t try it in the near future, they’ll want to have everything ready in case they have to make a move.”

I couldn’t even imagine anyone that devious, making plans that many years ahead. How could they do something like that? And why would they want to?

Calhoun smiled sadly and shook his head. “They may never do anything; they might not have to, you see. But how? I can think of a dozen ways, and so could you if you set your mind to it. Confounding the situation in South America is one way, and a pretty good one at that. If I had to make a guess, I’d say that, somewhere along the line, one of these intelligence agencies is going to start screwing things up in the middle east.

“We have a potential nightmare over there, Richard, what with terrorist activities and highjackings going on almost daily. Car bombs and kidnappings. Outright murder in the streets. Pretty soon someone is going to figure out a way to get us involved in an unholy mess in the Gulf. I predict before the year is out we’ll be sending our ships to the area to escort oil tankers through the Straits of Hormuz. Either that or we’ll carry out an air strike against one of the terrorist countries. Then there’ll be hell to pay, you can bet on it.

“And if the American people get tired of it and elect

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the wrong man to the Presidency, the intelligence agencies will be directed by people appointed by that President.”

“Sounds farfetched to me,” I said, “but if you can get a guarantee from the agency that they’ll never bother me again after this one, I’ll do what I can to help.”

Calhoun shook his head. “You’re a real funny guy, Richard. You have the balls to sit there and ask for guarantees in a void-where-prohibited universe. Look around you, man; the goddamned country is coming apart like a cheap suit because no one wants to see what’s happening. They don’t want to get involved anymore, so the frigging rats are eating away at everything you and your comrades fought for in Vietnam. You, of all people, should be able to see that you can’t sit around with your eyes and ears shut when the world is falling apart. Not anymore. Not anymore.”

He slid out of the booth, tossed down the last of his drink, went outside, squinted at the crowds of people wandering along the sunlit walks, then looked back at me with hollow eyes.

“Sit down and read the report, Richard, and meet me here around noon tomorrow,” he said. “Stick with me on this thing and maybe we can work it out so nobody gets hurt.”

He walked away with his shoulders hunched up and his neck drawn down.

Calhoun; a man hiding from the world.

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THREE

Can anyone say with any degree of certainty that they really know themselves? Much of what happened to me in Vietnam is just an empty box inside my head. I came back with a paranoia no one would validate and intense memories of being locked into a tiny, cold room for months without any real contact with other human beings. I had spent endless hours counting holes in the ceiling or building and deconstructing a houseboat inside my head. But of the patrol and especially the torturous return to Cam Rahn I remember very little.

I had never even considered those memories might have been carefully removed by someone who didn't want me to remember.

But the information Calhoun had given me rang true. I had been smuggled out of Vietnam in January but had not reported to my duty station until two months later. Until he told me, I didn't even know I was missing that part of my life. I had been debriefed. I had been deprogrammed. By people who had perfected the technique.

If I'd been deprogrammed, had I also been reprogrammed? It would explain so much of what happened during the dark years after I had mustered out of the service.

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I slept outside on a board placed across two saw-horses because the house smothered me. I kept thinking I'd have no place to run if someone got into the house to kill me.

One of the first things I did after being released from active duty was to buy a .30 caliber M1A-1 carbine with a leather military sling and a thirty-round extended clip. I felt safe with it. I slept with it for two years. Always loaded, safety off.

I had been mentally ill and hadn't even known it.

Now the agency was back after twenty years to awaken those memories, dredging up the paranoia by insisting people from some secret intelligence agency were out to kill me.

I suppose if I had been able to think about the whole thing a little more seriously I'd have cranked up the motorhome, driven to Portland to get my wife, Brandy, and headed off into the high country until the agency solved their problem. The only thing that kept me from doing it was the knowledge we'd have to look over our shoulders the rest of our lives, and we had better things to do than run from one doorway to the next waiting for that fatal shot.

One of the promises I made while I waited to be released from the hospital in Vietnam was that I would never let anyone capture me and lock me up, or shoot at me without having to pay a price for it.

It was only five o'clock in the afternoon when Calhoun left, and I didn't feel like spending a nice afternoon locked inside the motorhome. It, too, was beginning to smother me. I locked the rig and strolled through the shops at Seaport Village, enjoying the golden weather.

A few pigeons wandered my way, bobbing their heads and hoping for a handout. People lounged on the benches, reading or talking, and the tuna boat crews

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scrubbed down the decks of their ships. Everyone seemed to be in their own world, oblivious to the dreadful workings of a few mad idiots who could destroy their tranquillity overnight if they were of a mind to do it.

So lost was I in the problem of the missing months of my life that I'd made a complete circuit back to the restaurant before I realized a man was following me. I walked inside, waited until I figured he'd had time to get to the door, then walked back out.

I sat on a bench until he reappeared seconds later. He made a quick right turn when he saw me and disappeared into the afternoon crowd. I went back to the motorhome and called Steve Dansforth at the San Diego station.

"It's Richard Constable," I said. "Do you have anyone following me?"

"Watching you. Have you spotted someone?"

"Yeah, but he doesn't look like someone you'd hire; he's too pretty,"

He asked a few questions but was unable to identify the man from my verbal description.

"Do you know where Calhoun is staying?" I asked.

"Yes, but I'm not going to tell you. It's not a matter of trust, you understand. It's just that if someone is following you, you would lead them straight to him. They'd have you both right where they want you. Did he set up a meeting with you?"

"Yeah, but the same danger applies if he comes here tomorrow. Someone already knows I'm here, so I want to alert Calhoun and meet him somewhere else. Call him and tell him to meet me at my cabin up at Big Bear Lake."

"It's too secluded; he'll never go for it."

"Secluded is why I want to meet him there. Maybe nobody can ambush us. I'm leaving right now."

I rang off before he could protest, got buckled in and

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fired up the rig. An hour later I was headed north on Interstate 15 to Big Bear Lake.

The miles of concrete sang beneath the wheels of the motorhome and the sun was yellow and enormous on the western horizon as I wound my way up into the mountains toward the cabin. There was little traffic behind me on the narrow road and, since I'd seen no headlights, I concluded I'd not been followed. I eased the rig into the turns, braking and downshifting all the way to the top of the mountain, then turned onto the single lane dirt road that led to the cabin, parked beside the pickup truck, gathered up some clean clothes and food, locked the motorhome, and went inside.

After I lit the water heater and got a fire started in the fireplace, I went into the bathroom to shower and shave, left the door open so I could hear if anyone came to visit. The .45 was wrapped in a towel on the water closet lid just in case. After the shower, I went to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee, then went into the living room to sit before the fire.

Who, I wondered, could possibly know, or care, that I had been a part of the team that had found that money back in 1966? Twenty years ago! The only people who would remotely be interested, as far as I could see, would be someone who was there at the same time. I'd left three other members of the team back there in the jungle. I remembered that! Had any of them survived? Could one of them be trying to bring the money back to the States?

Other people who knew about that money were military personnel, a host of Federal agents who had staffed the stations for CIA, DICE, DIA, the State and Treasury Departments, and the Embassy staff in Saigon.

How many people would that be? Hundreds? Thousands? What percent of those involved would be intelligent enough or crooked enough to try to smuggle the

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money back to America?

Calhoun told me Willis Hood had some hired help waiting for me to be released from the Dispensary at Ton Son Nuht. Had they been military people or Federal agents? Americans or Vietnamese? Or had they been members of the Shadow Companies sent by the intelligence agencies to erase my memory permanently before Halsey could sponge me clean?

A lot of people knew the information would be coming back in the satchel, maps that could pinpoint the exact location of every cache of money we'd found. Halsey had made certain I would be unable to reveal what I knew of it if they ever found me.

He left me only memories of the imprisoning room at Ton Son Nuht.

Damn him.

I got to know what kind of people were walking down the hallway by the sounds of their footsteps. The other patients padded like cattle in soft, cloth slippers. The nurses wore low-cut shoes with rubber heels and they walked in even measured strides. Orderlies milled about haphazardly. Doctors shuffled whether they were wearing dress shoes or green O.R. slippers. Visitors, those people from the Central Intelligence Agency, from Treasury or the State Department, from DIA, I-CORPS or DICE, walked with a special confidence, heels hitting first, soles snapping like the crack of a rifle.

When the keys jingled I knew I was going to have a visitor.

I was sitting on the edge of the bunk, staring at a tray of cold food, listening to footsteps snapping toward my cell, hearing muffled voices outside the door, the jingle of keys from someone's pocket. The door opened wide enough to admit Spenser Halsey, then slammed shut again with a click of the lock.

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He introduced himself, produced an identification wallet and insisted on asking questions. I pushed the table away and went to the window without checking his wallet. I really couldn't have cared if he was the President of the U.S.A. I grabbed the bars on the window, pressed my face between them, watched a C130 take off over the buildings, wishing I was on it.

He sat the tray on the bunk and spread a map and a thick dossier on the table, then wagged his hand at me, motioned me over to join him.

He pushed the papers around, getting everything in order so he could breeze through his interrogation. His insistent demeanor irritated me. I remember that. I remember, too, that I disliked him from the first meeting.

December, 1966. His words might have been spoken only moments ago.

"Can you tell me where the other members of your team were lost," he had asked, jabbing a finger at the map.

"Lost? They weren't lost, for Christ's sake, they were killed."

"So you say, but can you be sure?"

I shook my head in disgust and sighed. "What day is it?" I asked.

"What?"

"What day is this? Monday? Friday? What?"

"Thursday."

"What month?"

"December."

"Almost Christmas." I looked at the tray of cold, tasteless food.

"Couple of weeks. Can we continue?"

"They were killed, Mister Halsey. Dead. D, E, A, D. Dead."

He took a deep breath and held it for a while, then let

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it out slowly with his eyes closed and his teeth clenched tight. His neck and jaw muscles twitched nervously.

"Show me on the map, please, if you can, Richard."

I turned the map so I could see it, ran a finger up the Mekong, across it, and back to Tuyen Duc Province.

"Three here, I think."

He opened the dossier, pulled out a page of photographs of the team members. There were no names.

"Which three?"

I pointed them out and Halsey made three crosses over the pictures with a grease pen.

The others?"

"On the border between Tuyen Duc and Ninh Thuan provinces. Somewhere in here, I think." I made an idle circle on the map that would have covered a hundred miles of jungle. "I think we were in there somewhere."

"How many were killed there?"

"Well, all of them, I guess."

"How many did you actually see who were dead?"

"Six."

"Point them out, please."

"That one. That one. Those two. This guy and this guy."

"The lieutenant?"

I nodded.

"You're sure?"

"Yes, I remember the lieutenant. He had a hole the size of my fist where his mouth used to be." I turned away and went back to the barred window.

He made six crosses and put his pen away. After awhile he cleared his throat. "Well," he said, "that leaves three unaccounted for."

"I reckon so."

He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled the table over so he could rest his elbows on it.

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"Would you like a cigarette, Richard?" He pulled out a pack of Lucky filters.

I extracted two cigarettes, stuck one behind my ear while he lit the other for me, then sat down on the foot of the bed.

"How long until I get out of here?" I asked.

"A while yet, I'm afraid. I can't give you a firm date."

"Yeah. Well, I really would like to get out. You know?"

He watched me, resting his chin in the palm of his left hand, until I had finished the smoke.

"You had a rough time out there, Richard. I won't even presume to say I know how rough it really was. But seeing you here now, watching you, listening to you, I know it was bad."

"Bad?" I shook my head. "I don't know. Maybe it was bad."

"Want to talk about it? I'd be interested in knowing what happened out there."

"I don't remember much. I was sick. I think I was probably starving, too. Anyway, I don't remember much. And if you weren't there, you wouldn't understand."

Halsey clucked his tongue and turned away, studying the room. Presently, he spoke again.

"I read in the reports you brought back that you, your team, found a lot of money hidden in caves along the trail. Can you tell me about that?"

"Easy. We found a lot of money hidden in caves along the trail. What else is there to tell? We burned some, we left some."

"How much did you burn?"

"We didn't count it. We just burned it."

"An estimate."

"A hundred million dollars."

He looked at me with his eyes screwed up, as if trying to determine whether or not I was telling the truth.

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“In what denominations?”

“Hundred dollar bills.”

“All?”

“All.”

“Were they consecutively numbered?”

I nodded. “Appeared to be.”

“Did it look like authentic U.S. money?”

I nodded again.

He scratched the side of his face with his manicured nails and leaned on the table. “The report says you left twenty-two sites undisturbed. Do you say that’s an accurate accounting?”

“If that’s what the report says, then it’s accurate.”

“Who filled out the report each time?”

“I did.”

“How much money was in each cache?”

“I already told you we didn’t count it.”

He sighed, “Okay. Then how large was each bundle or pile, or whatever it was?”

I measured off some dimensions with my hands. “Three feet square by two and a half feet high.”

“Hundred dollar bills?”

“What I saw was hundred dollar bills.”

“How many bundles do you estimate were in each cave?”

“Twenty in some; twenty-two in others.”

“Humm, maybe fifty million dollars to a bundle,” he said to himself. “Times twenty, at twenty-two known undisturbed sites. I calculate over twenty billion dollars, at least; does that sound accurate?”

“Can you tell someone to turn down the air conditioning? They’re freezing me to death.” I got off the bed and went to the window to watch a Huey sweep in to drop off a group of men in business suits. They ducked away from the helicopter clutching their fat briefcases and

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headed for the adjacent building.

The big boys were there. The guys who stuck pins in a board on the wall. The guys who had all the answers before anyone thought to ask a question. The men in three piece suits who made all the plans, all the decisions, had all the theories that never worked in real life, who had never been in the mud and rotting jungle stench, who had never fired a shot in anger or desperation, who had never seen children scorched to smoldering cinders by napalm or incendiary bombs, who had never seen their friends laying in the mud with their faces gone, who had never had to shovel up a man's intestines, still warm and steaming in the early morning chill, who had never had to lift the body of a dead man and smell his piss and shit. The guys with manicured nails and salon hair styles who made and broke the rules all in one day to satisfy a pre-determined body count, never asking questions even when the whole world was falling apart in their hands.

The ones who looked around innocently and asked, "Gee whiz, fellas, what happened?" like they never had anything to do with planning or screwing things up to get a couple thousand American kids killed every week.

The pretty boys from CIA had arrived.

Those were the bastards who had been asking questions about how, and why, and when, and where we died while they were having champagne dinners and screwing each others' wives on company time. Those were the people who had sent the Shadow Companies down from their secret bases in Cambodia to fight with the Viet Cong, to kill American kids so they couldn't get too close to those tunnels.

Twenty years after the event, I have but to smell the odor of diesel fuel or cordite or the odor of Asian food cooking in hot oil and I am projected back to that room. I have but to gaze into the eyes of an Asian child and I am

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projected back to that room. I have but to hear the unique popping sound of a Bell UH-1 helicopter passing overhead and I am projected to that cold, empty, awful room.

So much of the room, so much of the money; so little of the mission. At last I was beginning to understand why.

Paranoia, like the wind-whipped tail of an October kite, seized me again. Halsey had positioned people to watch me, had scattered landmines and tripwires across my path for twenty years waiting for the day he could call me out and send me off with a silenced rifle to kill someone.

If you hear something go “click-chung” under your heel and an iron can jumps up in your face, ninety-nine times out of a hundred you re going to die. And your buddies are going to get tired of looking for all the pieces.

By telling me of the missing two months, Calhoun had deliberately led me into one of those mine fields.

I'd just heard that first dreadful “click.”

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FOUR

The next thing I knew it was morning and Calhoun was yelling at me from the other side of the window. Half awake, I stumbled from the bed, unlocked the door, and let him in. He complained about having to drive so far while I crashed around in the kitchen trying to get a pot of coffee started.

"I'll tell you the truth, Richard," he bitched, "I'm not too happy about driving up here this early in the morning. I had to leave San Diego at three o'clock. It was the middle of the night, for Christ's sake."

"Ah, hell Calhoun," I mumbled through a face towel, "someday you'll thank me for getting you out of the city on such a nice day."

"How do you know it's nice? You're still asleep."

I could hear him pilfering the cabinets for some cups.

"Bottom shelf, cabinet on the right," I hollered.

When I got out of the bathroom he was seated at the table peeking out the window between the curtains.

"Nobody out there," I said.

"Says you; I know better."

"You're getting paranoid, Calhoun. Why don't you relax, have a cup of coffee, and tell me what's going on."

"Oh, I'll tell you what's going on, all right, but I'm not going to relax while I do it." He tapped his cup on the

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table. "Pour the coffee."

I filled both cups, then began working on breakfast while he talked. Every few seconds, he peeked through the curtains and that made me nervous.

"You called Dansforth. Did he have time to fill you in on anything?" He asked as he shifted awkwardly in the wooden chair.

"I talked to him for half a minute, then hung up. He didn't have time to say much."

I got some ham and eggs sizzling in an iron spider while he complained about his trip to the cabin in the dark, peering out the window and jumping every time the house creaked. I made some toast, dished up the food, slid him a plateful, then sat down with my own.

"Did you read the report?" he asked, watching me carefully. "I'll bet you didn't read it. You didn't, did you?"

I held up my hands like a traffic cop. "Hey, Calhoun, take a break! I drove half the night getting here, same as you. I'll read it now, okay?"

He jumped from his chair and paced into the living room and back, holding his head with both hands, breathing heavily. He twisted his fingers together and came over to stand beside me, swaying back and forth on the balls of his feet.

"Okay, okay," he said. "I'm sorry about that. So much has happened in the past few weeks I just haven't had time to think clearly. I'm worried about Helen and the kids, and I'm exhausted from expecting someone to come up on me from behind." He rubbed his arms, walked to the window, stared out across the yard toward the road, and sighed.

"I'm so damned tired, Richard. I can't remember when I had a decent night's sleep. I want to run every time I hear a noise. It's tearing me up inside; it's really killing me." He walked back to the table and sat down.

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"Sometimes I think I ought to give this up and go live where no one could ever find me."

I reached over and nudged him on the arm. "Come on Calhoun," I said gently, "you can sleep for a couple hours if you want. I'll stand guard."

He smiled weakly and shook his head. "No, I can't, Richard. There isn't time for that now. We've got to figure out what's going on before it's too late."

I put my coffee cup on the table and leaned on the chair. It was getting stuffy in the cabin and I felt like walking, so I tossed the breakfast into the trash basket, put on my jacket, and headed for the door, motioning for him to join me.

Calhoun followed me out and we walked slowly down toward the lake. The air was clean and crisp, smelled of damp earth and pine needles, and our footsteps were muffled by the vastness of the conifer forest. The trail leading down to the lake was strewn with boulders, wound through red cedars and sparse undergrowth, switching back on itself, slick and muddy with dew. When we reached the lake, we walked out across stones and over logs until we were fifteen feet from the bank, then got comfortable on a couple of large boulders.

I picked up a stone and flipped it out into the lake, waiting for Calhoun to open up.

He kept looking at me as if he expected me to ask questions or comment somehow on what he'd told me, but I was lost in other things, wondering how I could devise a plan to get Brandy and take her with me if I had to run for cover.

I picked up a marble-sized stone and flipped it into the lake with my thumb.

"I still don't know what all this has to do with me, Dallas. Sure, I knew that money was out there on the trail but I haven't given it much thought since the end of the war.

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What do I care about it? If your people can't find out who's got it, how do you expect me to find out? I have no idea where to begin looking for clues and, besides, it isn't my job. Sounds like a job for the Treasury Department, anyway, so how did you guys get involved?"

"The Treasury Department is working on it. So is the FBI, the CIA, and a few agencies you never even heard of. I've already told you why you're involved so you might as well get it through your head that it's become a case of getting them before they get us."

He flipped a stone of his own and picked up another, rolling it fitfully between his fingers.

"Too many things are at stake here, Rich. We can't allow that money to be used for anything, especially anything that will create a scandal within this Administration. The country is getting well after being sick for a long time, and we want it to stay well.

"A lot of people here and abroad don't like this President, and they'd do anything to humiliate him right now, including financing an illegal war in his name."

He worried the stone while I tried to conjure up pictures of the money being moved and stored and shoved from one place to another while its owners decided what they were going to do with it. I couldn't make any sense of it and let Calhoun know it.

"Look, Dallas," I said, "maybe that isn't their plan. If all these people from our own government are involved, doesn't it make sense that whatever they're doing has been approved by the government? I know all these different agencies and organizations have figured out how to divert money into Swiss accounts, hide it until they need it, but an operation like this had to have involved hundreds of people, maybe thousands. How could they have got away with it for twenty years without someone noticing? You're talking about a lot of money. How could

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they buy weapons, things as large as rockets and airplanes, trucks, Jeeps, huge stores of food and medical supplies? Where could they hide all that stuff without getting caught?"

The stone between his fingers went sailing into the lake.

"Richard," he said, "when you have several billion dollars, you can do any goddamned thing you want to do in this world. If I gave you a billion dollars and you wanted to buy an army, all you would have to do is pick up the phone and call any one of a dozen people around the world, then sit back and let them take care of the business of getting everything you needed to start a war anywhere you felt like it. All of it can be purchased, shipped, or stored outside this country."

"Fine. I understand that. But you didn't answer my first question."

"Which was that"

"The one where I asked you what this has to do with me. I don't see how I can solve your problem here."

He clicked his tongue and looked at me sideways.

"If you had read the letter from the agency yesterday, you wouldn't have to ask,"

"Enlighten me, dammit!"

"Whether you know it or not, you have some information about that money they want. And whether you like it or not, you, my friend, are going to be the lure, the decoy, the guinea pig, to get these people out into the open."

"Like hell I will!" I shouted. "If you think I'm going to walk around waiting for someone to take a shot at me, you're nuts, buddy." I got up and headed back to the cabin.

"I swear to God, you people are crazy. This isn't the movies, Calhoun, this is real life. Out here if someone

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wants you to die, you're dead." I snapped my fingers. "Like that."

Calhoun jumped up and followed me, holding onto my jacket to slow me down. "Hold it, Constable. You aren't listening to me. They are planning on killing you. They may have already tried." He slipped on the wet stones, almost dragging me down. "Dammit to hell, Constable, slow down!"

I jerked away from him and plowed on up the trail. I had all these plans to load up the motorhome, jump in and drive to Portland, get Brandy, and get the hell out of civilization. Despite how I felt about being a patriotic American, I knew I was being asked to play out of my league.

"Leave me the hell alone, Calhoun, or I'm going to knock the putty right out of your windows." I started up the bank. Calhoun caught up with me, grabbed me by the arm.

"Don't get smart-assed with me, Richard. We have to stick together on this, look out for each other. They can't...." He stumbled again, slipped on the bank and fell heavily down onto the stones, dragging me with him.

I started cussing at him, then saw his face contorted with agony.

"Oh, Jesus, oh God." He groaned. I figured he had broken something. I knelt beside him and started to feel for an injury but he knocked my hand away and clutched his left hip.

It was then I saw the blood.

He coughed and spittle sprayed from his mouth, his eyes rolled upward under his lids. At the same time I heard a thump in the sandy soil at the edge of the bank just over my head and realized that someone was shooting at us.

I hollered a warning for Calhoun to stay down as I

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flattened out and eased back his jacket to see how badly he'd been hit.

There was a hole about the size of my thumb below his left hip and a jagged hole the size of a half dollar in his buttock. The Slug had hit him near the hip bone and deflected, saving him from a fatal injury but it was easy to see from the angle of entry that there were some shattered bones.

It was going to hurt like hell in a few minutes, and he was going to have problems walking normally for the rest of his life, but he would live if I could find the sniper.

"How bad is it?" He groaned as he rolled over onto his right hip.

"Bad enough, but it won't kill you if I can nail the guy. Got a gun?"

"Inside jacket pocket." He grimaced with pain. "How many are there?"

"No idea."

I grabbed him by the shoulders and dragged him to the shelter of the bank as another slug slammed into the stones just over our heads. I ripped the front of my shirt, stuffed it into the wound, then yanked the .380 Browning from his pocket.

"Stay here, pal," I said. "I'll lead them away."

"Stay here. Hey, that's hilarious, man; you shoulda' been a comedian."

"Well, relax, then, and I'll be back for you as soon as I can."

"You hope."

"I do that."

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FIVE

Calhoun's .380 Browning was a poor match against the sniper's rifle but, unless I could reach the motorhome to get the M1A-1, it would have to do the job. I slipped down the length of the bank looking for a way up so I could get above or behind the shooter. Whether I could make it or not depended on where he was. Because we were just about to reach the bank when Calhoun had been hit, I figured the gunman was down low on the slope. If he was up high on the hill he could have got us both while we were sitting out in the middle of the lake flipping stones. If that was true, I could duck along the bank to the south, get into the timber, and use the underbrush for cover until I could spot whomever had fired the shot.

I popped my head up for a fraction of a second and gave the entire area where I thought the sniper was an instant scan, then popped back down. The top of the bank eight inches above my head exploded into a cloud, showering me with flying dirt and debris. The ounce or two of lead travelling at over a mile a second missed me by less than a foot and by less than half a second.

I looked back at Calhoun laying curled against the bank with his life blood draining away onto the stones.

It was just too beautiful a place to have to die.

"I'll be back or send someone for you, Dallas," I said

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aloud, then ran as well as I could over the stones toward the cedars.

Either the shooter was gone or I had succeeded in eluding him because there were no other shots as I got into the trees. I stopped just inside and froze in a kneeling position, closing my eyes for a few seconds to help them get used to the dim light. If anyone was there I wanted to be able to see who and where they were. I turned my head from side to side listening for any sound and sniffed the air seeking an odor that would betray the position of a sniper. I knew there could be more than one of them out there; one to drive me into the forest, the other waiting to pick me off.

I waited. I knew the shooter, if he was still out there, was going to have to move an inch or a foot or a yard closer just to see if he could spot me. It was obvious he couldn't see me crouching there because if he could have, I'd be dead.

Nearly ten minutes passed before he made a move. He was good, I had to give him that, but he wasn't good enough. He stepped from behind an enormous cedar thirty yards away and was spotlighted by sunrays filtering down onto the forest floor.

It was the same guy who had followed me around Seaport Village in San Diego.

Had I a rifle with only a twenty inch barrel I could have dusted him with ease, but Calhoun's Browning was nearly useless at that distance in the underbrush. If I fired and missed, I'd only give away my position, and he could take his time after that to hunt me down.

He was carrying a long-barrel .223 bolt action hunting rifle fitted with a silencer. The rifle had tremendous firepower but it was bulky and awkward and seemed a poor weapon for a hit man to use in the deep woods.

There was one like it in the motorhome that D.I.C.E,

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had provided as standard issue. I had tried it but could never hit anything so I left it hanging in the rack, preferring my own .30 caliber M1A-1 carbine.

He began walking toward me, sweeping the muzzle of his weapon back and forth, ducking under low branches, sidestepping small rocks, but never taking his eyes from the area before him. He knew I was close, and probably figured it was just a matter of time before I bolted.

One thing was certain: he knew I didn't have a weapon capable of hitting anything over twenty feet away with any accuracy so I figured he had been watching us for awhile before he took his first shot.

I waited until he was fifteen feet away, easing under a cedar limb, then I rolled from behind the tree, levelled the Browning and squeezed the trigger. He tried to duck away, his eyes wide with terror, tried to swing the rifle toward me, but he never made it.

The .380 slug hit him just under the nose, smashing his head back in an explosion of blood and bone. His hands jerked uncontrollably to his face and the rifle went arching into the brush. He was dead before he hit the ground.

Calhoun was barely conscious, his face ashen, when I got back to him. I dragged him to his feet and agonized him up the side of the hill where I'd left the gunman. After I eased Calhoun down, I rolled the man toward him so he could see what was left of his face.

"You know this guy?" I asked.

He nodded weakly, rolled over on his side and began retching spasmodically, holding his hip, and groaning, "Dumb sonovabitch," over and over.

I got Calhoun over my shoulders and worked my way up the hill to the cabin, eased him onto the bed, pulled the phone into the bedroom and called Dansforth while I

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did what I could to minister to the wound.

"Calhoun's been shot," I said.

"What happened?"

"The guy must have followed him up here; caught us down at the lake. It's the same one who was following me yesterday."

"How did you get away from him?"

"I killed him."

Dansforth muted the phone, and I could hear him talking with someone. Presently he spoke again.

"How bad is Calhoun?"

"Bad, Steve. Lost a lot of blood. He keeps drifting away and I'm afraid he might not make it if I have to drive him to a doctor."

"No, no," he said urgently, "Whatever you do, don't take him to a civilian doctor. I'll send a helicopter. You haven't called Halsey, have you?"

"Not yet. Should I?"

"I'll do it. You keep an eye on Calhoun. Do what you have to do to keep him alive. Does Calhoun know who the guy is?"

"Alan Haniford."

"Oh, my good, ever-loving Jesus Christ!" Dansforth groaned, then he began saying, "Dumb sonovabitch," too, and I began to wonder if he and Calhoun were referring to Haniford or me as the dumb sonovabitch.

"Richard," Dansforth said, "if you haven't already done so, get out there and get him back to the cabin any way you can. No one must know about this. No one."

Alan Haniford, code name Didymus, was born in Akron, Ohio, April 14th, 1946. Captain, United States Army, served as one of the agency's liaisons with I-Corps in Chu Lai, Vietnam, listed as missing in action in 1968 and presumed dead. Dansforth told me more: scars, weight, height, MOS, schools, awards, specialties, but I missed

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them. All I could think of was the man was a DICE agent and I had killed him.

Didymus was a Greek masculine name that meant twin or double and was the biblical name for the Apostle Thomas. I wondered if Alan Haniford had a twin brother somewhere and asked Dansforth. He told me to wait and I could hear someone clicking the keys of a computer keyboard. Presently, he was back on the phone with the name and address of a sister living in Lolo, Montana. Her name was Allison Haniford.

I thanked Dansforth and rang off.

I could understand why Haniford was following us if he was trying to keep us from getting killed, but not when he was doing the shooting. It didn't make any sense. Unless he was on the other team.

He'd been with I-Corps in Vietnam and had been listed as missing in action before the fall of Saigon. Could he have been one of Hood's accomplices, or was he a latecomer lured into working for the smugglers by the promise of untold wealth?

Or was this my first brush with a member of CIA's Nightshade Company?

I pushed the phone away and turned to Calhoun. He was rolling his head fitfully and his face was contorted with pain. That was good sign; he was conscious enough to feel the terrible pain in his hip.

I shook him gently and he opened his eyes.

"I've got to go get Haniford's body, Calhoun. Dansforth doesn't want me to leave him down there where someone can find him. Will you be okay for a few minutes?"

"Yeah, yeah. Get him up here. I'll be fine."

I trotted off into the cedars, and ten minutes later, huffing and puffing, I had Haniford and the rifle wrapped in a canvas ground cover on the kitchen floor. Calhoun

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propped himself up on one elbow to watch.

"Oh, crap, man," I gasped as I struggled to stand. "I'm getting way too old for this."

"Come in here, Richard. I've got to tell you something," Calhoun said as he fell back heavily.

"Dammit, Calhoun, keep still. I finally got the bleeding stopped. What are you trying to do?"

He waved a hand at me and I went in to see what he wanted.

"Listen to me, man. I think you ought to get out of here. Don't be around when they come for me."

"Why?"

"Because we're in a world of shit, that's why. I don't know why Haniford tried to kill us, but he's one of Halsey's people. When he finds out you've killed him, there'll be hell to pay."

"That doesn't make any sense," I said. "I don't think Halsey expects us to stand around and let people shoot at us. I think he'll know why I had to shoot back."

"He won't, believe me." He grabbed my arm, pulled me close. "For whatever it's worth, pal, I've got to tell you that Haniford was our key man in Vietnam. He sent out all the reports about the money. He's been there since way back in 1967."

"I just found that out. But what's he doing here? And why was he trying to kill us?"

He rolled away, moaning softly, his breath coming in strangled gasps.

"I don't know, but you can bet whoever comes for him will try to finish the job now. Get your butt out of here while you can."

I sat on the edge of the bed and watched him closely. He closed his eyes.

"If I go, you're going with me. I'm not going to leave you here to wait for someone to finish this." I began to lift

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him from the bed but he pushed me away.

“Use your head, Constable. I’d bleed to death before we got to civilization. I’ll be okay if Dansforth’s people get here before someone else does. You get out. Go on, get out.”

“Did you know Haniford has a twin sister?”

“Up in Lolo, Montana, I think. You’d better get moving.”

I took some clothes and the carbine from the motor home, stowed them in the pickup, then returned to check on Calhoun before I left.

He was out cold. I searched his pockets quickly, removing his identification and phone book, just in case the wrong people showed up, shoved the envelope inside my jacket, and went out to the truck.

I spotted a white Ford Thunderbird at the side of the road as I drove down the hill, figured it was Haniford’s, and looked around for any other people as I sailed past it. I couldn’t see anyone. When I reached Highway 18, a helicopter swept up out of the valley, low over the trees, headed full bore for the cabin. I knew every agent on the coast would be looking for me before noon. I hoped they’d take good care of Calhoun.

I was in freeway traffic half an hour later and settled down to some serious thinking.

If Haniford was assigned to the agency’s station in Southeast Asia, what was he doing in the San Bernardino Mountains trying to kill us? The only reason I could think of was that his business in Vietnam was done. All the money had been collected, and he was here to protect his and his employer’s interests, whether that employer was a foreign country, the government of the United States, or some unknown cartel.

If Haniford was one of Halsey’s men had Halsey sanctioned the murder attempt? It didn’t seem likely. But what

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did Dallas Calhoun know that was so incriminating he had to be eliminated in order to protect the operation?

One thing was for sure: Calhoun knew someone was following him, was trying to kill him, but, knowing that, he'd been mighty careless walking around where someone could get a shot at him.

How had Haniford found Calhoun so he could follow him to the cabin? Did he have an inside informant, an accomplice in the agency who was providing information about us? Haniford had been waiting for us at both places, and that meant someone was letting him know what we were doing. He had apparently followed Calhoun right to the front door quite easily.

But who had access to the information that Calhoun and I were going to meet at Seaport Village, or that he would meet me at the cabin the following day? As much as I hated to admit it, it appeared that Dansforth had told someone where we would be on both occasions.

I wondered if he had called Halsey to inform him that Calhoun had been shot, or that I'd killed Haniford. He certainly didn't want me to call, had only wanted me to hide the body and get out. I knew I'd have to call Spenser Halsey as soon as I returned to San Diego to find out for myself if Dansforth was keeping him informed. I trusted Halsey; he'd always been honest with me, treated me fairly. He was a hardheaded taskmaster, sometimes overbearing, but I just couldn't imagine him as anything but an honest, if overzealous, man, and a conscientious government employee.

Truth to tell, Halsey left nothing to chance. I doubt that anything happening within the intelligence community surprised him. He held a firm rein on the horses pulling all his wagons and was especially in control of the situation when he last visited me at the hospital in Vietnam.

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Enemy troops staged in the hills around the air base had been dropping mortars and rockets onto the runways for a few days. Some of the incoming rounds had hit buildings near the hospital. I watched from my barred window, wishing someone would unlock the door so I could get out if the hospital was hit, but, except for an orderly bringing a bag lunch, no one even came to the door to acknowledge I was still alive.

Halsey hadn't brought any paperwork or dossiers when he visited me on the afternoon of 30th January, 1968. We had talked briefly about where I would like to be stationed when I returned to the States then he told me I would probably be leaving the hospital sometime during the night. I was dressed, sitting at the window, watching the activity around the base sometime after midnight when the door burst open and two men entered and began making frantic gestures for me to follow them. I jumped from the chair and ran behind them to a waiting sedan. They hustled me in, slammed the doors, and the driver roared off toward the runway. He drove through the gates, out onto the taxiway toward a 727, engines running, waiting to take off.

One of those boarding ladders mounted on a pickup truck was rolled up beside the rear door and they pushed me up it as fast as I could go without falling. One man shoved me down and buckled me into a seat, and the plane turned onto the runway and began its takeoff roll before the rear door was secured. The two men went forward into the crew compartment as the plane lifted from the runway, and ten minutes later the 727 was leveling off at altitude, headed east toward Hawaii.

Other than the crew, I had been the only person aboard that airplane. And I'd been so elated to be free that I hadn't even understood the implications of that.

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SIX

I stopped at a gas station in Escondido to fill up the tank and used my charge card to call Spenser Halsey in Washington, D.C. It was nearly closing time at the agency on the east coast but Halsey was still in and his secretary put me straight through. He greeted me cordially and asked why I was calling.

"Never mind that," I said, "I want to know if Steve Dansforth has talked to you in the last hour or so."

"No; should he have?"

"Who is Alan Haniford?"

"I'm not familiar with the name," he said. "Should I know him?"

"Maybe, maybe not. I understand he was overseeing the shipment of some valuable merchandise left over from the war. If he's with your agency, I'd like to know if he has any business in San Diego."

"Sorry, Constable, I don't recall the man at all. I can run a check to see if he's working for us, but it may take awhile."

"No need." I laid it out for him just as I'd received it from Dansforth and Calhoun, waited until he had time to absorb it, then asked him why Haniford would be in the United States when, by rights, he should still be somewhere in Southeast Asia.

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“I have no idea, and don’t know if he is working for us at all. If he is, I’d like to know how you got the information.”

I hung up, hurried to the truck, fired up the engine and got back on the freeway. Making the call was a mistake. If Halsey was not in on the investigation it might mean that he wasn’t supposed to know what was going on. Could someone at the agency initiate a covert operation without Halsey’s knowledge? Could they recruit military people, attorneys, politicians, arms dealers, foreign diplomats; divert money and resources, and purchase and store aircraft and ships, covertly, all over the world without being discovered?

Sure they could. But only someone inside one of the departments with the ability to alter the computer files and supply misleading information could do it with impunity.

My call would certainly prompt Halsey to call Dansforth to find out what was going on, and I figured everyone in the agency, despite their loyalty, would be looking for me, trying to shut my mouth permanently long before I could drive to Portland to get Brandy.

I arrived home just as the light failed and was met at the curb by Brad Ironsmith and Issac Courts, two of DICE’s agents from the San Diego station.

“We’ve been expecting you for hours,” Ironsmith said laconically. “What say we go in the house and relax? Mister Houser wants to have a word with you.”

“Who’s he?” I asked suspiciously.

“Deputy Director.”

“Aha. Well, I don’t feel like having a word with him. I’ll just get a few things from the closets and leave if it’s okay with you.”

They hustled me into the house and pushed me into a chair. Court got on the phone and made a call to

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Dansforth, informing him that I'd arrived about on schedule.

"You're an easy man to follow, Constable," Ironsmith growled. "You leave a trail of dead, wounded or unconscious people everywhere you go." He motioned for Court to stand guard with his Uzi, then sat at the opposite end of the table with his hands spread flat.

He was a big man, fairly well filled up the other end of the table as he idled there, tapping his fingers on the polished wood. His dark eyes glared and the muscles at his jaws twitched nervously.

"I can't figure out how you managed to get through twenty years in the Navy, Constable; you don't seem to enjoy following orders worth a damn," he said.

"I haven't heard any orders yet, only stupid suggestions that I'm supposed to walk around in public waiting for someone to take a shot at me. Frankly, that doesn't make a lot of sense. What have you birds done with Calhoun?"

"He's okay. In the hospital, but he won't be walking or sitting a lot." He began a smile, thought better of it, and glowered again.

I sat in silence for half an hour while they took turns waving the KG-99s at me, talking on the phone, and checking to make sure the agents outside were doing their jobs.

"If it's okay with you, warden, I'd like to make some coffee," I said.

He ground his teeth, jerked his head toward Court as I got up to go to the kitchen. "Someday your big mouth is gonna get you into trouble, asshole."

"Whoa, Ironsmith, that's bad talk from a public servant." I smiled, holding my hands up. "But you're right and I apologize. Let's make the best of this until the deputy shows up, then I'll be out of your hair. I just don't appre-

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ciate being held prisoner by someone who accepts my tax money as his wages.”

“You’re not a prisoner,” he said.

“That’s from where you sit. If I can’t get up and walk out of here without getting roughed up, I maintain I’m a prisoner.”

“After Houser has his say, I think you’ll be free to go. Not until.”

“You know what the problem is, Ironsmith? You, all of you, have this distorted, one-sided view of the world. You all have tunnel vision, think everyone is a spy or a conspirator, and you can’t understand that if you would all go away, the rest of us would figure out how to get along without blowing up the world or starting another war.”

“Can it, Constable, you don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t like you. As a matter of fact, I’d like to bust your face, and I may when this is over. Only you might not be around.” He stood, straightened his suit, and paced the floor from the kitchen to the living room window, anxious for the arrival of his Deputy Director.

“What did you and Calhoun talk about this afternoon?” he asked without looking at me.

“We didn’t have much time to talk. I was busy hiding in the bushes so I could shoot your buddy and Calhoun was bleeding to death.”

He might have killed me on the spot had not an automobile pulled into the driveway.

It was Christian Houser.

He conducted a brief, one-sided whispering session on the porch, sent everyone to wait outside, then walked over to the table and sat down.

He was 55 or 60 years old, had slightly thinning grey hair with a matching mustache, heavy eyebrows, and a handsomely rugged face with brown spots at the temples

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that his dark tan couldn't hide. He was nearly six feet tall with broad shoulders and rough, meaty hands. He leaned heavily on the table as he sat.

"You've been busy, Richard. I have to tell you that I'm going to lock you up for a long time if you don't quit badgering my agents every time you turn around." He worked his fingers into five little steeples, leaned forward, and glared at me. "Do I make myself clear?"

"Who was Haniford?" I asked, ignoring his question.

"Do I make myself clear?"

"Yeah. Who was Haniford?"

"Never heard of him."

"Bullshit. The man was out there shooting at us. I think I deserve to know who he was, why he was trying to kill us, and who gave him his orders."

"I'm telling you I do not know him. Do I smell fresh coffee?"

I went to the kitchen, fixed two cups and slid one to him.

"Haniford doesn't exist," he said quietly, pushing his cup around in little circles. "Not since Vietnam."

"Oh, I get it. Another of those people who don't exist. Did you know this nonperson was still alive, working for the agency in Southeast Asia?"

"No."

"How about Halsey?"

"I don't know. Why are you stuck on this problem?"

"I want to know why he tried to kill Calhoun, damn it."

Houser stared into his coffee, took a deep breath, and exhaled slowly. "You know, Richard," he said, "I have a feeling the shot Calhoun took might have been meant for you. I talked to the doctor who patched up Calhoun, and he told me there were pieces of bark, wood and cellulose in the wound. He seemed certain the slug hit a tree

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or a limb before it hit Calhoun, was deflected, and hit him in the hip.

"I questioned Dallas before he was sedated and he told me what happened. Knowing that, I'm convinced the shot was meant for you. You told Dansforth the man you killed was the same man who was following you after your first meeting with Calhoun."

I nodded. "Okay, so he was after me. Do you think he followed Calhoun to the cabin to get to me?"

"That's the way I read it."

"But why? I'd only been involved for a few hours, had only talked to Calhoun an hour or so the previous morning. How could Haniford have found me so quickly?"

"I don't know, Richard. Honestly, I don't. Incidentally, Dallas said you hadn't read the report. Is that true?"

I nodded. "To tell you the truth, Mister Houser, I really wasn't interested. I was really trying to figure out how I could avoid getting involved. Then Haniford showed up and that pretty well ended the conversation."

"The agents who went to the cabin reported that they found neither his identification nor the report; do you know what became of them?"

"No," I lied, "Dansforth told me to get out, so I did."

That report again. What information did it contain that was so incriminating someone was willing to kill for it? And why was Calhoun working alone, conducting his own private investigation? If, as I suspected, someone inside the agency was conducting the kind of operation that Calhoun had suggested, who could it be?

Well, Haniford for one. But if Haniford had been the only one Calhoun was worried about, his death would have solved all the agency's problems, and it hadn't. That meant there were others, either at DICE or one of the other agencies. I could be sitting across the table from one of them.

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That bothered me.

“Do you think Halsey knows what Haniford was doing?” I asked.

“I don’t know. It isn’t my place to ask him, and it isn’t yours, either.”

“Uh huh,” I grunted, wondering whose place it was. “So where do we go from here?”

“I was not informed of your task,” he said. “I understood that the instructions were in the envelope Calhoun gave you. When we find that envelope, I will know what to do with you. Meanwhile, you and I are going downtown to examine some files and discuss what you can accomplish while we wait for further information from Spenser Halsey.”

I refilled my coffee cup and leaned back in the chair. “To tell you the truth, Mister Houser, I don’t really feel like being someone’s target,” I said. “And you can’t convince me I’m not going to be followed or have any problems just because Alan Haniford is dead. I think I’ll just get Brandy and we’ll go ahead with our vacation plans.”

“No you won’t. When all this is over you can take her on your little vacation. Not until.” He rose, walked around the table to face me, held a fist under my nose, red-faced and tight-jawed.

“I’m not here to play games with you, Richard,” he growled. “We are up to our asses in deadly serious business, and you’re going to help get it resolved.”

He stood above me, swaying on the balls of his feet, glaring at me with frustration.

“If you refuse, we’ll initiate legal proceedings accusing you of deserting your comrades while you were on the patrol in Vietnam. We will say you left your dead and dying friends to save your own life.

“Deserting in time of war is a crime punishable by death. We can make you appear to be the most detest-

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able person on the face of the earth. We can produce the survivors, invent them if necessary, and have them testify that you deserted them with no regard for their lives or safety because of cowardice.”

He paced to the other end of the table and stood with his back to me.

“Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“You know I didn’t desert them; I escaped, by common consent, from certain death, to preserve that satchel full of information. I protested, but I was ordered to escape and get back to Cam Rahn any way I could.”

Houser turned, his cold eyes drilling into me. “We have only your word for that and you know it isn’t good enough. The agency could spend a million dollars to prove you’re lying, could keep you in court for years, until you’re convicted, sentenced, and imprisoned, or put to death.” He sat wearily in the chair and, moments later, his face softened.

“For what it’s worth, Richard,” he said, “until this operation is completed you’re going to have to forfeit some of your rights as an American civilian. You’re going to have to follow orders without question, and maintain the highest degree of secrecy.

“You’ll find out soon enough why we need your help, and why you must cooperate. I can’t tell you now, but, in time you’ll know. Do what I ask you to do for a few days. If things work out as we’ve planned, we can wrap this up in short order. We can be done with it, conceal the operation before the press gets word of it, and no one will get hurt. Understand?”

“Seems to me people have already been hurt. I’m thinking of Calhoun and Haniford. How will you justify that?”

“Calhoun isn’t talking, even to me, because he understands the importance of the operation. Haniford? The

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man doesn't exist. We could hardly accuse you of killing someone who was already dead, could we? We'd have to explain why we kept him a secret for twenty years, would have to justify his actions for all that time and, believe me, that would be more difficult and more embarrassing than trying you for desertion."

"And you would have an equally difficult time trying me for desertion since I've been dead for twenty years, too. But I suppose you've already figured out how to get around that."

"Of course we have. You might be amazed how easy it would be convince a jury you had created your own false identity. After all, you vanished from the face of the earth for two months after you were taken out of Vietnam. Could you account for those two months? We can."

He got up and went to the door, opened it a crack and spoke to someone outside, then came back and stood at the end of the table.

"One way or the other, we'll be out of this within a week. We'll either have solved the problem, or we'll have a whole new set of problems to deal with. Whatever happens, you will no longer be involved." He jerked his head toward the door. "Give me your truck keys, and come on out to the car."

I fished the keys from my pocket, handed them to him.

Houser draped his topcoat over his arm and led the way into the chilling night. I followed him, pulled my collar up against the cold, and waited until he had unlocked the passenger door of the agency sedan. After a brief conversation with one of the other agents near the back of the car, he ushered me in and we were soon on our way toward the Federal Building downtown.

He jerked a thumb over his shoulder at a set of bright lights closing up behind. "Agent Clayborn is bringing your truck. We'll park it at the motor pool and give you

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one of the sedans; too many people know what you've been driving and I don't want you to be a sitting duck if things get nasty later on."

I hung my left arm over the back of the seat and turned to face him, watched him intently, waited for him to continue. I thought about the report under the seat, and knew they were taking the truck downtown to search it. Presently he glanced at me sideways.

"We have a real mess here, Richard, the worst thing that could possibly happen to us right now. Someone has apparently managed to get their hands on that money and we have to find out where it is and what they intend doing with it."

I asked him how they had discovered the money was being circulated.

"Pure luck," he said. "Pure frigging luck. If some dope head hadn't got greedy and killed his pusher, we'd never have found it. The first batch we found turned up as evidence in a murder case."

"How much do you think has been circulated?"

"Very little that we know of, although it would be difficult to trace it in any event. It was perfect, you know. Oddly enough, we found a little of the good money, too; a hundred and fifty thousand perhaps, and that's what sidetracked us. When it began hitting the streets here in San Diego, everyone got involved in looking for the fools who were spending it. Turned out to be a big time drug dealer and some hookers.

"But that got the Drug Enforcement agents and the city police involved. Then the drug dealer was found dead and that got more local law enforcement agencies involved. A few of the hookers named some very important politicians and attorneys, and we found ourselves stumbling over FBI agents and the vice squad.

"So here we have all these separate civil and gov-

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ernment law enforcement agencies up to their eyes in this thing, running around, knocking heads, getting in each other's way, and each claiming to have the only valid ideas about the investigation." He shook his head.

I'd met plenty of people like Houser, both as a civilian and in the military. He was one of those people who believed there was no history except that which he could invent from the dark pit of his mind. As far as he was concerned, history may have begun that morning, just as he was climbing out of bed, and would end again when he fell asleep. I might even give him the benefit of the doubt and say history began with this operation, and would cease, or begin anew, with the inception of the next.

"Well," he said at length, "some of the politicians are beginning to get wind of this thing and they're going to cry bloody murder if we don't clear it up. They're demanding to know how we could let that money get away from us and into the hands of someone who might be planning an insurrection."

"They're only pissed off because they didn't get their hands on it first so they could finance their own illegal programs," I said.

"Quiet, Constable," he said. "Just shut up and listen to what I'm telling you. It isn't up to you to decide what's legal or moral."

I leaned forward and studied him for a moment. "If it isn't my job to question the civil servants," I asked, "whose is it? I help pay their wages and I think that gives me the right to ask questions occasionally."

He declined to answer, horsed the sedan up the Interstate 805 interchange, got his foot on the floor, and sped south in the fast lane.

I slid down, rested my head on the seat, and closed my eyes. Houser began telling me names, dates, places, companies, addresses and organizations who seemed to

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be involved in any way with the plan to collect and hide the money.

I listened with half my mind, wishing I could be out on a deep, blue lake somewhere casting for bass or hunkered down with my hat over my eyes, sleeping away the afternoon. I could think of a dozen things I'd rather be doing besides having a meeting with a GS-15 civil servant in a car speeding along a California Interstate in the middle of the night.

I'd been recruited, coerced into providing assistance, threatened with imprisonment or death if I didn't cooperate. Even if the agency couldn't prove I'd deserted my comrades they could keep me tied up in court for more years than I had left to live. It just seemed easier to do what they wanted of me and be done with it, even if it meant bruising my values.

"If you guys already know all this stuff," I grumbled, "I can't figure out why you need me. Why don't you just arrest everybody and put a stop to it?"

He maneuvered the sedan to the curb near the Federal Building and shut off the engine.

"You haven't been paying attention to me, Richard. We can't arrest anyone because we can't prove they're doing anything illegal. And we don't know where the money is, either. If we jump too soon, they'll go into hiding and we'll have to begin again. We don't have time for that."

We got out of the car, and I followed him into the building. We rode the elevator in silence to the third floor, stepped out into the abandoned hallway, and made our way to the agency office. Houser fumbled with the keys, finally got the door unlocked and the lights on, and motioned me to a chair beside his desk.

When he went into the closet and began banging around in one of the filing cabinets, I strolled over to the

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library table to search for any slips of paper with the current codes to the computer data base in Washington, D.C., found them on a file card under the keyboard. I copied them, then went back to the desk and sat down as he returned with a fat dossier.

He sat on one edge of the desk and pushed a folder toward me. "Take a look through these and tell me if you recognize any of the faces."

I thumbed through the information and photographs, recognized two politicians, a few wealthy middle east arms dealers, and the picture of Alan Haniford, but drew a blank on the two dozen others.

Houser pulled the pages apart, arranged them in neat rows and piles, jabbed a finger at the photograph of Haniford in the top left corner.

"As far as we can determine," he said, "the money has flowed in this direction. Haniford, who was in Vietnam during the fall of the south, somehow managed to collect all or most of the money that was scheduled to be destroyed during Sanction and Relieve. We're not sure how he did that; it was one of the things we had hoped to learn. Unfortunately, we won't get the chance to ask him now." He stared at me balefully for a few seconds, then jabbed a finger at the next photograph.

"This is Colonel David Alfred McKenzie Fourney. He was attached to the Embassy staff just prior to the evacuation of Saigon and was a drinking buddy of this man, Stanley Hall, from the Treasury Department, and this man, Edward Nunzio, from the State Department."

Hall had been found shot to death in his hotel room the day before he was scheduled to return to the States. Nunzio was killed when a C5-A Galaxy, carrying a load of Vietnamese children out of the country, crashed on takeoff from Ton Son Nuht Air Force Base. No one could prove it, of course, but there was sufficient circumstan-

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tial evidence for the agency to believe the C5-A was sabotaged just to prevent Nunzio from leaving Vietnam alive.

Hall had been the Treasury agent in charge of the Sanction and Relieve operation which, due to his death, was never executed. Nunzio had been the liaison officer for the State Department, and Fourney was the military officer in charge of the enlisted men who were supposed to take the money to the furnaces. The enlisted men and two Marine officers had been found murdered hours after they had loaded their trucks with nearly a billion dollars and departed to dispose of it. The four trucks have never been found.

“Colonel Fourney is now chief pilot for an outfit called Casablanca Air Freight,” Houser continued. “His one and only job is to recruit, train, and dispatch teams of mercenary pilots to fly contraband weapons to rebel armies everywhere in the world.”

Houser pushed the papers away, and walked over to stand at the window with his hands behind his back.

“Casablanca is a Spanish word, Richard, meaning white house,” he said. “Do you realize what that infers? Unlike Air America, which is a government funded and sanctioned operation, Casablanca is a privately financed covert air transportation company. Seems it was organized sometime near the end of the war and became operational immediately after our withdrawal from Vietnam.

“They’re using C-123s, C-130s, DHC-6s, and some modern choppers to transport and drop the supplies in where they’re needed. Our intelligence sources report that they’ve purchased at least half a dozen F-4 Phantom fighter planes, with air-to-air, and air-to-ground missiles. They’ve also purchased trucks, Jeeps, and weapons carriers from several sources in the Middle East. The planes and vehicles are scheduled to be shipped from the middle east country later this month.”

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“So Colonel Fourney, or someone else who knew about the money, decided it could be put to good use someday and saved it from the furnaces.” I said. “Treasury agent Hall was either in on the scheme and got cold feet, or he discovered the plot to bring the money back to the States. In any event, he was killed. Nunzio probably began asking questions about Hall’s death; maybe he figured out Fourney or one of his colleagues had killed Hall. So they had to kill him, too.”

Houser nodded. “Probably something close to that. But is Colonel Fourney the instigator, or is he hired help?”

I put my thumbnail against my teeth and thought about it.

“I’d guess he’s just a pawn in the game. For one thing, there’s Willis Hood, the officer in charge of the Long Range Patrol. He had to be getting his orders from someone to pinpoint those caches of counterfeit money along the Trail. I think they were going to use that money to finance their operation, buy all their equipment, and set themselves up in business. But when Hood got killed and I showed up with the maps Spenser Halsey locked me up, thinking that would secure the information about the location of the money they lost in the heat of battle.

“Hood was dead and I disappeared, thanks to Halsey, who had given me a new identity. The people who dreamed up the scheme may have sent their own teams back into the jungles to try to locate the money. Maybe they found some, maybe not. The people in these photographs, here, eventually got together, possibly long before we pulled out, and devised a plan to collect the money, hired some tough, old military officers who could organize a private mercenary army, and with some financial help from a few foreign arms dealers and opportunistic politicians and attorneys, began shoving the right people into important places so they could be in charge

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when it came time to steal the money.”

“And what became of it? You were there; you must have heard something or seen something these people don’t want us to know. How do you think it was moved and where did it go?”

“I don’t remember much about it, Mister Houser. I’ve had two days to think about it and I can only offer a supposition.”

“I’d like to hear it,” he said.

“You won’t like it.”

“Tell it anyhow.”

I pushed the photographs around and stared at the wall while I got my thoughts together.

“When the counterfeit money was first discovered by some of the American troops over there on the Trail, they reported it to the proper military authorities. The word got back to Washington. Particularly did it get back to the attention of CIA. I believe CIA had always known the money was being smuggled into South Vietnam and they were just waiting for the proper time to fetch it and hide it somewhere.”

“You think they knew about it that long ago? Back in 1966 and 1967?”

“They had Shadow Companies fighting with the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Regulars, Mister Houser. Of course they knew. They may have financed the printing operation and even helped smuggle it into the country. Air America agents were conducting counter-insurgency and terrorist strikes into North Vietnam from Cambodia. They actually orchestrated the war right down to deciding how many Americans would die on any given day. But where did the money go? If I were to hazard a guess, I’d say it went to Cambodia. That’s where Air America had their bases and that’s where they would have taken it. What became of it after that? Flown out. I have no idea

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where.”

Houser leaned over the desk, and tapped Colonel Fourney's photograph. “We've been looking at the wrong people all this time,” he said. “These people might have been members of the Shadow Companies while they were in Vietnam, but not anymore. They're working for someone else, someone neither we nor any other agency has been able to locate. But we will and you're going to help us do it.”

He reached for the phone, lifted the receiver, thought for a moment, then slammed it back down and leaned forward with his left hand to his forehead.

“No,” he said to himself. “I can call Dansforth in the morning; right now, I have to figure out how we can get someone inside the organization at Casablanca Air Freight. One thing is clear now that wasn't clear before tonight and you have helped me see what it is. Who, besides you, knows where the rest of that money was hidden? Who, besides you, could have told anyone else about it? Remember: all your comrades, as far as we know, were killed out there in the jungle. But someone else, someone outside CIA, knew the money was out there, knew where the maps were, and knows you are the only surviving member of that patrol, the only person who could expose him.”

I could think of only one person who met all those criteria: Spenser Halsey, the man who collected and kept all the intelligence data I'd brought back from the patrol; the man who was in charge of operations for the Vietnam area. He had become the agency Director in 1974, almost a year before we'd pulled out of Vietnam.

“Halsey's sharp, Richard,” Houser said. “He'll figure this out in short order, then we'll play hell trying to stay ahead of his first string team if he sends them after us.”

“Seems to me we have more than Halsey to contend

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with," I said. "Number one, if all this nonsense is as well known in the intelligence communities as you say, we're going to be dodging bullets from our side, too. I just told you that Air America retrieved millions of dollars from somewhere in Cambodia and flew it out. It could have been good money or it could have been counterfeit money. Whatever it was they weren't supposed to have it. So if someone in this agency got their hands on CIA money, I suggest letting CIA take care of getting it back. I don't feel like getting in the middle of it. Besides, three of the men may not have been killed."

"What?"

"Three other members of the team may have survived. I don't know for a fact that they were killed. I only assumed it. Halsey believes they might still be alive."

"How did you find out about all this, Richard?" he asked.

"I listened and I read things. And now I'm putting little pieces of my puzzle together until it is beginning to make a picture."

"But you had been reassigned to duty in the States when all that was going on."

"Mister Houser, I might have been physically in the United States, but I left too much of me in Vietnam. I lost a family because everyone thought I was nutty. I lived in a truck for two years out in the wilderness. I slept with a loaded assault rifle. I wore my cammies until they rotted off my body. Then I woke up one day thinking I was crazy and I wanted to know why. Every day I learn more. Every day I begin to understand that I was not crazy. I am paranoid as hell, oh yes, but with good reason. Ask me why I carried the rifle."

He was silent a moment, assessing me carefully. "Why?"

"I was afraid someone like you would show up one

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day to put a bullet in my brain. The agency was my enemy; not the Vietnamese people. I am out of their country and that is all they ever wanted. But what I know about Air America, the Shadow Companies and the theft of that money makes me a bugaboo. I can make things go bump in the night.”

I stood and asked for the keys to the sedan he'd promised me.

“Calhoun was right,” I said, “I'm as good as dead.”

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I spent the early hours of the following morning trying the codes I'd found under Houser's IBM, browsed through some incidental files and came at last to Haniford's electronic dossier.

It was still active.

There was no mention of his assignment in Vietnam and was empty after the entry concerning his disappearance. A list of names and addresses crowded in at the end caught my eye. One was for his sister whose last known address was Lolo, Montana.

I was getting ready to leave the file when I noticed a series of numbers and cryptic symbols at the bottom of the screen, so I copied them down, thinking they might yield some useful information in the future.

My own name was in the central files, and I knew that's how Haniford and his bunch had found me. I made some insertions that would put me in London for a couple of months, then got into the other files and began looking for some of the people Houser had mentioned the previous night. According to the information, Colonel Fourney spent a lot of time running his operation out of his home near Sequim Bay, Washington when he wasn't flying or squatting in a jungle somewhere eating rat meat and wild berries. I stared at the monitor, willing it to give me a

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logical explanation of his operation, and wondered why the agency hadn't done something before now to put an end to it.

Fourney had to know where the money was being kept because he seemed to be spending hundreds of thousands of dollars for some personal little war. I turned on my printer and let it deliver some hard copy while I went to the kitchen for a cup of coffee.

Calhoun had already told me they knew who most of the principals were and Houser had confirmed it later. I assumed he had some agents in Washington State keeping an eye on Fourney so they'd know what he had for dinner every night as well as how many times, and to whom, he talked on the phone.

Arresting Fourney or any of his men was out of the question at this point. That would bring the investigation to a screeching halt and allow everyone involved time to assume a respectable posture while they simply revised all their plans. In the meantime the adversaries would vanish at an alarming rate until the conspirators felt it was safe to begin shopping for weapons again.

I had an idea, too, they already had someone set up to go to prison for the whole sordid mess, if and when it ever got the attention of the press, so the real villains could get on with their war. Nothing makes a more effective cover for a covert operation than a scandal linking government officials with mercenaries. The reporters get so busy patting themselves on the back for uncovering the scoop of the century, and the public gets so interested in finding out who's going to jail, that they fail to notice the thieves sneaking out the back door with the family silverware.

They rearrange all the timetables, put new names on the bank accounts, and in twenty-four hours it's business as usual. Then all the investigations begin again from

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square one. That's why the agencies involved couldn't jump on anyone before they had the entire operation in one sack. Houser couldn't question or arrest anyone, and couldn't push people around or bop them on the skull until he had all his people in position to pounce at the same time.

But I could.

Houser and Dansforth both knew I'd have no second thoughts about what the reporters would have to say when I got ready to break down the doors and were probably only hoping I could get it done without involving the agency. That's why he'd warned me that the President had to be protected and intimated the agency could do nothing to stop the illegal operation without compromising the stature of the oval office.

But I knew that one covert action, like reports of an illegal war in South America, might be nothing more than a cover for another covert action. If there was a problem, the less important operation would be revealed, complete with suspects and villains, just in time to keep everyone looking the wrong way while all the people involved shredded their incriminating paperwork.

I got the hard copy off the printer, shut everything off and went to the bedroom to pack the .45 automatic, the .30 caliber M1A-1 carbine, one hundred rounds of ammunition for each, four kilos of C-4 plastic explosive with primer cord, timers and detonators, my Navy survival knife, and a set of green fatigues. Everything else I would need was at the cabin in the San Bernardino mountains.

By the time Houser arrived at 1:30 I had several lethal explosive charges wrapped in eighteen paper lunch bags and stowed inside the parachute bag. Six were rigged with remote detonators so I could trigger them at a maximum distance of about a thousand feet. The remaining twelve were rigged with four feet of zip cord and

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primers. If I was lucky enough to get into Fourney's base I wanted to be certain that no two boards were hooked together when I left.

Houser pulled the rig into the driveway as I was fixing a fresh pot of coffee, turned off the engine, then waved at me through the window.

"Jeezus, I hate driving this thing through the city traffic," he grumbled as I climbed aboard. "Can't see what's around you."

"Yeah, well, it gets a little better out on the open road," I said. "They're not really designed to drive in traffic."

He sat at the dinette and wagged a hand toward the opposite seat. "I guess so. Still, I find it very awkward." He lifted a briefcase from the floor and placed it on the table, snapped open the locks and withdrew a fat manila folder.

"Instructions," I said.

"I see you're already packed to leave. Good. This contains all the information you'll need to carry out your mission," he said. He put the folder on the table under his fingertips as if he wasn't quite ready for me to look at it.

"I've included gasoline credit cards and two different ATM cards in case you need some cash. There's some identification and two airline tickets in case you find yourselves in a position where you have to get out of the country in a hurry.

"Telephone numbers, computer access codes, radio frequencies; they're all in here." He pushed the envelope to my side of the table and leaned back, glancing furtively out of the window.

"And I'll leave this with you, too," he added as he pulled a neatly bound brown package from the briefcase. "This is twenty-five thousand dollars. But don't spend any

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of it unless you must; it's for emergencies only."

"Who's going with me?" I asked.

"What?"

"You said I'm getting two airline tickets in case we have to get out of the country in a hurry; who's going with me?"

"I assumed you would take Brandy with you." He pushed the curtains aside and looked out the window.

I asked him if he was expecting company or if he was checking to make certain his agents weren't sleeping on the job.

"No, not that. They've been called off for the time being; until all this business is completed."

"How did you manage that?"

"I'm the Deputy Director."

"Oh, right."

He leaned forward with his elbows on the table and studied me closely.

"After I leave, call Dansforth at the office; that's his number there at the top of the page. Tell him you're leaving for Washington State so you can find out what Colonel Fourney is up to. He will alert his people to be expecting you. We are flying your wife in and she should arrive in about an hour. You should leave as soon as she is packed. It will take you three or four days to drive to Washington State if there are no untoward delays. The rest of the instructions are in this folder."

He summarized the instructions, admonished me to refer to them if I had problems or questions, and to use the radio and computer when I required help. Then he questioned me carefully until he was satisfied I understood everything I was supposed to do.

Minutes later we went outside and he took the keys for the agency Chrysler. He seemed hesitant to leave, and I thought he was stalling until he got something set

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up, but he turned to me and asked how long I'd known Calhoun.

"About a year and a half. Why do you ask?"

"Do you think he might be the kind of person who would be involved in the theft of the money?"

I looked at him sideways, thinking he might have been working too hard lately, and said, "Calhoun? Come on, Mister Houser; you don't have a better agent than Calhoun, unless it's Steve Dansforth. No, I don't think Calhoun's stolen the money."

He nodded solemnly, slid into the sedan, started the engine and leaned out the window. "We found the envelope, you know," he said.

"I figured you would."

"Did you really not read the information inside?"

"No."

His eyebrows went up a fraction of an inch, and he levered the transmission into drive.

"You should have," he said and drove away.

I watched him disappear around the corner and returned to the house where I poured a fresh cup of coffee, spread the papers out on the bar and sat down to study them at my leisure. The instructions were simple enough: we were supposed to get into Fourney's camp, find out where the money was, and try to determine if any of the weapons the Colonel was supposed to have purchased were stored in this country where the agency could confiscate them.

Then, if we were still alive to do it, we were supposed to report all the information to the agency and get out. It seemed easy on paper, but trying it in real life would be another matter. Houser's operation puzzled me. I didn't approve of his priorities. He wanted me in the middle of this thing, out in the open where people could keep an eye on me, and he didn't care if that meant endangering

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Brandy. It was obvious we were going to be the decoys to get the thieves out of their holes.

On the surface, the objectives appeared clear cut and sensible. If someone really was trying to discredit the President, it made sense that every intelligence agency in the country would want to make everyone believe they were trying to protect him. But objectives are one thing, and motives another. I wondered who they were really trying to protect.

Sending me out to find the money didn't make a lot of sense unless they had ulterior motives. I began to wonder if they had got me involved just to confuse everyone so they could get the money out of the country while all the agencies were wondering who I was. And there was another thing that hadn't slipped past me: I knew about that money; if they had plans to erase all outside knowledge of it, they'd have to imprison or kill everyone who had anything to do with it.

That included Brandy and me.

I finished packing, filled a thermos jar with coffee, washed the dishes, then took my gear out to the motor home and stowed it, checking the weapons locker to make certain Houser had transferred everything from my truck after he searched it.

I dug out all of the information on Haniford and read the history of his activities during the war. There wasn't a lot, as it turned out, but I began to form a clearer picture of the man, his objectives, and his loyalties.

Haniford had been one of the agency's top operatives, his activities so secret that he was listed as missing and presumed dead so he could function anywhere in the world with impunity. Had he somehow obtained information about the counterfeit money and used his anonymity to search for it? The information in the dossier suggested that he had.

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In February of 1968, while I was being debriefed at the Washington station, a message had been sent to Haniford under the code name Didymus, instructing him to leave Saigon and proceed to Svay Rieng, Cambodia, just north of the Plain of Jars on the Vietnam and Cambodian borders to await further orders. That and nothing more. If Haniford had been given further instructions, they had either been pulled from the file, or they had been sent by other means. The single page of information revealed substantial evidence that Haniford had not only been near Ton Son Nuht prior to and during the Tet Offensive while I was being detained at the hospital, but that he had been in contact with the agency. Further, it indicated that Haniford could move about the country at will, a real mean trick since a large part of that area had been controlled by Viet Cong and several regiments of North Vietnamese Regulars.

The message, curiously uncoded, was signed by Spenser Halsey who was the Department Chief in charge of Vietnam operations from 1966 to 1971.

Calhoun apparently hadn't acted on any information Haniford had provided, and hadn't mentioned it to me at all before he was shot. Perhaps he hadn't believed it, or maybe he hadn't had time. Or maybe all that information had been in the report Calhoun had left in my care that I hadn't bothered to read.

The agency denied any knowledge of Haniford or his activities, and I had found only this brief, inconclusive reference to it in the computer. From his most recent behavior, I had to conclude that he had been conducting an extraordinarily complex investigation to find the money, and that his return to the States occurred only days before the agency's investigation got into full swing.

Calhoun told me I was supposed to be bait to lure out the people who were shipping money to this country.

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What if it wasn't that at all? What if it was all a set up, not to locate the money, but to bury it deeper and protect those who had stolen it?

Using the system in the motorhome, I dialed the Communications Satellite and got access to Green Hill Farms. A female voice answered on the second ring.

"Greenline Timber," she said. "May I help you?"

"I'd like to speak with Steve Dansforth, please."

"Please enter your caller number," she said after a brief pause. "Whom shall I say is calling?"

"Partisan." She thanked me and put me through.

"I'm supposed to tell you I'm leaving," I said when he answered.

"Do you have your instructions?"

"I have what Houser gave me a few minutes ago."

"Good. Follow the instructions and report your progress each night. Come directly to Greenline when you arrive. We'll brief you on your mission before we assemble the strike force."

"Has anyone figured out why Haniford tried to kill us?" I asked.

"No." He told someone aside that I had made contact. "Well, you should be leaving in about thirty minutes. The pilot just informed us he's approaching Montgomery Field. Look, I don't know what you're planning, Richard, but I'm asking you, as a friend, not to go on or do anything stupid until I've had a chance to meet with you. Those people are goons; they're going to hurt you worse than you've ever been hurt before, then they'll kill you. And they'll... Brandy won't survive, or won't want to, after they've finished with her." He tried to mumble something else, but didn't quite make it.

"Look," he said. "Since you have the number now, you can get me here for the next few days. Emergency only, get it? Proceed with caution. Trust no one. Do noth-

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ing on your own without consulting me first. Understand?"

"I'll make the briefing, Dansforth. That's a promise. But I won't promise anything beyond that. If I see a target of opportunity, I'll take advantage of it. And if I call you later and ask for a meeting, I want you to come alone."

"When do you propose?"

"I don't know. If things go my way, we won't have to meet. But if I find any of your people are following me or checking on me, we either meet or I kill them, understand?"

"A meeting might not be possible, Richard; you know that. Right now, you're bad news and certain people have been advised to kill you if you do not follow instructions."

"So they believe I wrote the letter?"

"More to the point, Richard, they believe you have the money or know where it is."

"I'll call you," I said, "but if we meet before I see you in Washington State, we do it on my terms or not at all."

He agreed to try, advised me not to go to Fournery's headquarters without help, then rang off.

I put the computer hardcopy away, got off the line, and poured another cup of coffee when I heard a vehicle slow and turn into the driveway.

There was no way I could get out of the motorhome without being seen. I was trapped. I pulled the .45 from the weapons locker and waited until I heard someone at the rear door.

I swung the door open violently, knocking the person backwards onto the ground. In the same instant, I leaped from the steps, shoved the pistol under the man's nose and thumbed back the hammer.

A young man, about twenty-five years old with short hair and a smooth face, looked up at me in terror.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

"Please," he said, "I brought a woman. Please."

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"Who? What woman? Where is she?"

"Are you Mister Constable?"

I lifted the pistol. "Tell me who you are. What are you doing here?" I asked again.

"The man I talked to said you'd know. I brought a woman. She's in the van."

I stood and yanked him to his feet, shoved him toward the van, watched as he slid the side door open and helped Brandy from the back.

She took my hand as she came to me but I pushed her behind me, held the pistol toward the kid. He watched me nervously, closed the door, got back into the driver's seat and backed the van all the way to the corner before turning to leave.

"Great reception, Richard," Brandy said.

"Sorry, Peach; I didn't know it was you. Come on in the house. We're supposed to leave... ."

"I already know about it. I listened to it over and over for four hours on the way down here."

"Come on," I said, "as soon as you're packed we have to leave. Do you want some coffee?"

"Oh, God, yes. I thought I was going to freeze in the plane. Why did you do that to the boy?"

"I didn't know who he was. Hell, he might have been here to kill me. He'll be okay. I didn't hurt him. Did they tell you why we're going to Washington State?"

"Everything, believe me."

"What do you think?"

"Frankly, I'm not too happy about ruining our vacation, but we're headed in the same direction so maybe it won't be too bad. Brad Ironsmith said it would only be a day or two and then we could go on our way. He doesn't like you, does he?" She patted the seat. "Sit beside me. God, how I missed you."

I slid her coffee to her and sat, slipping my arm

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through hers. Despite her briefing, she looked great. I patted her hand, unable to say much, and she rested her head on my shoulder.

“Did Ironsmith act odd or say anything unusual, anything that indicated what they were going to do, when he talked to you?” I asked.

She shook her head and stared into her coffee. “I hate it when you re doing this stuff,” she answered.

“Why? What’s the matter?”

“Oh, nothing, Richard. I’ve been locked up with those awful people all day, not knowing what might have happened to you, fearing that you might be hurt or dead. We haven’t really been together for almost two weeks now, and all you want to talk about is this investigation.

“I was kind of hoping we could talk about us, that you’d tell me you’d missed me, that you love me. Something like that. No, don’t say it now; it will only sound trite and insincere. I know you love me, and deep in my heart I know you missed me and worried about me. I’d just like to hear you say it more often than you do.”

She was right, and I knew it. I held out my hands in a desperate gesture of apology, unable to explain why the really important things in our lives had to be put on hold all the time. Maybe it was some defect in my personality, this tendency to assume she’d always wait until I finished what others wanted me to do. I felt like a rat, and began to apologize, but she put a finger on my lips and shook her head. She had said what was on her mind and let me know I didn’t have to explain; just understand.

It is for those things that a man loves a woman.

“He just told me they are trying to find some money that was stolen and that they need your help to find it,” she finally managed.

“Did he say why?”

“Why what?”

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“Why they’re so interested in finding money that isn’t theirs.”

“No, he didn’t say.”

We discussed the briefing aboard the plane for a few minutes, then she began packing. I carried her luggage to the motorhome and stowed it as carefully as I could, then locked the house. Minutes later we were on the 15 Freeway headed north toward the cabin at Big Bear Lake.

“I’ll tell you the truth, Peach,” I said, “I’m having a devil of a time trying to figure out what they need us for. I mean, look, Dansforth is already up there. Halsey is going to be there Thursday. Houser may be there, too, with every agent he can muster up who isn’t working on something else.

“The FBI, the CIA, the State Department, and people from INSCOM, NIS, and the National Security Council are crawling all over Washington State by now, trying to get a bead on Fourney’s operation. Why do they want us to join them I wonder?”

Brandy shrugged. “Maybe they just want us out of the way so we won’t get hurt. Maybe it’ll all be over by the time we get there and we can just keep going, take our vacation. What do you think about that?”

“I think it’s a grand idea, but I don’t think Houser went to all this trouble just to get us out of his hair. In the first place, if he was worried about us getting hurt, he’d lock us both up somewhere and throw away the key until all this was done. No, he wants us in it up to our elbows; I’m convinced of that. Why, is what puzzles me.”

We sat in silence for nearly five minutes, each of us lost in our own private thoughts while the miles passed behind us.

“Do you suppose,” she asked, “that Houser might be a part of Fourney’s operation, that he might even be the person who concocted the whole thing?”

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“He could be. I’ve thought of it myself. I’ve also thought that Spenser Halsey, or even Dansforth, might be in on it, too. Tell me why you thought of Houser first.”

She folded her arms across her chest, framing an hypothesis. “Well,” she said, “they seem to believe you know where the money is. Maybe they believe you will lead them to it. That’s pretty odd, isn’t it?”

“It is,” I nodded.

“And why do you think Houser wanted you to call Dansforth before you left?”

I told her I thought it was simply a way to let everyone know the first part of the plan was beginning. I was on my way. They could put their agents in place and wait for us to arrive.

Brandy leaned back against the seat, and closed her eyes. I thought she might have fallen asleep, but she stirred and reached out for my hand.

“I think you should find Dansforth and talk to him before you go up there, Richard. Call it intuition if you want, but I trust him. You should talk to him about it.”

“Oddly enough Dansforth suggested the same thing. That I talk with him, I mean. I agreed to it, too, but I doubt he’ll come alone as I asked. He said as much. Told me people were looking for me and meant to kill me. I wish I knew why.”

She glanced at her watch, then yawned, stretching and groaning. “Oh, God, I’m tired,” she said. “I haven’t had a decent night’s sleep since we were at the cabin. Nor a private bath. I think I’ll rest for a while.”

I nodded as she pushed her way out and headed for the bathroom, shedding her clothes and mumbling little half-completed sentences. She freshened up in the bathroom then lay on the couch, was soon sound asleep.

If I were a single man and younger, the task ahead, the decisions I’d be called upon to make, would be easier,

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or, at least, less complicated. Throughout the years, since I return from Vietnam, I'd been aware that the agency might call me. During those years, when I was single and running around all over the country, living out of the back of a pickup truck and bored out of my head, I'd have welcomed this job almost with glee.

But things had changed after I met Brandy. I'd grown accustomed to our comfortable life of domestic tranquility, to regular meals, and trips to the mountains with her at my side. She watched over me as a mother watches over her child, always aware of my needs, empathetic and sympathetic at once, mindful but never dominating, understanding without requiring explanations.

It was difficult to reciprocate at first, because I was locked into a kind of action nurtured over a span of twenty years while I served in the Naval Forces, much of it in foreign countries and out of contact with my fellow countrymen. One's thinking becomes crystallized into a non-committal bog when one spends too much time alone without benefit of fresh ideas from the outside.

Like most of the people with whom I was employed, I eventually began to forget the really important things of living and became interested only in pursuing the work.

I was at odds with myself, tempted, on the one hand, to run off somewhere with Brandy and hide until all this nonsense was over. But, now, because the agency had stolen two months of my life, I wanted secretly to see it through to the end, just to find out what they had taken from me. Twenty years earlier, it had been easy. I wouldn't have questioned the legality or morality of any of it. Now I could only think of Brandy and of the precious few years we would have together. To cast us into the camp of armed men whose only loyalty was to themselves seemed sheer stupidity. Years of fending for myself had put me outside the desire for that kind of cruelty.

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Driving in the pale light of evening, with Brandy sleeping innocently a scant dozen feet from me, I was not buoyed by any false elation that we could overcome the enemy and emerge victorious, for I was aware, as only middle-aged men are aware, that God does not necessarily watch over fools or that good always triumphs over evil.

Calhoun had said it more succinctly than any other when he chided I was looking for guarantees in a universe that promised nothing.

Stopping Fourney would neither make the world safer nor a better place to live, for others would simply take up the operation and move on, and those who survived would not even be aware that there had been a lull in the action. Unless one was blindly dedicated to the cause, it seemed useless. Still, I knew in my heart I had to do what I could to stop Fourney and the others before another day of my life slipped away in irresolute ambivalence.

When Brandy stirred moments later, I was filled with a suffocating fear that I might never hear her singing while she prepared a meal or tended her roses. Odd that such a common thing could come to mean so much to me.

We arrived at the cabin by late afternoon and, after I'd showered and collected the things we would need, I called Dansforth to report our progress. Then I locked the doors against the night, turned out the light, and coaxed Brandy to the bed.

I put my arm around her shoulders, combed out her ruined curls with my fingers. She put her face against mine and kissed me gently.

"These few moments we have together aren't enough for me, Richard," she said against my neck. "They're beautiful, but they don't make up for the times we're apart."

She pulled away and looked up at me. "It isn't just

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the things you're doing now, with Halsey and Dansforth; its all the times you're hiding up at the cabin while I'm trying to take care of things in San Diego. Sometimes I need you with me. I need to know that I'm still alive inside your head, that I'm not just someone who cooks the meals and pays the bills, you know?"

"You're more than that to me, Peach," I said. "I do love you, and I can't imagine how my life would be without you. When I was alone for all those years, I used to wish and pray that I'd meet someone like you to give some meaning to my life again."

"Then what happened to us, Richard?" she asked quietly.

"I'm having trouble with the audio portion of your routine. You keep fading in and out. We don't talk anymore, we don't dream anymore. I went back to work just so I'd have something to do besides wonder what you were doing up at the cabin. I don't resent it... .

"Yes, maybe I do. Maybe I'm selfish, too, because I want you with me more than you are. And I want the dreams again, too, the way it used to be." She rolled away from me and stared at the ceiling. "Is that asking too much? Is that childish or something?"

"No, Brandy, it isn't," I said. "I want those things, too. But we're up to our necks in civilization. We're living and coping with everything that the big city has to offer. You deal with it by going to a seven to five job and I deal with it by hiding at the cabin."

I put my hands to the sides of her face, pulled her toward me, and kissed her.

"I'm not a city person," I said. "Big cities scare me. I don't like crowds and freeways. They smother me. They do; they scare me to death. I'm at home in the woods, and that's why I go to the cabin every chance I get. I'm running away from civilization, not you. God, if I could

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change that, don't you think I would?"

She lay quietly, not responding, breathing softly, with her eyes closed.

"Come here," I whispered, "I need, very much, to hold you right now."

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EIGHT

The smell of fresh coffee eased me out of a sound sleep, but I stayed in the bed for awhile, listening to Brandy slip around in the kitchen making breakfast. I had those precious ten or fifteen seconds of acute clarity of mind just before I entered the world of living reality and an odd thought flashed through my mind, a question which had nagged at me ever since we'd left San Diego, sorted itself and begged for an answer.

Why hadn't anyone grilled the man who had claimed I had sent the letter? Perhaps they had. Perhaps his statements only confirmed that he believed I knew more about the money than I had admitted. If the agency had believed he was telling the truth, they would not have let me drive away from San Diego unless they were certain I would lead them to the money. But I could just as easily disappear before I got to Washington State. And why had they insisted I talk to Calhoun and get me involved in the investigation at all?

For a moment, the answer seemed perfectly clear: Calhoun had been close to discovering the identity of the person who had masterminded the theft of the money and had to be killed. Since they surely thought he might have passed his information on to me, they had to lure me out into the open because I had to be killed as well. It appeared that I had blindly walked into a trap, but, as I struggled with the problem, it became hazy and confused, then I was fully awake and the thought drifted away.

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I worked myself out of the bed and got into the bathroom to clean up. I found a shaving mug, a new razor, clean towels and washcloths, and fresh clothes stacked on a hamper beside the water closet.

Brandy had been busy while I snoozed.

After I got myself cleaned up, I dressed and went into the kitchen. Brandy hovered over the range pushing scrambled eggs and bacon around in an iron spider and she gave me a quick smile. She was wearing a pair of dungarees, a chambray shirt tied at her waist, and mukluks, and she had curled up her hair and applied a light patina of makeup.

I sat and waited for her to finish her cooking.

She slid a plate of breakfast in front of me, sat down with her own breakfast, and asked how I'd slept.

"Pretty good, I guess," I answered, "but the bed isn't very comfortable, do you think?"

"Actually, I didn't notice," she said with a smile, "but it's better than sleeping in a safe house with people watching every move you make."

"I reckon so."

We nibbled our way through breakfast, making small talk and trying to figure out the best way to approach Fourney's camp up on the Greywolf River. I let her know they would probably be expecting us, but it didn't seem to bother her.

"We don't belong here, Brandy," I said. "We're not a part of anyone's team; we're a diversion to keep everyone looking in the wrong direction while someone slips out of the country with the money."

"What do you mean, we're a diversion?"

There was no reason for us to be involved, I explained, unless it was only to provide someone with a way to escape unnoticed while everyone was trying to figure out who we were and why we were involved. My

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phone call to Dansforth alerted him that I was on my way. Their only problem would be to make certain I stayed within their timetable and didn't get to Washington State before they were ready to execute their plan.

Christian Houser had provided credit cards so we would leave a clear trail to Washington, a trail everyone could check and verify with ease, a trail that would prove, perhaps, we had gone straight to Fourney's headquarters, as if we'd known all along just where to go.

He'd specifically made an issue of Fourney as the most likely person to be holding the money, had shown me the photographs of the politicians and industrialists involved so I'd be forced to admit I knew who they were if I were captured alive, an admission that would incriminate me even further.

I had no legitimate reason to be involved in the operation, and I'd never be able to prove that Halsey had requested my help, because everyone would simply deny it. Then there was the cash Houser had given me when he brought the motorhome. It could be some of the money they'd smuggled in from Vietnam. I had no right to have it, and I'd have the devil of a time explaining why I was carrying it around, maybe even spending it.

The motorhome, too, was part of the plan to keep our exodus from San Diego a secret. No one, except Houser, and, possibly, Steve Dansforth, knew we were driving it north to rendezvous with Fourney.

"And how do we know what computer we're going to reach with those access codes?" I asked. "It could be in a motorhome like the one outside ten miles behind us, feeding us false information and leading us right into their trap."

Brandy stared at me with consternation. "Do you think he could do that without being discovered?" she asked.

"Of course he could. He's had years to plan for it. The

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operation is in jeopardy now, and for all he knows, his cover may be blown any minute. He needs someone to take the heat off him. Who better than the only man alive, outside the agency, who is supposed to know about that money?"

I stuffed my hands into my pockets and paced back and forth along the narrow aisle, feeling like a dunce for having got us into the mess. Finally, frustrated beyond rational thought, I went outside to get the motorhome ready for the day's trip.

I stood in the early morning chill, staring into the half light of the false dawn, hoping to see an omen rising into the sky, something that would point us in the right direction, give us an answer, a solution, to the problem. There was none. I sighed wearily, my breath a steamy puff that was quickly borne away by the light breeze, then went back inside.

I shivered away the chill and went to stand behind Brandy, embraced her with my face in her hair, breathed her fragrance, and delighted in her fragile warmth.

"I love you more than anything else in the world," I said with my mouth pressed against her neck.

She turned inside my arms and looked at me with concern, her eyes searching mine. "You scare me sometimes, Richard," she said. "Is this more than you think you can handle?"

Goons, Dansforth had said, who would torture, then kill us. Depressing fellow, that Dansforth, but, at the least, he'd been honest about it.

"No. I just wanted to tell you, that's all," I lied, "I just felt like saying it."

She moved against me softly and I kissed her, gently, tenderly, for a long time, feeling as if our very souls were passing between our lips, regretting the times I'd let these precious moments slip away from us while I was

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busy with some mundane preoccupation.

"I've been wondering," Brandy said. "Could there be someone else in the agency, someone we haven't thought about, who could have planned all this so he could get his hands on the money? Could someone do that without being discovered?"

I nodded thoughtfully, "Why not?" I said, "If he had a well thought out plan, I suppose a sharp agent could pull it off, and hide any knowledge of it, even from the agency."

"A sharp agent like Christian Houser, maybe?"

"Yeah, especially someone like Houser. But it would require a lot of planning, so if the agency realized what was happening, he could switch to plan B without anyone getting wise. Maybe all these little diversions are part of it."

She tapped her teeth with her fingernails, lost in thought for a moment. "Something like that might cost a lot of money, mightn't it?" she asked.

"Probably. I know what you're thinking, Peach; you're thinking that someone has done that very thing, but you're forgetting that they can't spend all of that money. Some of it is no good; it might as well be the Sunday funnies."

"We know that, and the agencies involved know that, but nobody else does. Who are they going to complain to after they've already delivered the goods? If you're a powerful government agent and you show a greedy merchant a truck load of money, he isn't going to ask you if it's negotiable; he's going to run out and round up everything you need to pull off your trick. What do you think about that?"

I'd already suggested something similar to Houser when he dragged me to the Federal Building, and I still thought the idea had some merit. "But we'd have to as-

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sume the person really was a well known, respected government official, someone whose credibility wouldn't be questioned."

Houser had suggested how the money had flowed through the ranks, I remembered, and made a big point of trying to impress upon me that Spencer Halsey had the power and authority to plan and carry out such a devious operation. But Houser could have done it just as easily, and my doubts about his involvement in the scheme were fading with each passing moment.

"Capricorn," I said aloud.

"What?"

"Capricorn. Dallas Calhoun told me he'd discovered an operation or an agent called Capricorn, was only days from discovering who, or what, it was when Haniford tried to kill him up at the cabin."

I stared out the window, reliving that morning, trying to remember everything Calhoun had told me. Damn, why hadn't I paid closer attention? Why hadn't I read the report as he'd asked, instead of trying to figure out how to avoid getting involved?

Where had Calhoun been living for the past month or so? Certainly not at his home. No, he was hiding, on the run.

"On the road" I said. "He was driving his motorhome, sure as hell, so no one could get a handle on him. And he wouldn't leave all his paperwork in an apartment someplace where it could be found while he was gone. He was carrying it around with him so he'd know where it was every minute."

"But where would he have left it?" she asked.

"He probably drove it up here the day he was shot. It wasn't in the yard that morning. He parked it somewhere and walked up to the cabin, probably so he could check it out first to make sure no one was hiding in the bushes.

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He must have waited out there for hours before he woke me up.”

I told her how he'd bitched about having to leave San Diego in the middle of the night to drive up to the cabin, a trip that should have taken no more than four hours.

“But it was nearly ten o'clock when he got me out of bed. If the agency hasn't already found it, his motorhome is still parked nearby. We have to try to find it now, because all his information is in it.”

She poured some more coffee and frowned at my suggestion. “Surely they searched for it, don't you think? If they knew he was living in it, they'd want to retrieve the information as quickly as they could so the wrong people wouldn't find it.”

“If they knew he was living in it. I don't think too many people knew he was. Dansforth might have. He knew how to get in touch with Calhoun, but he might not have known he was living in a motorhome. And even if he did, he was keeping it a secret, because I asked him how to contact Calhoun and he refused to tell me. Said he'd do it himself.”

I thought I knew Calhoun well enough to know that he'd keep his movements a secret from everyone who didn't need to know. He was scared out of his mind, wouldn't even walk into the restaurant at Seaport Village, and he trusted no one. Not even me.

Certainly Houser hadn't known, because he'd asked me about Calhoun's identification papers and the envelope. If he knew Calhoun was driving around in the motorhome, he'd have burned the forest to the ground trying to find it just to retrieve Calhoun's notes, and, anyway, he hadn't had time to search for it before he arrived at the safe house.

“Nope,” I said firmly, “the damned thing is still up here somewhere; I'll stake next month's retirement check

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on it.”

“Don’t you think Houser has also been wondering how Calhoun got to the cabin? He may have thought of it the first day. What do we do if he has some of his people show up here looking for the motorhome?”

“Maybe he thought Dallas and I came up here together, I don’t know. Maybe they think assembling in Washington State is more important than looking for Calhoun’s motorhome. I think we should look for it before we leave. Let me know when you’re ready.”

A chill wind was blowing and the sky was heavy and dark when Brandy drove down the long road toward the lake an hour later. To the north, the San Bernardino Mountains were all but obscured in low, wet clouds. It would rain that night.

“We’ll go in the back way,” I said, my words coming in steamy puffs against the cold air at the open passenger window. “There’s no place on the dirt road to hide something as big as a motorhome; I didn’t see it when I came down the hill that day. It’s got to be down here on the paved road somewhere; in one of the parking spaces just down the road, maybe.”

He wouldn’t have left it so far away that he couldn’t have sprinted back to it if he felt he was in danger. It had to be close.

And so it was. We spotted it at the same time, parked at the end of a row of empty campsites under the cedars, far enough off the road that it would be difficult to find if one wasn’t looking for it.

I sat in the passenger seat while Brandy made two runs through the spaces. Calhoun’s rig was the only vehicle there, and I told Brandy to pull into the spot next to it and shut off the engine. We waited a few minutes while I peered into the trees looking for any signs of movement that would betray a sniper. When I felt certain no one

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was waiting, I opened the door and stepped out. Brandy reached behind the seat, got the carbine off the floor and chambered a round.

“Take this,” she whispered.

“Won’t need it, Peach; nobody here.”

“Take it anyhow.”

I took the rifle, slipped up the safety, and we walked over to Calhoun’s motorhome, examining the ground for footprints. We went around twice, looking over every inch of the coach but couldn’t find any signs that anyone had been there since Calhoun had left it. I tried the door, found it was unlocked, stepped inside, then helped Brandy over the steps.

Calhoun had looked a mess when I’d talked to him at Seaport Village, and I had imagined the motorhome would be piled with dirty dishes and soiled clothing, with wet towels and overflowing trash everywhere. It wasn’t that. It was papers and books, maps and dossiers, computer printouts and notes neatly stacked or pinned on every inch of available space. The floors were clean, dishes were put away, the range was spotless, as was the table, except for some papers and an unfinished cup of herb tea. The keys were hanging in the ignition. While Brandy peered out the windows looking for visitors, I fired up the engine just to see if it would start, then shut it off.

“Calhoun’s a tidy man from the looks of this,” she said, “And thorough.”

“A tidy man in an untidy business. An enigma in a world of incongruities,” said I.

She moved papers and books, glancing at titles, and reading the computer sheets while I put things away into cabinets and onto shelves.

I checked the weapons locker and found all the standard issue there except for the .308 Browning which I

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still had in my coat pocket. I closed the locker and went over to see what Brandy was reading. She was turning several sheets of neatly stacked agency reports of Calhoun's movements and progress of his investigation over the past few weeks, right up to the day he'd been shot. My name was at the end of the unfinished report, indicating that the person who had input the data already knew the agency had contacted me.

She turned to me with raised eyebrows. "Somebody's keeping a close watch on you, bub," she said seriously.

"Yes, and if we search these long enough, we'll find they've been watching the both of us for a long time. I already know they've been keeping an eye on me for about thirty years, and you since the day we met."

"What've you got yourself into here?"

"Damned if I know, love, but we're going to get out of here as quickly as we can, then find a place where I can sit down and study all this, maybe figure out how to shake these birds."

"Doesn't look like it's going to be real easy." She waved an arm at the computer. "If Calhoun can do this, so can a lot of other people."

"I reckon so, but we have to try, don't we?"

I hustled her out and, while she fired up the Pace Arrow, I emptied the rifle, put it on the floor in Calhoun's rig, started the engine, and pulled it out. Brandy pulled our motorhome into the spot, and we transferred all our gear to Calhoun's, hurried aboard, and pulled out onto the road.

She sat back in her seat with a little falsetto laugh. "That was scary; do you suppose anyone saw us.?"

"No cars went past while we were there so I think we got away with it. But it won't be long before somebody finds the other motorhome now that both sides are looking. All we need is three or four days; after that, they won't

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have to look.”

Brandy sighed breathlessly, sagging against the door, and closed her eyes for awhile until her heart quit pounding and she was breathing normally.

“Where to?” she asked presently.

“I’m going to drive all night just to get as far away from here as I can. If you’re up to it, you can begin putting that stuff away.” I jerked a thumb over my shoulder at the papers slipping off the table onto the floor.

For the next three hours she sorted out Calhoun’s notes and papers, put his books away, and got things stowed. If Houser’s people were following us, I didn’t want them to trap us on some infrequently traveled road up in the mountains. I wanted to be on a road where I could make a run for it. When we had time and miles between us, I’d sit down and sort through the papers to see what Calhoun had discovered that had got him shot.

I headed north on 395 to Bishop, where I filled the fuel tanks, then drove on, watching the lightning crackling in the clouds against the horizon. The sky grew ominously dark, and we began to pass through a chilling fog as we headed into the mountain passes. I switched on the headlights and windshield wipers, listening to the slap-slap of the levers and the sizzling shush of the tires on the wet concrete. By five o’clock, it was raining steadily, huge drops splattering themselves into a solid sheet against the glass. The headlights reached out vainly ahead through the deluge, and at times the road seemed to vanish, dropping off to an empty void on all sides.

Brandy nodded and dozed fitfully in her seat until I nudged her on the arm and motioned for her to go back and climb into the bed. She looked at me with heavy lids, mumbled an apology for not being able to stay awake, then wobbled back and fell onto the bed, still fully clothed, and slept until morning.

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The rain slackened about midnight to an annoying, intermittent drizzle that kept me fumbling with the windshield wipers until, finally, weary and stiff from peering into the darkness and fighting the motorhome up the grades, I pulled into a RV park near Suzanville at one o'clock in the morning.

After I freshened up in the bathroom, I closed the bedroom door so I wouldn't wake Brandy, filched around in the cupboards for some instant coffee while a kettle of water heated on the burner, then grabbed some of Calhoun's papers and began reading.

As the hours passed, I pieced together most of what Calhoun had been doing for the past six months. He had kept accurate notes, some typed, some handwritten, all in chronological order. Most of them concerned the open investigation of the theft of the money during the fall of Saigon, with several cross-references to documents produced by the Treasury Department, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, CIA, DIA, MAC-V and INSCOM. It seemed that every intelligence gathering agency in the United States, civilian and military, was looking for that money.

Progress of the operation was extremely detailed, and there was ample evidence to indicate that all of the agencies involved knew exactly where the money came from, where it went, and who had it. That puzzled me, Calhoun had told me they knew the money was shipped, but, for years, no one could trace its movement from the source to the States. It appeared that he hadn't read his material very well. Either that, or he was purposely withholding a portion of the information from me. But why?

I drank six cups of coffee, peering out the windows occasionally until three o'clock in the morning while I read the reports. I was just about to give up for the night when I turned a sheet that stopped me cold. It was a

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speculation based on observations and investigation by the agent stationed in Saigon, suggesting that the operation to recover the money may have been financed by a conglomerate of attorneys and politicians from the United States. The agent had seen crates of money loaded into aircraft belonging to Casablanca Air Freight, and the manifests indicated the load was destined for Seattle, Washington.

The report went on to say the agent was convinced the cartel had been formed solely as a front to collect and disburse the money after it arrived in the United States but he stopped short of speculating what they were going to do with it.

A summary of his investigations revealed an unverified connection between Casablanca Air Freight and someone who called himself Capricorn. He was unable to pursue it because he had been recalled to the States.

The report was dated Monday, January 7th, 1985, and the agent's codename was Didymus.

Alan Haniford.

At the bottom of the page, in Calhoun's broad script, were the same series of cryptic symbols and numbers I'd found on Haniford's personnel file.

I pushed the paper away and leaned back on the couch. So, Alan Haniford was in the States as recently as six months earlier, about the time Calhoun had spotted someone following him. Had it been Haniford? Probably.

But why would Haniford, a former colleague at the agency, want to follow Calhoun and later try to kill him? Had Calhoun unwittingly turned up some information linking Haniford to the theft of the money, or was it the other way around? Both men had been in Vietnam prior to the fall of Siagon, and both knew about the money.

The agency may have been convinced that Calhoun was really Capricorn, and was close to making some

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move that would embarrass the President. Houser could have sent Haniford to stop Calhoun, if he was convinced Calhoun really was trying to get his hands on the money. Or he could have done it to cover up his own involvement, and he could just as easily have made me appear to be an accomplice. I remembered what Calhoun had told me that morning: he knew about the real money and I knew about the counterfeit money, and they wanted us both dead.

I was convinced Haniford didn't know who Capricorn really was or he wouldn't have followed the orders to kill us. Unless he was really convinced that either Calhoun or I was Capricorn, a possibility I wasn't ready to discard.

But the agency must have known something was going to happen. They warned me as soon as they were sure I was a target, flew Brandy back to San Diego and sent Calhoun off into the hills to hide.

Calhoun probably got Haniford's speculation from D.O.I.R.S., and that meant anyone else with access to the mainframe could do the same thing. Especially the Deputy Director, Christian Houser.

It had occurred to me more than once that Haniford could have shot me as easily as he'd shot Calhoun, but he hadn't. His second and third shots were accurate misses. If he had intended to kill me, I'd be dead. On the other hand, if they'd really wanted to kill Calhoun, he'd be dead, too.

Maybe Capricorn thought I could be of more use to him alive. Maybe he wanted me to think I was in danger so I'd be less hesitant about throwing in with him, and more agreeable to following orders without asking questions.

Whoever Capricorn was, he'd planned it well, and I was now up to my ears in their scheme. Spencer Halsey

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and Dansforth were probably thinking that I would arrive at Fourney's headquarters at any moment, and a little prompting by Capricorn would be enough to convince the lot of them to shoot me on sight if things went sour and I caught on to the game.

But had Capricorn really missed finding Calhoun's motorhome, or had he planted the papers hoping I'd find them and figure all this out, then hurry on to Sequim Bay to see what Fourney had stored in his closets?

Maybe Houser didn't really know Calhoun had compiled all the information, and from the volume and variety of the data, Halsey and Dansforth might not know, either. A lot of it had been gathered from sources not available to the system operator in Washington, D.C., and everyone agreed that Calhoun was doing a lot of clandestine investigating on his own.

That might have meant someone at the agency was suspect as far as Calhoun was concerned, and he might have been only hours away from exposing Capricorn.

I switched off the light and watched the infrequent traffic pass for awhile, wondering about Haniford and Calhoun, thinking about Halsey and Dansforth, and wondering where they were.

I put the papers away, stacked the dishes in the sink, kicked off my shoes, and went back to lay on the bed. Brandy moaned softly and moved over to give me room without waking. I sank onto the cool pillow, intending to rest for only a few minutes, with a mass of confusing thoughts crashing around inside my head.

I listened to the night sounds, soft and peaceful outside in the chill blackness, and heard an occasional car slip past quickly toward some unknown destination. After a few moments, I rolled on my side and pulled the covers over me.

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NINE

We were on the road again by first light, having decided to drive straight through to Washington State. I would drive at night, Brandy by day. By noon we were both starving so I pulled onto a sideroad so Brandy could fix breakfast.

After I showered and changed into clean clothes, I went to the telephone and called Dansforth. The secretary put me straight through.

"Have you given any more thought to our meeting?" I asked after he answered.

"Who is this?" he asked cautiously.

"Richard. Who do you think?"

"Where are you?"

"Where you can't find me. What about a meeting?"

"How about letting us know where you are."

"Later, Steve. I'm not sure who to trust right now. But I'll come in if you agree to meet me alone; that's a promise."

He sighed wearily, breathing into the mouthpiece for several seconds. "Halsey says no, Richard, so I can do it."

"Is he there?"

"Not at the moment."

"Will he talk to me alone if I come in?"

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"I can't speak for him, but I doubt it. Anyway, he won't be back until tomorrow."

His voice seemed strained, his words terse and angry, I asked him why.

"It's Calhoun, Richard; someone got to him at the hospital."

My mind went blank for a moment, and I wasn't certain I'd heard him correctly. I stared into the space between me and the window, trying to imagine what he was talking about. I tried to give an answer, but my voice failed me, and I found myself stuttering into the mouthpiece. Finally, I stupidly asked if he was dead.

"Injected with a lethal dose of poison, called batrachotoxin, from a tiny Columbian frog, we're told. Quick and painless. Halsey's with Helen and the kids now,"

"Jesus," I muttered incredulously. My hands began to shake uncontrollably and a pain constricted my throat. I held the phone away so Dansforth couldn't hear my strangled groans as I sat there with my eyes closed and my face toward the ceiling.

I hadn't known Calhoun intimately. We weren't close friends, but he was a gentle man, had an uncommon liking for other people, and it was difficult not to like him in return. Even when he was up to his teeth in an investigation, he still made time for his family and friends, and was always ready with a smile or a piece of advice.

I remembered, as the events of the past days flashed through my mind, that he'd told me he wanted to quit the agency and go someplace where he could live in peace with his family. Dallas Houston Calhoun from Van Horn, Texas. All he wanted from life was to be away from the raving madness.

"Capricorn," I said flatly.

"Ha! Where did you hear that name?" he asked, and I could hear him relaying the name to someone else in

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the room.

“Calhoun mentioned it before he got shot. I think he was very close to getting a handle on the guy.”

“Yeah,” Dansforth said and his voice faltered. I could hear him breathing heavily into the phone. Was he grieving for his colleague? Presently he asked about Brandy.

“She’s fine, Dansforth. We’re both fine,” I said. “What are we going to do about this mess now?”

“We’d like for you to come in so we can exchange information; we need to know what you’ve learned about Capricorn. How about it?”

He waited patiently, and I let him, wondering if his request was part of the scheme to involve me deeper in the operation, but I knew I’d have to trust him because we’d never get into Fourney’s camp without help.

“Are your people following us?” I asked, ignoring his request.

“That’s about the dumbest question I’ve ever heard you ask, Richard. Why would I keep asking you where you are if I had people following you? I know you’re on the road, but we can’t protect you if we don’t know where. What do you say?”

“We’re close and getting closer, Steve. Tell Halsey, when you see him, that I think Christian Houser is Capricorn. That’s a guess, and I may be wrong, but all the information I have points in his direction. I think he maneuvered everyone out of San Diego so he could kill Calhoun, too.”

“Probably, if he’s who you say he is. Maybe, maybe not. There are a lot of agencies working on this thing, Richard; it could be anyone.”

I explained my theory to him, told him about Houser bringing the motor-home without the usual mob of agents, the plan to get Brandy and I out of town and the twenty-five thousand dollars Houser had given me.

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"All arranged to make people start looking in my direction, Steve," I added. "And I think he even had an idea to make it look like I'd killed Calhoun."

He agreed the theory had merit, but was unwilling to admit his Deputy Director was Capricorn, then told me Houser had not been heard from for two days and might be with Colonel Fourney.

"They'll move quickly now, Richard," he said, "and we mustn't let them slip away. When will you be here?"

"Day after tomorrow, in the evening."

"Perfect," he replied, his voice quickening. "It's a day earlier than we expected. Find a place at the quay near the Whidbey Island ferry and call me. What're you driving?"

"Calhoun's rig. We found it parked... "

"Ah. I hadn't thought of that," he interrupted. "Well, I should have known if anyone could find it, it would be you. He should have all the updated computer access codes in his notes, somewhere. He had a lot of information we'd like to look at, just to see what he was doing. Don't let anyone else know where you'll be, and for the love of Christ, call me if things get sticky."

I promised I would and rang off with the feeling things were hopping at Greenline Timber.

I walked forward and kissed Brandy on the cheek, wondering how I was ever going to tell her about Calhoun. She'd want to turn around and hurry back to San Diego to console Helen and the children, and we didn't have time for it. I hated the thought, but there it was: the really important things were being stuffed into a trash bin while I deceived Brandy and tried to convince myself that a nylon bag full of plastic explosives and a closet full of Calhoun's notes were going to change the world.

The miles hummed beneath the tires as we sat in si-

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lence, each of us lost in our own morbid ideas and memories. I knew it was nearly time to tell Brandy about Calhoun.

I told her as gently as I could, told her everything Dansforth had related to me, and assured her that the agency would make certain Helen and the kids were cared for. She sat quietly for awhile with her eyes closed and her head back on the seat, breathing softly and regularly. When she turned to me same minutes later, her eyes were moist with tears and filled with the hollow look of someone who has resigned themselves to a fate they can no longer control. I'd seen it before on the faces of soldiers in battle, faces and eyes from which all hope is gone, and I was sorry I'd told her.

Can two people make any difference for or against any cause? The revolutionaries would say yes, that even a single person with the determination to struggle, fight, even die for his cause, is worth ten thousand who have neither a cause nor the determination to see it through.

Were Fourney and his soldiers revolutionaries? Maybe. Certainly they were determined to fight for their cause, whatever that might be, and it would be difficult, if not impossible, to overcome them, for neither Brandy nor I believed that our cause was worthwhile. It was even difficult to perceive of it as a cause at all. It just seemed so much random nonsense.

But that's because we don't know what they're trying to do, I reminded myself. Falling leaves appear random because we view them from a very narrow corridor. If we could stand somewhere else, outside the atmosphere, perhaps, we might be able to see the pattern inherent in the falling leaves. If I could view all that was happening around me at that moment, perhaps I could also see the pattern in the theft of the money.

I wondered if anyone outside their organization re-

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ally knew what was happening. Were we all just guessing at the motives, or was there information somewhere, hidden from our eyes, that would reveal it could we but find it?

The revolutionary soldier does not weep when his comrade dies beside him, he does not question his commander (for his goals are clear), he does not ask if the cause is just for the cause itself is enough to define justice, and he does not ask if what he's doing is right because victory alone provides the answer. He embraces all that the enemy opposes, and opposes everything the enemy embraces. He abhors war and seeks to abolish it with war, and anything or anyone that does not advance that concept is disposed of without so much as batting an eye. Mother, father, sons, daughters, relatives and friends; all are as expendable as the enemy soldier in the face of the cause. He doesn't try to protect them because to do so is to compromise the great struggle.

Compromise is weakness; indecision is defeat, and if the leader of an army or the leader of a nation can send his hundred thousand young men out to die without regret, do you think he weeps for a fallen alien enemy?

How many Americans understand a mentality that would sacrifice a regiment just to sink one ship, down one bomber, or overrun a hospital full of unarmed doctors and wounded soldiers? How many really understand that risk is not a factor to be considered when armed gunmen, trained from birth to be martyrs, kill Americans on the streets, or hijack ships and planes?

The cause makes the concept of risk ambiguous.

The cause. I was at a loss to define it in this case, unless it was simply a way for someone to make money while playing at war from a distance. Someone like Colonel David Alfred MacKenzie Fourney.

God, he was getting good intelligence data, almost

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better than the agency, and I wondered if he had contacts at DIA who were keeping him informed or, worse yet, if someone at DICE was providing him with our every move. If so, I couldn't imagine that we'd ever get close enough to him to find out what he was doing. If Christian Houser was really Capricorn, we wouldn't have a prayer of penetrating their camp up on the Greywolf River; they'd be waiting for us, would mow us down like wheat in the wind, and we'd never know what hit us.

I looked over at Brandy. She was staring straight ahead with the corners of her mouth turned down and her bottom lip pushed out a bit.

"A penny," I said.

"You'll be buying a lot of ugly thoughts for your penny," she sighed, "but I was trying to figure out who could be providing Fourney with all his information."

"And?"

She clicked a fingernail against her teeth and gave it a little more thought, then turned to me. "This may be crazy, but, well, I worked on a computer terminal for a long time and I saw lots of things, confidential things, that would have kept some criminals from getting caught had they known what was being planned against them. Drug busts, confidence games, murders, stuff like that. Evidence, you see, that could have been covered up if someone was of a mind to do it."

"By erasing it from the computer."

"Not exactly," she replied. "Not erasing it, but locking it into a file where no one else could find it, a file with a code or special command that could be recalled if anyone ever asked about it. If it was erased, gone forever, someone would want to know why. I mean, the whole agency wouldn't get amnesia at the same time; somebody would remember case so and so and might need to review it at some future date.

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"A system operator, now, who buried it in a locked file, could go in and get it... ."

"...if the boss asked for it."

She nodded. "But no one else, not even someone with the highest access, could find it unless they knew the code."

"What kind of code would it be?"

She shrugged and held out her hands. "Anything would do. The name of a child, a pet name, a series of numbers, anything. A series of numbers, I think, would be best, because it would be very difficult to remember or get by accident."

But it would have to be written down if it was extremely cryptic or complex, I thought, so the system operator wouldn't have to search for it or risk miscuing it when he had to retrieve the information. I thought of the symbols at the bottom of the single page of Haniford's file that I'd found in the computer, and she went back to get it from the drawer. She agreed it was probably just such a code, looked at her watch, calculated it would be three o'clock in the morning on the east coast, and asked if she should try to run it through the computer.

Fifteen minutes later I pulled into rest area and got the generator going while Brandy powered up the computer and sorted through some of Calhoun's other notes.

"Are we going to spend the night here?" she asked when I climbed back in.

"No, but I want to rest for awhile. I'm tired and I know you are, and I'd like to have a shower."

She nodded as she sat at the computer, punched in the numbers for the satellite, then got the agency's main-frame computer in rural Virginia.

"Well, we got it; what name shall I use?"

"The most obvious, I suppose."

She typed: CAPRICORN.

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We lost the carrier signal immediately and Brandy looked up questioningly, redialed, and tried again, using some of the access codes I'd found under Houser's IBM, and all the codes I provided from Calhoun's book. After twenty minutes of unsuccessful attempts, she sighed and rubbed the back of her neck.

"Let's see that paper," she said. I slid it to her and she sat entranced as she studied it, her eyes moving over the symbols again and again, trying to make sense of it. Presently she picked up a pencil and began separating the long line into sections, glancing at the computer keyboard, comparing the symbols with what she thought they represented.

"Darn," she grumbled, "this can't be that difficult. How many different ways can a person cue a program? And why was this one page not hidden with the rest? Was it purposely left in the unlocked files, or was it an accident?"

I suggested she try Haniford's code name, Didymus, then try the symbols.

"I already tried that; doesn't work."

"Try it in reverse order or something. Or every other one. Would that make any sense?"

She puffed with exasperation, holding the keyboard as if she wanted to strangle it, force it to reveal the method of entry. Finally she rubbed her eyes and sat back, staring at the screen. I pushed a cup of coffee to her and watched as she sipped it, studying the monitor.

"There's a reason why this page is still in the file," she said after awhile. "It surely wasn't done to provide the operator with the symbols because they don't seem to work. Maybe it was an accident; maybe the symbols were entered incorrectly, or purposely altered to confuse anyone trying to get into the file," she said to herself.

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“Or maybe it isn’t an access at all. Maybe they’re just reference numbers to something else,” I offered.

She reached over and turned on the printer, then redialed the number. “Or maybe it isn’t a computer function at all. As far as I can tell, these symbols don’t translate into any visible or invisible commands.”

She tried again, backtracking through the files, noting each move she made, discarding the methods that failed, until, an hour later, instead of loosing the carrier signal, the screen went blank and a cursor prompt appeared at the top left corner.

“Ha,” she cried. “We shall overcome.”

I rose from the bed where I’d been resting and joined her at the console. “What do you have?” I asked wearily.

“We’re not in, but we re not out. Now all we have to do is type in these numbers. It’s so simple I couldn’t see it. See here? It’s a telephone code. Two translates to a, b, or c. Three is d, e, or f, and so forth, right through the telephone dial. Asterisk-one is a command to prompt the computer to a menu. Observe.” She typed the numbers 227742676*1 for Capricorn and the screen came alive.

“Son of a gun,” I said, as the screen filled with information.

“Capricorn?” she asked, “Wait a minute; these are Calhoun’s insertions. The same stuff we found back there on the table when we...”

“Maybe not insertions, Peach,” I said, holding up a hand. “Could be he took the information out instead of putting it in.”

“Not unless someone else knows his access codes, See this?” She pointed to the code names at the top of the screen. “This is Calhoun, not Joe Doe.”

“Doesn’t mean a thing. A computer operator would know his code, and so would the person who assigned it to him. But let’s see what else is in here.”

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We looked at the screen as the information scrolled down. Colonel Fourney's entire life history was displayed there for us, but the information gave no hint of his operation. Brandy jumped to the end of the file, noted the symbols listed there, quit the file, and reentered using the new symbols as access.

In chronological order, from its inception in 1968 to the present, and extending into the future, with probabilities for success and estimates of casualties on all sides, was Operation Capricorn. Planned, funded, and sanctioned by selected members of a former administration, and embraced by some members of the present administration, and the cartel, it specifically detailed every step in a covert operation designed to gain control of the governments of the largest and most powerful countries on earth.

A plan for war, with open support for some countries and covert support for the others, promises for trade and threats of swift retaliation, subsidy for covert terrorist diversions, contingency plans to support or remove the leaders of certain nations, even plans to attack our own ships in the Persian Gulf if it became necessary to draw us into a conflict, were in the file, enumerated and listed in painfully thorough detail.

Letters of support from military officers, active and retired, industrialists, private citizens, names of government officials, inventories of supplies, staging areas, bank accounts; all were there, including the totals of the various bank accounts.

It was nearly fifty-four billion dollars, the exact amount Halsey had estimated was taken from Vietnam by Air America.

Brandy and I read it with growing dread as the printer cranked out hundreds of pages; pages of lies and threats, subversion and deceit, collaboration and alliances, pro-

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posed denials and coverups, assassinations and usurpation.

This, I finally understood, was the information in Calhoun's folder that I had refused to read. This was a plan for World War Three.

She looked at me with horror in her eyes, searching mine for an answer. "You're not even surprised; you know about this."

"Not this, but I understand how it works."

"But this report tells me people in this country have been supporting and subsidizing terrorist activities in the middle east for years by providing money to the United Nations Trade Schools to help train candidates to conduct terrorist activities against our own people. I can't believe it. And this." She searched through the stack of paper until she found what she wanted. "This clearly indicates that someone has contrived wars in the middle east and revolutions in South America and Asia simply as diversions to confuse the issue and deceive Americans into believing that the country is uniting to defeat international terrorist activities and armed insurrection. Can you believe that?"

She threw the papers onto the countertop and slumped in the chair, shaking her head in disgust.

The size of the lie is a definite factor in causing it to be believed, for the vast masses of the nation are in the depths of their hearts more easily deceived than they are consciously and intentionally bad. The primitive simplicity of their minds renders them more easy prey to a big lie than a small one.

Adolph Hitler

I believed it, of course, because I had once helped perpetuate the lies; not by actively advancing them, but

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by sheer inactivity. Knowing the lie and not revealing it is duplicity by silence. Guilty as charged.

I reached across her shoulder and flipped off the computer. "Come on," I said as I urged her out of the chair. "Let's get some rest. There's nothing more we can learn here. Sleep will help."

It wouldn't, of course, and we both found it nearly impossible to flush the trash from our minds as we lay there in the darkness. Brandy lay against me with her head on my shoulder and one leg thrown across mine, and, although she was still, I knew she wasn't asleep. Once she stirred slightly and looked up at me with eyes that were filled with hopeless resignation.

"It seems useless," she said some time later. "How can we stop it when so many people are involved, when it's the government?"

I would have suggested that we take the story to the press, to expose it to the public, but knew it would do little good. Witnesses would be provided, well coached in the lie, and some might even go to prison. But the game would go on, more deeply buried, more expertly executed, until the operation was complete.

It might happen next week, or next month, or it may not happen for ten generations, but it would happen, just as surely as the sun would rise in the morning, until someone's great plan for the world was fulfilled. Whether we were headed for Universal Capitalism, Socialism, Communism, Liberalism, Christianity, Mohammedanism, Zionism or any other ism one might name, it was obvious that some group was working toward a singular goal: One worldism.

In the end, of course, the haves would win, and the have-nots would loose, because the have-nots still believed they had to die, to become martyrs, so the haves could live.

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Sometime in the early hours of morning my tortured, half-mad mind shut down and I slept fitfully, drifting in and out of insane dreams where people with guns and knives, people with mutilated faces and staring eyes, chased me through head high cut-grass, they flying across the tops at the speed of sound; I moggging along in agonizing slow motion toward the edge of a bottomless precipice.

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TEN

I awoke first, three hours later, when the western horizon was faintly pink with the hint of the setting sun, and propped myself up on my elbow to look at Brandy. She was like a young girl, petite and fragile as a flower. Her hair was mussed, swirled across her cheeks and throat, fell in ruined curls onto her breasts, and she breathed deeply, her lips pursed slightly as if expecting a kiss, her face smooth and flushed in contented sleep. I watched her for long minutes, totally infatuated by her, until she woke and caught me stealing her beauty. She smiled and writhed under the covers, pulled her arms free and, stretching, put them around me, pulling me onto her.

"I love you, Richard," she said after some minutes, "and no matter what happens..."

I put my lips gently against hers, just lightly enough to keep her from talking, delighting in the feel of her against me, still warm from the heavy comforters.

"And I love you, Peach, and that's enough for now. Nothing else matters. Tomorrow will take care of itself; now is all that matters. Not today, but this very moment."

Later, she pulled her chair next to mine while we ate dinner, sitting close, touching me tenderly from time to time, resting against me when she laughed, and we talked and talked, discovering each other again, repeating

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words we hadn't spoken for months, as if we both knew it might be the last time we could say them, as if time might soon outrun us and leave one of us behind in the arms of death.

At last, when we had said what needed to be said of love and caring, of tenderness and wanting, of pleasures and contentment, the conversation drifted into a discussion of the real danger of our situation. Bit by bit we pieced things together, comparing our experiences to Calhoun's notes until we were reasonably certain who and what we were dealing with.

What did we think we were going to do? A rifle and a bag full of explosives in the hands of an inexperienced man and an innocent girl were no match for an army of renegades who'd as soon kill us as have breakfast. A fast jet fighter festooned with missiles and laser guided bombs wouldn't be enough; not even an atomic bomb would do the job.

We were going to try to stop a group of powerful men scattered around the globe from carrying out one little skirmish in their plan to control the world. They already controlled the arsenals of their respective countries, commanded their armies, held the loyalty of their citizens, had the keys to the gold reserves. Who can fight that kind of power?

"Do you think it would help if we revealed all this to the media?" Brandy asked as she cleared away the dishes.

"It might help stop this one operation, or, at least, slow it down, but it won't end anything as far as I can see," I replied. "This has been going on for hundreds of years. Money against poverty. Faithful against infidels. Black against white, Ideology against ideology. We're not going to put an end to that tomorrow afternoon, and the press won't put a stop to it, either, because as soon as

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they get a handle on this, some government manipulator will pull another little crisis out of the bag to divert everyone's attention away from it."

I went outside to have a look at the motorhome. When I went back in, Brandy was sitting at the dinette with a cup of coffee.

"What's the point in going on, Richard, if we can't stop them?"

"Because we can't afford not to go on," I explained, fearing she wouldn't understand. I poured myself a cup of coffee, stirred in some creamer, and sat with my elbows on the table.

"This isn't some isolated little crime being committed by a few ignorant greedy men," I explained. "This is a piece, a tiny piece, of a plan that has been going on for centuries. There are really only two kinds of people: Those who believe they don't have to work because they have made laws to force others to work for them, and those who believe if they don't obey the laws some men have written that they will be killed or imprisoned.

"Some of these men may even believe that what they are doing is for the good of all humankind, that they can eventually provide for the health and welfare of everyone, that they can feed and clothe and shelter all people equally.

"But then a problem arises. With everyone cared for and all disease conquered, with war and crime abolished throughout the world, there would no longer be a need for attorneys and politicians and priests, for generals and great machines of war. The wealthy industrialists would become what they fear most to become: common men without bank accounts. Attorneys and politicians would become farmers, or house painters, or shepherds; something for which they have neither the talent nor inclination.

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“Money and the control of the people through taxation, regulation of business, contrived wars, useless laws, and deceit, is the source their power, and that power is their god.

“They won’t give it up for the likes of us and they won’t jeopardize it for the likes of Fourney or any of the arms merchants, attorneys, industrialists, or politicians who are a part of this thing. If the public requires a scoundrel, these people will provide him, complete with all the details, which, by the way, have been conveniently stored in computers for the world to see when the time comes.

“But the people who have devised the scheme will never be implicated, and if they are, they will quote some stirring speech of denial and justification, thrust out their chests in righteous American indignation, and lead their accusers to the gallows, while someone in the background sinks an American ship or bombs an Embassy somewhere to turn everyone’s attention elsewhere.

“The sad part is that they’re using the insurgent war in the middle East to cover up what they’re really doing. If Fourney and the others were only supplying arms and other supplies to the antigovernment rebels over there, no one would be trying to stop him, because it’s something that must be done while Congress suffers from the Albatross Syndrome.”

“The what?” she cocked her head at me quizzically.

“The Albatross Syndrome. They have all these great plans but can’t seem to get them off the ground if the political wind is blowing the wrong direction.” I leaned on the table, chewing on a toothpick, and let her think about it.

“So,” she said presently, “do you think Houser came directly to you because he thought the others couldn’t be trusted not to cover it up?”

“I have no idea what Houser was up to, but it’s obvi-

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ous there's no official investigation per se. Right now all these people are trying to protect the administration, and themselves, from a serious scandal."

She sighed lightly and held out her hand, motioned for me to sit beside her. I slid over, put my arm around her, and she leaned against me, breathing softly. We sat quietly, holding each other, swaying gently, thinking our own private thoughts. After awhile she pulled away with a sigh, and looked at me.

"Well," she said, "we still have work to do. Fourney is still out there somewhere and may have been alerted by now. Then, too, we have to find out where they've hidden the money so it can be sent back to the Treasury Department to be destroyed."

"I don't know if the money is even an issue anymore, Peach; maybe it never was, but if we find it, which isn't likely, I want to destroy it myself, right on the spot, so I'll know it's been done. Why do you think Fourney might have been alerted?"

"Because Alan Haniford had a twin sister. Her name is Allison Haniford and she works for the agency at Green Hill Farms in Virginia. If she was the one who altered the computer files, she would have put something in the program to let her know if someone got into them. It might even allow her to trace it back to the source of the illegal access."

I got out of the seat and began stowing all the loose gear while Brandy went forward. After we'd buckled in and I'd started the engine, I reached over and took her hand.

"This morning was beautiful, Brandy, like finding something I'd lost as a young man. We shouldn't forget it, ever; we shouldn't get so involved that we let those things slip away from us. When we're done with this, let's get away, not tell anyone, forget about the house and the

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bills, everything, and go away somewhere for a month or two. What do you say?"

"Where will we go?"

"Anywhere we want. We'll just see where we are when we get where we're going. Let's not plan a definite destination. For that matter, let's not plan a definite length of time. We'll just go until we're tired of travelling, and stop until we're tired of staying in one spot. How does that sound?"

"Sounds like a deal," she said. "Shall we begin?"

* * * * *

The warehouse in Port Townsend, where we were supposed to meet Halsey and Dansforth, wasn't really a warehouse; it was a self storage company. We drove into town late in the evening, surveyed the place, took note of a couple of vans parked nearby, then went back to stay at the ferry landing for the night.

Brandy went grocery shopping while I checked the weapons, reviewed the plan of action, wrote some notes to myself, and tried to figure out what I was going to do when or if I confronted Fourney the next morning. I called Dansforth, advised him we were in town and waited for Brandy to return from the grocery store.

I helped her put the groceries away and sat at the table while she prepared a light meal. I stared out the windows at the darkening sky, watched the gulls shivering in the chill wind, and after a while Brandy began singing softly.

She dished up the meal ten minutes later and we sat together on the same side of the table, enjoying the food and talking about anything that would keep us from remembering why we were there.

"When this is all over," Brandy said, "I'd like to go to Mackinac Island up in the Great Lakes. Do you think we can?"

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“Mackinac Island? Why there?”

“I saw it in a movie once, an Esther Williams movie, and it looked like a beautiful place. Can we go there?”

I shrugged, admiring her optimism, and told her I thought it would be a grand idea, but stopped short of reminding her that people were going to be shooting at us the next day. I honestly believe she forgot for awhile, and I didn't want to ruin her dream. Half an hour later, while we were still in the middle of our future trip, visiting the steamboat museum at Desoto Bend, Nebraska, someone tapped on the door, and the dream vanished, completely forgotten, as if we'd never planned it.

It was Dansforth. He poked his head in for a moment, said hello to Brandy, then asked me to join him outside. Brandy and I exchanged glances, wondering why he wanted to talk then instead of waiting until morning. It could only be bad news. I got into my jacket, shoved the .45 under my belt, and went out.

Dansforth was standing with Halsey under an old iron street lamp at the edge of the quay wall watching a fishing boat chugging across the bay. Neither spoke for a while, so I leaned against one of the benches with my arms folded across my chest and waited.

“How do you feel about this, Richard?” Halsey asked, still watching the boat, “Do you want to go in?”

“Frankly, no, But why do you ask? Is there a problem?”

Dansforth cleared his throat and shuffled his feet. “Well, we're monitoring their communications you know, and we think, *think*, mind you, that they know we're here, that someone might be coming in.”

“We picked up a call very early yesterday morning from Virginia warning Colonel Fourney that we might be on to them,” Halsey said, turning toward me. “You could have an unfriendly welcome awaiting you in there. If you

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want to withdraw now, we won't hold it against you."

Like hell you won't, I thought. "Where in Virginia?" I asked.

They exchanged brief glances and Dansforth looked away, over my shoulder, toward the parking lot.

"The farm," Halsey said simply.

"So it is someone at the agency; do you know who?"

Halsey nodded. "Haniford's sister is our first suspect. We've been watching her closely for some time, but she's either very clever or she has lots of help. We think she's being coerced into helping them."

I shoved my hands into my pockets and walked to the edge of the quay wall, staring down at the boulders in the water. "How long is some time?" I asked.

"What?"

"How long have you suspected she was altering the files?"

"Since January, about six months ago, but that isn't the issue. We can repair that without much trouble; our primary objective is to prevent Colonel Fourney from carrying out his operation."

I turned to face them, watching their eyes and trying to separate what they were telling me from what they meant.

"And what is his objective here, Halsey?" I asked.

"I thought you were told," he answered. "He's going to transport weapons to Afghanistan to supply the partisan army."

He said it so convincingly I almost believed him. I wasn't sure, but he might have known I thought he was lying. My next question should have been to ask him how he knew that, but that would have got me killed, so I changed the subject.

"Why did Haniford try to kill Calhoun?" I asked.

"Ah, that." Halsey sighed and pulled his collar up

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against the chill. Dansforth shoved his hands into his coat pockets and wandered away toward the far end of the quay wall.

“An unfortunate accident,” Halsey continued, “that shouldn’t have happened. Calhoun had been working on the case for several months, sending his reports in to the computer regularly, not knowing, of course, that they were being read by the very person who should not have seen them. When they felt he was too close to discovering what they were doing, they elected to terminate him. We really didn’t expect them to try because we felt they knew it would lead us, eventually, to Haniford’s sister, and then to the source.”

“Does she know her brother was sent to kill us?”

“Maybe, but I doubt it. We think Fourney’s people might have sent him without her knowledge.”

“Does she know I killed him?”

“No, but I’m certain she knows something’s gone wrong. It’s been a week and he hasn’t reported in. They’ll tell her it was you.”

Dansforth strolled back to join us, stood slightly behind and to the left of Halsey with his shoulders hunched up against the cold, wet wind. We all watched each other in silence for awhile. What did they expect me to do? Presently I asked the question I hadn’t wanted to ask, the one I’d been practicing for two days.

“Who killed Calhoun?”

“We’re not certain, but we think it was someone Fourney hired after Haniford’s attempt failed,” Dansforth said.

“The MO is that of a nasty professional assassin employed specifically for the job,” Halsey added.

Job? Calhoun was a job? I despised Halsey for his apathetic interpretation of Calhoun’s death and wanted to tell him so until I realized that, like the revolutionary

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soldier, Halsey shed no tears for his fallen comrades. But a job?

"You know who he is, and that he killed Calhoun; do you have him in custody?"

Dansforth shuffled again, but Halsey stood stiff as a post and looked me straight in the eye. "We let him get away," he said flatly.

Then I knew the truth. He revealed in that one simple statement something I'd suspected all my adult life. They didn't let him get away; they helped him get away.

"You use him, don't you?" I asked, barely able to control my voice.

"He fixes things for us now and then, when we need him."

"Oh," I moaned, "you useless son of a bitch, how I hate you."

Halsey turned to Dansforth and motioned him forward with a wag of his head. "Don't let your emotions overwhelm you, Constable," he said with an insipid smile. "You, too, have a mission to fulfill. Agent Dansforth will enlighten you."

He stepped away and walked quickly to a waiting car. Dansforth and I watched him go in silence, and when I turned to him I was trembling with rage. My knuckles were against the butt of the .45. I wanted to use it so badly I felt sick.

"Won't you, for God's sake, tell me what's going on, Steve?" I asked. "Where the hell is Houser? What are you doing up here? What's Fourney trying to do?"

He straightened, jutting out his chin indignantly, as if by asking, I'd called him a liar.

"I've already told you; Halsey just told you. They're getting ready to ship weapons to Af..."

I called him a liar and insulted his mother, "I don't believe you, Dansforth, and I don't believe Halsey, ei-

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ther. If that's all it was, you wouldn't need me, I think..."

His cold, expressionless eyes fixed me impassionately, and a wall went up between us as he refused to hear what I had to say, refused to acknowledge me as a fellow human being. He smiled disarmingly, halting my words in mid-sentence, and I turned away, walked to the far end of the quay wall while he followed three paces behind.

"What do you think, Richard?" he asked when I stopped.

"I don't know. If I did, I wouldn't keep asking you, would I?" I turned toward him, and we stared at each other in silence for long minutes.

Presently he nodded, as if he'd made some kind of decision, and stepped closer. "Okay," he said quietly, "they are getting ready to send a shipment of arms and medical supplies to Afghanistan. It's one shipment of many. It's against the law actually. They've been flying back and forth for a couple of years now. But that's only the little part of their operation we can see. We've been watching Fourney and some middle east arms dealers for several months and, yes, we knew what they we doing. Yes, we've condoned it, even helped him when we could by providing him with intelligence data and a good cover because we feel it is a just cause. Would you give me your pistol please?"

His hands were still in his pockets, and I could see that he had his pistol pointed at me through the coat. I unzipped my jacket and gave him the .45.

"Are you afraid I'll shoot you after I hear what you have to say?" I asked angrily.

"No; before I've had a chance to finish." He shoved the Colt into his other pocket and continued as if there had been no break.

"Colonel Fourney was assigned to his duties in Viet-

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nam for one specific reason, Richard; his mission was to recover the money, the legitimate money and the counterfeit money, and bring it back to this country for the express purpose of financing the people's armies in South America, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

"That mission was conceived and endorsed by members of a previous administration because of the difficulty of obtaining the consent for funds by Congress. It was, and is, a covert operation of the highest priority, and it must continue if we are to balance the billions of dollars being supplied by Libya, Iran, Cuba, and the Soviet Union.

"But Colonel Fourney has...well, he's gotten out of hand, so to speak; he's been soliciting funds from private individuals and foreign governments. It is no longer just a covert operation, it has become an international calamity.

"He made promises to American industrialist and heads of foreign governments that he cannot keep, has no intention of fulfilling, and he did it in the name of the President, as his direct spokesman and agent. You see what that does to the President's credibility.

"Six months ago, in January, he made a deal to purchase six F-4 Phantoms and one hundred air to surface missiles, and secured the promise of a middle east country for a secret airbase on the Persian Gulf in return for some sophisticated surface to surface missiles, radar sites, and spare parts.

"All parties have delivered. The F-4s, which we thought were going to South America, are sitting ready to strike from their base near the Straits of Hormuz. You may wonder why that bothers us, why we would want to stop these countries from fighting each other.

"Frankly, we don't. We're selling weapons to both sides, waiting for them to destroy their economies so we

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can step in, offer American taxpayer's money as aid, and take over the financial administration of both countries."

"The idea being that the people who have the gold control the flow of oil," I interjected.

"Basically," he sighed. "But there are other forces involved now who are interested in drawing us, America, into a shooting war, and we're being slowly manipulated into participating by an international cartel who would benefit from our intervention. They intend to draw France, England, Australia, and others into the conflict in the Persian Gulf. The Soviet Union is already there, but financing the wrong people. The oil producing countries will be coerced into providing some support, and those nations without military power will be asked to provide financial support for the navies on station there.

"It is a perfect scenario for staging an international war, and it is drawing nearer as each day passes. The President and members of his staff, Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State, members of the National Security Council, CIA, FBI, and others are meeting at regular intervals, conferring with the governments of other nations, trying to find a way to resolve these problems without cutting off the flow of arms and supplies to the partisan armies. A high-level meeting is scheduled for this December, and we must have this situation in hand before everyone walks into the White House."

"Then the President *does* know about the operation? Why did..."

Dansforth wagged his head. "He does not know everything, and he must not know any more than he already thinks he knows. If we succeed with our counter plan tomorrow, he will have no need to know. The American people will have no need to know."

He walked to the quay wall, stood beside me quietly for a while, looking at the last faint glow of twilight in the

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western sky. Presently he continued.

“The planes and missiles Colonel Fourney and the cartel purchased are not to be used to strike inside either of the countries involved in the middle east war, Richard; they are there to sink American ships. Yes, American ships, in the Persian Gulf. We’ve shown a strong presence there in the past few years; it will increase by the end of this year, and by November we’ll be escorting oil tankers through the Strait of Hormuz. A task force will be formed from several nations; Poland, England, Australia, and others, and will remain on station continuously thereafter until the middle east war ceases. That timetable is April, 2003. But Operation Capricorn has plans to prolong and expand the war. We think they’ll try to sink an American ship and blame it on the Iranians. Maybe they’ll do something else. An embassy. I don’t know. But you can bet some country is going to lose some hardware and people out there, and we’ll all be pointing our fingers at the wrong people as the villains.”

I screwed up my face and shook my head in dismay. I felt as if I were standing in the presence of pure evil, and I shivered, visibly and involuntarily, wondering, on one hand, if he was telling the truth, and knowing, on the other, that it had to be.

“Houser, then,” I said. “What part does he play in this?”

“I don’t know, Richard. He may be Capricorn, as you suspected, but he has disappeared, I’m afraid, and we haven’t been able to find out where he went. Out of the country, probably, to protect his interests. He knows people who will conceal him for as long as necessary.”

I looked toward the motorhome, saw Brandy watching us out the window. She raised her hand timidly in a sign of greeting and I nodded to her so she would know everything was okay. Okay? Things could only have been

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worse if we were in the middle of a nuclear war, I thought. No, not even that; that would be over quickly and painlessly. This was some kind of unendurable hellish nightmare. I almost expected to wake up to find that I'd been dreaming again.

"Have you put Haniford's sister in the picture yet?" I asked presently.

"A speculation only. I think she was coerced into helping Fourney to protect her brother. I say that because she isn't the kind of person who has the moxie to do any of this on her own. Not that she's dull witted, mind you; quite the contrary. She's very intelligent, beautiful, well educated, and talented. But I'd stake my job on the assertion that she's been told her brother would be exposed or killed if she didn't cooperate."

"Kinda runs in your family, doesn't it?" I said, thinking of Houser's threat to have me imprisoned for desertion. He dismissed it with a disdainful frown, and I asked another question before he could respond.

"Why have you brought me here?"

I knew from his reaction that he'd been hoping I wouldn't ask. "Uh, that," he muttered as he shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other. "That is why I have both pistols."

"That bad, is it?"

"Depends on where you are when the shit hits the fan," he said.

"And where am I going to be?" He really didn't have to tell me; I already knew.

I was going in, he told me, to find out what their timetable was for moving the equipment. I was to find out how much they had, where it was going, and how they were going to move it. I was going to get photographs, if I could, steal records, if I could, try to slow down the operation, if I could, and get out.

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If I could.

Haniford's sister, Allison, was expected to be a guest for the weekend.

"What happens if I refuse?" I asked.

"Oh, Halsey's made sure you won't. We've prepared a press release, with extra copies for every member of a Congressional investigating committee, naming you as Capricorn, and we have all the intelligence data on the computer to prove it, most of which you've supplied yourself in the past few days."

"What would happen if I dropped a juicy letter into the mail addressed to some big newspaper?"

He shook his head sadly. "Wouldn't matter, Constable. Our people would intercept it, and even if it did get through, who do you think they'll believe? You have nothing but a wild story to back up your accusations, but Halsey can make you notorious in a matter of minutes."

He stepped back just out of reach and watched me warily with the pistol pushing a sharp bulge in his pocket.

But I wasn't worried because I knew he wouldn't shoot; they needed me for awhile, a couple of days maybe. After that our lives wouldn't be worth the price of a mashed cat.

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ELEVEN

The following morning dawned leaden grey and cold; a fine mist, almost a fog, obscured the view through the windows of the motorhome. I parked near the entrance of the storage lot while Brandy made a pot of coffee, then we settled back, she wrapped in a sheep skin coat, thermals, ski-pants, and mukluks, and I in my P-coat, jeans, and jump boots, to wait for the place to open.

I sat next to the window trying to keep an eye on the lot while Brandy rested in the crook of my arm. She twisted the leather thong at the end of her coat zipper, and glanced out the window once in awhile trying to see anything I might miss.

“What happens if they don’t show?” she asked presently. “Maybe last night was all the meeting they meant to have.”

I shrugged, took a drink of the coffee. “I don’t think so, Peach. Neither Halsey nor Dansforth indicated that we weren’t supposed to show up this morning. They said nothing about a plan of battle, if they even have one, and I think they’ll want to know where I’m going to be every step of the way. I wish I knew what happened to Christian Houser.”

“Maybe he’s gone, just like they said.”

“Maybe.”

We sat in silence for awhile until a dark blue Maxivan

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rolled down the street and stopped opposite the gate to the lot. Brandy nudged me.

"I see it," I said, wiping a clear spot on the window.

"Unless I miss my guess," she said, "that's a government rig."

After a pause of half a minute, the driver continued to the corner, turned around, and came back to park behind us. I watched through the rear window as one man, bundled up against the cold, stepped out, made some motions to someone inside, and walked toward our rig.

I went back to the table. "He's coming this way; do you know who it is?"

Brandy peered out the window, down the side of the motorhome. "Can't see him." She reached into her pocket and withdrew a .38 revolver. I held the .380 Browning down beside my leg, out of sight, but ready, just in case.

The man knocked on the door and I went back to answer it. "What do you want?" I yelled.

"Obviously I'd like to come in if you don't mind," a smooth, deep voice replied.

I opened the door, the man held out his hands to show me he had no weapon, and I moved aside as he came aboard, shaking the lapels of his expensive topcoat.

"Frightful weather," he said, "not fit for a beast." His eyes sparkled in a face the color of a polished almond shell and he seemed ever on the verge of smiling. He was balding, slender but wiry, about fifty years old. He produced an identification card, and smiled broadly.

"Jason Brown, C5," he said, as if it were one name. "May we talk?"

I looked at Brandy, she shrugged, wide-eyed, and I pointed to the couch.

"Would you like some coffee?" Brandy asked.

"Thank you, yes, this weather has chilled me to the marrow." He got comfortable while Brandy fixed his cof-

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fee.

“Just a bit of cream, please,” he asked politely.

Brandy and I sat opposite and studied the amiable, polite man for awhile. I figured he had to be an exceptional agent to have lasted as long as he had. He showed great confidence and poise and, judging from his perfectly enunciated speech, was undoubtedly both well educated and intelligent.

“What can we do for you, Mister Brown?” Brandy asked.

He folded his hands on the table and smiled. “Many of your colleagues at the agency place a great deal of faith in your abilities as an operative, Mister Constable,” he said with an approving nod, “as do I and some members of the other agencies.

“However, while they admire your physical prowess and remarkable deductive perception, I get the distinct impression they often feel you’re sometimes more a hinderance than a help to them, due mainly, I gather, from your aversion to following orders. We’ve been monitoring your movements for some time, both of you, and I’ve seen nothing to substantiate their concern that you may interfere detrimentally with this operation. My observations have led me to conclude that you have done remarkably well with a dearth of information.

“But that isn’t why I’m here, Richard. May I call you Richard? For the moment, I’m to dissuade you, if possible, from carrying out any unauthorized unilateral actions until Mister Houser has had a chance to speak with you.”

Brandy and I exchanged glances and she kicked my leg under the table.

“Colonel Fourney and his associates are expected to begin removing their merchandise from their headquarters this afternoon. We have a number of agents from several different organizations inside, positioned to strike

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in the event we are forced to thwart their plan.

"We don't want them killed. Houser informs me you have a penchant for dispatching people and asking questions later. May I have your word, Richard, that you will follow orders, and agree to talk with the Deputy Director immediately you're finished with Halsey and Dansforth?"

I looked from him to Brandy, and back again. "How did Houser find out we were here?" I asked.

Brandy shrugged, pursing her lips; Jason Brown blinked his laughing eyes.

"You're a relative latecomer to this investigation, Richard," he said. "Most of us have been working on it since the evacuation of Saigon. We've known for some time where the merchandise has been stored because we've had inside information, and, of course, we keep an eye on everyone who joins us. That's the nature of our business; to keep our eyes on other people.

"Christian Houser has had his eye on you for a number of years because he felt you were one of Halsey's anonymous agents, in the basket with the Hanifords, and has even suggested that you might even be one of Halsey's hired assassins.

"It appears that way, you see, because Halsey gave you a new identity and let everyone know you'd been killed in Vietnam. He only does that if he thinks he can use the person for some future operation. You see what I mean."

I squirmed nervously in the seat, trying to frame a question about Houser's location that wouldn't sound as if I'd been told he was out of the country. Finally, unable to do so, I simply asked where he was.

"Nearby," Brown replied flatly, offering no more than that.

"And he wants to talk to me?"

"Urgently."

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I scratched the side of my face. "Would I be out of line if I asked..."

Brown held up a hand, chopping my question in the middle, and smiled benignly. "I'm only delivering his message and wasn't informed of the nature of the exchange he will have with you." He sipped his coffee, then continued.

"There is a small camp near the confluence of the Dungeness and Greywolf Rivers in the extreme north-eastern foothills of the Olympic Mountains. He'll be waiting for you there in a motorhome similar to this one. The location is near Colonel Fourney's headquarters. Stop and see him before you go in. Do you understand?"

I nodded, wondering if I was being lured into the final trap; the one where they carried me out in body bag surrounded by television cameras and pious federal agents.

"How do I get there?" I asked.

"Go to Palo Alto Road, one mile east of Sequim, and turn left," he told me. "Follow the road until the macadam runs out; it's a long way back, ten miles, maybe. On your right, you'll see a road leading down into the canyon where the two rivers meet."

"Okay," I said. "What if Spenser Halsey and Dansforth want to know where I'm going, or where I've been?"

"They won't. They're going to assemble their agents at strategic points around the headquarters and won't be checking on you for some time. I must impress upon you the importance of secrecy in this matter, Richard. Don't let either of them know he's waiting for you; it's quite important."

"I understand."

He finished the coffee and pushed the cup away, mopped the table spotless with a paper napkin, then stood and walked to the door. "Fine. Thank you for the

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coffee. I hope I'll see you again soon under more favorable circumstances. If they ask, tell Halsey and Dansforth I came for some of Calhoun's papers." He nodded politely to Brandy and stepped out into the chill fog.

I went back and sat opposite Brandy. She looked at me with confused wonder. "What do you think that's all about?" she asked as the van drove away.

I had to admit I couldn't make heads or tails of it. But if Houser was still here, it either meant Dansforth lied to me or Houser had very cleverly made everyone believe he was really out of the country.

He could do that easily enough, but why? One of two reasons: he was here to take charge of Fourney's operation and get his share of the money, or he thought someone else was. Either way, he wouldn't want anyone to know he was here. But if he was here to thwart the Colonel's plan he wouldn't have made the agency think he was out of the country unless he thought someone was there who might recognize him and alert the others. Allison Haniford, maybe.

Or he could be tightening the noose around my neck by involving me even deeper in the conspiracy. Everyone had made it clear that a culprit would be produced when it came time to expose all this to the media. They would protect each other; that's the way they work. But a civilian who just happened to be the only surviving member of the patrol that found the money would be the perfect scapegoat.

It would be a posthumous trial.

A man came out of the storage warehouse about five minutes until eight, and stood hunched and stomping his feet in the cold until Halsey and Dansforth arrived in an agency sedan. He unlocked the gate, and, as they drove through, an overhead door yawned open in the side of the building and they drove right in. Three minutes later,

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Dansforth appeared and walked over to invite us to join them.

"We were hoping for a better day," he said as we followed him back through the puddles.

"It's early yet; might clear off in an hour or two," I offered.

"Yes. "

As we reached the door, one of the vans pulled from the curb, made a turn in the street and drove away to the south.

I watched it go, wondering if they were going after Jason Brown Cee Five.

An agent took Brandy to one side as we entered the office, led her to an adjoining room, and closed the door. I looked at Dansforth questioningly, but he waved away my concern with a nonchalant shrug.

I don't know what I'd expected to find inside the building, but what I found when they led us in stopped me in my tracks, and it was impossible to hide my surprise. The agency had taken two bays of the storage warehouse and turned them into a complete communications center with radios, computers, telephones, maps, desks, and a battle plan table.

Plastic cups and wadded food wrappers were stuffed into trash baskets, and stacks of papers were shuffled into neat piles on every available flat surface. Scanners, decoders, homing devices, and a host of surveillance gear lined the floors at the bases of the walls. Radios crackled and telephones buzzed while fifty or sixty men assembled weapons, shoved boxes around, and changed into foul weather gear.

In the center of one bay Halsey and eight other agents were bending over one of the large scale plastic relief maps of the area that had been provided by the Naval Reconnaissance Technical Support Center in Suitland,

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Maryland. On it, in exaggerated detail, were Fourney's headquarters with the warehouses and sod airfield. Beside the table, on an easel, was a USGS map of the specific area, with all the access routes overlined in red marker ink.

Blue Team One, Two and Three would enter on the south side, Green Team One, Two, and Three would enter on the east side, Yellow Team One and Two would enter on the north side, and Red Team would enter on the west side. In front of the Red Team was a single black dot. I asked what it represented.

As if I didn't know.

Halsey launched into a long, one-sided explanation of the plan of attack while I tried to keep my mind from straying away from the road that wound up to Dungeness Forks camp ground which appeared to be about three or four miles from Fourney's headquarters. I memorized the way in while I made note of the rather awesome firepower assembled in the warehouse, counted heads, and tried to remember faces.

I was going in ahead of Red Team, do as much surveillance as I could, steal any records I could get my hands on, radio back that all was ready, and get out.

Then he went around the group leaders and gave them their last minute instructions.

After about ten minutes, Halsey turned to me, glanced at his watch, and asked me if I had the plan clear in my mind. I nodded. Then everyone synchronized their watches as if they really thought they were going to pull it off with an error of only seconds, and I fiddled with mine just so they'd believe I was concerned about it.

Dansforth handed me a transceiver. I looked at the terrain: Mountains. Valleys. Meadows. A hundred thousand cedar trees two hundred feet tall. He might as well have handed me a pair of signal flags.

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I shoved it in my coat pocket and he scowled at me threateningly. I smiled back at him as innocently as I could, wondering if I could drop the radio into a trash can without getting caught.

Halsey was wrapping up the briefing. "We'll give Constable until eleven o'clock to get to the area, at which time we will all board the helicopters and depart for our respective drop zones. If we haven't received his signal by thirteen hundred we go in blind. Are there any questions?"

There were none from the other side of the table, and even though I had a list about twenty pages long, I let them pass.

Dansforth disappeared for a while, and I went outside to wait until he came out with Brandy ten minutes later. Brandy was grim and flushed with anger. I asked her why.

"They're trying to talk me out of going with you; they got pretty nasty about it, too."

I looked at Dansforth for an explanation.

"Don't you think she'll be safer here with us?" he asked us calmly.

"She's an adult; if she wants to go, she goes."

He sighed and nodded his head. "Well," he said, "we tried." He asked her to go ahead to the motorhome so he could talk to me privately, but we both refused his suggestion.

"Okay. I just thought you might want to spare her some grief, Richard. I'll be frank; you may not get out. These people are well armed and they'll have no second thoughts about killing you if they discover what you're up to. Do you understand what I'm saying?" He looked at Brandy, then at me. "Understand?" he asked again.

"If he goes, I go," Brandy said.

"If I go, she goes," I said.

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Dansforth stopped in the middle of the street and let us walk on to the motor-home. Brandy got into the passenger side. I opened the driver's door and turned to Dansforth.

"See you at the weenie roast," I said.

He turned his collar up and walked back to the warehouse.

Brandy was staring out the windshield, her face a mask of frustrated anger.

"They told me Spenser Halsey insisted that I stay behind while you went out there by yourself, said I could assist at the command center until you returned." She folded her arms across her chest and puffed, trying to mimic the agent.

"He is an agency employee; you, on the other hand, are not. As a civilian, you will be held legally accountable if you interfere with an official government investigation. If you refuse, we may be forced to hold you against your will for your own safety."

I studied her face, looking for a sign that she might have misinterpreted what they had told her, but found none. She was serious.

"I can't believe Halsey would make such a demand," I said.

"Then may I convince you by stating emphatically that for awhile they even hinted they would use whatever means they felt were necessary to prevent me from going? Said it had been approved at the highest level of government, all the way to the top."

I sighed and stared out the window for awhile. Brandy reached over and grabbed my hand, holding tight and trembling with fear and rage.

"I'll be okay, Richard," she said softly. "I have everything under control here. I just can't help but feel they weren't worried about my safety as much as they wanted

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a hostage. Call it intuition if you want, but I think there's more going on here than we know about. I just got this creepy feeling that they wanted to keep me there as insurance, you know; like they wanted to make sure you did what you were supposed to do instead of running off somewhere. Does that make sense?"

Nothing they did made any sense. If it made sense, they couldn't get it done. I shrugged and shook my head.

"No, I said, "it doesn't, but maybe we can make some sense of it after we talk to Houser."

"You're really going to talk to him? I don't trust him at all; less than Halsey, less than Dansforth."

I started the engine and Brandy unbuckled her seatbelt and threw her arms around me, embracing me tightly, trembling.

"I hate this, Richard," she said against my neck. "Promise me you won't go without me; promise you won't leave me somewhere."

I put my arms around her, held her gently, and closed my eyes. Did my thoughts show so much? Could she really guess that I'd thought about leaving her somewhere in the motorhome, far away from all this nonsense, so she would be out of danger? I held her away, looked into her eyes.

"Is there no way you can get out of doing this?" she asked, "I'm genuinely afraid."

"I think not, Brandy, We're in this to the end whether we like it or not; they've seen to that. I'll be able to make a better decision after I talk to Houser."

"But I'm afraid he'll be waiting up there with a gang of armed men to kill us. What could he possibly have to tell us at this point?"

"Only one way to find out."

I pulled away from the curb, turned around at the end of the block. The second van, I noticed, was gone.

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TWELVE

We talked about the hours ahead of us as we cruised south to the junction of Highway 101, turned northwest, and headed toward Palo Alto Road which would take us to Dungeness Forks. We both agreed it didn't seem likely that Christian Houser would be hiding out in the bushes somewhere if he didn't have a good reason. Had I been in his place, I would have got out of the country as fast as I could. If he wasn't planning to kill us, really waiting for us, I wondered what he had to say that was so important that he'd risk his life to reveal it.

Dansforth had seemed reluctant to accept the idea that Houser was Capricorn when I discussed it with him earlier, but last night he candidly agreed that I could be right about him. What information had they received in those two days that might have convinced them Houser was their man? It could have come from anyone, from any source.

But not the computer. Houser would still have access to it, would be able to determine the agency's every move. Maybe that's what he was doing. Maybe he'd got some information about the briefing we'd just attended and knew we were on our way to play hell with the operation. If so, we would be driving right into a trap.

But who was Jason Brown? If he really was an agent

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who worked for Houser in C5, the agency's South America section, he could be part of the renegade operation. On the other hand, if he was, why would he risk exposure by contacting us openly? He seemed not the least bit concerned that Halsey or Dansforth might see him leaving the motorhome, and even suggested that telling either of them that he was there to get some of Calhoun's notes was sufficient to explain his presence. It probably would, and I had to conclude that Brown's message and presence were legitimate.

Brandy turned to me with a troubled frown. "Houser wouldn't stay around here if he was a part of this thing and thought he might get caught, would he?" she asked.

"Doesn't seem likely, but maybe he has a plan to get his hands on that money. The agency thinks he might have left the country, remember?"

"But why would he let them think that, and send Mister Brown over to tell us otherwise? Either he isn't there and we're being led into a trap, or he is there and has something to tell us, something he's discovered while he's been gone this past week."

"Well," I said, "I have an idea he's really waiting for us."

Brandy pondered it for awhile. Presently she nodded. "Me, too," she replied.

We tried to figure out why for the next twenty minutes, but finally gave it up as useless speculation. The answer could only come from Houser himself.

Halsey had given me precise directions to Fourney's headquarters, told me to turn onto Palo Alto Road about a mile east of Sequim, and follow the road, even after I thought I was lost, until the macadam ran out. I memorized the detour from the USGS map and realized that Houser must have known about Halsey's attack plans.

Sure enough, one mile east of Sequim, on the left, was

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Palo Alto Road, only I sailed right past it, because he forgot to warn me that the road was at the top of a hill in the middle of a left curve, was hidden by its own road cut and couldn't be seen until one was directly abeam of it. I made some cussing sounds and found a place at the bottom of the hill to turn around, then tried it from the other side. I slowed to let a van rocket past, then made a right turn onto the road.

"Was that the same van that was outside the warehouse?" Brandy asked.

"I don't know; I was too busy looking for traffic. Do you think it was?"

"I know it for a fact," she answered grimly. "I don't like that, Richard."

"Well, they are gathering for an attack up there, Peach," I said. "Maybe they've just been looking around to see if anyone is moving."

"I don't know," she grumbled.

I eased the rig up into the foothills of the Olympic Mountains and forgot about cussing at Halsey because the road wandered up and down and through the firs and cedars, and past old clapboard houses sequestered in the greening shade. I drove slowly so we could fill up our minds with the sights, and after about fifteen miles, the macadam road turned to gravel and disappeared around a cedar-lined bend.

A sign, half hidden by a stand of last season's mustard canes, indicated Dungeness Forks was down the dirt trail to the right. At the bottom of the sign, in six inch letters, were the words: **MOTORHOMES AND TRAILERS NOT RECOMMENDED.**

I started cussing again, but aimed the rig in the right direction, and headed down into the shadows.

The road to Dungeness Forks wasn't really a road; it was a rut-filled slice off the side of a mountain that had

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been cut by no more than two swipes of a bulldozer blade, and I began to understand why the signwriter hadn't recommended motorhomes. There were pullouts every hundred feet, all on the other side of the road, so I put the transmission into low and stood on the brakes all the way to the bottom, hoping I wouldn't meet anyone coming up, and wondering how I'd ever get out when it came time to leave.

Brandy braced herself against the dash with both hands, clenched her teeth, and closed her eyes. Once her lips moved, forming the words of a silent prayer.

The motorhome bumped and banged and lurched like a skiff in high surf, but we made it to the bottom without leaving anything hanging in the trees or littering the trail, and when the road levelled out, we crossed a sturdy wooden bridge across the Greywolf River.

The Greywolf wasn't much of a river, as rivers go. Under the bridge it was, maybe, thirty feet wide, but it was as clear as a piece of crystal glass and, although it was running down over stones and boulders washed from the mountains ages ago, we could see every pebble on the bottom.

I stopped on the bridge, looked under the canopy of trees to where it merged with the Dungeness an eighth of a mile west, and we could see a series of neat little campsites on the south bank. I eased the motorhome across the bridge and turned onto a single wide trace that led to the sites.

There was a gate, but the chain was down, so I drove on in and cruised slowly under the trees until we spotted another rig parked down by the Dungeness, then backed in next to it, which put us about forty feet away.

The other motorhome was nearly identical to ours and was clearly government property. I expected to see a stack of firewood, a folding chair or two, and half a dozen

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agents standing around cracking their knuckles, but the motorhome and surrounding area seemed abandoned.

Brandy raised her eyebrows at me silently and I shrugged, shut off the engine, and got out, listening to the quiet for awhile, then walked down to the Greywolf and scooped up a handful of water just to see how it tasted. It was as cold and clear and sweet as water percolated through five hundred feet of Indiana limestone.

The water trickled down my face and I wiped it away with my shirt sleeve, then walked back to the other motorhome, peering into the cedars to see if I could spot anyone. Except for some fresh footprints in the damp soil around it, there was no indication that anyone had been there, and I wondered if Houser was sitting up in the brush sighting down a rifle. I went back to our motorhome and made a motion for Brandy to roll down the window. I told her the place was deserted, and we discussed whether we should wait for awhile or go on. We finally decided we could safely wait fifteen minutes, then we'd have to leave.

"There are a lot of footprints over there," I told her. "Looks like three different sets, but no signs of trouble." By that I meant there was no blood or pieces laying around anywhere.

"Maybe the guys in the van were here and Houser went with them," Brandy offered.

Maybe, but it didn't make a lot of sense for him to send Brown to get us then leave before we arrived. I told her I was going to look around up in the trees and down by the river to see if Houser had wandered off, warned her to stay inside with the doors locked, then headed up into the cedars behind the motorhome.

I pulled the .380 from my belt, held it against my right thigh, and walked back and forth at the edge of the undergrowth until I spotted some footprints and crushed

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vegetation where someone had gone into the forest. Whomever it had been had made no attempt to conceal his tracks; it even appeared that he had rushed in headlong as if he had been running. The length of the strides and the damage to the brush seemed to verify that.

I crept in slowly, alternately scanning the trail and watching the area ahead of me, remembering with acute clarity how I'd got Haniford in exactly the same position. About twenty yards in I found where another path through the brush converged with the one I was following. Two sets of footprints, made by rushing men, were clearly visible in the soft, wet soil.

I squatted down and gazed into the underbrush trying to spot any unusual mass against the background that shouldn't have been there, but saw nothing. After what seemed minutes, but was probably only seconds, I moved on, bending low and staying close to the bases of the trees. The trail curved around to the east for thirty yards or more, then I found an area where someone had waited or fallen in the brush, and two sets of footprints angled off through the brush in a direct line with the camp sites. I squatted again and examined the brush carefully.

Blood, already blackening from oxidation, covered the stems and leaves of nearby plants, and a small puddle stained the ground like dirty oil.

Behind me, about waist level to a standing man, I saw a fresh scar on one of the cedars that had been made by a bullet. It appeared to me that two men had chased Houser into the forest and one of them had got shot for his trouble, because they had given up the chase and gone back to the camps, side by side, rather than in a line, as if the wounded man had been leaning on his partner.

I scanned the area ahead of me again, turning my head from side to side as I listened for any sounds that

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might betray the presence of another person. There was none, so I continued on until I found more blood in the trail.

Cautiously, and as quietly as I could, I followed a steady line of blood deep into the forest for a hundred feet, then stopped. Ahead of me, perhaps twenty feet away, and with his back to me, Christian Houser was sitting on the ground, leaning against a tree with his legs splayed out in front of him. I eased around to the right until I could see his face.

He looked peaceful, almost dead, but he breathed with spasmodic, painful gasps. The front of his shirt was covered with blood and his hands lay loosely on his lap, palms up with his fingers curled uselessly. His Smith and Wesson .357 was in the dirt beside him.

I levelled the Browning at a spot just in front of his right ear and stood slowly, then stepped out from behind a tree. His eyes rolled up to focus on me; otherwise, he made no attempt to move.

"Constable," he said softly, barely moving his mouth. "You're late." He looked back at the revolver in the dirt, staring at it with his jaw slack and his eyes expressionless. His face was ashen, sagging lifelessly.

I got down beside him and checked the revolver, discovered he'd fired all the bullets, then pulled his shirt open and looked at his wounds. He had two ragged holes in his side, dark and puckered with mortification, and oozing blood.

"Fourney's people, I think," he explained, still staring at the ground where the revolver had been. "They must've followed me up here."

"Well, you should have left the country when you had the chance. How long have you been here?" I thought about the van we'd seen at the junction of the road. If they'd shot him, which was probable, he'd been sitting

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there for half an hour or more.

With great effort he tilted his head back against the tree and fixed me with a puzzled look. "Not leaving the country; too much to do," he said.

I nodded toward the blood on his shirt. "Looks like you've run out of time."

"Looks like." He closed his eyes and was quiet for awhile, and I began to think of Brandy waiting for me at the motorhome, decided I should be getting back.

I watched him carefully, wondering if I should do something for him. Patch him up or put him out of his misery, maybe. Someone would come back to carry his body away after they took care of Fourney. With Houser and the Colonel out of the picture, their operation might simply fall by the wayside, at least for awhile.

I decided it wasn't my problem and turned to go, but he tried to reach out to me, to stop me, and lost his balance.

"Wait," he groaned, choking with the effort. "A moment, Richard. Have to tell you things." He breathed quickly, gasping with painful moans, and slid sideways helplessly.

He rolled his eyes toward me again. "Help me sit up, Richard, and take my identification papers."

I propped him back against the cedar tree, marveling at his determination to live, thinking that a smaller man would have died long ago. When I got him upright, he seemed to breath a little easier.

He wagged his right hand weakly, motioning me to get closer, and I knelt down, staying just out of his reach. He still had enough strength to grab me, maybe wrestle the gun away from me.

He groaned again but managed a weak smile.

"Hell of a way to end a career, isn't it?" he asked. "Actually, I'd planned on exposing this operation and

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retiring as a hero. Things have a way of defeating our dreams, don't they?"

"You know who planned the operation, then?" I asked.

"Fourney and Halsey..." he coughed, spraying blood and spittle from his mouth and nose, caught his breath and blinked away tears of pain and anguish.

"Do you still have the money and the identification I gave you?" he asked presently.

I nodded, told him I did.

"Good," he said. "Good. If things go bust up there at Fourney's, go to London. Contact the man whose name is with the information I gave you. He'll help you find a place to live, protect you until these people quit looking for you. May take years. If you can get out within the next twenty-four hours, you'll both have a pretty good chance to make it. It'll take awhile for them to organize a search." He looked at me, waiting for some kind of answer.

I didn't know what to say, didn't know what he was talking about. Surely he didn't expect me to believe Halsey was behind all this nonsense when the evidence clearly pointed to Houser. But then I remembered what Steve Dansforth had reminded me: if the evidence all points in one direction, it's a sure bet the evidence has been planted.

"Take my I.D." he said weakly, "Everything; wallet, money, everything. Don't want some citizen to find me here."

"Maybe I should try to get you out," I said as I emptied all his pockets, "Think you can walk?"

"Don't be stupid; I can't even sit up by myself. Just listen to what I have to say, then get out. This has all been going on since before we got out of Vietnam, Richard. Halsey has people like you, like Haniford, scattered all over the world. Farmers, shoe salesmen, secretaries,

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baby-sitters; anonymous people he'll use when the circumstances are right. This time he used you and Haniford, and Haniford's sister, too, to accomplish things for him so he wouldn't be implicated.

"No, listen; it's true. He sets people up, lies to them, tells them their job is to protect the system, then has them kill their own colleagues and conspire against the very things they're supposed to protect. But it isn't their fault; they think they're doing the right thing."

"Blind obedience."

He nodded. "Blind obedience and never ask questions. A lot of cruel things can happen to a person who lives that way. When they've served their purpose, they disappear. A private plane suddenly gets shot down over South America, a pleasure boat sinks off the coast of Baja, California, or a hooker gets stuffed into a trash can in an alley someplace. Those are people who have outlived their usefulness, Richard. That's why you and Brandy have to get out of the country now. Don't go into Fournery's camp; they're waiting for you. If they don't kill you outright, they'll indict you and your wife as the conspirators in this operation, just as they'd have tried to blame it on me. The only thing they can do with me is try me posthumously. You too, I imagine. But you can see why I wanted you to have the passports and identification, and why I gave you the credit cards and the money. You're going to have a tough time for awhile, Richard. It isn't easy adapting to the customs of a foreign country, not being able to let your family know you're alive, not seeing your kids... ."

His voice trailed away, and he began to breathe in short, strangled gasps again. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth.

I waited until he looked back at me. "All this to prevent a bunch of terrorists from dragging us into a war in

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the Persian Gulf? Doesn't make any sense to me."

He spit the blood from his mouth and looked away into the trees for awhile.

"You don't get it, do you?" he asked presently. "We are the terrorists; we organize, arm, and finance them. We even help them escape from the people who are supposed to be their enemies when they get trapped inside the wrong country. We're the terrorists, the drug dealers, the arms dealers, and the instigators of all the ugly little wars in every country in the world. If, by some stroke of luck, some country manages to stabilize an area they're trying to control, we provide the intelligence, weapons, and opportunities for the enemy to regain some strategic hold there.

"We help bomb an Embassy or attack one of our ships or military units then make sure it gets to all the media so the American people will begin to demand that we go to war. If it is properly manipulated, the administration can exert tremendous pressure on the American press, you see, and we can make the citizens and politicians believe they should occupy a country or withdraw as the circumstances dictate."

I understood that. It was a simple matter of economics. That hundreds or thousands of people had to die for that idea was not even considered important; their survival was meaningless against the greater cause of preserving the ideology. If we put an end to cold war intrigue, thousands of intelligence agents would be standing in the unemployment lines. If we put an end to drug dealers, thousands more would join them. If we put an end to wars, millions of people, all over the world, would be without jobs and wouldn't know what to do with themselves.

Espionage, war, terrorism, and assassinations; all these, and others, were the catalysts that kept the world

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economy stable. It was a kind of job security built into all political systems.

“What about Halsey and Dansforth, then?” I asked. “What will they do when this is over?”

“If Dansforth survives, he’ll probably testify against you and me at the Congressional hearings and become some kind of folk hero for undoing this evil. Halsey will be subpoenaed, but he’ll never testify. He’ll enter the hospital with some contrived disease, cancer or a brain tumor; something like that. After awhile the hospital will issue a proclamation that he’s going to die, or has died, and he’ll disappear. If people start asking too many questions, we’ll create some other crisis to divert everyone’s attention away from him.

“He’ll go to Europe or the middle east and begin again as someone else. He may even go over to the Russians. Yes, the Russians would love to have him, would love to know what he knows.”

“Would he really do that?” I asked, knowing perfectly well he would. “Could he?”

“He provided Haniford with a new identification so he could function anonymously, didn’t he? He did it for Haniford’s sister, and he did it for you. How many others? The government provides new lives and new identities for countless federal witnesses every year. They help criminals and political refugees, even former enemies, live with complete anonymity; why not himself? As for going over to the Russians? Of course. What else does he know how to do? Once a spy, always a spy. And the Russians would treat him well. If a man like Halsey can’t operate in his native country, he’ll go where he can. Unfortunately, we have no loyalties, we spies, except to ourselves.”

I nodded and turned to go, promising to inform Jason Brown of his location, but feared Houser would be dead

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long before anyone could get back to him. As I hurried back, heedless of any danger, I was nearly overcome by a need to get behind one of the trees and vomit.

If I survived the next few hours and was taken alive, I'd be arrested and imprisoned until Halsey and Colonel Fourney could get out of the country, and in that time, I wouldn't be allowed to speak to anyone from the media, wouldn't be allowed to tell the truth of the matter.

Dead men can't talk.

The agency would make it appear that I'd used my contacts to organize the arms deal, and if the secret air base in the Persian Gulf was ever discovered, they'd make it look like we were a part of that, too. But if they didn't kill me outright, how could they force me to incriminate myself if I didn't feel like telling them anything? I stood at the edge of the forest for awhile, thinking about how many different methods one might use to make a prisoner talk. I'd seen more in my lifetime than I cared to remember. None of them were pleasant, were downright horrible, in fact.

I moaned lightly and shook my head, then stared under the canopy of trees toward the Greywolf. I wanted to go down and wash away the ugliness and revulsion I felt, then wander off into the forest and get lost, but I knew I couldn't run away until I did something, anything, to try to put an end to the insanity.

I stood in the cold under the cedars and listened to the sounds of the forest, concentrating on the sound of the river rushing down over the ageless stones, hearing every note of every drop of dew that fell, every leaf and twig, every pine needle that whispered in the wind. Even the cold air felt good. I began to realize how much I was going to miss everything.

After a minute Brandy called from the doorway of the motorhome and I walked over and got in beside her,

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buckled in and started the engine, then turned to her.

“I found Houser back there in the cedars,” I said flatly.

“What did he say?”

“Not much; he’s got too many holes in him to make a lot of sense.”

“Shot?”

“Very.”

Her face darkened, and she chewed her lip. “What do we do now, Richard?”

“Well, I believe this is where it gets scary. Let’s get it over with,” I said as I levered the transmission into gear and pulled out of the camp.

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THIRTEEN

The road was winding and rough, and we began looking for mailbox numbers and names as I eased the rig over the hills and through right-angle turns. Many of the numbers were faded and worn; most were blank. We'd gone another five miles before Brandy spotted the number we were looking for. I made a quick mental note of the building, and sailed past, looking for a place to turn around.

The house was a large A-frame built of cedar with rubble stone fireplaces and a few surrounding buildings set forty yards off the road in the dark, close shadows of hemlock fir. A dirt lane led to another large building behind the house, and several vehicles were parked in neat rows next to it.

Beyond the house and adjoining buildings, we could see a broad, open meadow containing two large warehouses, a fuel storage tank, and a hanger. Two DeHavilland Otters, an OV-10A Bronco, and half a dozen Cessna Skyrangers were parked at the edge of a sod airstrip. Across the field I could see four Beechcraft T-44s.

I found a pullout about a quarter of a mile farther down the road, pulled in, shut off the engine and we went back to the dinette to talk. Brandy retrieved the thermos jar of coffee and sat opposite me, working slowly to get the

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coffee ready.

"That's the place back there," I said. "I think I can walk back, get over the fence, and have a good run at the house through that stand of cedars just to the south. I saw two guys out front; how many did you see?"

She poured a cup of coffee for me, stirred in some creamer, put her elbows on the table, and rested her chin in the palms of her hands. She sighed once, very lightly, but didn't answer.

I narrowed my eyes, studied her face, searched her eyes for an explanation for her silence, but she turned away and stared out the window.

"Whatever you want to do, Richard," she said. "I'll follow, and I'll help. I wish we had more time to think about us, though. It seems we've left a lot of things unsaid and undone in our lives, don't you think?" She twisted a paper napkin nervously and tried to focus on her coffee cup through the tears that had welled up in her eyes, "This isn't exactly how I'd planned to spend my last hours with you."

I reached across the table and took her hand, squeezed it gently, but couldn't answer. What could I have said that wouldn't be a lie? I knew how she felt about leaving without me, but I suggested it again anyway. Her eyes flashed toward me, flashed away again, and she set her mouth hard, pursing her lips.

She wasn't going to talk.

I sat back in the seat, wrapped my hands around the warm coffee mug, and waited to see what was going to happen. After I got tired of the silence, I went to the closet, pulled out the bag of C4 charges, a cross bow, and my carbine, and took them back to the table. I checked the charges to make certain all the fuses were set, dusted the carbine and blew some dust motes from the sights, selected six bolts for the bow, then went to the bedroom

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to change into my camouflaged greens so I'd blend in with Fournery's troops.

When I returned to the table she looked up slowly, dropped her hands, and leaned forward on the table. "You really don't think they're going to let us just wander in there, plant a few bombs, steal some papers, and leave again, do you?"

"Well, we know they want us to come in because that'll make it easy for them to capture us, and we know they won't let us out, but they don't know we know that. Another thing no one knows about, is all this junk here." I waved at the plastic charges. "Steve doesn't even know I have it. If we can distract them somehow, do something they aren't expecting, I think I can at least set the C4 charges and get back out. They don't need names and paperwork; they already know who's inside and what they're up to. Getting us inside the fence is just an excuse for us to get caught with our hands in the cookie jar or to create enough of a diversion to allow all those cowboys to storm the compound. You see? But we'll use their own tactics and get them looking in the wrong direction while I get over the fence, set the charges, and get out."

"Do you think that'll stop them?"

"I doubt it, but they'll have a lot of explaining to do while they're sweeping up the mess."

I got a flight bag from the closet, dumped the contents onto the bed, and replaced them with the money, tickets, and identification Houser had given me, then I set one of the C4 charges under the kitchen sink. I showed her how to activate the fuse and explained that she would have six minutes to get away from the motorhome before it blew up.

We took the flight bag into the forest and buried it under some brush and pine needles so we could retrieve it later, then went back to get the parachute bag, carbine

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and bow. I opened the driver side door and motioned for her to get in.

“Drive back until you’re almost in sight of the house,” I said. “Give me fifteen minutes, then set the charge and get out. Go back and wait for me where we hid the flight bag. Just wait; don’t get anxious and start wandering around looking for me. Take a little food and something to drink, and wear that camouflaged poncho in case it rains.”

She nodded and looked at me questioningly. “How long should I wait?”

“Two hours. If I’m not back by then, get the flight bag and go back to Houser’s motorhome. The keys and his identification papers are in the bag with everything else. When you’re away from here, take time to read the instructions and do exactly what they say. Don’t contact anyone, and don’t let anyone else know what you’re doing. Okay?”

She closed her eyes and exhaled with a pained sigh.

“I love you, Richard,” she whispered, unable to hold back her tears.

I embraced her fiercely, kissing and caressing her, unwilling for a moment to let her go, knowing that I must. I closed the door, touching her fingers at the window sill until she drove away.

I looked after her long and hard for awhile, trying to imagine how she would get away, wondering if she would make it to London alone if I didn’t return, and convinced myself that the people Houser had chosen to help us would see that she was cared for.

I shouldered the carbine and bow, picked up the parachute bag, and headed down into the brush on the other side of the road. There were no trails and no signs that the area was regularly patrolled, but I went carefully, aware that those inside had already been warned

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of my mission, until I came to the chain-link fence. I examined it closely, decided that there were no sensors to alert anyone, and climbed over awkwardly, dragging the bag and the carbine as I went.

There was a perimeter trail inside the fence and I found it covered with human footprints as well as dog tracks, but I reminded myself that they wouldn't try to prevent me from getting in, only from getting out. I came to a small stream that wandered down a narrow gully toward the savannah where the aircraft were parked, and walked down it, stumbling over the wet stones and mud, to slow down any dogs that might pick up my trail. At the bottom of the hill, where the ground levelled out, the stream was wider and shallower, crossing a clearing and skirting a stand of cedars.

I stopped at the edge of the clearing and studied the terrain; it was a perfect place for an ambush. Anyone crossing the clearing could easily be spotted and killed by a single man in the cedars on the other side. I backtracked into the forest for several yards, then proceeded to the right, staying near the edge of the clearing, until I had made my way around the cedar copse. I squatted in the bushes and looked at the way ahead just as an explosion echoed from the top of the hill.

Right on time. I looked at my watch, hoping Brandy had time to get back to the forest before anyone spotted her.

Sound travels well in a quiet forest. Every alien sound seems to be inordinately amplified, and a minute after the explosion I heard a radio crackle a command from the cedars across the clearing. Two men rose from the brush and hurried off towards the house, leaving one man guarding the post. I made a mental note of his position as I unslung the crossbow and fitted a bolt to the ramp. Ten seconds later the man was face down in the mud with a

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quarter inch bolt in his forehead.

I picked my way carefully across the clearing until I was in the cedars, then followed the stream again until I came to a slight grade rising to a roadbed. A culvert under the road diverted another stream down into the cedars, and I made my way up to it, looked across the road to the warehouses and hangar a quarter of a mile away, then ducked down and crept through the narrow corrugated steel pipe under the road.

Some rocks and debris had piled up against the mouth of the culvert, and I spent a few minutes clearing it away so I could get out, tugged the parachute bag around in front of me, then hid a charge and one of the electronic detonators under the stones. I was tempted to take the longer way around to the warehouses just because it would be the least logical way to get there, but I'd already spent more than forty minutes of my two hours getting to the culvert, and I couldn't waste precious minutes going half a mile out of my way. I eased out of the pipe, got into the forest, and set off toward the warehouses in as straight a line as I could manage.

Except for some mechanics who were servicing the Otters, the warehouses and hanger were deserted. I set a total of ten charges at the three buildings, then made my way around to the fuel storage tanks adjacent to the motorpool building, where I set three more under the fuel transfer valve. Just as I finished, a truck came roaring down the hill and skidded to a stop between the fuel storage tanks and the garage. Four men, armed with M-16s, jumped out and stationed themselves at strategic positions between me and the runway.

I looked up the hill toward the house, saw a lot of smoke rising over the trees from the burning motorhome, and estimated there were about twenty men fanning out through the cedars on both sides of the road, making a

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searching sweep down toward the warehouses.

They knew I was aboard.

I pulled one of the two remaining C4 charges from the bag, shoved it onto the end of one of the bolts, charged the crossbow, twisted the fuse, and fired it toward the planes. It arched over the right corner of the hanger and stuck in the fuselage of the Otter on the right. One of the mechanics raised his head, climbed to the top of the hardstand, saw the burning fuse, and let out a scream as he leaped to the ground and led his companions away from the impending explosion.

Seconds later, the Otter disintegrated into a cloud of boiling fire and smoke, sending searing shards of torn metal spinning into the sky. It collapsed upon itself in a melted mass just as the platoon mustered behind the hangar to try to fight the fire.

I got into the cedars again and made my way to the house. An hour and fifteen minutes had passed since I'd left Brandy, and if my luck held and I could set the final charge without being spotted, I figured I would be across the road with Brandy in plenty of time to outrun Halsey or anyone else who might choose to come after us. We could fire all the charges, light up the area, and leave while everyone was trying to get out of the way of all the pieces falling out of the sky.

I crept around the perimeter of the house looking for a crawl space scuttle until I got to the east end. I squatted in a mass of rhododendron, packed the charge against the foundation, shoved the crossbow and carbine into the shrubs, and looked through the foliage toward the adjacent building.

It appeared to be a two story barn with large overhead doors on the west end. An entry porch angled off of the northwest side and was fitted with a steel fire door, and a large dish antenna sat in a small clearing forty feet

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to the left. A microwave dish was clamped to the peak of the dutch roof, oriented in the general direction of Canada. The place looked deserted.

I stood carefully and made my way to a nearby window, pulled myself up to the sill and looked in.

Two well dressed men were sitting on a couch talking casually to an attractively dressed woman at the kitchen table. The woman was sitting with her back to me and I couldn't see her face. None of them seemed the least bit concerned about the confusion going on outside. Suddenly the larger man jumped up and walked to a telephone mounted on a stanchion at the foot of the stairs leading to the second floor. He listened quietly, nodded, replaced the receiver, and had an animated conversation with the other man. The woman gathered her purse and a stray shoe, then rose and walked to a closet under the stairs, where she waited until the two men had recovered their briefcases and joined her. Together they stepped into the closet, closed the door, and I could hear an electric lift motor grinding from somewhere above me.

They'd taken a small elevator down to some area under the house. I turned to look toward the barn again and found myself staring into the barrel of a KG-99 automatic pistol.

A very large man wagged the Uzi at me, motioning for me to get out of the flower bed.

"You must be Constable," he said. "I ought to blow your brains out for wrecking my plane, and I will soon's Colonel's done with you." He made it sound as ominous as his thirty-five years would allow.

I got out of the flower bed and he marched me into the house. I calculated my two hours were going to run into some overtime.

The entry door was on the right side of a rubble stone

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fireplace and the front wall was lined with oak bookshelves. The hardwood floors were polished to look like glass and were covered with expensive oriental rugs. A Matisse hung from the chimney, some Colombian artifacts decorated the bookshelves and table tops, and a glass case laden with models of world war two aircraft sat under a row of track lighting near the center of the room. On one end of the glass case was a small lighted sacrarium with military medals and an American flag folded neatly into a triangular rosewood case. The brass plate on the flag safe indicated that it was in memory of First Lieutenant Adam Fourney, 1944 to 1967, killed at the controls of his helicopter while trying to medivac some troops out of Khe Sahn.

If he'd survived the war, I wondered, would he now be flying contraband weapons to the insurgent army in Afghanistan? Probably. Once a pilot, always a pilot, despite the cause.

I was pushed into an office at the right side of the house and we waited until Colonel Fourney strode into the room with his red neck mashed down into his hunched shoulders. A .45 caliber model 1937 military automatic was virtually hidden under his left bicep. He stood directly in front of me, glaring down with his eyes full of hatred, slapping a swagger stick against his thigh. After a moment, he waved the guard out of the room.

Colonel Fourney was an intimidating character who seemed to have been carved from a piece of red cedar by a chainsaw-wielding madman. He was easily six foot-six, weighed in at two hundred and fifty or sixty pounds, none of it excess fat, was broad shouldered and barrel chested with the arms of a lumberjack. He appeared, at first glance, to be bald, but as he stood above me, I could see that his head was shaved to the skin. He was wearing camouflaged military trousers, green undershirt, and

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spit-polished black jump boots. A Marine Corps K-BAR knife was strapped to his right calf.

He clenched his teeth, swaying on the balls of his feet, then, without warning, he brought the swagger stick down across the knuckles of my left hand, breaking my small and ring fingers. I pulled my hand to my chest, covering it with my right hand, and groaned with pain.

He walked away, stood at the end of his desk, and stared back at me without compassion. Beads of perspiration covered his forehead and he patted it away with his left hand, then pulled a white silk handkerchief from his pocket to dry his fingers. Presently he spoke in a deep voice that trembled with rage.

“You idealistic son of a bitch, you’ve cost me one good plane and three good mechanics. But if you think you’ve succeeded in sabotaging this operation, you’re wrong. We’ve found some of the charges you set, and if there are more that we haven’t found, you’ll soon be persuaded to reveal where they are.”

He sat in the leather executive chair and folded his great arms across his great chest, eyed me across the great desk, then smiled disarmingly, almost pleasantly.

“Do you know why you’re here, Constable?” he asked, then answered the question before I could frame a lie.

“You’re here because you’re a gullible fool. Did you know that? We all have our place and time and purpose, you know. Some of us are planners and leaders; some are listeners and followers. You are a listener and a follower. You are because you’re as predictable as a child. You listen to what people tell you and you believe all you hear without once risking a question.

“The universe devises no history, Constable; it only presents moments of opportunity.” He swept the swagger stick toward a shelf of books on his left. “See those?

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Lies. I read a hundred books a year. Oh, yes, a hundred, even more if I can. Religious books, political books, psychology books, even history books. They're all full of lies, sterilized by some snot-nosed editor who's afraid of the truth, sanitized by government agencies whose only purpose is to distort the facts. Nothing you can read, or hear on the radio, or watch on television, is free from editorial lies.

"Did you know that? Are you aware that everything you read is lies, and that they are devised by people who want to destroy this country, turn it into some kind of unattainable Utopia?"

"You read. I know you read. I've seen your dossier. What do you think, Constable? Have you found any truth in anything you've ever read? No. But you begin to believe it after awhile, don't you? I did, Believed it for years. Fought for my country, bled for my country. Sent my only son off to fight for his country.

"Do you know what I have to show for it? A flag stuffed into a wooden box with his name on it. Nothing else. And for what? The lie, Constable; the lie. The bullshit we've had pounded into our heads from birth until we begin to believe it, the idea that we're supposed to stand up and die for our country.

"Do you know who benefits from my son's death? Not me. Not you. Not his mother who died of grief over it. The people who make guns and bombs and warplanes, Constable, that's who. The people who trade in arms. You notice their sons don't go to war. They're exempt from dying, you see. The politicians stay behind their desks and send my son off to die. The Wall Street bastards pay to have their sons declared unfit. The industrialists send their sons to live in Europe until the war is over, and fly around in private jets so they won't become victims of a terrorist bomb. The sons of bitches."

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He rose suddenly, with astounding agility, as large men often do, and went to stand at the window. He watched the activity at the warehouses, rocking easily at parade rest.

The world had no history as far as he was concerned, except as it related to what he felt he had to do for the rest of his life. Maybe even less, I thought. History, to him, could have begun the day his son died, and would end when he had used his stolen money to exact revenge on those who had been responsible for his son's death.

Beyond being pawns in a game rigged to suit his purposes, the rest of humanity was valueless now. I realized that he'd conspired to get his hands on the money soon after his son had been killed, but I wondered if he knew that someone else was using him, as he'd used others, to carry out a plan that would only send more young men off to die needlessly, and that the politicians' and industrialist's sons would still reap the rewards?

Didn't he understand that the next President would simply continue the same policies as if they had always been his own? Didn't he understand that the rules were made, not by the President or the people, but by the very powerful industrialists he despised, and that nothing he could do would change that?

Colonel Fourney, I decided, was as mad as a hatter.

I'm tempted not to relate the events of the next few hours, or I'm persuaded to embellish them; that is, lie, because they revealed something in me that most men are loathe to admit: I was afraid. Not so much of dying, although there was certainly that, as of knowing that I was once again in a position where I no longer had any control of my life. It is the sudden fear that springs upon a person when he realizes that he's been duped into a position where he can no longer choose whether he will live or die.

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I tried awkwardly to remain calm, but my mind became frozen in a kind of limbo from which I was powerless to wrest it. Odd, unrelated images flooded in, memories from the past, dreams of the future, hopes never to be fulfilled. I leaned forward in the chair like a runner on his mark and eyed the door nervously, trying to calculate the distance and time it would take me to reach it, wondered if I could before he could react, pull out the pistol, cock it, aim, and fire.

I decided, after trying it mentally several times, that I couldn't, and even imagined that he was expecting me to try so he'd have an excuse to kill me.

Not that he needed one.

When he turned toward me some minutes later, his eyes were dull and filled with contempt. His right arm twitched nervously as if his brain had sent a signal to draw the .45 and he'd had to override the command.

"You had some help getting in here, Constable. Someone set off a charge on the road so you could work your way down to the runway. Who was it?"

So Brandy had made it away. At least she would make it to London, I thought. At least she'll live. That was something.

"I came alone," I lied.

"Did you now?" He stepped toward me purposefully, aggressively, and shoved a beefy fist under my nose, pushing my head back until I was looking at the ceiling. I tried to hold his wrist with my right hand but he slapped it away.

"Did you now? Did you now?" he said again through clenched teeth, pushing viciously at my nose until, with a swift thrust, he jerked his fist sideways and up, cracking the cartilage and bone.

Blinded by searing pain and involuntary tears that filled my eyes, I put up my hands, tried to duck away, but

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he hit me twice, so quickly that it seemed a single blow, and I fell sideways, tipping the chair, and crashed to the floor.

Blood, enormous amounts of it, streamed down my face and into my mouth, and I tried to spit it away, tried to catch my breath, but nothing seemed to work. My ears rang from the blow to the side of my face and my eyes were unable to focus properly. My tongue was swollen and cut, and I felt pulpy masses between my teeth. I tensed for the next blow or the bullet that would end my life, tried to focus on the growing smear of blood under my left cheek.

He'll never get the stain out of the rug, I thought stupidly.

Fourney kicked me over onto my back, yelling for a guard, and blood drained into my throat, choking me. I coughed, sending bright red droplets of blood and mucous spraying upward, watching as if in some surrealistic nightmare, as it arched upward, then dropped to splatter onto my face.

"Take this son of a bitch down to the kennels," Fourney screamed hysterically. "And bring the woman." He stomped from the room in much the same way as he'd entered: red faced and with his bull neck drawn down into his hunched shoulders.

Half a dozen strong arm bully-boys, clad in camouflaged greens, snatched me from the floor and literally dragged me outside, then dumped me into the dirt of the dog race at the perimeter of the kennel. My stomach churned and I fought away an overwhelming need to vomit. Then another fear gripped me as I realized that Fourney must have meant to set his dogs on me, to tear me to pieces.

"Where's the woman?" I heard him shout, then an answer that someone was bringing her. For awhile ev-

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everyone seemed to stand in silence and wait for the woman to arrive.

What woman? Was it the woman I'd seen inside the house?

What part did she play in this? Was it Haniford's sister? Was she here? Were they going to let her kill me because I'd killed her brother? Would she kill me quickly with a bullet in the brain, or would she set the dogs on me?

Suddenly weary and beyond caring, I let my face fall into the hot dust, drifted into a real nightmare that leaped from some long-locked pigeonhole in my mind.

* * * * *

On the third day of indoctrination at the Jungle Environment Survival Training School, the twelve members of our Long Range Patrol unit were mustered, naked, in a dusty, barren compound that had been built to resemble a North Vietnamese prison camp. All our clothes had been taken from us on the first day, partly to dissuade us from escaping, but primarily to strip us of any dignity, to make us degradingly common and without identity.

We stood at attention for over two hours in the oppressive jungle heat, forbidden to blink away the sweat that poured into our eyes, forbidden to swat the flies and gnats that bit us and drank our blood.

Purposefully, with calculated heartlessness, the instructors waited until we were just on the verge of collapse before they made their entrance, striding belligerently up and down the file, spitting insults at us, ridiculing our manhood, jeering, pushing, shoving.

At length, after a suitable show of sadism, we were whipped to attention and stood in abject humiliation as the camp Commandant strode out of his headquarters, stiff-backed, contemptuously snapping a swagger stick against his thigh. We were to learn how that leather bound

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stick felt against bare skin in the following twelve weeks.

He arranged himself ceremoniously on a narrow podium with a minion on either side and introduced himself, speaking in Vietnamese, waiting until one of the lieutenants screamed each phrase in English.

We were not to attempt to escape, he told us, or we would be punished by the box. The box, he explained with a sweep of the swagger stick, was not something we would enjoy, but he let us know, with a sadistic grin, that he could think of nothing quite as entertaining as stuffing a malcontent into the box.

Made of mahogany, with tight seams and caulked with pitch, the box was five feet long, two feet wide, and sixteen inches high. A few holes had been drilled into the tight fitting top near one end to allow a man inside just enough air to stay alive.

It was placed on a log about ten inches in diameter so it could be rolled back and forth by pulling on upright poles at each end. Either end could be depressed or elevated at a passing guard's whim.

The box, tight as a New England dory, contained about two inches of filthy water. They assured us that such devices existed in the prison camps but were filled with urine, human excrement, vomit, garbage, dead animals, and live snakes.

It was a claustrophobic's nightmare.

We all went into the box several times during the training, because we all tried to escape. That's why we were there; to escape from, and elude, the enemy; to confuse him and keep him busy trying to find us as long as possible, and to learn to survive in the jungle by eating anything remotely edible, and by making weapons, clothing, and shelter from anything we could find or steal along the way.

I learned to find a comfortable position while I was in

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the box, with my back jammed against one side and my head in one corner so I could move a little and flex my feet after the lid was on. Laying that way, with my back against the side and my knees against the other, made a reasonably effective dam that prevented the water from rushing into my nose and mouth when the head end of the box was tipped down. The water came slowly enough that I had a chance to hold my breath for a minute, sometimes longer, while my head was under water.

Occasionally, when I was so tired I could no longer think rationally, a condition they delighted in perpetuating, I'd wonder if it would be easier to take a deep breath while my face was under water and just die.

But either from a fear of dying, or a desire to go on living in spite of the pain and torture, I always held my breath until I felt my heart and lungs would burst, over and over, hour after hour, day after day, until someone would drag me from the box, more dead than alive, and throw me in the dirt.

* * * * *

I was choking, gasping for air, and struggled to wake from the nightmare, but my body and mind refused to respond to the command. Shouting voices, startling in the silence of the nightmare, broke the spell, and a boot or rifle butt jolted me back to consciousness where I found myself strangling on my own blood, my nose caked closed with a mixture of blood, sputum, and dirt.

"Here's the woman," a voice shouted.

"Get him on his feet," another commanded, "and bring Tasha." I recognized it as Fournery's voice, and wondered if Tasha was the woman they'd fetched for him.

Wobbling drunkenly between two armed soldiers, who held me as easily as one might balance a bag of groceries, I tried to clear my vision as I groped numbly for something to hold onto. Colonel Fournery stood five paces

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in front of me, holding a leashed dog.

My God, this is it, I thought. The crazy bastard is going to have me eaten by a goddamn wolf.

It was a wolf. Silver grey and beautiful as an artist's dream, with electric green eyes and a perfectly proportioned head. Its mouth was open, tongue lolling awkwardly, and it seemed to be smiling at me.

"Sit!" Fourney commanded, and the wolf sat. "Stay," he said, pointing to the ground with the swagger stick. He dropped the leash and walked over to stand in front of me.

"You see that wolf there? I love that animal. I raised it from a pup. I trained it. Me, personally. Understand? I love nothing, have no greater kinship for any living creature on this planet. No man, woman or child means more to me than that wolf."

He grabbed the front of my shirt and shook me like a rag doll. My knees gave out and I sagged helplessly, but he held me effortlessly.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?" He spat at me, and I nodded dumbly, wondering why I couldn't get my feet under myself.

He shoved me back into the arms of the guards, went over to stand by the wolf, pulled the .45, and put the muzzle against its skull just behind the left ear. The wolf's eyes rolled up toward its master trustingly, lovingly, it seemed to me.

"I love this animal," Fourney said gently, as the wolf started to look up expectantly, then he fired the pistol, driving the wolf to the ground as if crushed by a truck, splattering its brains in the dirt.

He holstered the weapon and strode purposefully forward to stand directly in front of me.

"And you, you motherless bastard; you, I hate. You're going to tell me what I want to know or she's next."

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Fourney grabbed me by the hair, jerked my head roughly toward the cedar forest and pointed into the shadows.

I followed the trembling finger, past the rows of armed men who were staring in astonished stupefaction at the lifeless wolf, to a cedar where a woman was bound by her wrists, hanging from a low branch. I blinked my eyes, trying to focus through the tears and dirt.

“Oh, Peach,” I groaned, as the two guards let me fall.

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FOURTEEN

Two guards, both of whom were twenty-five years younger and considerably stronger than I, practically tossed me onto the concrete floor of the barn, then walked off without a word while I tried to get into a sitting position so I could observe what was around me.

The barn was larger than it looked from the outside, and wasn't really a barn at all. It was a workshop with welding equipment, lathes, metal break, drill presses, milling machines. A set of stairs led up to a second floor and, judging from the jackets hanging on hooks near the landing, went to more sleeping spaces.

The same two guards led Brandy into the space a minute later, lifted me to my feet and led us to a closet under the stairs. The man on my right pulled me in and closed the door, leaving Brandy with the other man. A moment later we were on our way to some underground room, surrounded by hats, coats, and boots, in a cleverly disguised elevator.

"I'll get out on the mezzanine," I mumbled to the hulk beside me, but I guess he missed it because he just stared at the door.

We glided to a stop and stood in a hallway while the elevator went up to get Brandy and the other man. When they arrived we all marched down the hallway to a large

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office where we were pushed into chairs to wait.

Brandy stared at me with agitated concern. "You look terrible, Richard," she said, reaching out to touch my face. "I think your nose must be broken."

"Among other things." I held up my left hand, looking at the swollen fingers, black and twisted into an ugly claw. If, by some miracle, we survived, it was going to give me a lot of trouble for the rest of my life. I didn't even want to think about my nose or my jaw, and I was surprised that they didn't hurt more.

One of the guards had a KG-99 pointed in our general direction. I nodded toward it. "Now that you have us in a locked room thirty or forty feet underground, don't you think you could put that away?"

"Not until the Director arrives." He fixed me with a steady gaze.

Brandy leaned forward again to study my mashed face, touching it gingerly, but the guard behind her pulled her back roughly and pointed a finger at her silently, raised his eyebrows, and wagged the Uzi menacingly.

Thus we sat, silent and dejected, each of us knowing we had failed to accomplish what we wanted to do. From the beginning, I felt this would be the eventual result of our foolish plan. We hadn't hindered them enough to even notice, and after they found a couple more airplanes, everything would continue as if we'd never existed.

After nearly fifteen minutes Spenser Halsey entered the room, followed by Colonel Fourney and six lieutenants. I cocked an eyebrow at Halsey and he flashed a brief, triumphant smile.

"I do hope you'll forgive me for deceiving you, Richard. As you can see, I'm obviously not here to help you," he said. "It was, as you shall soon understand, a neces-

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sary contrivance in order that we might recover our money and, at the same time, provide the politicians with a scapegoat." He waved everyone to chairs.

I already had the picture. They needed me out of the way for a few days, so they contrived to keep us on the road until they could gather their loot from the various warehouses, muster the troops to be ready for the attack, and make the necessary preparations to escape before anyone had time to figure out what they were doing. I wondered how many agencies, how many people, were in on this thing.

"We have a few people from several, but not all, of the agencies which operate within the framework of our government. Precious few, actually. Would that there were more.

"Sergeant McKonkey informs me you have done in four of our frontline men. A pity. I know that you are opposed to government meddling in areas it has no right to be, and that you disapprove of the more nefarious tactics inherent in our various governments." He wagged his head and studied his nails. "Perhaps we should have informed you of our intentions. Had we done so we might still have our plane and those four young men."

"Why didn't you, then?" I asked.

He pushed some papers around on the desk, sat on the corner, and folded his arms across his chest.

"Yours is an unusual mind, Richard. For awhile I thought you might have condescended to throw in with us if we had made it attractive enough for you; if we had promised to leave you alone, perhaps, and agreed to take your name from our files. I'm amazed how little it takes to amuse you two. But I am convinced you would have perceived some inherent evil in what we are trying to accomplish. We are, after all, using money, nearly half of which is counterfeit and none of which has any true value,

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to pursue a goal which, if successful, might throw the world into another global war. We do so with no misgivings, but I'm certain you would be unable to set aside your prejudices in favor of our cause.

"The governments of the world, did they but know of our plans, our goal, would send armed battalions of men in here to crush us and decry our cause as a crime against all humanity. They would do it in the name of national security and rally the common man to their cause with lies and deceit. We can't have that."

"I guess you know all about deceit, huh?"

He tapped his lip with a manicured finger, looked at me with a laconic smile.

"One must fight one's enemies with whatever weapons one has in the arsenal. I consider deceit as nothing more or less than a tool to achieve whatever tasks I have set for myself."

"Then you view the government as an enemy.?"

"Not so much an enemy, as a pack of competing corporate lawyers who must be outwitted at any cost. We wish to use these resources to try to maintain a better balance of power in the world. The present governments, on the other hand, would squander it on useless, petty projects that would give our enemies, our real enemies, even more of an advantage than they already have. But as you play the devil's advocate with me, I see my assessment of your mentality was correct; you do see an inherent evil in what we are doing."

"I see one group of people saying they can exercise judgement over the use of force to conquer the world better than another. To me, your judgement in this matter is neither better nor worse than anyone else's; it's just the same thing with a different name."

"And given the opportunity, you would fly to the authorities to expose us."

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I nodded. "Probably, yes. Not because you want to keep these kinds of covert operations secret, not because you want to change the world, because some of it needs changing, but because you're using the same tactics of deceit and murder that other evil men have used to do it. You are no better in that respect than those whose methods you despise."

"You refer, of course, to Dallas Calhoun and Alan Haniford. Unfortunate but necessary affairs. Had Calhoun probed much closer we would have been undone and all this would have been for naught."

He eased off the desk and walked behind it, pushed a button on the intercom, and spoke softly to someone on the other end, then he sat in the plush executive chair and watched me closely. Presently he spoke again.

"Agent Dansforth... ."

"What don't you ask him where the plates are?" Colonel Fourney interrupted angrily.

"In good time, Colonel," Halsey said, still looking me. "Agent Dansforth pleaded your case rather eloquently, Richard. He insisted you could be trusted, although I do not know upon what foundation he based those assertions. He never fully understood what I had planned for you, but I suspect he wished not to be a party to your demise. He became unusually agitated when we got you involved, and, of course, has become somewhat of a liability to us now. Like you, his loyalties are deeply ingrained, and they cloud his vision during matters such as this. I, on the other hand, have no reservations whatsoever in doing away with you. You have caused us considerable travail with your meddling."

I looked around the room, noting that Dansforth was not present, and wondered if he would have spoken on our behalf had he been. I suspected that he was either out of the country, was preparing to leave the country,

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was dead, or soon would be.

"I want to know why it was so important to get us involved in this thing, Halsey," I said, trying not to bite the inside of my swollen mouth. "If you needed someone to blame for this, why not one of the attorneys or one of the politicians you claim to despise?"

"Ah," Halsey said, holding up a finger. "A fair question. When we were making our plans years ago, we did choose a number of them who seem to enjoy twisting the laws to their own profit, and we included some wealthy industrialists, even a few military officers. Some of them are on the list still; others have died, some are no longer in positions of power.

"Our list changed as the circumstances changed. But the problem was that the agency knew everyone on the list and were watching them, expecting us to implicate them when the opportunity presented itself. You, on the other hand, were a surprise. No one knew who you were, and suddenly, because we had put the plan into action, they all assumed, with a little prompting from us, that you were the key to the organization.

"But Christian Houser and Dallas Calhoun... ."

Colonel Fourney slammed a fist down onto the desk, leaning toward Houser. "Where the hell are the plates for the bills?" he screamed.

Halsey actually jumped away from him, his eyes wide. He trembled. After a moment he cleared his throat and composed himself, glaring at Fourney.

"Houser and Calhoun, because they had access to the same files, discovered what we were doing and had to be killed. Had they not, they would be with you today, and would be tried for treason at some future date. The record will show that you were the person who contrived the scheme, because you alone survived the patrol, you alone knew where the money was hidden on the Ho Chi

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Minh Trait. During the investigations, which are being planned at this very moment, evidence will be produced plunging you deeper and deeper into the operation. Meanwhile..."

I stood up, with great effort, much to their consternation, and went to stand beside the desk. Halsey tensed, as if he thought I might strike him, and Fourney eased his hand under his bicep for the .45. Everyone else was busy releasing the safety catches on their weapons.

I glanced at Colonel Fourney as I passed, and knew from the disgusted look on his face that he didn't want to hear another word from Halsey. He only wanted to punch me around long enough to learn where the plates were for the counterfeit money. I knew he'd kill me long before I could convince him I didn't know.

To Colonel Fourney, it was just so much rhetoric he had to endure while he worked out a way to get rich at the expense of the politicians who'd sent his son off to die in the jungle half a world away. I hadn't the slightest doubt that he would kill everyone in the room to accomplish that, and from the look on his face, he'd already decided the order in which they'd die.

I was going to be number one.

"You people have some serious problems, the way I see it," I said, "because if you don't think what you want to force upon the people is a world in which no one can live, then you haven't given your plan half the thought you should have. It's bullshit from the word go and if I could force up my last meal, I'd puke on you. The only two people in this room who have an idea what they're going to do today is me and Colonel Fourney. But you once indicate to me that three other men might have survived that firefight in Vietnam. I'd like to know if they did."

"Two of them did. They were killed later. One in Vietnam about a month after he was found, and the second

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after he returned to the States. He had been a prisoner for nine years. Suicide. Would you like to know their names?"

"No. I'll remember them the way I've saved them in here." I tapped my forehead. "Now if you're going to kill me, take me the hell out of here and do it."

Fourney wagged a hand in the air, putting an end to Halsey's speech, and the men with the guns led us out, roughing us up some more, pushing and shoving until we reached a room with a bed, a desk, and a chair. They pushed Brandy inside and locked the door. One man stayed behind to guard her.

The other man and I rode the elevator to the surface in silence. He kept the Uzi pressed against my back until we got outside, where he motioned me into a Ford van. I looked back toward the house, hoping no one had found the weapons I'd hidden there, and decided I'd try to escape. While the guard was busy with the ignition key, I fell out the door with the grace of a water balloon, gathered my legs under me and took two or three steps before the lights went out.

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FIFTEEN

When I regained consciousness some time later, aching over every inch of my body, I found myself in a dark room with pale light showing at a single, high window. I eased painfully from the floor on which I'd been tossed and groped blindly for a familiar object on which to lay my hands.

My first fully conscious thought was of Brandy, and I called her name softly a few times, peering into the darkness to see if she was in the room with me. There was no response.

I touched boxes, crates and metal cannisters as I felt my way around the confined space, and decided I'd been locked into some kind of store room. I stumbled over a wooden pellet and glass jars clanked ominously in the darkness. As I approached the pale light I could see that it was not a window, but, rather, an air return vent to an adjoining room.

I paused at a rack of rough wood shelves, barely discernible in the faint light and ran my tongue over the inside of my mouth. Swollen, crushed to loose pulps of hanging flesh, and tasting like copper, my lips protruded out to touch my broken nose. I touched it gingerly and found to my dismay that my nose was as large and soft as a rotten plum, and my nostrils were still clogged with dried blood.

My legs buckled as I fought a wave of nausea and vertigo. I slid down to sit on the floor, resting against some

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boxes until I had my breath. Without moving my mouth too much, I probed with my tongue and discovered one tooth missing, several loose, and another broken and realized that was why everything hurt so badly.

I rested wearily, gulping air through my mouth, until the nausea passed, then pulled myself up the shelves until I could see out the vent. The louvres restricted much of the view, but I could see a man pushing crates around on a pallet-truck and periodically consulting a list clamped to a clip board.

The adjoining room appeared to be one of the hangar bays and, if so, it looked like Fourney was preparing a shipment of weapons for transport to one of his insurgent armies.

Well, I thought, a store room should have a light, so I climbed from the shelf and began looking for it. In the process of searching for the switch, I found the door, but, as I expected, it was locked. Anger, frustration, and fear; all the emotions that prevent us from thinking clearly, welled up inside of me as I rebelled against the forced loss of freedom and for a moment I was back in the isolation room at Ton Son Nuht.

But what of Brandy, I wondered. Where is she now, and what might they have done to her? As unclear as my vision had been earlier, she appeared not to have been harmed. But how long ago had that been? Hours? Days? No, no, I thought, as my fingers swept across the light switch. It had been only a few hours judging from the condition of my face and the dried blood in my nose. To my knowledge, no one had come back to check on me since locking me into the room. It may have been only minutes.

I covered my eyes and flipped on the light, only to discover that the precaution was unnecessary. A single, bare, low wattage bulb glowed from the center of the

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ceiling, revealing a narrow room packed with medical stores, pharmaceuticals, and an assortment of chemical reagents.

After a couple of minutes searching the shelves, I discovered that the warehouseman didn't know how or where to store potentially dangerous chemicals. But his stupidity could be my way out of the mess I'd got us into. Someone had stored twelve pints of potassium permanganate on one of the shelves, and directly below them were six pints of glycerin. Any schoolboy who paid attention in chemistry class would know the two chemicals, when mixed, would burst into a violent, uncontrollable flame that most common fire retardants could not extinguish.

A kind of poor man's napalm.

I found a case of surgical tape and began taping pairs together carefully, then made some slings so I could hurl them as far as my aching arms would allow if I got the chance. Four pairs seemed all I could carry without danger of breaking them, so I placed them on a shelf by the door, then wrapped a long strip of the tape around the rest of them and threaded it across the shelves to the door where I made a loop I could hook over the door knob or pull on when I was ushered out. If I could tip them over, the wooden building would burn to the ground and the whole platoon would be powerless to stop it.

But I knew I'd have to find Brandy and lead her to safety if they had moved her to the building so she wouldn't perish in the fire. As it turned out, they brought her to me.

Shortly after I'd dressed my wounds, I heard a voice outside and a key rattling in the lock. There was some shuffling around for awhile, and I backed away from the door, waiting for it to open.

A big man, looking like a younger Colonel Fourney,

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stood in the hallway with Brandy and waved an AK-47 at me warily, holding it in one beefy mitt as if it were a child's plastic toy.

"Out," he said, backing away and motioning for Brandy to move down the narrow passageway. As I passed through the doorway, Brandy jumped on the man's back, digging her fingernails into his eyes. He teetered backward, howling with pain and vainly trying to keep the rifle pointed in my direction while he pulled her off. I grabbed the butt of the rifle and, using his arm as a lever, swung it up sharply against his temple. He staggered back, releasing his grip as Brandy stumbled across the passageway, and I swung it again, striking him across the forehead as he tried to duck away. He fell to the floor, jerking spasmodically, and a second later he was dead.

I reached back into the room, grabbed the four incendiaries, gave two of them to Brandy, then pulled the others from the shelf. A violent implosion sucked air into the room and bright orange flames burst into the hall.

"Don't break these," I yelled as I grabbed her arm and led her to the nearest exit, fighting away the pain in my legs and arms as we stumbled awkwardly into the sunlight.

"What are they?" she asked breathlessly.

"Fire bombs; same things that caused that fire back there." I glanced back, saw a great column of black smoke rising into the air with eighty foot high flames shooting through the roof and noted with satisfaction that I'd planted two of the C-4 charges near the center of the building.

Half a dozen armed soldiers came skidding around the side of the adjacent building headed for the fire and I cut them down with the AK-47 as I trotted awkwardly sideways, pushing Brandy ahead of me.

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I tossed one incendiary into the motor pool garage as we lumbered past and the bottles broke against the concrete floor, fanned out under the trucks parked there and burst into flames. Three mechanics panicked and ran, fearing the ensuing holocaust when the fuel tanks burst.

Brandy ran ahead, clutching the two incendiaries to her bosom, and I skip-hopped behind, grimacing from the pain in my legs.

We reached the fuel depot and storage tanks where two men were hastily moving a tanker truck just as the C-4 charges exploded at the hanger four hundred feet behind us. Brandy ducked instinctively as the shock wave reached us, nearly dropping the bottles, balanced them cautiously and hurled one over the fence at the tanker truck.

"Straight on, toward Fourney's house." I yelled, pointing the muzzle of the rifle.

"You're mad," she replied as she sprinted up the shallow incline into the cedar trees. When we were a hundred yards from the fuel depot, she held up a hand and sat down, placing the jars carefully on the ground beside her.

"Rest," she gasped, "just a minute."

I got down beside her and we turned to watch the chaos behind us. The hanger was completely engulfed in flames and the trucks at the motor pool began to explode like a string of bombs as the fuel tanks ruptured. Men were running in all directions, had given up trying to save either building, and appeared to be mustering to try to keep the fire from spreading to the fuel storage tank.

"That was pretty quick work back there," I said. "What made you think of it?"

"The truth is, I didn't think about it. If I had, I wouldn't have done it. I guess I was afraid he was going to kill us."

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“Well, it worked perfectly. Probably saved our lives. Sometimes you surprise me.”

“Well, I’m pretty tough, you know,” she said firmly as she fell back, spread-eagle, onto the pine needles. Later, she said softly, “But sometimes, I surprise myself.”

I urged her up after a short rest and, staying well into the trees, we made our way past a line of uniformed men and civilians and into the brush adjacent to the house. I left the AK-47 with Brandy, admonishing her to get to the road, recover the flight bag, and find Houser’s motor home if I didn’t return, then picked up one of the incendiaries and made my way to the house to recover the C-4 charge and weapons I’d hidden there.

Nothing had been disturbed and after I gathered them together, I limped to the barn, got inside and went to the elevator. I slid the door open, set the C-4 charge and placed it and the bottles together inside on the floor and sent them down while I hobbled back to the entry. As I reached the door, a man came out of the house and stood in the driveway to watch the confusion down at the bottom of the hill. I waited as long as I could, and when I was certain he was going to stay a while, I charged the crossbow, slipped a bolt onto the ramp, fired it through his left temple, and wobbled past him before he fell, stiff as a post, into the gravel.

I stumbled into the brush and sat down beside Brandy, leaned back against a tree, and groaned with pain. She appraised me carefully and reached out to touch my face.

“Oh, Richard, your face looks worse,” she said. “Your nose really is broken, isn’t it?”

“Oh, Jeez, I don’t want to hear that, Brandy,” I groaned. “But I’m afraid it is. My jaw, too, maybe, and a couple of fingers on my left hand. I don’t know what’s wrong with my left foot; fractured or badly bruised.” I managed a weak smile. “But they’ll heal if we get out of

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here alive. I hope that's more than Halsey and Fourney have to boast about."

"Are you going after them?"

"Just as sure as God made little green apples."

I worked my way into a standing position and motioned for her to gather up what she could carry and follow me just as the C-4 charge exploded under the barn, sending the major force rushing up the elevator shaft to carry away the roof and east end of the building. Great chunks of heavy timber and burning shards of roofing and siding arched into the sky as a tongue of fire erupted upward from the hole to ignite the shattered building.

"That ought to hold them for awhile. We'd better get away before all these trees catch fire. This way."

I took her hand and led her through the sparse undergrowth toward the culvert where I'd hidden the electronic detonator and plastic explosive. If I could get to it, I could detonate the C-4 charges I'd placed under the fuel transfer valve at the storage tanks and that would take care of the east half of Fourney's estate.

We were near the culvert when another C-4 charge detonated with a thumping explosion, sending a shudder through the cedar forest, and casting a great black pall of smoke across the sun. The air smelled of burning wood and rubber, paint and incinerated flesh. Brandy held her hand across her mouth and began to retch.

We stopped where the trees ended at the edge of the meadow and looked back toward the hangers and fuel depot. All the buildings east of the fuel storage tank were aflame and we could hear small secondary reports as the ammunition stores began to explode. Brandy stared at the scene with her eyes wide.

"God," she muttered, "that'll take some sweeping up. What's that out there, on the other side of the field?"

I followed her pointing finger and saw two

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Beechcrafts and the OV-10A being moved toward a small concrete building on the far side of the landing strip.

"Ah" I said. "So that's where the road leads. I wondered what was over there."

"What is it?"

"A bunker of sorts where Fournery can find some protection while he makes his escape plans, I imagine. If the money is anywhere on this land, it's in there. That green plane there, the Bronco, is probably his private airplane, and he'll use it to escape. If Fournery hasn't already killed him, Halsey will probably go with him."

I motioned toward the culvert a hundred feet ahead of us, and she followed me along the road embankment until we heard the sounds of approaching vehicles above us. We flattened ourselves against the bank and watched as a small truck sped past, followed shortly by another. Both were headed toward the concrete building across the runway.

After they were well out of sight, we made our way to the culvert where I retrieved the C-4 charge and firing device. I pulled them from the plastic bag, set the numbers, and pushed the button. An incredible explosion shook the air as a block-wide column of fire blossomed from the storage tank, climbing into the sky as a bright orange, boiling mushroom. The cedars behind us swayed in the shock wave as the first out-rushing concussion reached us and several hundred thousand gallons of burning gasoline surged skyward.

"Through the culvert, Peach," I said, nudging her into motion. "To the other side of the road."

"Wait, Richard," she said, holding my arm. "I want to clean some of that blood off your face."

She dipped the hem of her blouse into the water in the bottom of the culvert and began gently cleaning the wounds, grimacing and squeaking every time she un-

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covered some ugly bruise or cut under the layers of blood and dirt. When she was finished, she twisted the water from her blouse and smiled at me confidently.

"There, that's better. It isn't nearly as bad as it looked."

"You can say that because you're not inside this skin," I said. "Shall we go?"

Small animals, rats or squirrels, displaced by the fire in the meadow, scampered through the pipe ahead of us as we slipped and splashed in the brackish water. We emerged on the other side, skidding down the spillway just as a Jeep came slowly up the road and stopped twenty feet away. The driver stared up at the descending fireball as the gasoline drenched cedars exploded into flame. I stood, fired across the hood through the windshield, then grabbed Brandy's hand and dragged her up the slope to the road as the man toppled out of the seat.

With the brake released and the clutch engaged, the Jeep lurched forward and began chugging toward us. I tossed the carbine and the C4 charge into the back seat as it passed and limped along side until I knocked it out of gear.

"Oh, damn, I don't need this," I groaned as Brandy trotted up beside me clutching the makeshift fire bombs.

I knocked the windshield forward and latched it down, then stowed everything in the back and placed the AK-47 across the hood. "Give me the bottles," I said. "You drive."

"I can't drive a Jeep," she protested as she slid behind the wheel.

I eased into the passenger seat, holding the bottles on my lap and steadying the rifle with my right hand. "Sure you can. Accelerator. Clutch. Brake, Gear shift." I pointed to the parts with my swollen left hand. "Just like a real car, only it's painted green. Nothing sophisticated."

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She got it going and I slid down in the passenger seat trying to fight off the nausea and blurred vision.

"You okay?" she asked with concern.

"Yeah."

"Are you sure?"

"Okay; just go. Thing was designed for the lowest common denominator."

"What?"

"The truck. Designed so an idiot could drive it. Stop, go, turn left, turn right." I giggled, falsetto, deliriously.

Brandy reached over and put her hand on my forehead. "My God, you're burning up!" she cried.

"Burning. The whole goddam place is burning," I mumbled. "Yeah, it is."

"I'm going to stop, Richard. I'm sure you have a concussion. You're ill; you may die." She pulled off the road and stopped.

"Go on, honey. I'm just tired, that's all. Weary. I'll just rest here for a minute, then I'll be okay."

"You're not making any sense, Richard," she protested. "I think you may have a concussion."

I wouldn't be a bit surprised. Fournery had hit me pretty hard, and his thugs had worked me over good, too. I waved my hand toward the road. "I'm okay, really. Go on," I mumbled.

She held her hand in front of my face. "How many fingers?" she asked.

"Eighteen."

She slipped the transmission into gear and pulled back onto the road, watching me carefully.

"To the concrete building?"

"Not quite. There's a road to the left, about a half mile on, that leads to the far side of the field. We can go down there until we're within walking distance. I'll try to get through the trees and stop them before they take off."

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“Do you suppose that was Halsey and Fourney in the trucks we saw?”

“Who else would be going over to that side of the field? That’s where the plane is, and that’s where they’re going.”

I leaned back and closed my eyes, aware of every jolt and bump in the road until she slowed and turned onto a hardpack dirt lane. We’d encountered no other traffic, saw no other people. Those who weren’t killed by the explosions and fire were probably trying to find a way out of the state.

“How far?” Brandy asked.

I sat up and stared at the road. “About a quarter of a mile, I think. You’ll see a clearing on the left before we get to the building. Pull back in there and I’ll go the rest of the way on foot.”

I envisioned myself crawling through the cedars on my hands and knees.

She drove slowly until we reached the pull out, then turned in and switched off the engine. A strange, unreal silence descended upon us, and we sat quietly for a moment, trying to pick up any sounds filtering up from the destruction below us.

Gunfire, muted by the cedar forest, and the popping sounds of helicopter blades punishing the air, drifted up the valley as the agency began the assault on Fourney’s camp. Everything sounded far away and detached from the reality of our desperation, like a nightmare from which it is impossible to escape; something I’d heard before in another life half a world away.

Although we had driven nearly two miles, the smell of burned gasoline and scorched paint filled the air, and the pungent smell of burning cedar and smoldering rubber tires stung our eyes and noses. I was surprised that I could smell it at all, then decided I was probably tasting

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it, for the inside of my mouth burned with more than the pain of crushed flesh.

Presently Brandy nudged me on the arm and motioned toward the road behind us. "Over there," she said quietly. "Eight or ten people coming up the road."

I squinted my eyes into the dim shade of the cedars and saw Dansforth leading a small group of the Red Team force up the lane toward us. I motioned silently for Brandy to get out and crouch down beside the vehicle, stuffed the last C-4 charge and detonator into my pockets, slung the carbine over my shoulder, then got out of the Jeep and began walking toward them.

Dansforth held up a hand to halt the line of men, some of whom had already been wounded, then came forward to talk to me, grimacing with mock pain when he got close enough to see my face. He shook his head with resignation.

"You met Colonel Fourney, I see," he said, "I told you he was a goon. Where's Brandy?"

I motioned over my shoulder toward the Jeep. "She's waiting back there. Did you know Halsey's in with Fourney?"

"Yeah," he nodded. "They passed us awhile ago I think, headed for that building down the road. Who was in the second truck?"

I shrugged and shook my head. "We had our heads in the dirt, so we couldn't see the drivers. How long have you known about Halsey?"

"Awhile."

"How long is awhile?"

"Since January for sure, but we suspected he was up to something long before that. If Calhoun hadn't alerted us to some suspicious information he found in the computer, we wouldn't have discovered his involvement at all. Allison Haniford's around here somewhere; have you

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seen her?"

"She went down to the underground with two men and I think she saw me at the rear window. Whose side is she on?"

He looked puzzled, cocked his head and narrowed his eyes.

"Ours. Didn't Calhoun tell you? I thought you knew that; she's been inside for months trying to get a handle on Fourney's operation and relaying the information back to the farm."

"I thought she was a system operator or something; what's she doing out here with these clowns?"

"Halsey's request, I imagine," he said.

"I hope she got out before the building blew. Well, right now I think we should concentrate on Halsey and Fourney. The OV-10A has been moved to this side of the field and they're probably getting ready to leave."

Brandy came trotting up behind me, breathless and gesturing down the road in the direction of the house.

"There's a big truck full of men coming this way from the airfield," she said. "It's one of those big army trucks with a gun mounted over the cab."

Dansforth looked at me for an explanation and I told him I'd seen two 6 by 6s parked near the runway with M-60 light machine guns mounted at the front bed racks.

"Holy mother of God," he yelled, waving his arms and motioning for everyone to take cover. While they scrambled into the trees, I led Brandy and Dansforth over to the embankment above the meadow.

"I thought everyone would be rounded up by now," he said as we slid into the tall grass. "Can't be very many of them, though. Just enough to keep us busy here while Halsey and Fourney fly away with the money."

"Only takes one guy with an M-60," said I.

"Do they have it with them? Did you see it?"

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“What?”

“The money. Did they have it with them?”

“No, Steve, but it only stands to reason that if they worked so hard to get their hands on it, they wouldn’t leave it behind. Not all of it, anyway.”

He thought about it for awhile, then nodded in agreement. “You’re probably right. They’ll take as much of the real money as they can carry, I’ll bet....”

The M-60 began rattling from a point around the bend and slugs came crashing through the trees, thumping into the trunks and limbs. Some of the agents began returning fire as the sound of the truck grew louder.

I rolled over on my side and looked down the curve of the cedar forest toward the bunker, saw that the planes had been parked near it. I tapped Dansforth on the shoulder.

“Looks like they’re getting ready to load up, Steve. I think I’ll just make my way over there and see if I can delay them for awhile.” I kissed Brandy, promised her I’d be back, slid down the bank to the tall grass at the perimeter of the meadow and looked back as a volley of lead smashed into the brush above Dansforth’s head.

“Need some help?” he yelled.

“No. You keep that mob busy as long as you can and meet me down there when you’re finished. If I’m not back in thirty minutes, make sure Brandy gets out.”

I stood and began making my way toward the planes as quickly as I could, ignoring the pain in my foot and oblivious to any danger. I checked the clip as I ran, released the safety and got into the trees when the ground levelled out near the building.

The ground cover was sparse and I could see men boarding the T-44s as I drew near. The engines started almost immediately, then the planes lumbered down to the far end of the field, leaving Halsey and Fourney alone

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beside the bunker. When the planes were out of sight, Fourney opened the building and disappeared inside. Halsey swung open the Bronco's aft cargo bay then followed him into the bunker.

They emerged, each carrying a heavy corrugated box, and began stowing them in the plane as I eased behind a large cedar twenty feet away. I waited until they returned to the building, then stepped toward the plane, pulled the C-4 charge from my pocket, and placed it and the jars into the cargo bay in front of the two boxes. Each box, I noticed, was large enough to hold about two million dollars in one hundred dollar bills.

The two Beechcraft took off side by side, straining into the air with their engines wound up tight, gained altitude and banked to the north toward Canada as I backed into the forest with the carbine levelled at the doorway.

I got behind the tree and waited for Halsey and Fourney to come out, wanting to wait until they had loaded everything they were going to carry before detonating the charge. They made seven more quick trips, loading a total of sixteen boxes, before Fourney closed the doors and latched them.

"That's all we can carry," he said, "We'll have to leave the rest. It sounds like the firefight is moving this way; we'd better get out."

I could hear Halsey grunt in agreement so I stepped from behind the tree as he climbed onto the boarding ladder, picked Colonel Fourney as my target, aimed the rifle at the base of his skull, and called his name.

Halsey froze on the ladder as he was about to swing a leg into the aft cockpit, and Fourney stiffened, leaning slightly as if expecting a bullet in the back. He turned slowly, fixed me with a look of disgust and smiled disdainfully.

"Damn," he said, "I knew I should have killed you

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when I had the chance. How about this, Spenser, what's your plan now?"

Halsey looked down at me as I stepped into the clearing, then his eyes quickly scanned the area behind me. He shrugged and started down the ladder.

"No," I said, "just stay up there where you won't get into any mischief, Halsey, and keep both hands on the canopy where I can see them. I believe some of your agents will be here pretty soon to take you away, so let's just stay calm until they arrive. I don't particularly want to kill you because I need you alive for the authorities to question, to clear myself, but if you try anything stupid, I'll shoot."

"Will you, now?" Fourney asked, easing his hand toward the pistol under his arm.

I fired a burst past his left ear, so close the powder scorched the side of his face. He didn't even try to duck.

The Colonel was one of those guys who mashed cigarettes out in the palm of their hand or sliced off their fingers to prove how tough they are. He just didn't give a damn.

Halsey said, "Hmmm," and looked into the trees again. I heard a sound behind me and stiffened, hoping it was Steve Dansforth, but knew from the look on their faces it wasn't.

Someone walked up behind me and shoved the barrel of a revolver into the side of my neck, "Just ease that piece down," a woman's soft voice said, "and toss it over there in the bushes."

Halsey started down the ladder and Fourney, who was smiling with glee, stepped forward to begin pounding on me again, but the woman stopped them both with a menacing wave of the pistol.

"He's mine," she said. "I have a score to settle here. You had better get in the air while you have a chance."

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Halsey agreed and urged Colonel Fourney into the Bronco. Fourney hesitated. I felt certain he was willing to risk going to prison or being killed for the pleasure of hitting me two or three times, but Halsey convinced him he was being foolhardy.

Fourney started the engines as soon as he was seated and I could see him strapping in as the plane rolled onto the runway. Halsey was looking back toward us as the canopy came down, then they made a turn and were out of my line of sight.

The woman made me walk to a position where she could watch my back and see the plane over my shoulder. I kept trying to turn enough to see her face but she pressed the pistol into my neck. The plane's engine noise subsided for half a minute, then roared to life again as it reached the end of the runway.

I heard the woman take a step or two backward. "Well, that's that," she said. "Okay, you can turn around."

Allison Haniford was everything I'd heard. She was beautiful, petite, well groomed and impeccably dressed. And she was holstering her pistol. I squinted at her. She didn't take her eyes from the plane but when I leaned forward to take a step, her hand went to the pistol.

"Don't," she said softly. "I have reason enough to kill you, and it's a much better reason than Fourney had to kill you. But Halsey wants you alive."

"Look, about your brother... ."

"I don't want to hear it. I've heard it too many times already until I'm sick of it. I understand what happened and why it happened. Colonel Fourney is responsible for my brother's death. He sent Alan to kill Calhoun. Well..."

Tears welled into her eyes. She walked out to edge of the runway as the plane turned for its takeoff roll. "Now the bastards are all going to get away with it."

"I don't get it," I said, walking to the runway to stand

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beside her.

“You aren’t supposed to get it just like I’m not supposed to get it. You, me, we follow orders. I don’t think anyone is supposed to know what’s going on most of the time.” She pushed her chin out a bit. “I wish I could have stopped Fourney, though. He’s going to get away.”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the remote firing device, handed it to Allison. “Maybe not,” said I.

She looked at the remote, then at the plane, already at about two hundred feet, then at me.

“Right about now ought to do the trick.” I told her.

She knew exactly what it was and what to do with it.

Click, it said.

The OV-10A was vaporized, its engines, still turning and screaming, arched over the runway and debris, flaming fuel and millions upon millions of smouldering Federal Reserve notes showered down over about three acres of what once was Fourney’s military compound. The concussion nearly knocked us to the ground. A sudden deathly silence followed. All the shooting and shouting from below the hill and around the turns in the road seemed to stop at the same time.

“Cheeze,” Allison Haniford said.

Dansforth and Jason Brown Cee Five, leading what was left of Red Team One, came around the edge of the stand of trees. Most of them were watching all the junk falling from the sky. Others were watching an AV-8 Harrier that was jinking around on the far side of the runway. We could see people tossing their weapons down and others rounding them up like errant geese. The battle appeared to be over. Now the paperwork would begin.

I sagged to my knees, then slowly fell forward onto my face.

I wanted to go home.

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SIXTEEN

The Harrier made a couple of hovering passes over the field to survey what remained of the Bronco before it powered up and disappeared over the mountains in the direction of Whidbey Island. Dansforth and Jason Brown stood at the edge of the field with their hands on their hips and watched until the plane was out of sight, then turned their attention to the matters at hand, gathering evidence and organizing rescue parties to find their wounded or missing agents.

Federal, state, county, and local law enforcement and firefighting crews mustered to extinguish the flames, but not before one hundred acres of cedar forest had burned to dust along with the house, barn, hangers, storage buildings, fuel tank, seven airplanes, two helicopters, and thirty vehicles.

Twenty-six of Fourney's men and seven agents had been killed, a total of eleven had been wounded, and, except for those who had escaped in the two planes, the rest of Fourney's men had been accounted for.

Treasury agents were grumbling that inept planning had allowed someone to escape with nearly one hundred million dollars of the taxpayers' money and an undetermined amount of money conned from the people who thought they were buying a piece of the action. They

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ground their teeth, calculated that the one hundred million dollars was untraceable and lost forever, but scheduled tentative assignments to try to find the rest of it.

I sat under the cedar for nearly three hours before all the wounded agents had been flown out in agency helicopters to be admitted to government hospitals. Bodies were hidden until they could be removed by agency vehicles so no one would have to explain how and why so many people had been killed.

A press release had been prepared earlier with the explanation that a military plane, on a routine training flight had crashed into the forested mountains killing the passengers and crew in case anyone found any pieces, but everyone agreed that within two weeks all but a few locals would have forgotten about the incident and focused their attention to more pressing affairs.

Dansforth and Jason Brown directed the clean-up operations, rehearsed their lies, sent people away in trucks or on foot, loaded them aboard helicopters and got everything swept under the carpet that might incriminate their agency.

I listened to an appallingly dispassionate recount of the carnage and destruction as I drifted in and out of consciousness, leaning against Brandy as she sang comforting children's songs to me. The only heartening words we heard for the next hour was that Jason Brown had gone back to the Greywolf when he couldn't contact Christian Houser, had found him barely alive, but had got him out and safely into a hospital where he was expected to recover. The men who had attempted to kill him, both Fournery's men, had been killed in the truck on the road above the meadow.

When he returned to the agency, Houser would become the new Director, Jason Brown would become the first black man to fill the position as the Deputy Director,

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and Dansforth would be promoted to Brown's former job as Head of South American Operations, C5.

It seemed things would continue as they always had with different people at the controls.

Allison Haniford had been one of the last to be flown out and would resume her duties in the computer room at Green Hill Farms. While she waited for a flight out, she and Brandy talked in hushed voices, exchanging secret information as only women can do, and when they called her to board the helicopter, she leaned toward me, whispered that I shouldn't worry about Calhoun and promised that my files would be buried somewhere, if not removed, so I'd never have to worry about getting a call from the agency again.

In my battered state I hardly registered what she said.

Time and events merged into a kaleidoscope of blurred images after awhile and, when they finally loaded me aboard one of the last helicopters out, a Navy medic sedated me and I drifted into a mercifully peaceful oblivion where neither sound nor sight, taste nor physical pain, could invade my tiny universe.

Brandy was at my side when I awoke for the first time two days later and she immediately notified the doctor. People poked and punched at my wounds, changed bandages, made medical comments designed to prevent me from knowing how close I'd come to dying. My face looked like a rotten pumpkin, my teeth had been repaired or replaced, my jaw had been wired shut so I had to suck food through a straw, and my left hand and left foot had been encased in twenty pounds of concrete.

But I'd be up and about in no time at all, they told me.

And how long was no time at all?

Oh, three, maybe four, weeks, if all went well.

We all got to watch Halsey's family bury an empty box the next day while the television news commenta-

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tors reminded us what a perfectly fine fellow he'd been, and there was a shot of Old Glory at half staff, snapping in a stiff breeze and dissolving to the logo on the front of the agency building in Washington, D.C.

Dansforth and Jason Brown came to visit me the following Monday but refused to answer any of my questions, particularly those I asked about Halsey. I knew he hadn't been killed, knew he'd trotted off into the hills somewhere, probably when the Bronco had stopped at the far end of the field, had probably got to Canada, then made his way to another country and they knew I knew.

But they made a point of reminding me that other people, with far less damaging information, had been known to vanish without a trace, suggesting I should forget the incident at once.

Houser had intimated that Halsey might go to Russia, but I thought that was another smokescreen and I tended to believe he was keeping himself busy in one of the countries around the Mediterranean Sea, with suitcases full of money and his recording equipment pointed toward the masjids and oil fields of Iran.

But why? To continue with some extension of the operation, or simply to begin a new career without having to account for Operation Capricorn and one hundred million dollars? Dansforth and Brown knew the answers to all of my questions, but they declined to discuss the subject.

It was Monday, December 2nd, 1985. The appropriate agencies had launched new investigations to round up the all the people who had been involved in the operation, some were arrested and in jail, a dozen or so others had been arrested and released on bail and a few had fled the country and had sought asylum elsewhere. Some secret bank accounts had been uncovered and impounded, meaning the money had been transferred

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to other secret bank accounts; weapons had been confiscated and returned to military armories or destroyed as necessary, and the President and his cabinet emerged relatively unscathed from the potentially scandalous affair and were meeting to explore options for dealing with the growing crisis in the middle east.

Dansforth had assured us all was well with the government, that allied nations had all been notified of the operation and alerted to the possibility that some remaining members might continue the operation in their countries. Detailed reports were quietly supplied to the Soviet Union and member nations of the Warsaw Pact with the understanding that if they could fall to a conspiracy, so might we all.

Still, on the face of it, little changed. The insurgency war in South America expanded to the border countries, the Soviets struggled in Afghanistan, Israel and the Arabs continued their sad war of attrition. Terrorists activities increased with plane and ship highjackings in the name of the Holy War. The dollar began to stabilize, gold was up, and the industrialists were lobbying for economic sanctions against Japan.

But everyone tried to avoid explaining how a group of greedy men could get that close to causing an international calamity, no one apologized for the Colonel's involvement, the truth was buried and hidden, and all the wealthy industrialists hired wealthy attorneys to defend them. Some of the politicians who had been implicated in the covert operation were appointed to the investigating committee organized to look into the affair.

If there is any truth, it is that there is no truth. Men in positions of power, backed by the wealth of equally guilty men, will always protect each other from incriminating scandal. Only the poor common man, the soldier who carries the rifle, the accountant, the secretary, the mes-

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senger, will fall under the gavel and go to prison for the crimes of their employers.

A marker with Calhoun's name on it was stuck in a dusty plot in Van Horn, Texas, and Helen and the kids had slipped away unnoticed. Calhoun had come near to the truth when he'd told me that a man with a billion dollars could buy anything he wanted in the world, even freedom and exoneration from deceit and treason, or the anonymity to live a new life somewhere far from the madness.

Neither Dansforth nor Jason Brown had apologized for the ugly mess they'd dragged us into. No one had ever talked about the missing one hundred million dollars, nor had they once uttered Calhoun's name.

As I was checking out of the hospital at the end of the third week, a young intern handed me a small envelope.

It was postmarked in Idaho only four days earlier. I read it twice, folded it carefully and slipped it behind my driver license, thinking I'd mention it to Brandy someday.

A Get Well card from Dallas Houston Calhoun.