

2017-01-01

Killing Atlas

Gary Dee Penton

University of Texas at El Paso, gary.penton@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open_etd



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Penton, Gary Dee, "Killing Atlas" (2017). *Open Access Theses & Dissertations*. 520.
https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open_etd/520

This is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UTEP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UTEP. For more information, please contact lweber@utep.edu.

KILLING ATLAS: A NOVEL

GARY DEE PENTON
MASTER'S PROGRAM IN CREATIVE WRITING

APPROVED:

Daniel Chacon, MFA, Chair

Jeffrey Sirken, Ph.D.

Frank Perez, Ph.D.

Charles Ambler, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

KILLING ATLAS: A NOVEL

By

GARY DEE PENTON, MASTER OF FINE ARTS, CREATIVE WRITING

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree, of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department of Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

May 2017

Killing Atlas – Critical Preface

Eleven years ago, I wrote a novel. It was called *Combat Aircrew Seven*. There had been nothing written about my obscure military profession up to that point, at least nothing I could find on Amazon or Barnes and Noble. I was a naval flight officer, mission commander on the P-3C Orion antisubmarine, surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft. It has since been replaced with the P-8 Poseidon which I employ in my novel, *Killing Atlas*.

A decade later, I read the pages of *Combat Aircrew Seven* (quickly scanning with my face turned partially away from the pages), and while there were certainly some cringeworthy passages, it wasn't a terrible novel, but I found a way to publish it in paperback for free and purchase copies to pass around to family and friends. One will pop up on the online bookstores from time-to-time but I never marketed it to a wider audience than family, friends of family, squadron-mates in the P-3 community and shipmates in two aircraft carrier battle groups.

I've been working on "*Killing Atlas*", my second attempt for approximately four years. Until late 2015, I wasn't writing consistently but I eventually realized that, after a full military career and another decade running a small business, writing became something more than a lark and was something I had to pursue full-time. Whether the novel is good is yet to be seen, but I learned long ago that, to do something well it takes hard work and study. After two careers, this was something I really wanted to learn to do as well as possible, so I joined the MFA in Creative Writing program.

My novel is 'hard' science fiction, which is to say that I extrapolate 40-years into the future, current technological research. It is fictional until the technology exists, but I

stay away from the impossible fantasy genre which employs concepts not possible according to laws of physics, whether that be Einstein's Theory of Relativity or the mysteries of Quantum Mechanics. Quantum Mechanics and Physics allow me to propose concepts that are unimaginable because it is that physics that gave us the ceramic superconductor which defies all physics – scientists simply don't know how it works, only that it does. This is like many psychotropic drugs, even lithium that has been used for decades for bipolar disorder. Neuroscientists can't explain precisely 'why' they work'. Even as late as 2009, Columbia University was soliciting funding to better understand how Lithium works in bipolar patients as a serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI).^[1]

Killing Atlas was originally military fiction set in the present but I learned over the past two and a half years that I could take the story anywhere I liked, and though the primary setting I chose to set the story is still the island nation of Singapore, I have extrapolated current societal aspects a half-century into the future.

I would say that Dr. Sirkin's science fiction class, "Reality and other Fictions" was one of the two most impactful classes on the changes to my story. The other is Dr. De Pierola's "Consciousness in Fiction". I will describe how consciousness plays into my story later where it fits chronologically.

A long life of varied experience informs my novel. I've lived in Japan for a decade and my experience in Japan informs one of the premise of the novel. Significant time spent in Singapore allows me to describe that primary setting with verisimilitude. I've been to Singapore many times, I don't know the precise number of visits, but each was for up to two weeks at a time. Though Singapore is the primary setting, Japan is

important to the story and the story visits Japan before Singapore so I will start with Japan.

Future economies:

My degree in Business and experience as a small business owner after my military career informs this aspect of the novel.

Japan is currently the most indebted nation in the world with a 242% debt-to-GDP ratio, which is \$99,725 debt per person, while the United States has 107% debt-to-GDP ratio, \$58,604 debt per person. ^[2]

Politicians like to point at these numbers to deflect the danger of our current \$19.45 billion national debt, but in my future socialized U.S. government, jobs lost to automation will explode social program subsidies, and concepts such as forgiving student loan debts would add another \$1.3 trillion. In my future fiction, the promise of student loan forgiveness and free college is kept. Americans who chose not to attend university but rather go directly into the workforce would take an equal share of that debt and also be on the hook for the salaries of more than the current 1.7 million university professors, those with full professorship status garnering an average salary of nearly \$100,000.^[3] This will be another enormous and catastrophic strain on the U.S. economy that I will estimate at well over \$3 trillion per year in today's dollars for the full strata of academic faculty and staff. This one example of out-of-control spending that will doom the United States and any nation who holds her debt.

If nations like Japan that own \$1.1 trillion of our national debt should 'cash out' when their economy begins to collapse, what will that mean to the U.S. economy? And

in my fictional future war with China, the Chinese would certainly cash out as a military strategy and that's another \$1.3T.

The pressure on American businesses would increase dramatically because our system of supply and demand requires profits be made on the margins. The impact of doubling the nation's average minimum wage would result in immediate clamoring for proportional increased wages for everyone who has left that traditional bottom rung of the workforce ladder. The Licensed Practical Nurse who currently makes \$42k per year will ask for \$84k per year.

In my fictional future, manufactured class struggle and economic catastrophe leads to the nationalism of all businesses in the United States. Automation has created an environment where there simply are not enough jobs for the population which causes extreme animosity with citizens who feel they aren't getting their fair share from those who 'are working' and driving the economy.

As the margins disappear, the only way for business to cope will be to raise prices on their product. Without a corresponding increase in government subsidized incomes, the people will rise in protest in my fiction and those still working and producing will come under verbal and physical threat. In this situation, my antagonist takes advantage of the situation and approaches the Japanese government to trade cloning technology for a safe-haven in Japan for American businesses that he will ultimately lord over.

Japan:

Japan's population has fallen by nearly one million in the past five years, and that decline is projected to only increase. Like ours, Japan's economy depends on an expanding labor force to drive growth, but while Americans put no artificial limit on population, Japan is still experiencing the phenomenon where nuclear families average only 1.2 children and that number has held for decades and there is no societal change that would indicate an increase any time soon.

Each year the Japanese government produces a pamphlet, "A Profile of Older Japanese." It's prepared by the International Longevity Center-Japan. It is a compilation of data from various ministries of the national government. It describes Japanese over the age of 65 currently making up over one-fifth of the population and in twenty years it is projected that the numbers over 65 will reach one-third of the total population.

Japan's nine major urban areas account for 54% of the total population, with Greater Tokyo now home to 29%. Rural areas, on the other hand, are being hit by severe declines.

In the novel, the antagonist makes a pitch to the Japanese government to provide cloning technology for the opportunity to move American businesses to those abandoned rural areas of Japan after U.S. businesses are under physical attack by the populous and the looming certainty that politicians are moving towards nationalizing businesses to have more control over the economy they feel is necessary to fund super-bloated social programs.

I got the idea for this when the Japanese started promoting a program that became known as Womenomics, whereby the government would subsidize day care for the children of women who might join the workforce. This had very limited success

because the culture of raising children in Japan places extreme importance on having one parent at home.

Unlike the United States, daycare for two working parents is not nearly as common. Some families have opted for grandparents to take care of children during working hours but this is still unacceptable for many Japanese.

Another popular option in the United States is the 'stay-at-home' dad. This is right out in Japan. Japanese paternal culture is such that men who choose to stay at home while their wives earn the family income is considered demeaning. All this means that the population isn't expected to stop its decline.

Singapore:

I've lived and worked in thirty-one nations with short visits to many others. I spent as much time exploring by myself as I did touring around with my small circles of friends during ten years in Asia (the other ten years in Iceland, Europe, and the Middle-East). I know Singapore well and thanks to social media, I have stayed in touch with families in Singapore of Chinese and Indian descent. I hope that familiarity has added verisimilitude to the novel.

Singapore is unique from what we have devolved to in the United States. By this I mean that Singapore is a stratified society rather than a class society, by Marxian definition. In Singapore, there is no manufactured class conflict, tension, and struggle, which, in my fiction, leads to the eventual transformation of the United States into a socialist society. Rather, Singapore is a stratified society where there are certainly unequal life-chances, but no inherent class conflict.

The apartment the protagonist shares with two females is a metaphor for Singapore. There are several ways Singaporeans self-identify in the social hierarchy and one of the most powerful is the type of housing they live in on the crowded island nation.

While education is an important class indicator in Singapore, it is not something a stranger can identify. However, the type and location of residence is as important as a very accurate indicator of income as well as education level. An address on a personal calling card is declaring one's class identity. In Singapore, where one lives is indicative of social status. The lower and working class literally self-identify with such terms as 1-2-roomers and 3-roomers, while the middle class aspire to call themselves 4-roomers. To live in a 'private apartment' is unanimously considered upper-class.^[4] My protagonist's roommates are extremely class-conscious with a long-term plan.

While one is at university, the other is an anonymous dancer in Singapore's small and controlled red-light district so that they can afford to live in a 'private apartment' in the present, while eventually both will have advanced degrees that will ultimately allow them to have high-paying work and be 'honest' upper-class. Of course, I must give credit to their western roommate who pays a third of the bills.

But, within two months of starting the MFA program, I realized that my characters were cliché and two-dimensional. The main character was a retired pilot living with two beautiful Asian girls who thought he was irresistible but he saw them as sisters.

Why do they have to be attracted to him at all? What if I made them lesbians who needed a roommate so they could afford to live in an expensive apartment in an exclusive high-rise? Who would be a better roommate than an ex-military westerner

who would not be shocked at all by their relationship which is still quite unacceptable in Singapore? This ex-military 'security system' who can't speak any language other than English would be just mysterious enough that he could pass as a love interest for either of the girls, in case their two families (who weren't acquainted with the other) began to suspect their illicit love. Personally, I think this is much more interesting.

Cloning:

Another change to the original story is that the ex-pilot is a clone. The U.S. military cloning program is secret, so he thinks that he and his three identical brothers were quadruplets given up for adoption, but they were actually cloned from a highly-decorated fighter pilot and close friend of the novel's antagonist who promised to take care of the four boys safety and future. This becomes a challenge for the antagonist when two of the boys get in his way. He does all he can to protect them while at the same time pursuing his goals.

It is my intention to characterize clones as what they will be, normal human beings. There have been only a few novels that have described the lives of cloned children, the best (and heartbreaking) in my opinion is, "Never Let Me Go", by Kazuo Ishiguro, in which clones are brought up in loving dormitories, like orphanages, but they know from the outset that their life purpose is to provide organs (parts) to their sponsors. They accept this and we follow the characters until they eventually and necessarily die (killed by a future society is more accurate).

The clones created under the military program in my story are raised by unsuspecting but highly-desirable childless families. This situation is very similar to the

most extreme and tasteless story about clones, but the best comparison I can make, which is Ira Levin's "The Boys from Brazil". [5]

In Levin's novel, 94 babies were cloned from Adolf Hitler's cells by genetic molecular reproduction – the evil conception of a fictional Joseph Mengele. Mengele was an actual human, as it were, who once ran Auschwitz. In the novel, he invented this way to summon up a 4th Reich.

The infants were reared in all parts of the world by average civil servants with kind dispositions who were all about to reach the age of 65. The character Mengele has arranged for these civil servants to be killed by his "boys from Brazil" who are six auxiliary killers. At the end, there's an inevitable confrontation between Mengele and an old Nazi headhunter called Liebermann in the house of the next victim along with some Dobermans and a youngster who when last seen is on his way toward that second coming. A surprise ending to be sure – what became of that last boy?

Cloning:

If we can grow various organs of the human body, then can we regrow an entire human being, creating an exact genetic copy, a clone? The answer is yes, in principle, but it has not been done.

In the movie, "The 6th Day", Arnold Schwarzenegger's character battles the bad guys who have mastered the art of cloning human beings. More important, they have mastered the art of copying a person's entire memory and then inserting it into the clone. When Schwarzenegger manages to eliminate one bad guy, a new one rises with the same personality and memory. Things get messy when he finds out that a clone

was made of him without his knowledge. (When an animal is cloned in reality, the memories are not.)

The concept of cloning hit the world headlines in 1997, when Ian Wilmut of the Roslin Institute of the University of Edinburgh was able to clone Dolly the sheep. By taking a cell from an adult sheep, extracting the DNA within its nucleus, and then inserting this nucleus into an egg cell, Wilmut accomplished the feat of bringing back a genetic copy of the original. ^[6]

People around the world began to duplicate this feat, cloning all sorts of animals, including goats, pigs, cats, dogs, horses, and cattle. Ron Marquess just outside Dallas, Texas, may still have one of the largest cloned-cattle farms in the country. First-, second-, and even third-generation cloned cattle – clones of clones of clones. I cannot find the footage but I remember the report that showed about eight identical twins, all lined up. They walked, ran, ate, and slept precisely in a row. Although the calves had no conception they were clones of one another, they instinctively banded together and mimicked one another's motions.

But even if human cloning becomes possible, it will likely be kept extremely compartmentalized in the military. Besides the military implications, there are social obstacles.

Many religions will oppose human cloning, like the way the Catholic Church opposed Louise Brown, the first baby in history to be conceived in a test tube. This means that if the military operation were to be public knowledge, laws will probably be passed banning the technology, or at least tightly regulating it.

I have written and submitted a short story where such clones are known but a political party ‘ironically’ will not give them the right to vote or access to social programs because they ‘presume’ that a superior clone would be likely to vote for the opposition party. I didn’t include that in the novel however.

Also, the commercial demand for human cloning will be small. At most, probably only a fraction of humans will be clones, even if it ever becomes legal. After all, we already have clones, in the form of identical twins (and triplets), so human cloning will gradually be normalized.

But who will clone a human? Perhaps a parent mourning the death of a child or a wealthy man who has no heirs? Yes. That is precisely the description of one of my secondary characters. Mr. Maguire is a very wealthy widower with no children with a debt to the antagonist for the gift of his daughter, a clone of his wife.

So, in the future, although there might be laws passed preventing it, human clones will probably exist. However, they will represent only a tiny fraction of the human race and the social consequences will be quite small.

Future military technology:

In my first full 20-year career, I was a naval flight officer. I know aircraft carrier operations as well as anyone, as I was a designated Command Duty Officer with complete authorization for all ship’s operation in the absence of the Commanding Officer.

Future systems described in my novel are either in testing, or on the drawing board. The electro-magnetic catapults in chapter one are real and will replace current

steam-powered catapults (steam generated by nuclear fission reactors). The electromagnetic catapults will take up far less space and will cut required personnel drastically, the Air Department flight deck personnel by up to fifty people.

They are currently installed on the USS Gerald R. Ford but the catapults do not work at present. However, there are electro-magnetic catapults installed on a runway at Lakehurst, New Jersey and they have successfully catapulted all navy carrier-based aircraft and even the new \$100M F-35 Lighting II.

The aircraft artificial intelligence I use in my novel does not exist at present, but the \$400,000 helmets that current F-35 pilots wear do exist, and are blended with cameras positioned all around the aircraft so that no matter where the pilot looks, he can see other aircraft 360 degrees in all dimensions, even if his face is looking down in his lap.

This is accomplished with two projectors on the top front of the helmet that project video onto the inside of the helmet face shield when activated. This is an incredible advance because the most advanced 5th generation aircraft produced by other nations still limit the visibility to what can be seen through the canopy, which is usually limited to 225 degrees left or right, and 60 degrees down from the pilot's shoulder decreasing to 10 degrees down off the nose.

Artificial Intelligence:

In the future, it is predicted that aircraft artificial intelligence will blend with that technology also and free up the pilot to concentrate on combat tactics. In my novel,

artificial intelligence has advanced nearly to the point of having a personality like the Hal (the HAL 9000 space ship computer) in “2001, A Space Odyssey.” [7]

Japan is one of the world’s leaders in this technology. Japan is spending so much money on artificial intelligence in robots to alleviate the coming crisis in medical care. In retrospect, it is not surprising that Japan is one of the leading nations in robotics, for several reasons. First, in the Shinto religion, inanimate objects are believed to have spirits in them. Even mechanical ones. In the West, children may scream in terror at robots, especially after seeing so many movies about murderous robots, but for Japanese children, robots are seen as playful and helpful. In Japan, it is not uncommon to see robot receptionists greet you when you enter department stores.

Second, but important to my story, again, is that Japan is facing a demographic nightmare. Japan has the fastest-aging population. Some demographers have stated that we are watching a train wreck in slow motion: one demographic train (aging population and falling birthrate) will soon collide with another (low immigration rate) in the coming years. This will be felt most acutely in the medical field, where a robotic nurse with artificial intelligence will be quite useful. Already, robots like those made by Toyota would be ideal for hospital tasks, such as fetching medicines, administering drugs, and monitoring patients twenty-four hours a day.

“By midcentury, we should be able to complete the next milestone in the history of AI: reverse engineering the human brain. Scientists, frustrated that they have not been able to create a robot made of silicon and steel, are also trying the opposite approach: taking apart the brain, neuron by neuron—just like a mechanic might take apart a motor, screw by screw—and then running a simulation of these neurons on a

huge computer. These scientists are systematically trying to simulate the firings of neurons in animals, starting with mice, cats, and going up the evolutionary scale of animals. This is a well-defined goal, and should be possible by midcentury.

Optogenetics is a first, modest step. The next step is to actually model the entire brain, using the latest in technology. There are at least two ways to solve this colossal problem, which will take many decades of hard work. The first is by using supercomputers to simulate the behavior of billions of neurons, each one connected to thousands of other neurons. The other way is to actually locate every neuron in the brain.

It may take decades to slowly climb this path, but they believe that it is only a matter of time before the machines exceed us in intelligence. AI researchers are split on the question of when this might happen. Some say that within twenty years, robots will approach the intelligence of the human brain and then leave us in the dust.” [7]

Daisy:

I describe the protagonist's gelcap with a personality. He names it Daisy and they can communicate. It is artificial intelligence but I hope to show an evolution into full consciousness as it learns from experience. I demonstrate this with internal monologue between the pilot and the 'mapper', a term I borrowed from Antonio Damasio in his nonfiction treatise on consciousness, "Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain." The 'mapper' in the novel is entirely fictional, though its functionality is based entirely on Damasio's brain mapping description, applied to an extension of the brain's cerebral cortex (gelcap) for enhanced memory and reaction time.

A large part of the problem with this scenario, but an advantage for fiction, is that there is no universal consensus as to the meaning of the word ‘consciousness’.

Philosophers and mathematicians have grappled with the word for centuries, and have nothing to show for it. David Chalmers has even combined and catalogued nearly 20,000 papers written on consciousness, with no consensus whatsoever.

Consciousness means different things to different people. Simply put, there is no universally accepted definition of the term. That’s good for me.

We obviously do not know how to create a brain interface with consciousness, but we can imagine a framework for measuring consciousness. This ‘mapper’ would excel in running complex simulations of the future far ahead of us, from more perspectives, with more details and depth. Their simulations would be more accurate than ours, because they would have a better grasp of common sense and the rules of nature and hence better able to ferret out patterns. They would be able to anticipate problems that we might ignore or not be aware of. Moreover, they would be able to set their own goals. This will be critical as pilot tasks become more intricate and challenging. The mapper will be able to monitor external inputs such as the ability to interface with an aircraft and if it isn’t timely to warn its pilot that he should prepare to eject, but to make the decision on its own and eject the pilot unilaterally and without warning.

Mapping:

Daisy is called a ‘mapper’ because she is not only connected to cloud-based intelligence, she is also artificial intelligence that can store more memory in a cerebral

cortex expansion I call 'gelcap'. I got the idea from a book we studied in Dr. De Pierola's "Consciousness in Fiction", specifically, "Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain" by Antonio Damasio. In it he describes that consciousness evolves as the brain is bombarded with imagery and experiences. He calls it 'mapping' as each experience overwrites existing knowledge as a cartographer would make updates to his map as new information comes in.

Damasio writes, "The distinctive feature of brains such as the one we own is their uncanny ability to create maps. [Brain] mapping is essential for sophisticated management. Mapping and life management going hand in hand. When the brain makes maps, it informs itself. The information contained in the maps can be used non-consciously to guide motor behavior efficaciously, a most desirable consequence considering that survival depends on taking the right action. But when brains make maps, they are also creating images, the main currency of our minds. Ultimately consciousness allows us to experience maps as images, to manipulate those images, and to apply reasoning to them. Maps are constructed when we interact with objects, such as a person, a machine, a place, from the outside of the brain toward its interior. I cannot emphasize the word interaction enough. It reminds us that making maps, which is essential for improving actions as noted above, often occurs in a setting of action to begin with. The construction of maps never stops even in our sleep, as dreams demonstrate. The human brain maps whatever object sits outside it, whatever action occurs outside it, and all the relationships that objects and actions assume in time and space, relative to each other and to the mother ship known as the organism, sole proprietor of our body, brain, and mind." [8]

Political Science:

My antagonist's intrusion on the drug trade was inspired by a class I took with UTEP Defense and Strategic Studies program, 'The Americas'.

Much of the heroin that is imported to the United States comes from China. In my fiction, a rogue leader takes control of the drug trade to fund his own operation. I think this will be interesting to my reader because we never hear China and heroin used in the same sentence in our news feeds for various reasons, some underhanded.

Modern politicians like to focus the nation's attention on drugs coming into the United States from everywhere but China. They like to point at the southern border. That aspect of the international drug trade is a sad reality, but that is not the only reason the politician singles out our neighbors to the south.

A political reality is that by focusing on the opioid epidemic and the shocking numbers of people who die of drug overdose, many politicians use the tragedy to distract from another concern which is the long-term value to another political party of allowing the immigration of uneducated and unskilled people to cross the southern border to expand their constituency.

Governor Jerry Brown of California passed a law that 'required' that voter registration be available upon being granted citizenship. When my Japanese wife was sworn in at a ceremony in San Diego, there was a tractor trailer in the parking lot. It was lovingly customized as a mobile voter registration office and a small army of volunteers intercepted everyone leaving the auditorium, including me and my wife. We were obviously excited to have the luxury but our personal experience was precisely what

politicians in the other party fear and why they want to stop illegal immigration, imagining the future expansion of voter rolls in those precincts. ^[9]

The other political reality is that neither of our two majority parties want to describe the other side of the border as a literal economic relief valve. When President Ronald Reagan passed strict immigration legislation nearly exactly twenty-years ago, the New York Times reported on the activity it prompted in Mexico. In the article, they quoted President Miguel de la Madrid, “Any reduction in the flow of migration toward the United States can be a serious element in the development of Mexico, since this factor has served as a mechanism of adjustment regarding employment.”^[10]

It remains that the ability for the poor and oppressed to move freely across a border for relief minimizes the risk of internal strife in the nations to the south, and maintains the financial boon of money that returns from the north via Western Union or in hard currency smuggled by drug lords to the south.

Politicians also point at Afghanistan for their huge opium production as one of many reasons to exert military force and nation building. I have deep personal knowledge and feelings about such things as a graduate of the War College.

All this excludes China. They are entirely ignored. Politicians have used the epidemic of heroin overdose as a major campaign platform but refuse to point at China, a rival superpower. Those politicians know that to point at another superpower as culpable would risk enormous financial loss in retaliatory trade wars, not to mention increasing support to our rivals and loss of support in the U.N. Security Council.

So, one of my purposes was to show that much of the heroin imported to the United States comes through China from the region where India and Thailand converge

on the Chinese border, and how a rogue leader could take control of that operation without China complaining, because complaining would be tantamount to a confession of their heroin exports. Instead, they fight a secret war against my main antagonist that spills over and harms the innocent friends and lovers in my main protagonist's circle.

I hope this preface accomplished two important things. One, that my novel, though the skeleton existed when I began the program, has been otherwise entirely informed and inspired by my experience in the MFA program.

Second, I hope that this described sufficiently the 'science' involved in my science fiction which I think is so important for verisimilitude which I hope will allow my reader to suspend disbelief.

Bibliography

1. Parsey, Ramin. "Understanding the Mechanism of Action of Lithium and the Pathophysiology of Bipolar Disorder with Molecular Imaging of the Serotonin System." *College of Physicians & Surgeons of Columbia University*, <http://www.dana.org/Media/GrantsDetails.aspx?id=39076>. Accessed 16 April, 2017.
2. Planes, Alex. "Is the United States the World's Most Indebted Country? Not Even Close." The Motley Fool, <https://www.fool.com/investing/general/2014/03/15/isthe-unitedstates-the-worlds-most-indebted-coun.aspx>. Accessed 16 April, 2017.
3. Wikipedia contributors. "Professors in the United States". Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Accessed 16 April 2017. https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Professors_in_the_United_States
4. Ern Ser, Tan. Does Class Matter: Social Stratification and Orientations in Singapore. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2004. Paperback.
5. Levin, Ira. The Boys from Brazil. 1976. New York: Pegasus Classics, 2010. Kindle.
6. Kaku, Michio. Physics of the Future: How Science Will Shape Human Destiny and Our Daily Lives by the Year 2100. New York: Anchor, 2011. Kindle.
7. Clarke, Arthur C. 2001: A Space Odyssey. New York: New American Library, 1968. Hardcover.
8. Damasio, Antonio. Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain. New

York: Random House, 2010. Kindle

9. Voter registration: California New Motor Voter Program, CA assembly. CA

AB1461

10. Router, Larry. "Immigration Policy; Mexico Fears The Loss Of America As A Safety Valve." The New York Times, 15 March, 1987,

<http://www.nytimes.com/1987/03/15/weekinreview/immigration->

[policy-mexico-fears-the-loss-of-america-as-a-safety-valve.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1987/03/15/weekinreview/immigration-policy-mexico-fears-the-loss-of-america-as-a-safety-valve.html). Accessed 16 April

2017

Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	xxiv
Chapter One.....	1
Chapter Two.....	24
Chapter Three.....	41
Chapter Four.....	52
Chapter Five.....	62
Chapter Six.....	71
Chapter Seven.....	80
Chapter Eight.....	88
Chapter Nine.....	96
Chapter Ten.....	104
Chapter Eleven.....	113
Chapter Twelve.....	125
Chapter Thirteen.....	139
Chapter Fourteen.....	148
Chapter Fifteen.....	152
Chapter Sixteen.....	161

Chapter Seventeen.....	177
Chapter Eighteen.....	197
Chapter Nineteen.....	221
Chapter Twenty.....	224
Chapter Twenty-One.....	249
Chapter Twenty-Two.....	251
Chapter Twenty-Three.....	256
Chapter Twenty-Four.....	276
Curriculum Vita.....	285

Chapter One

Against the clear sky, the icy rampart was far more striking than he had imagined when the intelligence officer told him to expect a dramatic difference between its reality and the old satellite imagery scavenged from the Russian intelligence library. Those pictures only showed white above 18,000 feet, but the snow and ice had grown over the years to cover the mountain as low as 15,000 feet. When the updraft buffeted

Lieutenant Finn Connor's fighter jet, he started snapping his fingers happily, pleased to know that there were still such places left on earth. So remote and without humanity. If global temperatures fell to even more deadly levels, this eastern area of the Himalayas would become inaccessible even to the wealthy adventurers who conquered the world and smiled broadly as a local Sherpa took photos.

It occurred to him that the tallest mountain on Earth was just over six-hundred miles due west. He knew he would eventually be on the flight schedule for a boring high-altitude combat air patrol mission, and, if tankers were in the area and weren't the tattling types, he would buzz the peak of Everest with a short twenty-minute detour at three times the speed of sound.

Connor mentally commanded the aircraft's artificial intelligence to transition the variable-cycle engine from fuel efficient high-bypass turbofan for cruising speed to turbojet in case he needed to go supersonic.

As he descended to his reconnaissance altitude, he passed over the permanent snow and glaciers that still dominated the terrain as they had hundreds of years before. At around 17,000 feet, he passed over several outlet glaciers that had been shown as mostly green at his mission brief. It wasn't until he passed below eight thousand feet into the old Hkakabo Razi National Park, that he saw the needle-leaved evergreens that he recognized from his own youth

in Alaska. A snow forest.

As he approached the target area, he was still contemplating the scenery when he saw a small village in a rocky valley directly along his path.

"Corsair, you are off course," he said in his mind.

The aircraft AI didn't respond.

"Confirm we are off course," he repeated.

There was still no response. There were four redundant intercom systems, so he knew the aircraft had heard.

He confirmed the cockpit voice recorder was on.

"Daisy, what do you have on this village?" he asked his cortex mapper.

"Just satellite imagery. The aircraft carrier only arrived in the Gulf of Thailand this morning, so the ship's intel hasn't uploaded any detailed information, but I just queried Alaska headquarters J2 and their database reports all villages in our combat radius are abandoned."

"We aren't flying over that village."

"The aircraft isn't responding to my inputs either," Daisy said in his head.

"Doesn't matter – we can't fly over villages. What about this aircraft? I've never heard of a Corsair making an error like this."

Again, he mentally commanded the aircraft return control.

"Daisy, I'm going manual," he said, switching off the computer. "Confirm you have all position and course information."

"Why are you talking out loud? I record everything."

"I want this all on audio. This is bad."

He mentally commanded the aircraft to make a gentle turn to starboard. The aircraft didn't respond, so he focused on the throttle icon in the upper right hand of the heads-up display that was superimposed on his face shield. Nothing.

"Override! Pilot has control!" The urgency of his words was also interpreted.

"Access denied," the aircraft said.

He confirmed that the cockpit voice recorder was on and spoke aloud for the record. "The aircraft artificial intelligence has been corrupted somehow. We are off course and about to overfly a village. The aircraft refuses to return control to pilot and the logic unit override switch is inoperable."

"There have been no instances of the Corsair III disobeying pilot instructions and you're still talking out loud," Daisy said.

"Daisy, I want everything on the aircraft data recorder and in your memory, okay?"

Override!" he shouted again.

"Access denied."

The Corsair was fly-by-wire and its artificial intelligence responded to mental commands by calculating the appropriate maneuver instantly and sending electronic signals to control units on the various hydraulic systems.

Suddenly, Finn felt the vibration and heard the familiar rumble of the bomb bay doors opening as they approached the village.

"The aircraft is going to bomb the village!" he shouted.

It occurred to him to pull the master arming circuit breaker. It worked.

The breaker disabled the electrical signal of the stand-alone system that powered the arming lever on the bomb racks. He finally released a deep breath when he no longer heard the bomb bay doors. He could breathe easier now. After years of cursing about flight instructors, the simulator training and constant check-rides had drilled this lifesaving action into his reflex. It was one of very few fail-safes that he had control. Finn then instinctively and successfully compensated for the increased drag caused by the open bomb bay doors.

"Ejecting," Daisy announced.

"Wha –"

Leg restraints automatically pulled his feet to the base of the ejection seat and he instinctively brought his fists against his chest so that his limbs wouldn't hit anything when the rocket under his seat fired him up and over the rocky terrain.

"Jesus," he thought, clenching his teeth in pain, *"What the hell, Daisy? I think I broke my damned arm!"* Daisy was the name and mental image he chose for his neural cortex mapper. Not simply an artificial intelligence, but something far superior.

"The aircraft wouldn't respond to me either, Finn," Daisy explained calmly. *"The Corsair will fly into a mountain. It is unavoidable. There wasn't time to warn you. And your arm is not broken."*

Daisy was not only his cortex mapper, but she also monitored his physical condition and made decisions nearly instantly, faster than even the best pilot could manage. Without filters like Daisy, his reaction time would be slowed to such a degree that he would become overwhelmed, frozen and mentally defenseless. Simply put, even the best human military operators could not process information fast enough for modern battle.

"I can't believe this. This is the worst possible place on Earth to be hanging from a parachute."

Daisy was silent.

Finn started going through the bailout checklist, obviously skipping the first step. He thanked Daisy in his mind.

"You're welcome."

He recognized the wisdom of his mapper, but he still liked to complain and Daisy seemed to like to hear him do so. He thought that Daisy was becoming more human over every hour of every day.

"Human? No, thank you. I'm happy the way I am. Do you know how disgusting your bodily functions are?"

"You wouldn't know they were disgusting if I didn't think they were."

"That's a great point. Perhaps you can custom order a cone-shaped helmet to cover it."

"Good one, Daisy. I like it when you aren't your normal snooty know-it-all self."

"Self? I have to think about that. But, for now, you do realize that you are in a parachute over enemy territory, right? It seems an odd time to be joking."

"Joking or not, we're still in a tight spot," Finn said. He didn't have Daisy's topography data that was updated in real-time, so he trusted her that ejecting over enemy territory was safer than staying with a Corsair at one hundred feet above a valley floor in these jagged mountains. Then, he heard an explosion in the distance where the Corsair would have been.

"Thanks, Daisy."

"Just doing my job."

He heard the whiz of large caliber munitions and looked down to see a swarm of Chinese uniforms downslope. In a panic, but still well-trained to act immediately, he pulled the chute around to land as far upslope as possible. Then he unsheathed his gas piston MP7-A1 and fired it downward. It was unlikely to hit anyone, but it warned them that he was armed. He also had a detachable grenade launcher for the MP7 on the side of his chute bag. *"I'll have to ration these puppies. How many bad guys are there?"*

"One hundred twenty two," Daisy said, nearly instantly after processing the helmet's 360 degree and full up/down camera coverage.

"Jesus, it just keeps getting worse. The briefing officer said it was clear."

The Chinese were not supposed to be here. The mission brief was purely reconnaissance and there were other aircraft assigned to provide air support for the troops further south who were battling Chinese drug lords, the principal financiers of their military, for control of the 70-square-mile valley. Finn was stunned and suspicious that such a disproportionate number of the enemy happened to be there.

"I was thinking the same thing," Daisy said, *"it's almost as if both you and the aircraft were given different briefings."*

"No way. Two people are required to open the combination locks on the mission and crypto gear and they are chosen randomly."

Finn identified the largest boulder below the canopy, marked it on his HUD with a squint, and the pneumatic servos squeezed the base of the left lanyard, causing the chute to deliver him to within a foot of that spot. By the time he landed on the safe side of the boulder, he was already struggling for air in the high altitude where oxygen was thin. He breathed carefully so that he wouldn't cough. He had to concentrate.

The trees and terrain were not so different from the wilderness that surrounded the family vacation cabin just near Barrow, Alaska where he spent his summers skiing. The connecting roads to the cabin from either direction were closed from early December until the snow and ice were cleared in the spring, so his father shuttled the family back and forth to the slopes in his personal helicopter. His father, Jack Connor, had been a successful defense attorney before he retired to his small farm in East Alaska. If the notion is true that an attractive lawyer has a better chance with a jury, then Jack Connor was solid gold.

He was second generation Japanese and uncharacteristically tall at six feet and an inch, with a strong square jaw and dark brown eyes. Finn and his three identical triplet brothers also had Asian features, but their skin color was very pale, paler than their mother who was of Irish ancestry. The brothers also had striking bright green eyes that, due to the contrast with their skin, caused people to stare.

In high school, their biology teacher was impressed enough that he had done research and told them how unlikely the color was, but that repressive genes had created odder creatures. Their father, Jack, had passed on his height, plus an extra inch to his seventeen-year-old sons that allowed two of the brothers, Finn and Doug, to claim to be twenty-two in order to meet the age requirements to be Navy pilots. Graduating college three years early met the other one.

Finn's memories of childhood were extinguished though when two large caliber rounds thudded into a hardy evergreen nearby, shredding the bark. The smell of fresh pine and crisp clean snow reached out and comforted him in an eerie way. Another volley of gunfire swished into the snow only two feet from him, bringing him back to the reality that he was probably about to die.

"Damned environmentalists. They are deforesting to encourage global warming," he thought.

"Funny," Daisy said.

With his back pressed to stone, he would occasionally lift the MP7 over his head and fire backwards just to remind them that he was still deadly. He only fired a grenade when there was a lull in the noise that might indicate they were moving up the mountain. After the grenades exploded, the small weapons fire resumed, but closer. He was right that they were moving up the mountainside.

Finn's throat tightened as he heard a sharp snap on his Kevlar helmet and felt a slice in his scalp, though the nerve endings had been deadened there.

"Daisy, system check," he said, hoping the bullet hadn't penetrated the gel layer that connected his cortex mapper with the millions of neurons in his brain.

"Systems check good. The bullet only grazed your scalp. You will see blood pouring down your face now, but it is only from your capillaries and it will stop soon."

Finn felt the blood before he saw it on the front of his flight suit.

"The neural gel cap is undamaged," she said, *"scalp capillaries bleed profusely, but only for a short time."*

"Thank God," he thought, wiping blood from his forehead before it could get into his eyes.

Daisy was developed in strict secrecy in order to provide a mediation stage between cloud and brain, which filtered, interpreted, and prepackaged all neural inputs. The brain could not deal with so vast a flow of inputs, so Daisy's mediation stage edited out the unimportant bits. It was a triumph of design. When the mapper's neural gel-pack was installed over his skull, he

was only under local anesthesia because he had to participate verbally during the surgery. Of course, he couldn't feel any of the robotic nano-connections to his brain cortex, but he was a volunteer prisoner with his head secured in a clamp on a bed for two weeks.

The sensitive nerves at the base of his ears had long since been removed – otherwise he would have been shrieking in pain day and night during the procedure. But he could still feel what was happening throughout the surgery, if not as pain then as a psychically disturbing knowledge that somebody was sliding edged instruments around in a very touchy part of his brain. He was allowed an acceptable four hours of sleep per day, but, otherwise, he had to be awake to communicate with the surgical team as they tinkered with changes in potentials, noted readings, talked to each other in the numbers that are the language of technologists. When they were finally satisfied with the field strength of his perceptual system and allowed him to stand, he almost toppled.

"So, you see," one engineer said as he described the mapper, "human beings perceive the world in predigested ways. The sensory inputs themselves edit and rearrange the information. So, what we are doing is simply giving you a little help in interpretation. On a modern battlefield, an unenhanced human brain can't handle all the information. It's a mass of gray jelly with a capacity-limiting structure and we can't keep pouring sensory information into it. The only place we have to work is at the interface before it hits the brain and that is your gel cap. A great benefit of it is permanent hair," the doctor said rolling his eyes upward to his own bald scalp.

Finn's days wore on as they phased in the mediation circuits, one by one, testing and adjusting them, and then his mapper, that he affectionately named Daisy, was tied into civilian and military databases with access to more information than any normal human could handle. Daisy required constant cloud updates to her cortex mapping technology and to fix bugs in real time.

Just then though, the Chinese were still firing, seemingly intent on disintegrating everything around him, and there was not much doubt that they would succeed. After the first ten minutes freezing on the mountainside though, it occurred to him that he was being watched by friendly eyes. It comforted him to finally realize that there were as many as three unmanned drones overhead sending infrared video images back to headquarters. These drones couldn't provide weapons support because unmanned drones had been outlawed by the UN in an emergency session that had been demanded by the United States. This happened the day after she was attacked by two hundred drones launched from over a hundred ships in international waters, just twelve miles off of the Eastern Seaboard. Each carried two laser-guided anti-personnel bombs that were dropped onto targets ranging from crowded high school football stadiums in Georgia, to children's summer camps in rural Pennsylvania.

These drones above him were sending high-quality video and infrared imagery to military intelligence. The heat of Finn's body would show up as a white dot against the black that represented the very cold background of snow – that is, until his body was dead. He could only hope the cameras had zoomed out enough for headquarters to see the swarm of Chinese white dots slowly creeping up the mountain towards him.

He imagined that someone as high up in the chain as Admiral Brad Biffle was directing the rescue mission, pacing around as he squeezed his rubber ball to release nervous energy. At fifty, Finn thought Biffle was the very image of a warrior, though his time on the front line was probably a distant memory. All of the admiral's experience was now too important to risk in combat, but they weren't going to leave a junior officer behind, even if he was mortally wounded and his white infrared dot faded to black.

"Intel reports rescue helicopter is inbound," Daisy said.

“Thank God.”

Twenty minutes later, the thuds of bullets hitting trees and the zings off of stone hadn't slowed when the ground began to quake and he heard what sounded like a monstrous avalanche. He was nearly overwhelmed because if the Chinese didn't kill him, a wall of snow and rock surely would.

In tight spots, Finn often considered the claim that man finds religion when he is faced with his own mortality, and, once again, he decided that he was better off not insulting God by claiming to be religious, just before crashing a heavenly party so unfashionably late.

He had almost resigned himself to death when he popped up to look upslope and saw that there was no avalanche at all. The noise was, in fact, coming from down the slope, where he saw huge mounds of exploding snow and trees being split apart and men being ripped to shreds. And he heard screams.

This wasn't nature – this was an awesome display of military might.

He did not hear or see an aircraft overhead, but he knew there was an AC-135 Freddy gunship flying in a lazy circle nearly three miles above. He chanced another look around the boulder to watch the terrain exploding just seventy meters away, with over 4,000 high-explosive rounds per minute chewing up earth and humanity, and the occasional crater being formed by a Howitzer cannon. He could only curl up tightly behind the boulder and hope.

Ten minutes later, he heard another aircraft approaching, and he quickly recognized the familiar Army CH-74 Chinook II. He was already snapping his fingers when he realized the rescue workhorse's two huge synchronized propellers were thumping towards him.

He pulled the VHF radio from his vest and found the pilot on the common guard frequency. He directed the chopper to a shelf he had spotted earlier from the parachute that

was large enough and flat enough for the pilot to touch down long enough for him to climb aboard. He was nearly giddy with excitement, but he still faced the challenge of making it up the slope to his rescuers. Finn could see the door gunner's grin as the helicopter hovered.

When the gunner waved palm down, Finn knew to press his body and face into the snow as the gunner fired over him and down the slope to give the enemy something to think about before Finn began his sprint. The gunner fired his automatic .50 caliber machine gun for two five second bursts and then waved Finn up. Adrenaline flooded his body and he started up the hill, pumping his legs in and out of the thigh-deep snow as hard as he could. He was going to make it.

The chopper was in a steady hover and the gunner was still smiling when the sounds of machine gun fire from the ridges above erupted from several directions, ripping into the chopper. He could see the pilot was trying desperately to throttle up and pitch the nose down, but a rocket-propelled grenade burst in the port side, tearing through the fuselage. More enemy machine-gun fire followed the RPG, ripping into the interior and the brave men who were sent to rescue him. Finn watched the aircraft shudder violently and drop, landing hard enough to shake the rock under his knees. He dove for cover as a huge rotor blade cleaved through the sky only feet above his head. He heard the other giant rotor blades shatter and dig into rock, causing the aircraft to shake itself apart. His stomach turned when he heard the groan of the chopper's steel structure give way under stress.

He wanted to help those who had been sent to rescue him, but he knew he wouldn't make it very far. Any enemy survivors would relish the opportunity to cut him down as soon as he rose from behind the boulder and he would be of no help to anyone if he was dead. He felt defeated and worthless as he knew that some of the men were probably still alive and in terrible pain, and it was his fault.

It seemed an eternity before he heard the familiar whine of A-10 Thunderbolt II attack jets heading his way. There was no mistaking the sound of the aircraft that had been taken in and out of service over the years, but kept battle ready because every time Congress and the Air Force argued for the Thunderbolt to be decommissioned, the Army and Marine Corps won the stare down. They had engines that whined like enormous Hoover vacuums and some thought they were ugly. At that moment though, it was the most beautiful aircraft Finn had ever seen. Even its pilots lovingly called them the Warthog, but, pretty or not, no other aircraft provided close air support like the Thunderbolt. It was highly maneuverable because its jet engines were mounted on the fuselage just behind the wings and forward of the horizontal stabilizers, thus allowing an incredibly tight turning radius.

After an expert pass over and around the area to familiarize themselves with the terrain and enemy positions, they jets their attack run. Finn watched the rock eye cluster bombs tumble through the air, opening like clam shells at 300 feet, scattering each weapon's 247 devastating anti-personnel bomblets over their human targets.

After one more pass to drop their remaining bombs, the Thunderbolts climbed to two thousand feet so that a flight of three F-53 Corsair fighter-bombers could descend. Finn could see the aircraft, but they were too low and far away to attack the enemy troops. He watched bombs fall from the aircraft directly over the village.

"What the hell? They destroyed the village!"

"Perhaps the aircraft got the same mission upload as ours," Daisy suggested.

"Three aircraft getting the same conflicting flight instructions? Impossible."

"Logically, it's not impossible," Daisy said.

"Conspiracy?"

"There is no other logical scenario," Daisy said.

"But why? It's a dilapidated village. Intel says it's abandoned."

"I'm only doing math."

He watched as the Corsairs made a tight turn to pass over his Chinese antagonizers. One hundred meters below, he watched each aircraft drop four 500-pound bombs and the shock wave puffed his cheeks and shook snow from every tree within a quarter of a mile. They lit up the side of the mountain below him with a brilliance that he had never imagined, as bright as the sun, and he closed his eyes tight until the pink of his eyelids darkened. He opened them to see a thick blanket of smoke before him and it was as if he could walk across the valley on its thick weave. The Corsairs didn't drop mere bombs – they were white phosphorous bombs. He felt truly sorry for any man who didn't die instantly. He knew instinctively to use the smoke to provide a screen for his escape up the mountain.

Finn left the protection of the boulders and resumed his sprint. With heavily muscled legs on a tall frame, he wasn't built for long-distance running. The dash lasted no more than eighty meters when his thighs burned and he could go no further. He dropped to his knees behind another boulder and almost relaxed until he realized that his ass was hanging out on the other side.

He heard gunfire above him. He was caught in the cross fire. He would never survive in this position. Weary and with a heavy heart, he pressed himself down into the snow and waited for the inevitable, listening to the cacophony that surrounded him. Below, he heard men crying out and screaming in agony and it occurred to him that none of the gunfire upslope was directed at him. He carefully craned his neck back and up to see Rangers, survivors of the crash, expertly moving down towards him. They shouted directions for Finn's every movement and, when they met up, they turned to return up the hill, leapfrogging from boulder to boulder. It was

an enormous effort physically and mentally in the thin oxygen-deprived air and under heavy automatic weapon fire and facing rocket propelled grenades. They climbed the steep slope, most of it covered in over three feet of snow, weighed down by their weapons, body armor and equipment.

As they neared the destroyed chopper where they intended to take cover, Finn heard another approaching helicopter. The newly-arrived Corsairs continued to destroy the lower five hundred meters of the mountain, while the Warthogs strafed the ridge where the first chopper fell. The new chopper made a careful approach, with the door gunners finding their targets expertly. The aerial devastation caused enough damage and confusion to the enemy for the Chinook to drop from the sky to lift Finn, the survivors, and the brave men who had died from the frozen shooting gallery.

* * *

Finn's brother, Doug, also his squadron mate, had been in the operations tent watching the infrared and listening to the radio traffic from the moment he got news that Finn had gone down. He had been scheduled for an afternoon mission, but the flight had been postponed and all attention was directed at the recovery of his brother. He was at the helicopter pad when the Chinook set down. He hugged Finn tight as soon as he jumped from the chopper onto the tarmac.

"Man, am I glad to see you, brother." They knocked fists, their Academy class rings together as was custom. "I was worried sick!" Doug shouted over the noise of the helicopter's engines and rotor downforce.

“Jesus Christ, Doug!” Finn yelled. “Something strange is going on. The aircraft took control from me.”

“Took control? What do you mean?”

“I mean just what I said. I commanded manual and it refused, it said access denied. Daisy fired us out just seconds before the Corsair got an intake full of rock. It slammed into a mountain right after I ejected.”

Doug was quiet and Finn knew he was likely thinking of all the possibilities that Daisy had considered.

“You know that small village in the valley?” Finn said.

“The abandoned one?”

“There’s only one village. And I don’t think it is abandoned.”

“Did you see people?” Doug asked.

“No, but when the aircraft took control, it began a dive over the village and tried to open the bomb bay.”

“Tried?”

“Yeah. I pulled the master arm circuit breaker.”

“Damn. Good thinking.”

“Lucky thinking. I think there are people in that village and the flight data upload was compromised before takeoff.”

“That takes two people,” Doug said.

“Yeah, but it’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“So, do you think the admiral is in the China drug trade too?”

“Who? Admiral Biffle?” Finn forced an ironic smile. “Brother of mine, you need to get off that Afghani drug lord thing. It’s just a rumor. How would the guy have time for a second job?” Finn laughed. “I heard a preliminary investigation found him innocent.”

“No, they found ‘no proof’. Big difference,” Doug said, “he would be careful about everything. He was an aide for Vice President Clinton,” Doug said, raising his eyebrows meaningfully as if that explained everything.

Finn heard all this before. “I don’t know, Doug. What I want to know right now is who ordered that village destroyed and who authorized White Phosphorus bombs.”

“Willy Pete” Doug whispered the nickname for White Phosphorus bombs. “Holy Jesus. Willy Pete.” Doug repeated quietly to himself looking into the distance.

“Yep, nearly blinded me. They torched the whole mountain side.”

“Willy Pete! Damn. What a way to die. That’s gotta be the worst.”

“The very worst. And I’m going to find out who, what, whither, and when, and I’m going over to ops and find out right now.”

Finn turned and stalked across the compound towards the operations tent. He knew this camp had just been set up, so he was surprised that the slit trenches were already stinking, but, after many years using them himself, he preferred the natural way, instead of the sweet-sick chemical smell of a porto-potty. He also noticed that they had moved a lot of boulders to the perimeter and replaced them with gravel. He marveled briefly that the Navy Construction Battalion SeaBees had gotten such a lot done in the few hours they had been here.

* * *

Finn stopped outside the Operations tent.

“Are you recording, Daisy?”

“I’m always recording, yes.”

Finn walked into the Ops tent and got right to the point, shouting, “Who ordered the attack on the village?”

“Hey. Whoa! What’s your problem lieutenant?” a colonel shouted back, crossing the room quickly.

Finn didn’t know that a full bird colonel was in the operations tent, but he quickly decided he didn’t care. “Sir, I was given an aircraft that was either incompetent or tampered with. Then I watched two Corsairs drop bombs directly on top of the village that my aircraft attempted to bomb and then the same aircraft dropped white phosphorous on the enemy. I’m happy to be alive, but Willy Pete? And how about the Rangers? The pilot was sent into a lead storm without any warning about the enemy concentration on the adjacent ridge lines. If there were enemies at the bottom of the mountain, why didn’t it occur to anyone that there would also be enemies on the adjacent ridges? It’s as if we are floundering around, learning as we go.”

“That was a mouthful, Connor, and a hell of a professional way to introduce yourself. I’m Bill Fields. Now, let’s start over.”

Finn ignored him and crossed the small room. “Right here.” Finn put his finger on a small-scale topography chart tacked to the wall that used squiggly lines to delineate altitude at 500 feet elevation intervals, giving a two-dimensional picture of the mountain terrain. “Here. Right here. See that? That is a damned village and it’s probably populated, in my opinion.”

“It’s not populated, lieutenant. Abandoned as soon as the druggies moved in and remember the druggies make money for the bad guys. Furthermore, the rescue was planned with joint intel and I think it’s fair to assume that they have thought farther ahead than a green lieutenant.”

That was the response he thought he would get after thinking about it on the long helicopter trip to the forward operating base. But he needed Daisy to record the colonel saying out loud that those Corsairs dropped napalm on an inhabited village. That this self-important jerk might take offense was the least of his concerns.

“Yes, lives were saved on our side, and I really appreciate that, colonel,” Finn mocked. “But if this village is populated, the rescue will mean nothing.”

“Tell me, lieutenant, is this your first operation that hasn’t gone off without a hitch? The first operation that hasn’t been perfectly executed?”

“No, sir, I’ve had the pleasure to see major mistakes on many occasions, many caused by my own dumb ass. But this is the first time I’ve seen such a gross mishandling of sophisticated technologies and advanced intelligence.”

“That’s enough, Finn,” a major interjected.

“No, let him speak,” the colonel waved him off. “This is interesting. A first-tour pilot with a critique of Joint Operations.”

“Colonel,” Finn softened his voice, “do you need a critique at this point? What about those MK-77 bombs that were spewed over the side of that mountain?” Finn saw recognition in the colonel’s face. “You ordered those birds to drop napalm fire bombs when you knew the targets were human.”

“Lieutenant, napalm is a note in history – this is not Vietnam.”

“The MK-77 was a slight chemical change, just to get rid of the ugly name, like clean underwear on a dirty ass,” Finn hissed. “That weapon is unguided and tumbles through the air until it slams into the earth, spewing sticky flames over everything, but this new monster is nearly impossible to put out.”

“That’s enough,” the colonel said through clenched teeth, remembering that they were in a room full of junior enlisted women and men. He moved closer and let his shoulders drop. “Look, Finn, I’m frustrated too. I’m not going to say I know how you feel. I wasn’t on that mountainside with little hope of rescue, but I want you to know that the white phosphorus succeeded and it was dropped on orders from those far above me. The MK-77s provided a smoke screen for you and your rescuers to make their climb to the Chinook.”

Finn wasn’t buying it. He knew the weapon would surely provide a hell of a smoke screen, but that was a side effect. The colonel was just covering his ass. “What about the village?” Finn asked loud enough for every man in the tent to hear. “If intelligence missed a full company of the enemy on that mountainside, then how can we know for sure that the village at the foot of the mountain was uninhabited?”

The room went silent and the colonel flushed red. “Lieutenant, that village was cleared in the beginning stages of this operation and has been cleared regularly since.” The colonel’s voice wasn’t sure or confident. There wasn’t a single person in that tent then who was certain that innocent people weren’t killed.

Finn glared at the colonel and turned his head partway, not taking his eyes off of his senior officer. “Sergeant, please connect me with the ship. I want to speak to the admiral’s chief of staff.”

“Sir, the carrier is in darken ship. No lights, no spectral emissions.”

“That’s alright, they’ll patch me through. Tell them it’s Finn Connor, the guy who almost

died on the first sortie.” Finn turned his gaze to the Ops Officer who knew he had just been outranked.

Finn put the transceiver to his ear and waited a long time for the switchboard to pass his name around. The enlisted man came on the line, “Sir, I’m transferring you to Admiral Biffle. He wants to take the call himself.”

Finn lost a bit of courage when he heard that name. Admiral Biffle was a combined Commander of the 8th Fleet and the Carrier Battle Group Commander. Biffle was once his mentor, a man he had once trusted completely, but now suspected, not as much as his brother did, but still.

“Finn! Biffle here. How the hell are you, boy? That was a close one. Seems we got you out of there just in time.”

“Hello, sir. I’m sorry to bother you. I didn’t want my call to be transferred to your level. I just wanted to talk to Captain Davis before talking to the aviation element.” Finn was awed by the man at the other end of the phone who had been a part of his life and training from his early teenage years.

“Hell, I am the aviation element, I’m every damned element. What can I do for you, son? What’s this all about?”

“Well, sir. Some of our Corsairs were tasked to lay down a line of bombs on a village and MK-77’s on enemy troops. I thought it was important enough to be discussed at flag level.”

“Can you give me GPS coordinates, so that I can see the picture?” the admiral asked.

“Yes, sir.” Finn went to face a three-dimensional holograph and waved at it until he saw the village. He pointed at it. “Position in latitude and longitude.”

“Two eight decimal two five two north. Nine seven decimal three three east,” the console

answered.

Finn scribbled it down and walked back to the radio. The operator handed him a sat-phone instead. "It's Admiral Biffle, sir."

Finn crinkled his brow and took the call.

"Lieutenant, who do you think you are, you arrogant prick?" The connection was bad and the admiral's tone had changed from concern to fury. Finn looked over at the comm console and saw the transceiver connection was still active, on hold.

"Sir?"

"Listen to me, you little shit. Here's what I had to work with – I had a kid I love like a son, and I had a chopper full off Army Rangers, the very best men our country has ever produced, pinned down." He paused for a moment. "And you – you have the nerve to question the rescue mission," the admiral spoke quietly, but with venom.

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't think –"

"I don't give a damn what you thought. To paraphrase one of the idiots that put a great nation on the path to ruin, 'It takes a village'. It takes a hell of a lot of connected and cooperating villages in the shape of ships, aviation wings and battalions of infantry to fight a war and I'll go to any length to protect my men, and you are one of my men. You have just gone way above your pay grade and you had better limit yourself to operations, lieutenant, or I'll take a different angle of interest in your future!" The line went dead.

Finn was mortified. He absently handed the sat-phone to the sergeant.

"Sir, Admiral Biffle is on this line again," the sergeant held out the transceiver that was on hold during the satellite conversation. It was immediately clear to Finn that there would be no record of Admiral Biffle's stronger words and disregard for innocent lives.

“Hello, Finn,” the admiral’s voice was very kind on this official line, a stark contrast. “I see the position on our display. Our J2 Intelligence commander confirmed that the village was a front for heroin trade – it’s been uninhabited for quite some time and is said to be booby-trapped.” His voice became stern and menacing. “Let me know if I can help anymore, Finn. You can call me anytime.” The line went dead.

Finn stood stock still with the receiver still pressed to his ear. He had never told the admiral the village latitude and longitude. Biffle had somehow known.

“The drug Lord just hung up on me, Daisy.”

“I heard, and everyone in the room heard. You just said that out loud,” she said.

“Oh, God,” he thought. “To hell with it!” he yelled at the room.

The colonel look worried as Finn left the tent without apologizing.

Chapter Two

After reporting to the Officer of the Deck at the top of the gangway and identifying himself as Dr. Timothy Jamison, the doctor was escorted through the maze of the huge aircraft carrier. It was his first time on a Navy ship. He might have seen the interior of an aircraft carrier in the movies, but he didn't remember. The ceilings and walls – overheads and bulkheads they called them – were thick steel that reverberated with every sound. Every surface was spotless and as sterile as a hospital, but with a distinctive scent of Brasso and the military's own brand of floor wax that smelled as if it had been mixed with anti-freeze. Ozone hung heavy in the air, a byproduct of the hot electric wires that were bundled together with metal bands and sagged from the overheads like enormous anacondas with multi-colored stripes. He was told there were nearly a thousand miles of wires and cables on an aircraft carrier.

He approached the two Marines guarding the state room door and introduced himself. While one Marine watched him carefully, the other extended his arm and Jamison pressed his index finger on the arm display.

"You're early, sir."

"Yes, but the admiral will want to see me right away."

The Marine looked at his arm display again. He confirmed the information with a nod, made a right-face turn and knocked hard, twice.

"Enter," a stern voice called out.

The second Marine entered the state room to announce the visitor. He returned and invited him in with a respectful sweep of his arm. "Sir."

"Thank you."

The doctor walked across the outer office into the living area. He heard the admiral in the lavatory, so he looked around quietly. He wasn't surprised that there were no personal effects. The admiral had changed state rooms during the night in case there was any suspicion ... and in case his stateroom was bugged. Jamison imagined there were other pairs of guards positioned in front of the other empty state rooms. Even on an aircraft carrier at sea, there were ways.

"Hello there, doc, good to see you again." The admiral shook his hand and stretched with a luxurious yawn. Then, with his head tilted down, he looked up at Jamison and smiled as if bashful. "Did we make some money?"

"Yes, I'm happy to report that the Corsair landed safely, though it took a little shrapnel when the ground charges went off, but it was only cosmetic. The explosion was recorded on your flight data recorder and Connor's cortex mapper with all the conversation – all very convincing, by the way."

"And what did we get?"

"Exactly what was agreed upon. The funds have been transferred to the Singapore investment house and bounced around the globe, so they are untraceable. And I had a contact at the Naval Aviation Medical Institute make an off-site diagnosis that Connor suffers from severe PTSD and is not safe in the air, perhaps even suicidal." He laughed.

"You think that's funny? Have you ever been in danger, doctor? Hell, he probably is traumatized. Get him to a psychiatrist by the end of the day or you'll have real PTSD when I'm done with you," Biffle said and let it sink in as he walked to his wardrobe. "Listen, Jamison, I'm glad to get him out of my hair, but I swore to take care of the little bastard. Get him whatever he needs and find a way to make sure he has enough money to start out in his next career. Show him an official-looking document that shows a huge increase in combat pay or something, but

make sure it's plenty, and that he believes it's on the up and up."

* * *

Colonel Fields had been thinking over how to handle Connor's announcement to his entire operations staff that Admiral Biffle was a drug lord. He took a night to think over the situation before calling Biffle. It wasn't enough to tell the admiral what Connor had said in front of a packed tent – he had to offer a suggestion, so he had thought it over carefully before calling the admiral.

"This is Colonel Fields, sir. Operations have been successful for the most part." The phrase, 'for the most part' was code for the admiral to switch to secure mode. Biffle had been elated all day and now he groaned. "Roger, switching to secure."

"Go."

"Admiral, we've got a problem."

"No shit. So, what's the problem?"

"Sir, it's about Connor."

"Yeah, well, he's off the flight schedule. He's grounded indefinitely and we're working on processing his discharge. Military Personnel Command has it on the fast track."

"Sir, he said something that the entire staff heard and I thought it was important enough to tell you."

"Yeah?"

"He called you a drug lord in hearing range of twenty operators, and after checking on

his recent activity, I found that his brother is an even bigger problem.”

“Doug,” the admiral whispered absently, then he said to Fields, “His brother has been on my ass since we met.”

“And it’s not only about the China heroin operation – he’s even insinuating about our Afghanistan one too. He described his suspicion to a ready room full of pilots, saying that the village was a heroin cache. In fact, his words have infected the entire air wing, as far as I can tell.”

“As far as you can tell? Don’t tell me you’ve been discussing this with other pilots? Hell, that just makes it more suspicious.”

“No, sir, I didn’t speak to anyone. This comes directly from the ship’s AI. When I plugged in and searched for terms, such as your name and phrases like ‘drug trade,’ there are too many hits for comfort. It all traces back to the brother. He’s doing damage, no question about it.”

“Damn! Why the hell didn’t you tell me this yesterday? Look, get back to Washington and erase everything about it from your AI. I’ll take care of Doug.”

“Sir, I didn’t want to call you with a problem without offering a solution.”

“Jesus Christ. Alright, what’s your solution?”

“Put him in the air and cause another ejection, but this time we’ll have airborne witnesses to see the aircraft land and be towed away by the Chinese. We’ll sell another Corsair and the project gets another two billion dollars, and there will be official video showing –“

“Showing Doug Justice on film, essentially delivering a Corsair to the Chinese,” Biffle said. He was silent for a moment and then he said, “But that will implicate Finn. It will look like two brothers gave the enemy two Corsairs. I don’t like it, Tim.”

"I understand, sir, but this way, everything the both of them have said about the Afghan and Chinese drug projects will be forgotten as the ramblings of traitors. It will neutralize anything both brothers have said."

"Listen, Fields, we'll do this, but if he refuses to eject—"

"Sir, he can't refuse, his mapper—"

"Right. His mapper will eject him. Look, Fields, their father was a friend of mine, the best pilot I've ever known. I don't want them hurt. I promised him that if they decided to fly that I would protect them."

"His father? So he knows he's a clone?"

"Damn it, Fields, you signed a nondisclosure agreement," the admiral hissed into the phone.

"But this is a secure connection," Fields whined. He was afraid. It was in his voice. He knew what could happen if he failed Admiral Biffle.

"Are you telling me that you've discussed this before even on secure communications? Don't you understand after all these years that we barely stay ahead of cryptologists who break our codes as fast as we can change them? Please tell me you haven't discussed this with anyone else in the program." Biffle knew he hadn't. Everyone in the program was monitored very closely.

"No, sir, I swear, I've nev —"

"Shut up, Fields. You've been in the program too long to not understand the situation. He doesn't know what, I mean, who he is, none of them do. I don't want you to see him again. Keep your trap closed, God damn it."

* * *

“Doug, you’re on the flight schedule,” Finn announced, rushing into the state room without knocking.

“No, I’m med down. The ‘flu,” Doug said from beneath his sheets.

“You’re supposed to be walking in thirty,” Finn said with sudden fear. “Dude, you can’t be late for mission briefs. Damn it! I’ll call the duty officer to get Strike Ops to find you a replacement.’

Finn called the ready room, and, after a quick exchange, he slammed the phone down. “Idiot flight surgeon is out of his mind letting you fly. He could lose his wings for this shit.”

“Seriously? He’s waiving the ‘flu,” Doug said, shaking his head as he looked down.

“Finn, I’m worried.”

“About what?”

“I went down to medical just two hours ago and the flight surgeon gave me an antihistamine right there on the spot. Rules say I can’t fly for twel – ”

“Twelve hours after the last dose.” Finn finished, then thought it over quickly. “Well, maybe after what happened with me yesterday, and with you and me being brothers, maybe they just want to get you back in the saddle right away.”

“Hell, I understand getting up and dusting yourself off, but this ain’t exactly a horse I’m hopping on. I’m strapping on an eight-billion-dollar flying brick.’

“Don’t be a baby. You really think you’re not safe for flying?” He immediately felt bad for

calling his seventeen year-old brother that.

“Hell, that ain’t what I mean,” Doug said. “It just seems to me that, since you almost died yesterday, they might want to have a squadron safety stand down, you know, at least a day, so everyone can shake it off.”

Finn didn’t say anything.

Doug looked at his boots. “Maybe you’re right ... they’re right. I suppose I need to strap it on.”

“Hold up, I’ll walk up to the flight deck with you.”

After the brief and Doug had suited up in his G-suit and inspected his helmet, carbon dioxide transfer and recharge kit, they made their last stop at the squadron maintenance control where Doug reviewed the recent maintenance and signed the aircraft maintenance log for aircraft 201. He had a sudden compulsion to look around at the senior enlisted men in Maintenance Control, the very best in Naval Aviation maintenance. Each of them were overfed and unkempt, but they were the men who made the well-oiled machine that was a Navy fighter squadron work.

After making their way through the carrier’s labyrinth, they finally poked their heads up in the strong gusts caused pointing the carrier into the wind. The Officer of the Deck high above the flight deck on the ship’s bridge made sure there were at least twenty five knots of head wind split between the bow and waist catapults.

They climbed out of the catwalk and over the thick external aircraft power cables and fuel hoses onto the noisy flight deck. The carrier was a cacophony of helicopter propellers and eighty jet engines whining. Eight at a time were taxiing on the small postage stamp version of an airport, with four aircraft on the catapults at once, two in full afterburn.

In all this action, Finn saw the two white-jerseyed troubleshooters on Elevator One leaning on a weapons pylon under the wing of a Corsair. It wasn't natural to see flight deck personnel acting so casually during flight ops. One of them touched his cranial helmet with a half-assed salute. Finn returned their salutes properly and the men straightened and gave real salutes – message received. Then he saw Admiral Biffle leaning with a hand on the side of the avionics bay of Aircraft 201.

When the brothers reached him, the admiral leaned in and yelled into the side of Doug's helmet, "Think you are okay to fly, Doug?"

Doug couldn't help being proud that the battle group commander was there to see him off. He knew the other pilots were watching.

"Yes, sir. Always ready to fly!" he shouted back.

"That's good, really good! This has been a rough time for all of the air wing and I wanted to see you off for myself." He slapped the side of the aircraft. "Be careful, son!" he yelled over the screaming jet engines and electromagnetic catapults slamming into the water breaks at the end of the run.

The admiral tipped his chin to Finn and the knocked their Military Academy class rings together.

"Finn," Daisy said immediately.

"In a minute, Dais"

The admiral guided him by his arm into Flight Deck Control, out of the thunderous noise of the flight deck. They stayed around long enough to watch Doug taxi, following the flight directors hand signals and carefully positioning the aircraft so that the nose gear straddled the catapult. When the nose gear was locked into the shuttle, the jet blast deflector was raised to

redirect the afterburner exhaust up and away from men and machinery that stood aft of the catapult.

When the gross weight of the aircraft was entered into the ship's AI, the magnitude of the launch stroke was calculated and a green light told the Shooter that the system was ready for launch. The Shooter gave Doug a salute and Doug returned it. The Shooter watched the bow carefully and, when the swell of the sea made the bow rise, only then did he lean and kneel forward to touch the thick, gritty non-skid surface of the flight deck to signal the firing of the catapult. The aircraft was jerked to 170 miles per hour in two seconds. Three seconds after the first thud jerked the fighter forward, there was another thud when the shuttle hit the air brake as the fighter was slung off the bow. Doug immediately pulled up into a ninety degree vertical climb, showing off.

After the launch they knocked rings again and the admiral left Finn in Flight Deck Control.

"Finn, he knows."

"Knows what?"

"I'm not sure, but he knows about the problems with the Corsair AI."

"Yeah, well after losing a Corsair, I'm sure they are investigating every possibility."

"No, that's not what I mean."

"Daisy, Biffle is a confident man. He probably has a strong opinion on what caused our accident."

Daisy didn't argue.

"What made you say that out of the blue?"

"I don't know. I felt like I could read his mind when you shook hands at the aircraft and just before he left."

"We didn't shake hands, Daisy."

Daisy was silent.

* * *

Once on station, Doug was on a simple Combat Air Patrol flying just one hundred feet over the peak of Hkakabo Razi, once Burma's highest mountain. But now that Burma was under Chinese rule, Hkakabo Razi was now just a little brother to China's Mount Everest, sitting in an eastern subrange of the Greater Himalayan mountain system, near what was once the northern border of what was once India and Tibet. In the images, the mountain range looked mouse-colored and sinister, with only the peaks having a chill gleam. They were utterly majestic and remote, and their very namelessness had dignity. Those few thousand feet by which they fell short of the known giants might save them eternally from climbing expeditions too as they offered less temptation to an impatient adventurer.

"201, this is 302 over."

"Copy, 302."

"I'm on station. 1,000 feet above you at your 5 o'clock."

"Doug looked at the icon in his helmet that allowed rear view. He looked up."

"Roger, I have visual."

“Anything interesting, besides the view?”

“Nope, haven’t heard a peep out of Sentry.”

“Roger, maintain heading and climb. I’ll follow and descend,” the other pilot said, “It’s Filipino night in the aft galley.”

“Copy, have a good one.” Doug could feel his stomach grumble. Filipino night was the best.

Forty minutes later he was at 300 feet and 200 knots nearing the coastline. As he crossed the Vana Nava Hua water park, looking down for bikinis, his aircraft suddenly throttled up into afterburner without his command.

“Here we go,” he groaned, shaking his head, feeling the adrenaline kick in.

“Override systems. Switch to manual!” he shouted with little hope.

“Access denied,” the aircraft said.

“Of course, it is,” he said ironically. “Report most recent access to avionics.”

“No data available.”

“Of course, not.” He was afraid.

“Doug, the aircraft isn’t responding to me either. Something in the interpreter. It’s not the same as yesterday,” Lucy said.

“I suppose we both expected this, Lucy. If we don’t survive, I want to tell you it was a pleasure knowing you.”

“And you.”

His head suddenly hit the left side of the seat surround and the aircraft banked to the

right. He knew what was coming next and held his breath as the aircraft went into an accelerated stall. He wasn't surprised. He held his breath tightly and let it out in bursts, shouting the word 'HOOK', keeping his stomach muscles tense throughout the ordeal. The hook technique had been taught forever to help to keep blood in the brain so that pilots wouldn't black out due to oxygen deprivation. That manual technique supplemented the G-Suit that inflated and pressed the lower torso and legs to also limit blood from draining from the brain.

He tried to regain control by ordering a nose down to reduce the angle of attack in order to allow the wings to regain lift. The aircraft ignored that command and Doug's next command to apply maximum power to increase the airspeed. Lucy had been monitoring events and Doug's physical condition, and when it was clear that they wouldn't recover from the stall, that the aircraft would enter a dangerous spin condition that might not allow a successful escape, the mapper said, "Doug, it's too late for recovery." His legs were jerked to the bottom of the seat and the ejection seat rocket erupted. Doug lost consciousness when the positive G of the rocket combined with the positive G of the aircraft's attitude combined to make twelve times the force of gravity.

A Navy Nighthawk II helicopter was off the coast nearby and its crew were watching. Twenty cameras were filming as the fighter fell from the air like a slowly spinning brick. After the pilot ejected, they watched in amazement as the aircraft regained control on its own. The Corsair shut down its engines and then applied back pressure to the elevator and released it as part of a normal recovery. When it regained sufficient airspeed, it restarted its engines.

To the helicopter crew, it seemed to magically circle and glide to landing on the firm sand where gentle waves lapped at the steaming landing gear. When the helicopter approached, capturing 360 degree video that included the Corsair, they came under small arms fire. The pilot pushed the nose down and throttled to full when she heard the warning tones of surface to air missiles. The missiles never came and, when the missile warnings ceased, the

team returned to pluck an uninjured Doug Connor from the water.

* * *

Doug was shaken awake and immediately felt airsick. He hadn't felt airsick since basic flight training. He fell back on the bed, closed his eyes tight and rubbed his jaw, being surprised to feel a nearly full beard.

"How long have I been out? Who are you?" he asked without opening his eyes.

"Jamison. I'm Dr. Jamison. Just a couple of days. You were shot down on Wednesday. How do you feel?"

Doug focused on a point in space, concentrating. "Where is Lucy?"

"Is that the name of your cortex mapper?"

Doug nodded as he looked around the sick bay.

"You needn't worry. It – she will be back."

"Will be back? What does that mean? She is a part of me. Where did she go?"

"Not to worry. We knew you would be out for a while, so we took it off-line for some upgrades. She should be reinstalled tomorrow."

"Okay," Doug said, relieved. "Hey, doc, you're a squadron flight surgeon. Do you know anything about the flight? I'm pretty sure the avionics bay was tampered with just before I took off."

"I know they are trying to verify what you said, but please understand that you have been

saying a lot of strange things after you were picked up. The medics said you were rambling incoherently, something about drones.”

“Yeah, I suppose some of it was weird, but the aircraft wouldn’t respond to my commands and that actually made it an unmanned drone and I’m a vicious supporter of manned aircraft,” he said, standing up to his full height. “The damned aircraft wouldn’t respond to my commands, so logically and, literally, at that instant, it became an unmanned drone.”

The flight surgeon didn’t seem receptive or sympathetic.

“Listen, if I say someone tampered with the avionics, then damn it, there was tampering,” he said heatedly. “No offense, doc, but I’m tired. Please have Lucy returned to me unchanged.”

“Of course, as soon as it is ready.” Jamison was suddenly startled by Doug’s bright green eyes.

“When will she be ready?”

“Tomorrow,” he said. “You’ll be reunited tomorrow morning in time for your mission brief.”

* * *

Doug was up, preparing for the day. He felt an odd emptiness without Lucy and missed her fiercely. He was surprised to realize that he had somehow forgotten that she was just a software filter. No, she was a librarian, with real intelligence rather just than a simple program. But it didn’t matter yesterday, and it didn’t matter today. He and Lucy were close, a unit.

He looked up as Jamison walked in, uninvited, again.

“Good morning, lieutenant,” Doctor Jamison said, without so much as a passing courtesy knock.

“Hey, yeah, good morning, doc,” Doug said as he hustled around the room gathering his dogtag and checklists. “I’m sorry, but I’m leaving for a mission brief. Walk with me? We can talk along the way.”

“Lieutenant, there is no mission.”

“What? You said I would be flying today, with Lucy, by the way.”

“Listen, Doug, I don’t like to mislead people, but we needed to hold you here while we debriefed Lucy.”

“Debriefed?”

Jamison turned a chair backwards and sat with his arms on the backrest. “Lieutenant, there were some inconsistencies in your story about the loss of your aircraft, so we went through the filter’s memory.”

“So you are giving Lucy the black box treatment now,” Doug said, his face reddening.

“That is an excellent analogy, very apt,” Jamison said, then took a long dramatic moment to light a cigarette. “Listen, Connor, when I said before that you had been unconscious for a short time, I was lying. You were in an induced coma for a week. We analyzed your cerebral cortex mapping and observed some very interesting interactions you’ve had over the last few months. We even picked up subconscious information.”

“What?” Doug looked down, shaking his head, puzzled. “Look, I can’t recall anything out of the ordinary, except for weird dreams.” Doug was surprised by the sudden turn of the conversation. “What is this about?”

“This is about an eighth generation fighter-bomber, a seven billion dollar aircraft.”

Jamison leaned back and smiled. “You are a very nervous man right now and rightly so.”

“I’m not nervous at all. I’m outraged at the implication.”

Jamison leaned in and narrowed his eyes at Doug. “We recovered the data recorder and it shows an accelerated stall and excessive control.”

“But that’s just it, I didn’t have control,” Doug said.

“The data shows that you attempted a 12-g pull-up, causing a severe stall which resulted in a spin. The spin was exaggerated when you initiated recovery before the aircraft had enough flying speed to respond to controls, and – “

“You didn’t hear me. I didn’t have control. The aircraft ignored my inputs and my verbal commands.”

“Connor, stop. This has never happened before your brother’s identical incident yesterday, and now there is a second very similar occurrence a day later, which was confirmed by voice and data from both the aircraft and your cortex mapper. It was the first time in history and highly unlikely to happen twice, within hours of each other, but it did, with both of you, two brothers,” he said meaningfully.

“What the hell!” Doug shouted. “Listen to the voice recorder. I was literally begging the AI to return control. Hell, check Lucy. She was recording.”

“Unfortunately, the voice data was corrupted, but we did review your mapper and the conversation you claim was quite different from the conversation we heard. You ditched that aircraft on purpose. You were offered 400 million dollars two months ago, and you took it. I’m certain that we will find that your brother also ‘took it’.”

“That’s a bunch of bull. She would never, ever, say such a thing.”

“Perhaps you don’t understand what your Lucy is. The filter is part of a net that covers your cerebral cortex. It stores memory of every experience of your entire life. We saw you make the deal. This isn’t conjecture or a hypothetical. Science is far beyond that now. The human brain, the conscience, is constantly bombarded with electrical signals, and your synapses firing was like watching the Hiroshima blast on constant repeat. With that overstuffed brain of yours, it’s a wonder that you can even keep your head up.”

Doug knew Jamison was involved in some kind of set up, so he struggled for a question to trip him up with.

“Why don’t we go straight to my executioner?” Doug said. “That’s where this is leading, right? Treason equals firing squad. I’ll take my conscience and leave you my body to experiment with.”

“Ah, dualism, a Cartesian man,” Jamison said with a smile. “I suppose the mystical concept of a soul detached from the body is pretty comforting about right now. You think you can take your soul to Heaven and leave us with a good-looking corpse. Well, I’m sorry to inform you that we settled that argument centuries ago. There is no such animal spirit in the brain, though you have certainly proven that the greed instinct is alive and well.”

“You have no concrete proof, and I don’t have anything else to say to you.”

“Well, perhaps there won’t be a firing squad, but the report that is now on Admiral Biffle’s desk informs him that 400 million dollars was deposited in your name into a Lebanese bank account.”

“This is a set up and you know it. You’re in on it, aren’t you?”

The doctor was silent, unsmiling.

Chapter Three

Three months later, after being cleared of all charges, Finn and Doug were at their retirement ceremony at Naval Air Station, Anchorage, Alaska, on the flight deck of the decommissioned aircraft carrier, USS BARACK HUSSEIN OBAMA.

They decided not to discuss what had happened with their family. Their folks only knew that they were retiring after their service obligation was fulfilled. Finn had a wife who wouldn't, who couldn't, understand what happened. And their parents – they would be horrified. He couldn't bear having them know about the lies and the supposed cover up of something that had never happened.

There were exactly three people present at the ceremony who knew why Finn and Doug Connor had suddenly decided to retire from the Navy – the two brothers and Admiral Biffle who had just delivered a speech to an appreciative crowd.

Finn was proud to hear a true description of his actual achievements and military actions, and it was good to have the Air Medal pinned to his chest, but he was uncomfortable to accept the Meritorious Service medal that he hadn't earned. The entire ceremony was tainted with the knowledge that the admiral was giving a speech to their family and friends with full knowledge of the details of the awful embarrassment that ended with them here, feeling disgraced, for allegations which, even though they were untrue, hurt terribly. Even so, he smiled for his wife.

"Wow! Is that a smile?" Sarah said, elbowing him. "I hope you can keep it long enough for me to enjoy the entire day." She turned to face him and became serious. "I know how hard the decision was. You've been sad and I understand. But I'm also selfish and glad there's no more worrying about a visit from a Navy Chaplain with the news that my husband is dead." Her

voice broke as she started to cry. "Truly, Finn, I am so happy."

Finn choked up a little. He understood her relief and it reminded me how much she loved him. But, still, the fact was that he didn't decide to retire – someone else had forced him to. He and his brother were framed very thoroughly and, if it wasn't for Admiral Biffle's stepping in and influencing the process, he knew he would be in a brig awaiting trial now, and, with the tampered testimony from their mappers, they didn't stand a chance.

"I'm sorry, Finn. I have no memory of the ordeal," Daisy said.

"I know that, Daisy. You know I don't blame you. I just can't help thinking about it right now, that's all."

"Look at Admiral Biffle's arm candy," Sarah said, looking across the crowd at Biffle and a beautiful Asian woman. "Gorgeous," she said, "A little young for him though, I think. Oh, here he comes." Sarah sighed happily as the admiral and the woman made their way through the crowd.

"Great ceremony, Finn. Very well done. I've never seen better. How about you, Sarah?"

"I've never been to one, but it was very exciting. When Finn walked past those artillery shells, I knew it was over and he is mine now, not yours." She laughed.

"Has it hit you yet, Finn? That you're a civilian now," Biffle asked.

Finn's face was hot and he wasn't able to hide his embarrassment. He didn't do what they had claimed, but the admiral couldn't know that for sure. "Yes, sir, a civilian," he said shyly.

"Damn, your father would – Your father must be so proud."

The admiral looked at the third brother, Peter, for the first time in his life. He was surprised that there was another – the three of them standing together with their startling green eyes amazed him.

Pete stuck out his hand. "I'm Pete. It's nice to meet you."

"My pleasure. I'm glad you could make it. I wish your parents could have been here."

Pete pointed at a man with a camera. "They'll get to see."

"So they will. Well done."

Then the pretty Asian woman elbowed Biffle.

"I'm sorry, honey," he said. "This is Finn, his wife, Sarah, Doug and Pete. Everyone this is my wife, Lin Su."

She smiled bashfully.

"Where are you from, Lin?" Sarah asked.

"Lin's family is just across the water from Singapore," Biffle said quickly. Lin said nothing, but simply nodded her head.

"That would be Indonesia," Doug said.

"Yeah ... Indonesia," Biffle said evenly. The Indonesia across the Strait was not a place for anyone to be proud to call home.

"I see three Connor brothers. Are there more?" he asked.

"Triplets," Doug said. "Pete works on the farm with our father."

"I thought your father was an attorney," Biffle said, knowing their father wasn't their real father.

"He was an attorney," Doug emphasized the 'was'. "He bought the farm a few years ago."

Biffle nodded his head and smiled at the pun. After listening to the ensuing conversation

for a moment, he cleared his throat to get Finn's attention. "Finn, walk with me. I'm not likely to get a better chance, and there are things I want to talk to you about."

Finn squeezed Sarah's hand and left the group as they peppered Lin with questions about her home and her job as a financial advisor for a political organization in Indonesia.

When they were far enough away not to be heard, the admiral said, "Finn, I know this is rough for you and Doug. We've known each other for a very long time, and I know you'll believe me when I say that I trust you were framed somehow." He lifted his chin meaningfully. "I don't know why, but I'm fighting charges myself."

"Sir?" Finn feigned ignorance.

"Come on, Finn, you know my situation, you've heard, everyone's heard. But I want to talk about your last mission. I was wrong about that village, but not to the degree that would warrant any grudge. Those were drug runners down there and they happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"If one of your staff hadn't been caught up in that business, we would have never known."

"That's what I'm talking about. Someone has accused me of being in on it just because the traitor worked on my staff. Jesus! Me? In the drug trade? Can you imagine? Hell, I don't have time to even run a carrier battle group the way I had hoped." He shook his head. "Look, I don't know if it's the same people who framed you. I know you couldn't have done what they say you did, and you better damn well know that I didn't do what they are saying. But I promise you this, I'm going to find out what this is all about and clear both our names."

Finn couldn't help but believe his one-time mentor and he felt embarrassed that he ever doubted him.

Lin had been watching and she thought the conversation was heated, so she walked over quickly.

“Gentlemen, this is not the place. It isn’t appropriate.”

“What? Oh, yes. You’re right, of course.” The admiral put an arm around his wife’s waist and they walked back to the others.

Admiral Biffle shook Pete’s hand. “I’m sorry but we have to get to the airport. Lin is delivering her master’s thesis tomorrow morning, so we need to get to the airport. Finance!” he said proudly. “She’ll make me a millionaire before she gets her doctorate.” The Connors couldn’t know what an enormous underestimate that was. He offered his hand to Sarah. “It’s always nice to see you, Sarah. I hope you like having this guy at home. It’s our loss, and a big one.”

Lin said her quiet goodbyes and they left.

The family looked at Finn for an explanation of the exchange with the admiral.

Finn took a big breath and rolled his eyes. “I criticized his decision to bomb a small village at the bottom of that mountainside where I was pinned down. He knew the town was a cover for an organization that trafficked in heroin and he took it upon himself to destroy the village. I won’t argue that I’m not thankful, but I’m not sure it was noble.”

Doug’s face reddened. “Bull, Biffle was using Ranger volunteers to infiltrate the heroin trade,” Doug said, “and it became public when one of the men was killed. Central Command decided that it would be a bad idea to admit that there was a vigilante at the top of the food chain, so they made him out to be a hero.”

“That’s conjecture about past events and I disagree,” Finn said, looking at Sarah. “The heroin trade is certainly a matter of national security, but I don’t think for a moment that the admiral considered anything but mine and the Rangers’ safety when he ordered that air strike,

and the admiral's actions had a devastating effect on Chinese military funding. Alaska needs men like Admiral Biffle."

Doug's eyes flared. "Most Alaskans don't even know where we are and what we're doing," he sneered. "Celebrities and journalists decide what people should believe. A high school dropout actor in Fairbanks gets a lucky break, and, a couple of years later, he is invited to the UN to spout his opinions about global cooling as if we didn't finally recognize that big ass star overhead with historical cycles that has everything to do with the Earth's climate." Doug was trembling with anger, but Finn knew he was just venting. "We're going to lose Alaska, just like we lost America."

Doug took a deep breath, straightened and announced, "I'm moving to Singapore. I think I'll open a nightclub or something. They've got a pretty good music scene."

"Holy crap, that's it, isn't it? You still want to be a rock star." Finn chuckled.

"That's part of it, yeah," Doug laughed. "You'll visit, right?"

Finn smiled at him proudly. "Yes, we will visit, lots."

* * *

Finn and Sarah were on their way to his parent's home in the foothills of Denali after the retirement ceremony. Finn was still trying to come to terms with the loss of his seat in a combat aircraft, the only place he had ever felt like he belonged. He knew that he was lucky that he didn't die, and he was aware that he was blessed by the Lord, his creator, but the constant replaying of the events in his mind didn't compensate for that. He didn't exactly feel guilty, but it was damned uncomfortable.

"You know, Sarah, I'm not sure exactly what I'm going to do," he said.

"I know, sweetie," she said, scooting closer. "Don't worry about it. Take all the time you need. You can take forever as far as I'm concerned. I make plenty of money," she said cheerfully.

Finn was tapping the steering wheel in time with the windshield wipers when the phone's ring startled him from his thoughts. He fumbled around, trying to locate the handset.

"Watch the road," Sarah said. "It's raining too hard. The highway is covered with water."

Finn found the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi, son, where are you?"

"We're running a little late, Mom. We got into Palin International late, and now it's raining really bad. I think we might have to stop in Nenana. I can hardly see the hood of the car."

"I can't remember a storm hitting this hard, Finn," she said. "I just talked to Jack. He and the other boys are riding out now to round up the cattle to get them to high ground before the soil is saturated. I hope we didn't lose any already."

"I need to hang up, Mom, the weather is getting worse."

"Alright, alright, the creek might be busting its banks. Be careful, okay?"

"I promise. Bye, Mom." Finn closed his cell phone and peered out at the road. He unconsciously bit his lip. The rain was still coming hard, and the wind seemed to be picking up.

As they rounded a curve, he could see water streaming over the banks of the swollen creek below – just how deep it was he could only guess. Out of habit, he straightened in his seat to look out over the concrete highway toward the wooden bridge on the old road that the

interstate had replaced. It was the road he remembered as a child, except that the water had breached its sides and was carrying away ancient pieces of lumber. He hoped the bridge that held so many childhood memories would survive.

“FINN!”

Finn stiffened his arms and squeezed the steering wheel, feeling disoriented when the car began to do the opposite of what it should have been. The physics were all off. He quickly realized that the car was hydroplaning, that the tires were skimming over the pavement, no longer gripping the highway. He knew to take his foot off of the accelerator and keep the steering wheel straight, so that the tires would eventually regain traction. He was surprised at his calm. He knew how to do things by the book and surely this would work out fine. After all, this was a modern interstate highway that was wide enough for this to turn out okay. The interior was oddly quiet and he realized he suddenly couldn't hear the hum of the tires on the asphalt, and he watched as the horizon slowly spun before them. He wasn't terrified but, still, he held his breath while he waited for the tires to grab the road again. It seemed like they were spinning faster and, at this rate, it would be bad when the tires finally did grab the road.

He turned to look at his wife, who was already searching his face. She had scolded him, begged him to slow down, to be careful. Now they were twisting and turning down the highway. He looked over out of her window and saw the shoulder of the highway disappearing under the car. He tried to counter the spin by jerking the wheel over. He over-compensated, sending the car rolling over and down the embankment until they landed upright on the old bridge.

He was relieved to realize that they were upright, but Sarah was screaming. Her airbag had inflated and deflated quickly and he could not see if she was hurt. He was not afraid, and he wanted her to see that, and to know he would keep her safe.

“We're okay, Sarah. It will be just fine. If you're afraid, close your eyes.”

The engine was still running. Finn shifted to first gear and inched forward. He could feel the planks sink under the weight of the car. The rain was battering the windshield, and he could not see past the hood. The side window was not any better. Looking down, he could barely see the edge of the open bridge as it rose and fell with the force of the water surging beneath it.

On the other side of the car, Sarah sat tense and frightened. Gripping her knotted scarf like a rosary, she prayed out loud. "Dear God, get us home safely ..."

The car sputtered and died. Finn turned the key frantically, while pressing on the gas pedal. Nothing; it would not start. He pumped the pedal and tried again.

"We have to get out of here," Sarah cried, pulling her seat belt free. The sound of the bridge breaking apart muffled her next words.

A rush of freezing water lifted the car like a rubber raft and flipped it over into the creek. The impact shoved Finn against the steering wheel. He watched in horror as his wife was thrown upward, then forward. Sarah's head shattered the windshield, and she fell, slumped against the dashboard.

It was then that his confidence broke, and left him completely. He was looking at his unconscious wife and they were now underwater. His mind was reeling. As quick as an idea popped into his head, he ruled it out and replaced it with another, but he couldn't see any perfect course of action. He suddenly became entirely instinctual. His body was finally moving as fast as his mind and he had only one intention. He was going to get Sarah out of her seat and to the surface. They could survive the cold water for only a few minutes. He took a deep breath and reached over and pulled her back against her seat.

Releasing his own seat belt, he reached over Sarah and let the passenger window down. His own door was pinned by the force of the water, but he knew that it would open if he let his window down to allow the water inside to equalize the pressure on the door. He pushed

the window button, but it was jammed from the impact with the truck. He tried the door again, but it was still jammed tight. He became frantic when he thought of his unconscious wife next to him. He pushed himself up and away from the steering wheel and pressed Sarah through the passenger window and was swimming after her when a section of the bridge lumber was thrust through the window pinning him to the ceiling of the car.

Submerged up to his neck in frigid water, Finn was crying out for Sarah as he edged his way around the rotting wood and swam to the back seat. The force of the water nearly flattened him against the ceiling. With all the strength he could muster, Finn lunged for the door and missed. "Sarah," he cried, into the small air pocket behind her seat. Her name broke apart as a wave of water filled his mouth. Choking and coughing, he fought to regain his breath.

He braced himself against the opposite door and kicked hard, bursting the window. Battered as he was carried away by the raging current, Finn struggled to find Sarah in the muddy water. While he searched, he was tossed and whipped though the cresting water like a detached tilt-a-wheel. He saw one end of her yellow scarf flutter above the torrent in the distance. It hung momentarily in the wind, and then it fell wet and limp into the mist as the current took it around the bend.

He attacked the creek like a madman, his strokes digging faster than he had ever swum in the Navy. He saw the scarf again, to his left still further. He swam faster, but it seemed that he could never make up the distance. When it seemed he would die from the exertion, he was finally within reach. They had been in the water for over two minutes when he grabbed her scarf. He pulled it up and the other end fluttered in the wind.

"SARAH!" he screamed with an agony that he never knew could exist. Panic rose in his chest. He grabbed at a dark shape passing to his left. It was a dead cow.

He dug his fingers into its hide, and then moved his grip to its foreleg, pulling himself up

on his elbows to see over the debris that covered the water. He held tight to the cow's lifeless body as they were pushed down the heaving creek.

At another bend, the cow crashed into the bank with such force it spun into a strand of half-submerged trees and lodged between two trunks. He scrambled onto a log and looked downstream. He saw violent waters, but nothing that might be his wife. He pushed away from the log and began to swim with the current so that he knew he was farther downstream than his wife could have been carried. He searched from side to side as he swam and, finally, took up a position where the creek had narrowed. He waited, and he cried.

"Keep faith, Finn," Daisy said quietly.

Chapter Four

Admiral Biffle was comfortable in the passenger scramjet on the final approach to Narita International. Two years after the sale of the two Corsairs had added billions to the project that was already flush with cash from the Afghan and Chinese heroin trade. After a few bombing sorties that disappeared carefully selected family members, the Afghan, Columbian, Mexican Zeta and China lords demoted themselves to well-paid under-lord status, and their life expectancies improved. Junkies would die no matter who ended up with the money and, for Biffle, it was going to a good cause, freeing Alaska from the threat of being retaken back into the oppressive socialist monstrosity the United States had become.

Biffle had always been just as comfortable in a business suit as a military uniform. He was a warrior protecting nations, and a man with a plan for the survival of the fittest.

As the scramjet glided over the Chiba Prefecture on its final approach, he looked down on all the land that had long since been abandoned as the Japanese moved their elderly closer together in Tokyo. For generations, the Japanese had dutifully had their 1.3 children after the UN had warned the world of the global warming, then global cooling that would starve an overpopulated planet. Their excuse for the sudden reversal: "We are just trying to save the world." Biffle chuckled at the genius of using a global calamity to generate enormous wealth for a very few at the expense of billions, financial and mortal. Taking carbon based fuels from the Third World had killed millions – the exact number would never be told.

Japan had toed that line too well. Now there weren't enough young people to take care of the elderly. The population contracted to only a few cities when it had become too costly to maintain the infrastructure of the smaller outlying cities and towns. He looked at all the available land just above sea level and thought it was a shame that he would not be lobbying for this

excellent area for American businesses – he was here to lobby for higher ground. The Kanto plain would be submerged along with the rest of the world's low-lying areas within a few short years if all went according to plan.

But the immediate matter was to present a plan to the Japanese that was over two decades in the making. He had the spark of an idea over a decade earlier and so he had managed to get himself assigned as the Commander of the U.S. Forces Japan, now Alaska Forces, Japan. He had made Japanese contacts that were now paying off. In his many discussions with up and coming Japanese officials, he had hammered out a plan to present to the Japanese Diet, the Japanese version of the United States Congress of the early twenty-first century. The plan was to relocate the large companies remaining in America to Japan, companies whose creators were under assault by politician looters and their bought moochers.

As Biffle walked from the jet bridge into the gate area, he looked around for a sign with his name on it. He was surprised when he was recognized by a young Japanese woman who stepped forward and bowed. She offered her hand in the Western style.

"Biffle-san, welcome to Japan," she said. It was a practiced greeting. "Please follow me, we have a company helicopter to take us to Chiyoda."

He shook her hand respectfully and met her eye. She looked away quickly. Then he remembered. He had embarrassed her several years earlier after making an adolescent advance on her after late night drinks. He wasn't a big drinker, but he knew he had a high opinion of himself. She made sure he knew he had overestimated himself that night. He was tempted to apologize for not recognizing her immediately, but he decided to just let it go.

When they arrived at the hotel, she escorted him into the lobby and handed him a folder for the next day's events and told him that a driver would meet him in the lobby at 8 a.m.. Then she said goodnight with a fantastic smile that told him all was forgiven.

The next morning, when the Japanese Shūgiin leader, their equivalent of the United States Speaker of the House, bowed to him, Admiral Biffle stood. He delivered his statements in small lines as his cortex mapper translated his thought words into their language. He knew the Japanese were far beyond the UN in robotics and were making some progress in cloning technology, so his offer of advanced clone technology wouldn't be as shocking as the cloud-based cortex mapper that allowed him to speak in any tongue. Clones were human, this artificial intelligence was not.

The best of America worked out of a love of competition and personal achievement in order to build companies that were allowed only marginal profits after paying the highest taxes on earth, so that moochers could have that tax money handed to them in the hope that they could, in turn, use that money to essentially purchase a company's products for free. When this nonsense drove major industries to Alaska, the social engineers were somehow shocked. In the end, the social engineers gave it all away to make a once great nation a mere nation-state under the United Nations. But that was then, this was now. The social engineers would not survive the wilderness he had in store for their kind. He just needed more start-up funding.

"China will invade Japan soon and there will be nothing you can do to stop them," he announced.

There was a collective gasp in the room and it wasn't so much from surprise as it was that someone had said out loud the fear that no Japanese official would acknowledge publicly.

"First, I want to thank you for the invitation to speak to you today. You all know the purpose of my visit and I'm sure you will recognize that most of what I have to say about your current situation is very true." He paused for the translation. "Japanese leaders and your citizens are aware of your demographic challenges, but the citizens don't yet understand what this means for the numbers in the Japanese Self-Defense Forces. I assure you that the Chinese

do know, and they are waiting patiently for the time when you are so undermanned that they will take minimal casualties to their own military and finances when they claim any number of your islands.

“Your population numbers have declined and the proportion of people of working age versus the elderly continues to decrease. The birth rate is well below replacement level. Japanese people are aging fast, while life expectancy continues to rise. It is simply not sustainable and the implications for Japanese security and economic stability are severe.

“Yet you and your business leaders seem to prefer not to discuss it. Perhaps your business owners are too preoccupied with the day-to-day problems facing them, or worse, and I hope this isn't the case, they might think that the coming disaster can be left to their successors, that they will have time to come up with an answer.

“I know that steps are being taken, but they are totally inadequate. Even if a wholesale change in traditional attitudes could be engineered, there is no promise that anything you do in that regard would even increase the Japanese birth rate in time to achieve a stable population.

“Already the decline in your population numbers has affected your education system and, most important, your industries and commerce. With all respect, many in this room realize that it will soon be impossible to fund pensions for the elderly who have worked their entire lives for Japan, or to even find appropriate second careers for those who can still work, but cannot function in their current capacities.”

“Admiral,” a senior member of the Japanese Diet interrupted. “We think that a partial way of coping with the declining number of young workers is to increase imports of goods from countries where wages are low. Our balance of payments is likely to allow this for a very long time. We are also dealing with the shortage of labor by increased use of robots. This is already happening and will certainly lead to a phasing out of certain jobs, even though many so-called

experts think we are overly optimistic.”

The admiral fought the urge to shake his head. The man was stuck on finance when this was about an imminent threat of war with China.

“I think that Japan will only survive and prosper if it alters its strict immigration policy,” Biffle said, then holding up a hand before the predictable argument could begin. This was a touchy subject. Strict immigration had allowed the Japanese to maintain a peaceful and homogenous society.

“I realize that the argument against immigration is that it significantly alters your homogenous population, perhaps even your shared values and harmonious consensus. I realize this and I agree. We already see it with the immigrants who have turned Kabuki-cho into a crime-ridden district,” he said with a meaningful raise of his eyebrows.

“This argument has led to a picture of Japanese society framed in tinsel. Korean and Chinese minorities have been glossed over, as have regional cultures, like those in Okinawa and the Ryuku islands.” Biffle hoped that his mapper had translated correctly his strong argument. It was important that they know that he understood their problem as well as their social experts.

“The Japanese leadership must begin arguing publicly and loudly for a relaxation of Japan’s immigration policies as they are damaging your economic and national interests. Some nurses have been admitted from the Philippines, but your strict language tests are overwhelming and a deterrent for such necessary workers. As an isolated island nation, you can certainly pick and choose who you allow in, while nations with large borders, like the United States and Germany, have little choice in the matter.

“Fortunately for Japan, refugees from parts of the Middle East were too far away to knock down your doors and the Vietnamese refugees of the late twentieth century are unlikely

to come again. When China cut off all aid to North Korea, there was an opportunity until they were successfully democratized by their old families in the south, so now few Koreans see any advantage of crossing the sea to Japan. You have taken in very few refugees, many of whom share your values.”

“It is true,” another politician agreed. “Japan faces massive demographic problems that will not go away. It is dangerous and selfish to leave it to future generations to find solutions. If we stiffen our resolve, the leaders of this generation can face these challenges and tackle these issues with determination.” The man stood suddenly and bowed at the waist and spoke firmly, “For Japan, another immediate step should be to vigorously confront Japanese chauvinism and traditional prejudices against women in the workforce.”

“Yes, Biffle-san is welcome and even correct to remind us of these problems,” Japan’s Prime Minister Nakajima said from the center of the table.

The members of the Diet straightened in their chairs.

“It is not enough to try simple ideas, like urging business firms to employ more women and to encourage promoting them to more senior positions,” Prime Minister Nakajima said. “These small scale social engineering ideas have had only limited success. The basic problem lies in the traditional attitudes of our male-dominated society that developed centuries ago when fighting was venerated and regarded as heroic. Confucian ethics emphasized the dominance of the male and no amount of prodding is likely to change attitudes quickly. Employing more women will not in itself solve the problem.

“It is not enough to give women time off from their careers to have babies so they will still be competitive for promotion in modern-thinking Japanese companies. This so-called Womenomics, this policy of employing more women requires more day care centers, but these sorts of facilities will not solve the problem posed by the instinct of mothers, mothers-in-law and

grandmothers that taking care of one's own children is a necessary part of motherhood. It is not enough to ask mothers to consider day care when our society is still built around the nuclear family with stay-at-home mothers. In fact, the numbers of mothers showing interest in working outside the home has been disappointing, but this is predictable. Access to free daycare has been insignificant.

“Our sociologists report that young Japanese men are becoming much more willing to do the domestic chores that women have done throughout modern history. They are even spending more time taking their children to visit Tokyo Disneyland, but they do not anticipate a point in the near term when there will be Japanese men who will proudly admit that they are house-husbands. Japanese men are proud and stubborn and they have shown a resistance to these blatant attempts at social engineering. In fact, it has backfired, so that many are dug into tradition as never before.”

The leader of the conservative faction stood when the Prime Minister lowered his head. “We have to also recognize that one element of the decline in Japanese fertility is the continuing traditional disapproval of children born to unmarried mothers. Though this behavior has led to the ruin of the many nations, it wouldn't be such a bad thing in Japan, at least for the near future.” Many in the Diet chuckled at the implication. “Another trend is the decision to marry later in life and for mothers to not have their first child until late in their thirties.” Then he stiffened with a frown. “I think that Japanese attitudes toward paid sex and pornography are also factors. When this behavior is considered an alternative to marriage and childrearing, we are shooting ourselves in the foot, as the American saying goes.”

Biffle stood and bowed. “Have you considered cloning?” There was a typical thoughtful pause by everyone in the room. Only a few were impolite enough to look at this man who had just suggested the absurd. Biffle expected this reaction, but didn't say anything. He just waited patiently to let the sudden change of direction settle. He knew that the Japanese had been

working feverishly on cloning technology and he knew that it seemed more unlikely to them with each attempt.

“Biffle-san, it is no secret that our bio-engineers have made much progress in this area, but it is unlikely that we will ever have cloning ability in this century, in time to save our nation, if China is as hostile as you say they are.”

Biffle bowed again. He looked around the table slowly, meeting each of the Diet member’s eyes who would look at him. “Homo sapiens has been cloned successfully” he said.

When there was no uproar, he continued, “If I offered the Japanese people the technology to clone, I would ask in return that you allow U.S. businesses to relocate their research and development operations to Japan. The increasingly cold and icy world of Alaska is driving down production in every sector. We only ask for production facilities in Japan that your economy can absorb quickly. I am offering this technology in exchange for the safety of Alaskan company leaders and a few select members of the American technology sector. They are being terrorized by citizens who are already being whipped into a greedy frenzy by their politicians, even as they sell off that once great nation. I am here to ask for asylum for a few and, in exchange, I am offering cloning technology and jobs.”

This was enough to cause a loud discussion that broke into small groups. It was all in their own language, but Biffle had an immediate translation and the filtering to sort and listen to each discussion. Some already seemed to accept the possibility and advanced the discussion toward its implications for immigration. He listened until the major points had been discussed. When they veered toward insignificance, he interrupted.

“Of course, we respect the Japanese and understand what it would mean to lessen restrictions on your immigration policy, but I assure you that you would be able to create a sort of jury pool to deny immigration to any you deem undesirable without any intervention from our

side. I can only insist that business owners and their families be allowed to immigrate, and also ask that you consider select corporate board members and the best employees be allowed in too. I will not take this to Alaskan or American business owners until I have your approval, but there is an urgent need to find safety, so I cannot wait long for a decision.” The implication was clear. If Japan wasn’t interested, there would be another nation who would be.

“I know this is something that requires a lot of discussion, so I will take questions and then return to NATO headquarters in Brussels. I will make myself available to you at all times, but I would be grateful if you will please consider our timezone differences.”

“Biffle-san. You have already moved to immigration when we have only just now learned that you have discovered how to clone humans. You understand that we must peer review the procedure.”

“Certainly, we’ve already arranged to have our people to be sent to Japan to share information,” Biffle said, “but this must be kept entirely secret and it can only happen if we do it in Japan. I am certain that you all understand how important it is to ensure that nothing of our meeting is released to the public.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, this is not a new technology, as we have perfected it over a twenty year period, but—,” he stopped to look around at each man and woman in the room carefully, “this is a secret that must be kept very carefully or it will change your world immediately and the rest of the world in terrible ways that you or I cannot imagine. A world war is not only a possibility, but is assured when the world learns that man has been successfully cloned. I promise that we will not share this technology with any other nation, if Japan is willing to join us.

“The benefit of this deal for the Japanese will be the jobs that it would bring. The welfare society does not exist as it does in America. Welfare is available only for the truly needy and

those needy were treated with respect. For an able-bodied Japanese to accept government welfare is to lose face, and, too often, tragic suicides, a stark contrast to pre-United Nations America where welfare was not only acceptable, but even a family business, a career path handed down from generation to generation. Believe me when I warn you that without jobs, the cost of caring for the elderly will become so burdensome that you all here today will be forced to ask more and more of Japanese businesses until they do what American business did – they will leave.

“We carefully considered societies before we decided which to partner with and I hope we chose correctly. The Japanese are famous as an honest and honorable people and I am sure that what we’ve discussed here today will still be unknown to anyone else, even your family members, long into the future. There will be a time for the world to know, but now is not it.”

Chapter Five

It was raining and late at night when Finn finally returned to his high-rise Singapore apartment, something that he could never afford without roommates. They were a lesbian couple who wanted a male roommate with protective instincts and skills and he was certainly ferociously protective of his new sisters.

He shut the door quietly, so that he wouldn't wake them. He went to the large American refrigerator and laid four clinking bottles of Tiger beer into his cradled arm. He didn't want to make another trip. He slid the patio door open, pulled a plastic chair from under the awning and stepped out into the nearly constant warm rain that the northeast monsoon season brought to Singapore. He let the rain punish him just as the rain had punished him two years before.

From the apartment balcony, he could see down onto the building just across the boulevard. An architect had imported Sakura trees from Japan and planted them on the rooftop. Finn knew how delicate the trees were, so it was amazing that they could survive at all. The trees would not show their delicate white flowers until the early days of May. Still, the web of branches stood out in beautiful relief over the impressive landscaping. He did not know of any city in the world where developers competed even over the beauty of rooftops.

After a while, the rain slowed to a sprinkle and he heard the patio door open. He knew it was Kade, one of his two roommates, and he knew she would be naked. He almost laughed.

She pushed his shoulder and he scooted forward, so that she could sit behind him. Her hard nipples brushed the sensitive scars on this back. She worried about him when he sat in the rain and grieved for the death of his wife. These nights in the rain were coming more often.

"How was your day?" she asked.

The tense knots in his shoulders relaxed at the sound of her voice.

"I tried not to wake you," he said.

"Nice try. Anyway, Mio keeps kicking me," she complained, "so I had just got into your bed to get some sleep." Mio was Kade's lover and both often crawled into his bed when the other was particularly fitful in her dreams.

"Kick her back," he said.

"I can't do that," she giggled. "How do you call it in Alaska? Domestic abuse?"

He smiled at her cleverness.

"You know it isn't exhibitionism if nobody can see you."

"I think somebody sees me. I think the man on the second floor in the Google building watches me."

"Go get your brush, silly," he laughed.

Finn followed her inside and when she returned with her brush and a large towel for Finn to sit on, she sat on the edge of the sofa with her back to him. He sank his fingers in her long hair; black like onyx. He put the back of his fingers against her neck and slowly pulled the brush down through her silky hair to meet his fingers and fall smoothly to the middle of her back. He kissed the top of her head as he would kiss a little sister if he had had one when he was still an innocent boy growing up in Alaska.

Kade's finger traced the figure of a heart on his knee and x'd the center with a kiss as he brushed her hair.

"Doug called, he wants you to call him back," she said.

Doug had become a somewhat successful musician, and had even opened a nightclub.

After Sarah's death, Finn decided to give Singapore a shot. He thought a new culture would help him get over his loss, but he now realized that he would never forgive himself for Sarah's death, no matter how far he ran.

"I already talked to him. My car wouldn't start, so he dropped me off," he said while still brushing her hair. "I have to go to Penang in the morning to deliver some equipment and weapons to Mace, but I'll be back by the weekend to see Doug's band play at The Duck."

Kade suddenly twisted her body to face him. "I know a sweet girl in Penang. You should meet her. I can call her if you like." Her voice was hopeful.

He shrugged his shoulders and she knew not to press the issue.

After a while, she stretched and reached back and over her shoulders to ruffle Finn's thick hair. He could see the reflection of her body in the glass of a large print on the wall, but even the sight of such a beautiful woman as Kade didn't stir him sexually. He only yearned for the touch of his wife, but Sarah had been dead for two years. Two years. It was still as painful as if it just happened.

After a while, Finn heard Mio bumping around in the bedroom she shared with Kade. It was nearly midnight, but Mio was a dancer and she would be getting ready to leave for work. Mio did not come from money like Kade did. She studied hard at university and needed a high-paying job that took the least amount of time from her studies. She was not proud of her job as an exotic dancer, but she never gave private dances either.

Kade pushed herself up with her hand still on his knee. "She's awake. I will be home at lunch," she said. "If I don't see you, have fun up there." She leaned back against his chest. "Be careful."

She bent at her waist to kiss the top of his head, and went to her lover and left him alone

with his thoughts and memories. She would be asleep long before he was numb enough from the alcohol to also sleep.

From the high vantage point of his apartment, he could see over the southern part of the city towards the harbor where his newly opened security company took up the end of a long pier. He could just make out his three new gunboats – they still looked rather anonymous, even without the .50 caliber machine guns mounted on their bows and sterns. The Connor Security Force wasn't allowed to mount big guns until their boats were out past the anchorage. That was the agreement that he had won from the Singaporean government and it had been a hard-fought battle. So the big guns were locked up in the operations shed with the other assorted weapons that belonged to his twenty-two dangerous hired hands. The other more exotic weapons were hidden in the false bottom.

The rain began to fall harder and he brought three more beers outside. The warm November rains of Singapore would fall steadily until the beginning of the Chinese New Year. He twisted the top of a bottle open and took a big, long drink. He wished he could be further punished by the smell of an Alaskan rain – a fresh rain on cattle, brittle grass and hay after a dry spell. After Sarah though, he thought Alaska could never be far enough away. He didn't know if he would ever return there. He tilted his head and let the heavy rain drops pelt his face as he remembered his wife. The painful emotion of her death was almost too much to bear. He wondered if his heart would ever heal, and felt sure it never would.

* * *

It was hot and humid when Finn woke. He rolled out of bed in his boxers and socks. The dull throbbing headache of hangover was too often part of his morning routine.

Hunched over, he pressed his head with his hands as he shuffled to the kitchen where he anticipated a nice, cold drink. He looked around with a dizzy pivot and saw the laughing eyes of his two roommates. With their low bangs and pixie haircuts, the Chinese beauties looked enough alike that he'd begun to kid them about being twins after he'd answered their advert for a room in a skyscraper.

"What time did he go to bed?" Kade asked Mio.

"Just after midnight, after the rain."

"Looks like you emptied the refrigerator, Finn," Kade said, smiling at the empty beer bottles scattered about the living room.

"So, you d-deserve that hangover," Mio chimed in with the stutter that Finn so adored.

Finn put his hands on his hips, mocking her. "So you deserve that hangover," he mimicked in a high-pitched whine, without the stutter.

Mio frowned and she looked like a kid, years younger than her actual twenty- three years.

"Mio bought our tickets," Kade announced.

"Oh, God," Finn said

Mio's large expressive eyes widened and her body went rigid for an instant, before she stalked off to the room she shared with Kade.

Kade crossed the carpet to Finn as her eyes followed Mio over her shoulder.

"What the hell, Finn. This means a lot to her. She's been planning this for months. She bought our dresses, she's memorized the words she will say to me, everything. Why don't you just stick a knife in her chest?"

“I didn’t mean it that way. You both know that. I just don’t see the point in all this. So you two go to the States and get married and then you come back to Singapore and nobody can know about it? It just doesn’t seem worth all the effort.”

“This is for her, so we are all going to do it. It is just three days and you will have fun or I will beat the crap out of you.”

“San Francisco isn’t the only place that you can get married. We don’t know anybody in San Francisco. How about San Diego? I have lots of friends in Coronado and I can guarantee we’ll have a great time. Why not do it there? On the beach?” Finn was almost pleading.

“Anywhere, but San Francisco. Do you know what the weather is like right now? Everywhere isn’t like Singapore. They have four things called seasons in the States.”

Kade grabbed Finn by the bicep, hard, and pulled his forehead to hers. “She bought the tickets already and we will be married in San Francisco,” she hissed, “so you will smile and make her happy.”

“Look, if it’s about the tickets, I’ll pay for connecting flights to San Diego or even L.A..”

“Finn, drop it!”

“I’ll even upgrade us to First Class!” he called after her as she walked into the girls’ room. Both girls returned after only a moment, and they were carrying on as if nothing had happened.

God, he loved the twins. He probably shouldn’t have messed with them like that. Too much teasing over the wrong subject. But he knew he was already forgiven. He executed a careful, but luxurious stretch and yawn and tilted his head to glare at Mio’s enormous Cheshire Cat clock. He hated how it dominated the kitchen. He hated the loud unnatural ticks and tocks, and he hated the four teeth with blue LED numbers. Some Japanese guy won a Nobel Prize for

figuring out how to make a blue LED.

After subtracting eight minutes, he decided that he had enough time to make coffee. “Why has this clock always been eight minutes fast? Why doesn’t somebody fix the time on the damned thing?” He turned away. “And turn on the air conditioner! It’s like Singapore in here!”

He staggered over and discovered an empty coffee tin that had bought just two days ago. He held up the empty tin and shook it at the girls.

“Ha!” Mio barked.

He could not help, but smile. He was the only one that bought coffee and he needed caffeine in a bad way. He was sure that there was no hope in the fridge, but he had to check. He opened the door. The two cases of Coca Cola that he bought from the military post only two days before were now empty. Only Mio would be thoughtless enough to leave an empty cardboard skeleton in the fridge. He held up the empty box and displayed it to the girls. “You guys drank all this too?”

“Ha!” Mio laughed again from her room.

He lifted a can from the counter that had weight and chugged it. It was as hot and flat. He stifled a retch.

“Damn it, Mio,” he growled, “get your little butt in here!” His voice rose with each syllable.

He knew Mio was the soda pop poacher because Kade didn’t like cola. Kade was the main coffee culprit, but Mio was also a coffee raider.

“I need caffeine and you girls drank everything. Will one of you please go downstairs and get some drinks?” He didn’t mean to raise his voice, but it was done. “Get me a couple of Red Bulls. I need a jump start. Get the big cans.” He spoke over his shoulder as he walked to the shower.

“You are yelling at us for that?” Mio stamped her tiny foot. “Get it yourself, j-jerk.

You don’t have to be a loud b-bully so early in the morning. Today is my day to sleep in, you stupid.” She turned her face away from Finn and her angry glare turned to a beaming smile for Kade.

Finn turned around and almost lit into her, but he suddenly remembered his transportation problem and steadied his voice. “Listen, pretties, I always buy drinks and I do more than my part around here. I had a rough night and I don’t have time to shop this morning. Also, I made breakfast yesterday, so it is Mio’s turn today.”

“Today is my day to sleep in, you stupid,” Mio said.

Finn saw the opportunity to turn the conversation around.

“I’m so sorry, Mio, sweetie. I forgot you were sleeping in,” he said, his voice changing suddenly to sudden syrupy concern. “You are absolutely right. I was inconsiderate. Give me a minute and I’ll go down. What would you girls like?”

Kade tilted her head, looking at Finn as if deciding how to respond to his sudden sappy, caring tone, then she came to him and traced a small heart on his chest with her finger and put an invisible X in the center and stabbed it hard with her finger.

“He wants your car, Mio.”

“What the hell are you talking about Kade?” Finn cried. “Here you go again, every day causing trouble.”

“He wants your car later to carry all his big guns to the airport – that is why he is acting all nice,” Kade said with a sly smile. “Watch, he will ask us to pick it up later at the airport.”

Mio cocked her head and narrowed her eyes at him.

“He wants your car.” Kade laughed, with her hands on her hips.

“Shut up, Kade! One phone call and one of my guys will be on the way up here, you big stupid!”

“See, he wants your car.” She pushed her chest out against her tight shirt and stuck her tongue out at him.

“Damn it, Kade ...” He stared her down until he couldn’t resist smiling.

Chapter Six

Finn thanked the pilot after the two hour trip north and stepped down from the aircraft into the blanket of heat that lay over the runway tarmac. Penang was not far enough north of Singapore to make any noticeable change in the smothering humidity that Finn swore that he would never get used to. The heat never seemed to bother the natives. They didn't sweat through their shirts, while his was immediately drenched.

Doug had once told him that he and another of the staff had run the circumference of Singapore. Using a taxi to pick them up and drop them at their stopping points, it took three nights to run around the island. If they had tried to run during the day, the thick, oppressive atmosphere would have dropped them in minutes. Even at night, they were drenched in sweat before they even started.

As he began to pull his weapon cases from the aircraft, a small Malaysian man jumped to his side to help.

"My name Chet, I help you," he announced in fair English.

"Well, okay, Mr. Chet, I appreciate the help," Finn said with a smile.

It took only a couple of minutes to transfer the luggage and weapon cases to the van and for Finn settle in with his arm on one of the bags that wouldn't fit in the back.

"Mr. Connor, sir, I take you to Georgetown," he said.

"But I'm staying at the YMCA," he said, wondering how the man knew his name.

"Mr. Mace told me to bring you first to restaurant near Fort Cornwallis."

Finn nodded his agreement to Chet who was looking at him in his rearview mirror.

"I drive car and boat, sir. The boats are very nice and have strong engines."

"That's great," Finn didn't want to be rude, but he was not in the mood for small talk. He acted impressed as he looked at the rearview mirror.

"You want anything in Penang, you ask me. I get anything for you, sir."

"No, thank you." He rolled his eyes and let out an impertinent laugh. "Just drive, little buddy." Finn was not interested in the veiled offers for whatever 'anything' implied.

Finn knew explicit sex was available, even the strictest societies, as an outlet for frustration, but one of the draws of Malaysia and Singapore was the less in-your-face sexualizing of women as was common in the colonizing West. There was nothing that couldn't be had in America.

The heat was harsh, but Finn sensed a definite relaxed mood only found in tropical destinations. Watching happy, sunburned, coconut-scented faces crowned with sun-kissed hair improved his mood. Chet adjusted his mirror slightly so that he could watch his boss's face soften with each mile. Finn was snapping his fingers as his mood improved and this intensified as they neared the city.

The Connor Security Force had a temporary lease for a small office, and pier space for his three gunboats in the original remnants of Swettenham Pier that had been otherwise expanded and modernized so it could berth up to three cruise ships which were even larger than aircraft carriers.

He had an appointment tomorrow with the Penang Port Commission to secure an extended long-term lease at the north tip of the new pier. He was sure that he could convince the port management that the mere presence of a shipping security company would appear to

be an outstanding addition to their own pier security.

And he knew that his men would surely love to be that much closer to the many single women who stepped off the cruise ships, often interested in a short romance.

Just when he thought the trip would never end, the car began to slow at a crosswalk and was swarmed by passengers from a huge cruise ship.

He saw an old man who was wearing black socks below a mismatched jogging suit turn to yell at two children across the street. A woman walked over and bent down to take their tiny hands in hers and then she escorted them across the street to their crude guardian.

She was striking. Finn had always recognized and appreciated beautiful women, but this was different and it wasn't based on sight alone as she had a dignified and confident manner. It wasn't in his nature to respond to superficial attraction, but this was something more than that.

His eyes were focused entirely on her, and her movements through the crowd made his car seem to still. He opened his passenger door and stepped out of the slowly moving car, landing face down in a cloud of dust.

When the crowd became noisy at the sight of him lying there, he looked up and saw that the woman had turned with the rest of the crowd to see and she looked away when he stood and brushed himself off.

Chet rushed around the car. "Please, sir, I will take you to hospital?"

"No, I'm fine, but thank you." He never lost sight of her. She was moving away and the crowd was dispersing. He thanked the driver quietly with a guilty smile and asked him to inform Mace that he would be at the office later.

She was not walking fast, but he wanted to close the distance quickly. He had to talk to her, but he didn't know what to say yet. He would simply follow until something came into his

scrambled mind.

She had very delicate features and soft, light reddish-blond hair. To Finn's eyes, she was not simply pretty, nor merely cute, though she was undeniably both, but perfectly and aching beautiful. He had a good batting average in terms of getting a woman's initial interest, but this was a one-shot deal and he had to be perfect. His mind was whirling with words, weaving spells with magical syllables.

He saw the woman turned and he imagined that she noticed the dusty man from the street. He looked away so that she wouldn't know that he was focused on her and scanning the path ahead of her. She began to walk in a figure eight around the stalls, looking over her shoulder as she shopped.

Sellers accosted her at every step, hawking their souvenirs, but he could tell she was using her peripheral vision to gauge the value of each item. If she knew he was following, she would see him lean against a wall or a column each time she stopped. He saw her pick up her pace and walk quickly to a small Polis Diraga kiosk.

When he saw that she was going to the police for directions, Finn saw an opportunity to help. He puffed himself up and when he was close to the Diraga, he suddenly found himself, once again, face down on his stomach. One of the men had circled around behind him and had a knee on his neck, while the other policeman was jerking his arms into handcuffs.

* * *

Mace arrived at the plaza in time to see Finn follow a very pretty woman to a Polis

Diraga at the front of the plaza. Then he watched as his friend was slammed to the ground and handcuffed. Mace knew Finn was not going to be harmed, so, in fact, he found it all to be quite humorous. He was content to watch his friend try to wriggle and talk his way out of whatever he had gotten himself into.

The pretty woman gravitated towards the big American where she felt safe enough to watch the action with a mixture of fear, relief and satisfaction on her face.

"I'm Mace," he said, extending his hand.

"Aidan." She shook his hand without looking up.

When Mace looked down at this beauty, he was sure that the woman had something to do with Finn's predicament. She was striking to be sure, but she was young, perhaps too young for his friend and boss. She was tall – five feet eight inches was his estimate, but her delicate skin and features could not disguise her youth. He looked away quickly when she glanced up.

"So, what did he do this time?" Mace asked with a big smile on his face.

"Do you know that guy?"

"Yeah," Mace sighed nonchalantly, "he's my boss – a great guy."

"Great? He was stalking me."

"No, he was probably just trying to think of a way to approach you. He'll take the loss hard. His driver said that he fell out of the damned car – when he saw you, I imagine. He said he got out while it was still moving."

She remembered the scene and thought it over.

They stood there, together, absorbed in the drama, as if watching a television show.

"Why don't you help him, if you are such a good friend?"

“He wouldn’t help me,” Mace said, “he would stand here and smile just like I am.”

As one of the policemen moved behind Finn, Mace watched the other undertake another body search much more aggressively than needed.

Mace bent close to her ear, “Watch the cash disappear from his wallet.”

As Finn was getting the vigorous pat down, the other officer lifted and quickly replaced Finn’s wallet. Mace roared with laughter and Aidan couldn’t suppress a giggle.

Chet had parked the car by then and had found his way to this ruckus. He saw his new employer in police custody and recognized a chance to redeem himself for whatever he had done earlier to upset Mr. Connor.

“That’s our boat captain, Chet,” Mace pointed. “Let’s see if he is going to be of any help.”

They never moved from their vantage point, never even moved their feet. They simply turned their bodies to follow the action.

Chet approached the Polis Diraga carefully with his head bowed and with two business cards extended from hands pressed together as if in prayer. He pleaded with the police that the man they held was a respected businessman in Singapore and Malaysia and was also a retired United States Military Officer.

Mace and Aidan watched Finn gesture in her direction as he explained to the police what he was doing.

Through Chet, Finn explained how he had become infatuated with the girl with the strawberry blonde hair and that he was only following her until he could decide what to say to her without embarrassing either of them.

The police walked over to Aidan, and Mace walked across the mall to Finn. The police

gave her Finn's explanation and Mace had it right. She decided that he was harmless and told them that she wouldn't press further charges.

They seemed happy with her decision. They had money and no paperwork. As they walked past, they patted Finn on the shoulder. He sniffed at them, straightened and walked over to Aidan with Mace in tow, still smiling broadly.

"Aidan, I present to you, Finn Connor. Or as he has been recently recognized, Stalker Finn."

Finn gave him a smirk and a screwy indignant nod.

Mace chuckled, waved Chet over, and left.

Aidan gave Finn time to break the ice, but she ended up bailing him out.

"Hi Finn, I am Aidan."

"Nice to meet you, Aidan." He fidgeted around for a bit too long, and then lowered his voice into what he thought to be a slow sophisticated tone. "Hey look, I am really sorry about all that. I didn't want to scare you, honestly. I saw you shopping and I didn't want to interrupt you, so I was just waiting until you finished so we could talk, that's all. You just misunderstood."

"Oh, sure, I overreacted," she said sarcastically. "I'm in a foreign country, I see a mysterious man tracking me down and I overreacted."

"No, you were right to think that. Again, I am very sorry," he said, looking around, while casually scratching the back of his neck. He turned back suddenly, as if he had just thought of something. "Well, hey, are you enjoying the trip?"

"Well, I only arrived just now and I already have material for nightmares, so, yes, I suppose it has been pretty interesting so far."

"Yeah, well," he started with a happy smile as if nothing happened. "How about dinner tonight?" He groaned inside, feeling stupid.

When she didn't answer immediately, he lowered his head and looked up at her. "Going to be real fun, lots of famous people."

"If there were any famous people in Penang, I would know about it." She didn't add that she worked for a cruise line.

"You're right, no celebrities, but I do impressions," he lied. What the hell is wrong with me, he thought.

"My thoughts exactly," Daisy said.

"Daisy ... not now, not now," he thought.

"You are a very odd person," Aidan said, after appraising him. "Okay, I will have dinner with you, but you must promise to act normal. I am staying in room 523, at the Copthorne Hotel. Please knock on my door at seven."

"Room 523 at seven, I'm looking forward to it." He decided to leave before he said or did something even more stupid. Without brushing off the scuffle with the Polis, he spun and gathered what dignity he had left and swaggered into the sunlight, fingers snapping happily, creating a cloud of dust about him as he left.

He found Mace waiting for him outside the mall.

"Score," Finn said it more to himself, but it was loud enough for Pete.

"Bullshit."

"No bullshit, my friend. At 7pm this very evening, I will meet Miss Aidan at the Copthorne Hotel, room 523."

"Well, good for you, my dear friend." Mace laughed. "Wear new socks."

Finn twisted his head to look at him. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Mace looked back over his shoulder at the hotel. "She'll see your socks because you will have propped the door open with your shoes."

Finn scrunched his brow. "What?"

"She told you to meet her at room 523, right?" Mace laughed again. "Well, the Copthorne has only four floors, so you will need something to keep the roof door open, so that you aren't locked out." Mace pointed. "Count."

Finn counted, but said nothing. He felt defeated and deflated.

"If you don't mind my saying so," Mace said, "she was a rather young."

"Yeah, too young," Finn agreed with a whisper. "How old do you think she is?" Finn asked.

"Hell, I don't know Finn." Mace knew where this was going and he was not going to negotiate her age. "The girl has already shown you the door, if you'll pardon the pun."

They walked in silence for a while. Mace hoped he hadn't hurt his boss's feelings, but the conversation had become ridiculous.

"Well, how old do you think I am?" Finn asked.

"I'd say about thirteen."

Chapter Seven

Two weeks later, on a southerly heading in the Malacca Strait near Singapore, Sarah Hughes, captain of the merchant ship, *Regina Trader*, stepped out onto the forward bridge wing to return a friendly wave from the captain of a passing ship. The American saw that the other ship's stern light was out, and that particular light was critical to avoid a bow to stern collision.

"Nice enough, fella," First Mate Simmons commented.

"Yeah, I suppose he is, but I would like him a lot better if he was in his own lane. We almost traded paint and he didn't even check his lights before entering the busiest waterway in the world."

"You ought to let him know, skipper."

"Yeah, I guess I should," Hughes groaned as she picked up her mic.

Before she could even lift it to speak, Simmons pointed out two men leaning over the ship's stern walkway, probably to replace the bulb. Hughes nodded and returned her focus to the busy traffic ahead.

The *Regina Trader* had transported rolled steel from Seattle to Darwin, and was now delivering military aircraft equipment to the U.S. military pre-positioning station in Singapore.

Their attention now directed ahead, the bridge crew didn't see that when the other ship was nearly astern, a black fast-boat on its opposite side slowed and turned to cross the wake and steadied below the *Regina Trader's* afterdeck, matching its speed as its silent crew threw grappling hooks. Thirteen pirates began to muscle their way up ropes in the half-moon light.

Juan 'Ricky' Ricardo of Connor Security Force was leaning into the salty mist at the bow

of the big ship when he heard a loud clanking. It was time to make his rounds of the perimeter, so he pulled up the hood of his raincoat and headed aft.

As Ricky turned the corner of the superstructure, he saw the intruder, but it was too late. A shotgun was leveled at his chest. He took the blast in the center of his Kevlar vest and was blown back on his heels over the scupper, falling sixty feet into the Malacca Strait. The impact of the blast took the breath out of him, but the saltwater-activated air bottle inflated his float-coat and he fought his way to the surface before the polluted water was sucked into his lungs. Once more on the surface, it took an instant to diagnose his situation. He considered the fate of those on the ship he was contracted to protect.

He automatically grabbed the VHF transceiver attached to the front of his harness and discovered that the slug had penetrated it before hitting his vest. He reached around and dug for the secondary transceiver already set on the public guard channel that all ships and the Coast Guard were required to monitor, and he knew the Finn and his backup were listening.

"Phoenix, Ricky, over."

"This is Phoenix, go ahead."

"The *Regina Trader* has been boarded and I was shot. The vest saved me, but I'm in the water. I can see the harbor from here and I can make the swim fine. I don't know how many bad guys, but, based on sounds, I recommend you send three wings."

"Roger. My display says we can have men there in less than thirty minutes."

"Copy. Call Setiawan to pick me up. I bear two seven zero from the pier. I'll shine my flashlight when I see the boat," he said. "Oh, and I'll call the Coast Guard from here."

"Roger." The pilot switched to intercom? "Wings, you copy?" he asked the men in the bomb bay laying on their backs attached to small aircraft.

“Roger, copy all,” Wing One answered, looking around at all the others who nodded.

“Roger. ...Wings, standby racks one, three and four.”

Finn was piloting one of three old retired U.S. Navy P-8 Poseidon aircraft that patrolled the strait where merchant ships were the most vulnerable to pirates. Three men were in the unpressurized bomb bay attached to the standard bomb racks, lying face up. Their Rosy jet-propelled wings had a top speed of over 200mph at a maximum altitude and if a client ship made a distress call, the bomb bay would open and the jet wings rotated so that the pilot was face down. After being released from the bomb rack, the jets would spool up immediately, so that the other flying warriors were not scorched in the bomb bay.

From the time of the first notification of a client ship having an intruder, it took only minutes to have armed Connor Security Force professionals on deck who were trained and equipped with state-of-the-art non-fatal and fatal countermeasures.

The men had ten seconds to tighten their harnesses and make a quick check of their weapons. The bomb bay doors opened and three wings rotated 180 degrees. When the wings clicked level, they were released into the slipstream. The men and one woman used their hands as ailerons and rudders to separate from each other, before starting their compact jet engines, two on each side of the one-piece wing. When the jets were spooled up, they pressed their hands into their thighs and let their AI take them to the *Regina Trader* at top speed.

It was lucky that the *Poseidon* was so close. They had only three aircraft to patrol the full five hundred mile long Malacca Strait that connected the Pacific to the Indian Ocean. In the south, where Ricky swam, it was only three miles wide from Singapore to the closest island of Indonesia, but it widened to over one hundred miles between Penang and the northern Aceh region of Indonesia.

The Malacca Strait was one of the most important shipping lanes in the world with over

50,000 major merchant ships transiting it every year. In the last few years, there had been nearly 500 pirate attacks and Connor Security Force was swamped with contracts from the very first day they opened for business. They would buy more aircraft and hire more ex-special forces staff, but it would take time, and, right now, time was working against the *Regina Trader*.

After Captain Hughes had made her mayday call, she turned to see five filthy men working furiously to breach the simple door latch that accessed the bridge. She knew she would not survive if she didn't cooperate. She opened the hatch for them and immediately took a rifle butt to her stomach. The attacker saw her face and panicked with recognition. He had hit a woman! He dropped to his knees and put his hands on the deck.

"Please, Chin Bui, I did not know it was a woman," he said in Chinese.

The leader had black greasy hair that hung in lank tangles about his shoulders. He had the bulging eyes of a fanatic and there was the acrid odor of a long unwashed body about him.

"A woman," Chin said simply, pulling a machete from a sheath over his shoulder and, in the same movement, slicing through the man's skull deep into his torso.

Hughes couldn't understand Chinese. She was dizzy. She didn't understand what was said to cause this, brutality but she also dropped to her knees.

"Please, take anything. Please do not hurt my men," Hughes spoke with a trembling voice, slowly pronouncing each syllable carefully. "I will show you anything worth big money," she said, hoping he could understand her pigeon English.

There was no answer to her plea, yet she had to get through. "Sir, I beg. Please let my men go. They are simple men. Little money. For children and mother. For family and small village."

Hughes hoped to appeal to any emotion, whether it might be love of family, or a sense of superiority, or even a hatred of the government that left the peasant class to fend for themselves.

He turned away from her and, as the intruders ripped through cabinets and shelves, she looked through the aft windows to the decks below and saw that nearly all her crew were being tied to empty wooden pallets tilted up on their edges. She saw a blade rise high, flashing in the moonlight, cutting through the skull of one of her men.

Hughes lost all muscle control. As she slid down the glass window that looked aft over the main deck, she turned her face away from the horror as another machete was raised over her First Mate. She vomited onto the glass, sending it splashing back on to herself. She didn't see the monsters below peeling back the flesh to count the vertebra on the spine of a man who had only joined the ship's crew during the last port call. He was a proud young man, giddy with excitement. Hughes had personally given him a tour of the ship, which was a special treat for the boy. She blacked out.

The pirates left her on the bridge to drive the ship. They extinguished all running lights, except those required by the Coast Guard, until they were clear of the Strait. Then they would darken the ship entirely.

The man named Chin Bui saw Hughes' face turn to horror as she looked down on the main deck below. He followed the captain's eyes even as she fainted and crumpled before him. One of the pirates below was giving orders to the others, but Chin Bui couldn't hear the commands through the double panes of glass. He bolted from the bridge and expertly slid down the rails of the ladders. His own shouts were muted by the screams of the victims and it was not until he was upon them that his men finally heard his shouts.

He grabbed an arm just as the blade of a machete was about to drop. The *Regina*

Trader's crewmen were wailing and begging for their lives. Several were shrieking uncontrollably. What those men had just witnessed was more than some could comprehend.

Before the leader could even start to scold them, his ruthless men began to plead their case. With such a large crew, the betting this time was even better than the last. There were twenty-eight of the ship's crew, and, if every pirates anted up, the purse would be huge for the winner. They could see that their leader was upset, but they also knew that he was upset only because he had not been consulted first.

An evil game was set up with the lightweight wooden pallets balanced on their edges. Four of the ship's crewmen were strapped to each pallet face-to-face on their knees. The killers had hacked ragged notches into the wood so that each prisoner's head was held in place.

The prize was a small cloth bag in which each pirate had put \$200 yuan. Taking turns with the same machete, each man lifted the blade high over his head and swung it down. The blade sliced through the victim's skull, split the wooden slat and continued through the torso. The number of vertebrae split determined the individual score and, if the blade veered, then the last vertebrae severed would be the score. Ribs did not count.

Of course, the men hoped to win the prize, but the real thrill for them was the look of disbelief on the face of a friend only two inches from their own when the machete splattered their face with bone and brains. To them, this was a priceless consolation. The thieves roared with laughter at the eyes wide with terror as the brain's internal carotid exploded across the neighboring sailor's face, causing even the toughest man to scream. The pirates were also covered with blood, brain tissue, bone and cartilage, but they enjoyed the game and they would wear the gore for days.

It was always a special time when their leader took his turn. Chin Bui had a deep scar down his face and all of his teeth had either been knocked out in fights or had rotted away, all

that is except six back teeth and molars. The gapped smile with the yellow back teeth made him look as horrific as he behaved.

He took the machete and considered the only living victim, his chosen target. The other men giggled nervously as they gathered around to watch his final act. He took a knife from his belt and pulled a dead man's head up so that the living could see the eyes. He used his forearms to squeeze the split head together and pulled up the sides of the mouth to make the dead man look at the living with a grotesque smile. He turned the blade to flash moonlight in his own target's eyes and then turned the blade back to the dead man. He pushed and dug a knife into the soft cartilage of the interior eye socket and quickly had an eye in his hand. He pulled slowly until the optic nerve snapped. He released the split head and it fell with a thud onto the wood. He turned slowly and lowered his face within an inch of the desperate witness. He moved his face, screwing it right and left, until his foul breath filled the living man's nostrils. He continued to taunt the pitiful man who was already at the brink of psychological failure.

Chin Bui grabbed the hilt of the blade and, taking a firm stance, he raised the blade and pulled it down with all his might.

His cut was straight and true and his men cheered and congratulated him. He was normally a failure with the blade, but this was a superb effort. Two of the others quickly pounced on the quivering body and pulled the flesh back to count the vertebrae. They were almost afraid to give him the bad news. His victim had scoliosis and even though his cut was straight, his count was only six.

But Chin Bui was used to losing and simply smiled and shrugged it off. For his men's pleasure, he put the eye in his teeth and held it there for several seconds, then bit down hard, popping the membrane and sending the vitreous fluid over the deck and into his own mouth. His men went berserk, jumping and hopping with laughter. They hurrahed and congratulated their

leader for another outstanding performance.

* * *

As the jet wings the Regina Trader, they shut down the engines so that they silently glided to a position near enough to the target ship. Then they deployed the parachute systems and guided the parachute by squeezing the lanyards in order to land on the target.

By the time the wings arrived and the Singapore Coast Guard soon after, they found the deck empty of its cargo and, except for the wide-eyed disbelieving captain, the entire crew was missing. In a smooth operation, the pirates had taken control of the bridge of the *Regina Trader* and killed the entire crew in a demonic death game. The pirates had dragged their victims to the scuppers, weighted them with chains and dumped them in the warm South China Sea. The ship was left floundering just south of the Anthony pass.

Chapter Eight

After a long and morbid debrief with his men, followed by a sleepless night, Finn woke, only to be peppered with the twin's worried questions. As he deflected their worries with a contrived cheerful mood, it occurred to Finn to visit the supply officer at Commander Logistics, Western Pacific. This was the ultimate destination on the *Regina Trader's* cargo manifest. Finn was a member of the military ex-pat community and had a hunch that a visit to his supply officer friend might provide information to make sense of the attack.

The supply office was in an old colonial building, built just after World War Two for American liberators and paneled from floor-to-ceiling with mahogany, just as the rest of the huge air-conditioned building was. However, Navy Supply Officer, Scott Lai, preferred the windows open, so he used big window fans that did nothing to tame the horrific humidity. He preferred to experience the climate as a peasant did. Finn remembered that he was married into a wealthy Chinese family who had come to Singapore many generations ago.

"Hi Scotty," Finn said as he walked through the open door.

"Finn! Good to see you! How the hell are you?" The supply officer came from around the desk and shook Finn's hand. A fresh-faced young lieutenant stood quickly and nearly knocked a lamp over.

"I hate to say it, but I'm not doing well at all, Scotty."

"Sit down, Finn. How can I help? Coffee?"

Finn shook his head. "No, thanks."

"Hey, let me introduce you to my replacement. This is Jason Murray."

“Hi Jason, I’m happy to meet you,” Finn said, “This place is a money sieve. If you steal only half as much as Scotty, you will be rich,” he joked, not knowing how rich Scotty had become over the last three years.

“A replacement means a new assignment. Where are you off to?”

“Nope, this three years makes twenty years and I’m staying put. Retiring right here with my family.”

It occurred to Finn that Admiral Gunn was here before Scotty reported for duty.

“You came over with Admiral Gunn,” Finn said, “That’s a hell of a long time for an admiral to be one assignment. They usually serve in a position for exactly two years and either get another star or retire. He must really like this job to work so hard to keep it.”

“What brings you here, Finn?” Scotty asked abruptly, breaking Finn’s train of thought.

“Oh, yeah, I’m hoping you can help me solve a mystery,” Finn said in a low conspiratorial voice. “Some really bad guys boarded one of our client’s vessels last night. I’m embarrassed to admit that we were taken by surprise. One of our men, Ricky, you know, Ricky? Well, he took a bullet in his vest right over his sternum that knocked him over the side into the drink. He’s okay, but he had to repeat the two mile swim that he had to do to prove himself before flight school, but this time he didn’t have to do it in full gear and boots.” He shook his head at his digression. “Anyway, they killed the crew in a manner that I will never repeat to anyone. Too horrifying to comprehend really.” Finn was pained and confused, seemingly speaking to himself.

“Historically, pirates are only interested in cash and personal property from the crew members and valuable cargo light enough to transport. I was wondering if you would tell me what the *Regina Trader* was delivering.”

“We know about the attack, Finn. Terrible, just terrible. The *Regina Trader* was

transporting Corsair parts. Avionics to be precise. Worth a ton of cash to somebody who needs them.”

“But who needs them? Look at the list their leader was carrying. They took very specific military parts and left others that were much more valuable.” Finn pushed a photo of the cargo list across the desk that his men had taken. “The part numbers are in military spec and your admiral would probably hate to know that these monsters are carrying shopping lists for military parts.”

Scotty turned to his computer screen and brought up the part numbers. “This is interesting,” Scotty said after a moment, “these parts are integral to the Corsair III specifically.” He looked up from his computer to meet Finn’s gaze who then walked around the desk to see the manifest.

“Australia flies Corsairs,” Jason volunteered.

“Flew, past tense,” Finn said, “but I know personally that China has at least two.” He looked at Scotty for any indication that he knew the story of two missing Corsairs. If he did, he didn’t show it.

Finn froze. “Australia! Daisy, what do you have?”

The mapper responded almost immediately, “Australia took custody of two Corsairs from a Chinese firm one month after our incident. There was major damage to one and minor damage to the other.”

“Which means ours didn’t crash, after all?”

“Choreographed to fool everyone,” Daisy said.

“Jesus, I never thought of that.”

"It only just occurred to me, and the timeline works perfectly."

"Thanks, Daisy," he thought.

Scotty had been talking throughout Finn's query of Daisy.

"... says here that the Aussies have replaced eight of their forty-one ancient F-16 Vipers with Corsairs and they are spread evenly from Sydney to Darwin."

"Jane's intelligence reports that the Chinese have built copies of the Corsair and are working on building more for export," Daisy said.

"So the Chinese are already making copies as they have with nearly everything else developed by the West."

"I agree."

"Scotty, why would China be raiding ships for aircraft they are making?"

"Could be Jemaah Islamiyah," Scotty said, "can you imagine how much cash potential there is from the sale of those parts?"

"I don't think so," Jason said, "Jemaah Islamiyah fell out of favor with the people of Aceh province after the tsunami in mid-2000. The Indonesian government did such a good job saving lives and cleaning up that the Aceh people pledged allegiance to the State. The JI leader escaped to Europe."

The other men looked at him.

"I did a paper on it in college."

"Daisy, anything?"

"All apprehensions of piracy in the Malacca Strait have been made in Indonesia. Indonesia is ninety-nine percent Muslim. In the many decades since the tsunami, JI, which is

still a client state of the Caliphate, have enjoyed renewed interest in the northern provinces. The son of Hassan Tiro, the JI leader in the twentieth century, left Sweden three years ago and his whereabouts are unknown”

“You’re reading to me,” Finn accused Daisy.

“I don’t know everything, idiot. I find stuff, remember?”

“You called me an idiot.”

“Yes, that is correct. And I didn’t read it either.”

The others didn’t see Finn scrunch his eyes and frown.

“I’m sorry, Finn,” Scotty said. “I just don’t have anything to offer.”

After sending Jason on an errand, Scotty called Admiral Gunn upstairs.

“What’s up, Scott?”

“Bad news.”

“Yeah? Anything we can’t handle?”

“That security company with the *Regina Trader* security contract ... the owner just stopped by with a lot of questions. It was Finn Connor.”

“What’s the damage?”

“Well, I figured that he knew what was on the manifest, so I volunteered that information. But I think I detoured his investigation back to Australia.”

“And?”

“He doesn’t know.”

“Good enough, I’ll make some calls, see what to do.”

“Roger that.”

“Give me five minutes to get to my quarters, then connect me with Admiral Biffle in Belgium. Call me when you have his secretary or when an aide takes the call.”

* * *

It took Gunn about three minutes to drive from the pier to his on-base senior housing with its full staff of servants, a large veranda and even a koi pond. He had his satellite phone with him as he sipped straight whisky.

When the phone rang, he went through the standard junior admiral/senior admiral dance. He listened as his secretary said to Biffle’s secretary, “Yes, ma’am, I have Admiral Gun for Admiral Biffle, is he available?” Gunn knew he was always available for anyone working in this project. “Admiral Biffle is available, please have Admiral Gun stand by.” After the requisite five seconds, Brad Biffle came on. “Hello, Dub, how are things in Singapore?”

“Hello, Brad, operations have been successful for the most part.”

For the most part. “Roger, going green.” The admiral selected secure and watched the green light that indicated the call was now being encrypted. “Go ahead, Dub.”

“Yes, sir, about last night. We had a visit from the owner of a new maritime security outfit in Singapore and the owner is a sharp guy. He was in my supply officer’s office first thing this morning talking about Corsair parts.”

“Jesus.” Biffle sighed, “Well, any suggestions?”

“Actually, I hoped you might have one. The security company is run by one of your old hands.”

“One of mine?”

“Finn Connor.”

“You have got to be kidding me.”

“No, sir. And he’s got an impressive set up. High tech.”

“Jesus, karma is after my ass and that boy is a favorite of karma. Your supply officer, can he be trusted?”

“Oh, yeah, his future depends on me.”

“Good. Look, my wife has full access – no, hell, she literally controls the Jemaah Islamiyah finances. The money JI pulls from that disgusting piracy is peanuts. The big money is with Klijinkolie Oil Company. We know the owner is going to pour millions into their cause to secure drilling rights after the revolution. He’s betting on the terrorists to win in this upside-down world.”

“So it’s true then. The JI are really going to do it,” Gunn said.

“Yes, we’re not sure of the timeline, but, still, stall Connor somehow until they make that deposit.”

“Stall?”

“I haven’t kept in touch with him, so find out everything about the boy, his home, his friends, everything about his operation and send it secure. I have people.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Listen, Dub, we gotta play this one careful, you hear? The project needs those

Klijnkolie funds before we move. When Lin Su – when my wife sees the funds transfer, we'll be able to settle this thing quickly. Listen, Dub, you will also make sure that Finn Connor is not harmed."

Chapter Nine

Only two blocks from the fringes of Singapore's Red Light District, Doug Connor smiled as he followed the small cobbled courtyard that led into a stately stone building which had been trading as a pub for only a year and a half. He was proud of how the building had been created with the look of a Dublin pub from the 1700s and how it felt authentic.

He proudly surveyed the Irish pub that he had built from the ground up. Actually, he and his 'friends' had built it. They weren't the most respectable businessmen, but they kept their illegal activities away from the public and only committed crimes against other bad players. They liked Doug from the beginning and had pulled strings so that he had a choice plot and that the place could be built with pilfered or leftover material from other projects.

The place exuded a great atmosphere. It was roomy, comfortable and old-fashioned with lots of old sturdy tables and chairs which wore the patina of the years. The spacious interior was highlighted by low-beamed ceilings, vintage Irish ale and whisky posters, original and replica Irish pub signs, a Victorian fireplace, stripped stone walls and an enormous, ancient grandfather clock.

The Drunken Duck had everything an Irish pub should have – great music, good company, and an ambience of bygone days, with a host of old European customers with great stories to regale the first timers. The regulars suffered those same tired old stories and more than a few would just as soon crack a pint glass over the storyteller's head, but this was Singapore. And that didn't happen in Singapore.

The pub grub menu was decidedly English. The Duck served fish and chips, eel pie, bangers and mash with Cumberland sausage and onion gravy on the side. There were traditional pasties and ploughman's sandwiches with cheddar and pickles. After the Asian

customers had mustered the courage to try them, they found that English cooking was just as bad as its reputation warranted. Along with international favorites, The Drunken Duck kept frog's legs in ample supply and prepared them in the Singaporean fashion.

A casual customer might not notice that the pub was built so that the eye was drawn to a small stage as the focal point. That stage hosted live music from opening to last call, seven days a week, all year around. With a population of 4.5 million people, and others from nearby countries, there was always an awesome talent patiently waiting alongside the building, politely out of sight of the customers. They were dreamers with heavy instruments stretching at their arms, hoping that someone on the playlist didn't show up.

"Sean," Doug called across the restaurant, "are we set up for the meeting of the roundtable? This is a big deal and I want everything double-checked."

"Yes, sir," the serious bar manager answered. "All set and double checked, drinks and food."

"Good. Very good, Sean. Thank you," he said happily.

Doug waved at two guitarists on the stage as he walked to the entertainment scheduling board.

"Sheila, can you move my set to eight o'clock?" Doug spoke loudly over the superb dueling guitars playing to an audience of three.

"Sorry, Doug, calendar is full and Elvis has the spot after you," the pretty Malay waitress said.

"So call him and reschedule."

"He won't answer. He stopped answering his phone after the last time."

Doug grunted and studied the calendar again.

There was rarely room on the twenty-hour schedule for all the talented performers who would do nearly anything to get on this stage. They would even buy a spot from musicians who had secured a spot on the schedule. Doug empathized with the amazing dreamers that showed up early, only to wait all night for a chance.

Several famous international musicians had played at The Drunken Duck in the eighteen months since they had opened their doors. Singapore was a popular stop for international tours and USO gigs. A world-famous rocker from the English zone had fallen in love with the small stage and the enthusiastic audience at The Drunken Duck. His vocal enthusiasm about the pub resulted was repeated throughout the music scenes in London, Berlin, New York City, Nashville and all the other major live music Meccas.

Doug knew well in advance who might be visiting Singapore and he made sure to have their favorite foods on the menu and he kept a huge collection of beers, liquor and wines from the Americas and Europe, just in case he wasn't given notice of their flight plans. He was known for being discreet in terms of never advertising a possible visit, but he certainly made sure that the place was packed for his famous visitors by carefully scheduling impromptu "Happy Hours" or "Ladies Nights" or a "Battle of the Bands" that inevitably poured out onto the cobblestone courtyard.

Only he knew when a celebrity would be stopping by. It would seem to occur organically, and that was just the way the entertainers liked it – a small stage, an excellent selection of amplifiers and soundboards, a surprised and very appreciative audience, good cheer, and good drink.

Doug's careful selection of managers and staff paid huge dividends because he could delegate the details of administration to ex-bar owners who had become experienced Drunken

Duck administrators. He didn't care for the business side; his passion was for the stage and his friendships with great musicians.

The Asian staff was two shifts of five men and seven beautiful women, all well-paid and lured away from other successful establishments. The men wore name tags with either Sean or Colin McCaffrey, and the women were either Rosie O'Malley or Sheila O'Malley. Doug insisted that an Irish pub needed Irish staff, and he thought it was funny as hell. They didn't think it was particularly funny though and the regular customers knew and used their real names, but the staff liked Doug and didn't complain. They decided as a group that they were just characters in The Drunken Duck, a pub established for entertainment, after all.

Doug suddenly remembered the meeting with Singaporean businessmen. "Sean, who are we missing?"

"Everybody here, boss."

"What! Sean, you must tell me when everybody's here! These are the most important men in Singapore. How long have they been waiting for me?"

"Sorry, boss." He smiled at Doug's self-importance. "I thought it more important that you find a time to play your guitar. What important to you? I don't know. Guitar or business?"

A Doris and two Shelia's burst into giggles and ran away.

Doug took a deep breath and glared at Sean. This Sean just shook his head and returned to his paperwork. Doug walked to the back of the bar and pushed the heavy oak door open.

The businessmen all stood to greet him warmly. They knew Doug would go to any limit to help them. They weren't the public leadership; they were fair men who represented the watered-down Singaporean version of an underworld.

Without the help of these important men, The Drunken Duck wouldn't exist as it was. Building materials were diverted from legitimate government projects to build it, and other associates smoothed the negotiations for the property that The Drunken Duck and its parking lot sat on, a large parcel of the most expensive land in the world. The original property owners were reimbursed to their satisfaction and the building materials were charged to a foreign military installation. Doug insisted that his partners never tell his brother how the huge pub was built so quickly in such a desirable location.

Doug was popular, despite his many flaws. He had a striking indifference to the strict interpretation of the law, was too fond of his imported spirits, and often careless with truth. The company of ladies of questionable reputations did not offend his sensibilities, and his language left much to be desired. These shortcomings endeared him to the Singaporeans who supported and loved him.

He stood up from the table to bring the group to order, and he suddenly bent frozen in position and fell over, his hands clamped into claws and his eyes bulging oddly from his head.

The men rushed to his side. One had some medical training and tried to straighten Doug's body, so that he could analyze the problem, but he couldn't unbend him. Even with the combined strength of all the men present, Doug's spine was locked in a tight curve, as tight as his clawed hand.

"Listen, he is saying something."

"There is no light," he whispered, "Where there is no light, there is no God."

And then he was silent.

The manager called for an ambulance and then immediately called Finn. Finn was at the

Duck within minutes and rushed to his brother's lifeless form. He dropped to his knees and gently touched his brother's face. His brother looked like a cripple there on the floor.

"Did any of you see? Were any of you here when he fell?"

All the men nodded affirmative and one spoke, "Mr. Finn, he just froze. He froze in that position and we couldn't help him because we couldn't straighten his body. We still tried CPR, but it was impossible because all his joints froze, including his jaw. We couldn't even tilt his head to give him our breath."

He thanked them and asked them to leave and they did, each man touching Finn's shoulder and telling him how sorry they were. Finn knew they were good friends to Doug.

The best English speaker said, "Mr. Connor, Doug said something as he died. I don't understand it at all, but he said, 'There is no white light. Where there is no light, there is no God.' What does it mean, Mr. Connor?"

"What does it mean, Daisy?"

"I don't know, Finn. I'm so sorry. I liked him a lot. ... I think I loved him as a human loves a brother."

He had to call his mother, so he did.

His father answered at the first ring, and, before he could speak, Finn heard his mother screaming in the background.

"Dad, what's going on? Is that Mom?"

"Finn, your brother is dead."

"I'm here with him. How did you find out so fast? Who called you?"

"What do you mean, you're with him? He's right here, on the kitchen floor."

Finn was confused. He could hear his mother wailing, but his father didn't make any sense. "Dad, I don't understand. Who is on the kitchen floor?"

"Pete," he wailed. "Finn it was terrible, he was talking with your Mom about whether the peas were ready and he just bent at the waist and fell over," Jack said, crying, but able to speak. "Finn, he just froze up right where he stood and then just toppled over. I'm strong, Finn. You know how strong I am. I couldn't even straighten him out to help. He was frozen in a tight curl and there was nothing we could do but watch and listen. Finn, he said, 'There is no light, and – "

Finn said along silently, "– where there is no light, there is no God." He paused, dizzy with the speed of events. "Did Mom hear him say it?" His mother was very religious.

"No, thank our merciful Lord that she didn't hear that. He was out of his mind, Finn. She was in the living room calling for an ambulance. At least she was spared that. ... Wait, how did you know what he said?" His father said in a clear serious voice.

"Dad, I need you to calm down for a minute." He heard the familiar sound his father made when he plopped rather than sat on a chair. He sobbed.

"Dad, Doug died a few minutes ago, and he died the same way."

"Oh, God," his father wailed, "Oh no, I can't tell her that. Oh, Lord, no, she jus – "

"Dad?"

"Finn, get to a hospital right now."

"Dad, I know what you are thinking, but I don't think – "

"Finn, you have to go to the hospital. Listen to me carefully. You three boys are not our own, yo – "

“Not your own?”

“Finn, listen, dammit. We adopted you boys when you were toddlers. We couldn’t have children and were lucky to get you boys. It usually takes years of waiting for adoption, but the government stepped in when they decided we were perfect candidates for the three boys of a military man and his wife who had been killed in an accident. Two of you just died at the same time. Go, to, the, hospital, right, now!”

“Wait, you mean that aft –“

“Finn, I’m hanging up and I’m not accepting any phone calls from Singapore unless it’s a doctor on the other end.” Finn heard the phone hit the carriage before the signal died.

“Sheila!” Finn shouted to the restaurant, “Call another ambulance. I need one for myself.”

He heard one of the Sheilas crying in as she spoke in Chinese on the phone. Two others were looking on, crying as they used the conference room door to keep them from falling over from shock. Doug had become as strong a family member as any of them had ever had.

“Finn, there are reports of the same thing happening around the world and the activity to keep it from trending is obvious to me.”

Finn was quick. “So I’m a fucking clone?”

Daisy was silent.

Chapter Ten

Two men stood on the bow of a brilliant white yacht. The sun was at its zenith and the partygoers ignored the smells of the stinking brackish harbor as they swept *hors d'oeuvres* and champagne from trays without losing their train of thought as they told their best stories. Some were already dancing and the yacht hadn't even left the pier.

"I don't like this. I don't like it one bit," Mr. McGuire said.

"Whether you like it or not is not a prerequisite. You owe an enormous debt to Admiral Biffle and, after so many years, decades, I understand, it is time to repay that debt."

The man was in his fifties and had a well-honed military bearing but had introduced himself only as gun. With a name like that, McGuire knew it was clear that he represented a man from his past named Admiral Bradley Biffle.

McGuire lowered his head, shaking it slowly. He looked aft. He saw his daughter dancing on the stern. He returned his gaze to the hard man who seemed to already expect his agreement.

"We want him out of business, Mr. McGuire – your part is to simply act surprised and, when Connor fails, you'll spread the word that the man who failed the *Regina Trader* also failed you."

"But I have family onboard."

"We've gone over it, McGuire. He is just one man and he won't be so uncouth as to arrive with weapons strapped all over him. It will be fast and clean. Your guests will be herded into the cabin and they will be gently unloaded of their cash and jewels. Five minutes, tops, and the pirates are off the boat and you can return to the pier to give that report in your hand to the

coast guard. The totality of Connor's recent failure to protect a merchant ship, whose crew was murdered, and now a failure to provide security for you. ... He won't recover his reputation."

"But the coast guard will know he is unarmed and that he couldn't help if he wanted to."

"The coast guardsmen who arrive won't ask about that – it is taken care of."

"But Connor will know I'm lying."

"Remember your debt to Brad Biffle. Remember all that he has done for you." The man smiled as he admired the modern electronics on the bridge.

"Yes, yes, of course you are right. I will play my part, but this makes us even?"

"Yes, Biffle has said that the debt will then be paid in full."

* * *

A week after burying his brothers in East Alaska, Finn was back in Singapore. He had recovered well enough to accept an invitation for a day on the water with a famous businessman who had just taken delivery of a new yacht. Mr. McGuire was the owner and Chief Executive Officer of Fantasia Cruise Lines. The company's main offices were in San Francisco, and if the man knew how bad piracy had become in the Strait, he might be open to a pitch for a contract for the security of the cruise line.

B.J. and Xou should already in place in the masts, above the party, and once they were clear of the harbor, Finn would point them out to the owner, high above in the mast, camouflaged in white, heavily armed and scanning the horizon. He hoped it wouldn't frighten him, but that it would be an impressive surprise. Both B.J. and Xou were in full white to match

the paint and wore 9mm handguns holstered in leather covered in white cotton. They each had white soft cases that protected two rifles, plus tripods and imaging scopes.

Normal operating procedures required by the Singapore agreement called for .50 caliber gun mounts to be broken down and stored while in harbor, but Finn decided to break the rule today so that he could impress McGuire by arriving at the eighty-foot yacht with .50 caliber machine guns mounted both fore and aft.

As Setiawan turned into the yacht's slip, B.J. reported that they were in position. Finn looked through the glasses and looked for them. He couldn't see them. Good.

As the ominous gunboat coasted down the side of the yacht, Finn could see the long legs of a woman on the yacht walking quickly as if to match the speed of the gunboat. He could see that the woman was swinging her arms, seeming happy as she followed the boat that was probably delaying her day on the water. He was just beginning to recognize her walk when she leaned down to look at the boat.

It was the woman. It was the woman who stayed on the fifth floor of the Copthorne Hotel that had only four. She didn't notice Finn. She straightened and continued to match the boat's speed until Setiawan put all engines back one quarter and expertly steadied up to the pier. He watched Aidan throw her arms around a shiny red-haired man who laughed around his cigar. She kissed the older man twice and McGuire duck-walked carefully down the slippery ramp to meet the gunboat.

"Mr. Connor!" The jolly man shouted, clapping his hands with pleasure. "I am so pleased to finally meet you." He jumped down onto the gunboat and grabbed Finn's arm and shook his hand furiously. "We all owe you great thanks for what you have done to make our waters safer." He leaned close and raised his eyebrows as he lowered his voice. "You know, you are already becoming quite legendary as your recent work and your military background becomes known."

Finn wasn't expecting such a warm greeting from someone so close to the red-haired girl, but he adapted quickly. "Thank you, Mr. McGuire. I'm always a little nervous when I'm about to meet a large crowd, but you have just put me at ease like no one has before. Thank you very much for the invitation and the warm welcome."

Finn watched over Mr. McGuire's shoulder as Aidan shuffled down the ramp, watching her feet carefully. He saw her surprise she finally recognized him talking to her father. He couldn't help but smile when one of her shoes slipped as she tried to stop. He could tell she was confused, a rich kid who didn't understand why he was at her party. He watched her turn around slowly to retreat, but her father saw her.

"Aidan! Come, sweetheart," McGuire called her, "you have to meet Finn Connor."

She obeyed her father, but decided to treat Finn as a vague stranger because that is what he was, but it would be childish to act as if she had never met the man. She had treated him badly, but that was then, this was now. She could not be blamed for her reaction to his frightening behavior. Still, she blushed.

"Aidan, Mr. Connor here owns a security firm here." McGuire's voice swelled with pride when he introduced his daughter. "Finn, this is my daughter, Aidan."

"Aidan." Finn nodded his head as way of introduction. He was as uncomfortable as she was.

"Thank you coming with us, Mr. Connor. Father is excited to play with his new toy."

Mr. McGuire laughed hard, a jolly laugh. "Toy, she says!" He waved his hands in front of him as his belly shook.

"Hello, Aidan. I appreciate the welcome, but this is also an opportunity, an opportunity to sell my company to a captive audience." He smiled at her and said professionally, "I hope you

and your guests enjoy yourselves.” Finn bowed slightly, dismissed her with his eyes, and returned his attention to her father.

She was stung. She turned away and climbed the ramp back to the boat. This was her day to sail under the sun and he had stolen the some of the glitter from the waves. The self-important jerk acted like he hadn’t stalked her to the point of imprisonment less than a month before.

McGuire took time to introduce Finn to all the adults aboard and, when the yacht backed out of the slip and everyone was distracted, Finn stepped into the cabin for a radio check with his men in the mast. As he talked to his men in their earpieces, his eyes were drawn to Aidan on the bow where she was looking out at the harbor. She had recovered from the obviously hostile version of herself to the girl that had been so happy before she saw him with her father.

She seemed to dance among the guests, never accepting a drink, but stopping long enough to speak with everyone. He noticed that she stopped regularly to steal a glance at him, standing apart from the lovely party. He appreciated the attention until it occurred to him that she was likely still uncomfortable that her stalker was looking at her every time she checked. He fought the childish urge to hide his face. He would try to explain his ridiculous behavior once again when they were safely returned to the yacht’s space at the pier.

Finn had a good scan routine going and was certain that no boat would get within five hundred meters without a radio challenge from his men above. An hour passed without event when B.J. broke into his thoughts.

“Boss, off the bow, twenty degrees left.”

Finn crossed the deck quickly and looked forward to see small freighter that would easily pass safely along the port side. “I don’t see, B.J..”

“There’s a small boat under the starboard wing of the freighter. Not tied up, four men with long guns,” B.J. said calmly, “a radio warning is too late. They’re committed.”

“Roger.”

“Ladies and gentlemen!” he shouted. “Please follow Mr. McGuire below deck!” He looked at McGuire meaningfully.

They knew who he was and what he did and they automatically located McGuire. Finn was happy to see an orderly procession of the guests as they hurried below deck.

“Guests are secured,” Finn said.

“Only one outboard engine, the big V Max. I can take it out with one shot.”

“Are they still under the bridge wing?”

“Affirmative.”

Finn took the ladder by twos and went directly for the ship’s horn that he remembered from his scan earlier. Xou would be spotting for B.J. through the scope, giving him the winds and distance for adjustments on the rifle.

“Xou, I’ll cover the shot with a blast of the horn on your third now.”

“Roger.”

Finn waited nervously. He wasn’t worried about the pirates – they were already taken care of – he was rehearsing the conversation he would have with Mr. McGuire.

Xou radioed, “Finn. Now, now ...now.”

Finn pulled the chain and the shot accentuated the beginning of the long horn blast. When Finn didn’t hear another shot, he let go of the chain.

“Engine disabled.”

“Roger.”

Finn watched the small boat floundering in the water and, when the freighter’s engine slowed, he made a mental note of the ship’s name. Xou knew to follow all the after-action with his scope to record everything – every inch of the freighter, enhanced sound, position, and atmospheric conditions.

“Xou, when you have everything, I need you on deck to interrogate. There’s a traitor on the yacht who doesn’t know you want to meet him.”

Finn climbed down belowdecks and opened the door to a crowded room and asked for all crew members to help. Mr. McGuire started towards Finn and Finn lifted his finger, indicating that he needed a few more minutes.

The interrogation was quick and Finn was satisfied that none of the men or women had any connection with the scum in the boat that was now being pulled alongside the freighter by the ship’s crew.

“That was amazing,” Aidan said.

Finn jerked around in surprise. “What were you do – “

“I don’t follow orders well. I thought it would be more interesting to stay up here and watch. That was amazing,” she repeated.

“I hope your father thinks so when he learns what happened.”

“Oh, he will,” she said.

After all the guests were back on deck, Finn pointed at the ship still stopped in the distance and explained that they couldn’t raise the captain on the radio and, with a possibility of

a collision, he had asked them to go belowdecks, so that if there was a collision, they wouldn't be knocked overboard. They took the news in their stride and became their happy, yapping selves again.

Finn introduced B.J. and Xou to a wide-eyed McGuire and, when Aidan interrupted, he let her tell him what happened. She was very thorough and seemed to understand their methods well. When she'd seen Finn's sudden change of attitude, she hid on the bridge and listened to his radio conversation. She'd determined that he was obviously speaking to someone on the ship that she didn't know about, and, after climbing up two levels, she finally made out two bodies who were no longer concerned with concealment since they were in prone positions with a rifle trained on a cargo ship. She went back down in time to hear Finn's plan to use the ship's horn to cover the shot.

When she was finished, Mr. McGuire turned to Finn.

"She just about covered everything," Finn said.

Mr. McGuire thanked him, not as enthusiastically as expected, but still Finn thought it was impressive enough to get the contract with the cruise line. He gathered B.J. and Xou who were wolfing down leftovers and sent them back up to their stations until the boat was back at the pier.

"I'm sorry about Penang."

Finn looked around to see Aidan looking up at him seriously, genuinely.

"You're sorry? I've been cursing myself for a month. I'm too old to be acting like a silly college kid."

"Want to try again?" she asked.

He looked confused.

“Okay, it’s my turn then. ... Mr. Connor, would you like to have dinner with me tonight?”

“Yes, ma’am, I would love to have dinner with you tonight.”

“What time shall I pick you up?”

He had to think that over. “I’m not sure. We have to debrief and make sure our clients are all covered. But I’ll be finished by early afternoon at the latest, so let’s say 7pm, same as before?” he said, smiling.

“Well, I am ready right now,” she said, “so if you don’t mind me tagging along, I’ll wait in my car until you’ve finished your work and we’ll start early.”

He thought about the twins and decided he wouldn’t bring them up just yet. “First a test – where are you staying? The truth this time.”

She giggled.

Chapter Eleven

They were parked across the street from the convenience store that was on the bottom floor of a twenty-story apartment building.

The two tattooed Asian thugs had strict orders to beat the living hell out of Finn Connor when he got home. Connor was described as wearing a Home United Football Club jersey with the number 12 on it. They were not to kill him, just beat him until he would have to spend more than a few days in the hospital. They were warned to not harm the roommates, just frighten them enough that Finn would consider a new line of work. Their boss was on their ass to take care of this guy once and for all – he was interfering in some plan or something. They didn't ask for specifics, they didn't care why he deserved their expertise, it was just their job and they would do it as if they were taking out the trash.

First, their employer called once every two hours to see if Connor had taken an ambulance ride yet, and now he was calling nearly every thirty minutes. The men didn't know who to fear most, their target or Chin Bui, who was infamous in their trade, but he was now working for a foreigner who seemed to frighten even him.

Biffle made sure that Finn was not to die, but the previous order that he not be harmed was now overcome by events. He didn't want to go to bed one more night without hearing of Connor's hospital admittance. So, at 9pm Singapore time, he decided on the second-best option and passed the order to Dub Gunn who then told Chin Bui to have his men to gain entry to the apartment and frighten the roommates and convince them that life would be very bad for them if Finn didn't find another line of business.

One of the thugs leaned forward to look at his side mirror. "There he is. Number 12, right?"

The other man confirmed the number via the rearview mirror. "Yes, 12. That's him."

When a man wearing number 51, who they thought was Connor, entered the stairwell, they got out and trotted across the road to follow him up the stairs. The two men still hadn't caught up to the man wearing number 51 when the happy football fan passed Connor's floor and continued up to his own apartment. The thugs didn't notice that the wet shoe prints continued up another flight when they entered Connor's hallway.

They followed the numbers on the doors until they came to Connor's. The door was open. They both donned gloves and, as they entered the living room, they saw two pairs of dainty feet up on a coffee table. The girls were sitting next to each other watching television and eating popcorn. When the men stepped into the room, the girls just blinked at them with their big, beautiful, frightened eyes. They didn't even move. One man put his finger to his lips, while the other tip-toed around the apartment, checking every room. When he didn't see Connor, he started looking into closets. Connor wasn't there.

"Where is Connor?" the other man asked.

"Not home yet," One of the girls aid quietly.

He nodded his head and leaned against the wall to watch as his partner walked slowly around the girls, his eyes roving up and down their bodies. He was nearly a foot taller than them, Asian but big, built like an American football lineman, with close-cropped hair like a Marine, and small, black, cruel eyes and big, meaty hands. The other man was a shorter than they were, but he had a vicious face with an upturned nose like a pig.

"Pretties," the big man said softly as he continued to pace before them.

The other girl was confused. This was Singapore. She offered him popcorn.

"No, thank you, Kade," He said, his dark measuring eyes never straying from hers.

Kade was startled and tried to remember the man.

"Come now, little sister," he hissed, "don't you remember me?"

She knew he was a gang member because of his hair – he was part of a group of Asian thugs who called themselves Jarheads. But she couldn't place his face.

Next to her, Mio stared into her lap, afraid to look up at the two men.

"How did you feel when you heard that De had killed himself?" Jarhead asked.

Then she knew. This man was the cousin of her once fiancé, a man who was devastated when she decided to stop the charade of being happy to marry a man. She was in love with a woman, the beautiful woman sitting next to her.

"He hanged himself, Kade." His eyes softened for an instant and then flared with anger. "And now you will hang." He kicked the table, sending popcorn all over the girls. He ripped the cord from a keyboard and pulled it around the circumference of the room to a jack in the wall where he cut it with a big, jagged knife.

"Boss said not to hurt them," the other warned. "You can't hurt them. You know what he will do."

His partner ignored him. This was a family matter and his brother was dead because of this unfaithful bitch.

"Cuff her girlfriend," he ordered Pigface who rushed over to Mio and snapped one handcuff around her arm, pulling it across her body, and slapping the other end over the arm of the sofa. Then he rushed to the doorway where he could keep an eye on Mio and also enjoy the violence in the bedroom.

In a few short minutes, Kade was trussed to the massive ceiling fan with her slender

arms folded and tied behind her back. Six strands of the thin wire circled her tiny torso, three around her belly, and three digging into her breasts where blood flowed. The strands that bound her arms were knotted behind her. Kade cried as she tried to explain why she had to divorce his cousin, as if it would make a difference.

The man reveled in the jerking of her slender body; the way the skin and muscles flexed, and her long neck stretched as she craned her head, searching for her lover. The need to break her, smash her and kill her was a throbbing fever.

Popcorn stuck to the rivulets of blood that already covered her nipples. He bit into her shoulder drawing more blood, and, when she screamed, he punched her stomach so that she had to gulp for air. He held her by her hair to steady her while he drove his fists into her breasts and face.

On the sofa in the living room, Mio closed her eyes and wished she could hit the man hard to rescue Kade and run away. The punching, slapping, and beating hurt her as if she were the one taking the beating. She tugged on her wrist, sobbing as the monster pounded Kade's body. She was surprised when the handcuff came loose from the sofa. Pigface had failed to check if it was locked. He had simply slapped the cuff on the sofa arm as if he was a cowboy who knew his horse believes in a loose leather knot.

She was free. That sense of freedom was instantly replaced by the paralysis of intense fear. If she went to Kade, she would also be strung up. What good would that be? Why was this happening? Now that her physical bonds were broken, she had a harder decision to make. She was much too small to stop what was happening to Kade.

Kade, why Kade? She never hurt anyone in her life. She could hear a whistle before each thud and crack as she was hit. Was that a pipe? Where did they get a pipe? I am next! She sat forward.

“Hey, stay still. Your girlfriend is being punished, not you. You stay still.” His eyelids were low as if he was sleepy from an orgasm.

Then Pigface noticed the opened cardboard carton on the countertop. He smelled fresh Styrofoam and walked over. He looked at the television and saw the glossy black box next to it. It looked like his father’s prized Nakamichi Dragon cassette player that he showed off to his mean friends. He was only able to locate one of the ancient cassettes, and the player had been stolen the next day.

He walked over and pushed the tape into the machine’s mouth. It spit it back out and the white reels and tape were a smile that mocked him. He threw the cassette across the room, jerked the player from the wall and slammed it onto the floor.

From the bedroom, she heard Kade cry out weakly, “Run, Mio.”

As she was being brutalized, Kade realized that this man wasn’t going to let her live. She was going to die, but Mio might escape. Delirious, she shouted again, “Mio, I love you, but you have to get out of h- ... RUN MIO!” Then she shrieked as he crushed her pubis with the pipe.

Kade was being torn apart and Mio could see the blood spray onto a wall, but how could she leave? Kade was all that mattered to her and, even if she could get to the door before the other man caught her, where would she run to? She’d never been anywhere. Singapore is a tiny island where anyone is easy to find.

“Kade, I love you!” she yelled. It seemed like such a silly thing to say, so out of place in this horror. They were both going to die and it was suddenly important to her that Kade remembered the reality outside of this nightmare.

Pigface glanced at her and then turned to watch the action in the bedroom – he wanted some. He wrung his hands as if he had already dipped them into Kade’s blood and he stepped

further into the bedroom with his back to Mio.

She looked around the room frantically and saw the big knife lying on the carpet where Jarhead had dropped it. She could make it! But then what? It didn't matter.

When Kade screamed again, Mio's eyes widened and she took a deep breath and lunged for the knife. Pigface didn't see her flash across the room. She dived for the knife and it cut her between her fingers. Her pinky was hanging there and blood flowed over the tip of it. I cut myself! Kade is dying and I cut my finger off!

She screamed into her sleeve and the rage fueled her hatred and her legs. She sprinted to Pigface with the knife grasped in her good hand and the butt of the handle pressed against her chest. She slammed into his back and felt the knife enter and turn. It veered off a rib and plunged into thick organ muscle. She hung tight to the knife with nine white knuckles as he turned and tried to shake her off. They moved in a jerky twirling dance as she hung onto the handle with a strength she didn't know she possessed.

Pigface finally shook her off. The pain must have been terrible, but he made no noise. He looked at her feet, seeming to look beyond her, and then he glanced up.

She could see him concentrate, as if he was listening to someone invisible. He tilted and turned and she was shocked at the river of blood that poured from his back. When he fell, it wasn't like she expected. There was no dramatic lurching about. He simply dropped and crumpled like a big, heavy sack, without a word. I killed him. Oh, God, thank you.

Kade was quiet. Mio rushed to see into the bedroom and Kade was looking at her, looking into her eyes. Mio's heart broke when she smelled shit and rust-iron blood. She wished with her heart to see a smile like the last smile lovers share before they die, but there was no smile. Kade was raising her eyebrows and grinding her teeth. Then Mio saw. Her jaw had been destroyed. She couldn't form words. But she was speaking!

Her eyebrows told her to run. *Run, Mio, Run!* She saw it, imagined her voice, and she ran. She grabbed her cellphone from the floor and turned it right-side-up so that she could press the numbers. She was already pressing 9-9-9 when she slammed into a big man in the doorway, and he wasn't smiling.

Chin Bui looked around the room slowly, the muscles flexing under the tight skin of his cheek. He put his hands on her shoulders and leaned over her head to listen.

In the bedroom, Jarhead pulled Kade's head up and pressed his face into hers.

"Are you ready, sister?" His eyes glittered.

She closed her eyes and nodded almost imperceptively.

He smiled and his eyes were half-closed when he stepped back. Silhouetted against the overhead light, he raised the pipe high. She saw a glint as it arced through the air and then a loud blast shook the room. She opened her eyes and watched Jarhead drop and his jawbone split wide on the pipe that had landed on its end.

Mio was in a daze at the doorway when the blast brought her back. She turned back to the living room and saw a trail of blood from where Pigface fell. He was still alive and was crawling toward the bedroom. In an instant, Mio was on him. She screamed and Pigface turned his head to see an enormous cartoon cat with glowing teeth become a white flash. He fell to his side, mumbling softly.

"What have you done? What have you done?" Chin repeatedly muttered as he looked at the destroyed female form rotating on the fan. "How could anyone do someth—" His anguished voice slipped up and down the octaves, like that of a boy coming of age. He turned on Pigface, who was whimpering on the floor.

"Who told you to hurt these women?" he asked in a high-pitched whine.

“Nobody. He just did it. I tried to stop him,” he lied.

Chin grew up watching his father beat his mother. For a man of few rules, there was one very simple rule that his men knew to obey. A man, never, ever, hurts a woman. It was one concept that helped him hold onto a semblance of sick sanity, and that shred of sanity made him successful, leaving others of his ilk to only look on as he climbed the ladder of success in an occupation with a shockingly high turnover rate.

“This should not have happened. We don’t do this.” He shook his head and bent over to lift his pant leg. He pulled a knife from a sheath.

As he approached Kade, he avoided her eyes and shook his head sadly. She closed her eyes, it was finally over. She was numb now, even peaceful as he raised the knife – but he didn’t cut her. He put one arm below her and raised his knife and she could feel the wires slip away. As he lifted her small frame, Kade died.

He cut the final wire that held her to the giant ceiling fan and carried her to the sofa. “I’m sorry. I’m so very sorry. Please forgive me.” Chin said.

He wished he had the chance to talk with her, to tell her that he was not an animal like these men. He might have fell to his knees in prayer for her soul, but he had exactly ten minutes to move Jarhead and ditch two cars. Six hundred seconds and he couldn’t spend even sixty of them praying, hoping to purge himself clean. But he would never be clean. He caught his breath and squeezed his chest to hold it in.

He turned to Pigface. “Put that – ... put him in your car.” Pigface slid along the wall to obey. Chin took Mio gently by the arm. He hung his head in shame, and he didn’t speak as he escorted her out of the apartment and down the steps, where his driver got out and came around to help her into the back seat of a large sedan. She thought about screaming for help, but she knew it wouldn’t matter, so she didn’t.

The man leaned out the window to his driver, "Go upstairs and get Pigface and the Jarhead. Leave the girl. I think she will survive. Jarhead is dead, don't know about Pigface. Put them both in the trunk of their car and I'll follow you to the west warehouse. Drive to the back and turn left. I'll flash the headlights when it's time to stop."

The driver got out and Chin Bui got behind the wheel of the sedan.

"Hey, move their car forward before you go upstairs."

The driver looked over at the tiny, vintage Ford Pinto, rare in Singapore, rare on Earth after a century. "Why did they back so close to the pole?"

"I don't know. Pigface is always bitching about that car. Says if someone hits the back of it, it will catch on fire."

The driver smirked and shook his head as he quickly crossed the street.

"Hey," the man yelled after him, "call for an ambulance for the woman just before you leave the apartment."

The driver acknowledged with a salute.

Chin Bui pressed his head back and watched his rearview mirror. The driver was back quickly. He and Pigface hoisted Jarhead into the trunk.

After Pigface had lost so much blood, he had still somehow made it down the stairs. But he was sitting now, leaning against the street lamp pole. The driver went over and lifted him up by the front of his shirt collar and pulled him to the car where he tumbled into the trunk of the old Ford compact.

"I'd like to ride with the boss if – "

"Shut up. Hide in here."

Pigface chuckled and mumbled something about a Pinto. "Hey."

"What?"

"What do you think is the worst way to die?" Pigface asked with a laugh.

"Never thought about it."

"Sure you have."

The driver was silent.

"Burned alive," he said, "damn straight. This car has a history of catching on fire when it is hit from behind." Then Pigface was quiet. After a moment, he started mumbling about his mother making bacon and eggs American-style. He was delirious after losing so much blood. The driver thought of the gruesome scene upstairs. Jarhead was shot in the head which explained the mess on the wall, but most of the blood came from the idiot in the trunk. What a mess.

When Chin Bui saw his driver behind the wheel of the Pinto, he told Mio to buckle her belt and he pulled away from the curb. Everything was done quietly and smoothly, as if they were just moving small furniture. Very calm.

She turned her head and looked at the man. His eyes were sad. She stared at his profile for a long time. He didn't seem to mind. She wondered how many he had killed. Why? How can people be so monstrous? Kade was only twenty-three years old. Twenty-three years of life experience, so many friends in and out of her life, grade school, middle school, high school, college, boyfriends, herself. Mother and father dead. Marriages, funerals, celebrations. So much pain and happy memories collected over so many years and she was gone – just like that. Mio didn't cry now, she just wondered.

She wasn't sure how long they drove. She might have fallen asleep. She remembered

the view through the window like a series of photographs. The car finally slowed down to crunch over gravel and stopped in a small, dirty lot with garlicky weeds pushing up around broken slabs of concrete.

“Stay put,” he told her.

The man and the driver started gathering papers from the ground. They tossed them into the back seat and then made another trip for combustibles, then another. They moved in a crouch as they circled the lot, searching and gathering. When they threw a final bundle into the car, Chin Bui grabbed the other man and twisted him around and elbowed him in the temple. As the man crumpled, Chin shoved him into the back seat with a ragged boot.

Then the man returned to his car where he seemed, to Mio, to be walking in slow motion.

“Come, follow me.”

She did.

The short distance seemed to Mio to take a very long time to cover – it was her final walk. He opened the Pinto’s back door and she bent her head to climb in. He grabbed her shoulder and pulled her back. He looked surprised for a moment. Then he shook his head and pushed her away from the car.

He reached into his back pocket and retrieved a small cube of metal. He feigned tossing it to her, a motion to tell her to catch, and then he did. She caught it. It was small and heavy in her hand. Silver, elegant. She looked up at the man.

“Here,” he took it back from her and she watched him open it with a smooth one-handed motion. The clamshell top clinked open. Then he snapped his finger on the little wheel and there was a flame. He closed it and handed it to her again.

She looked closely and pulled on it. It opened on a hinge. The sweet smell of Naphtha made her dizzy.

“Press your thumb on the wheel and spin it. That’s right. No, do it harder.”

It flamed up.

The man turned and stepped back.

She nodded her head absently and shuffled forward. She seemed hypnotized by the small flame, but she was never so aware. She felt everything. She could smell the flame in her hand and she could smell the tar and rotting fish in the harbor. She stared into the bright flame, but everything in her periphery was in sharp focus. She felt the breeze from the ocean and heard the grit under her shoes.

She heard the pig face man kicking the back seat. He was still alive and speaking fast, but his voice was muffled. She heard, she ignored.

She stepped back from the enormous heat and her eyes and her tears sparkled yellow and orange. As she walked away, the orange nimbus lengthened her shadow.

Chapter Twelve

It was late morning. Finn couldn't remember the last time he had slept so peacefully. He looked over at Aidan and laughed quietly. Her hair had fallen so that several strands were in her mouth and, as she slept, she tried to push the hair away with her tongue.

A ray of the early morning sun pierced the drawn drapes, illuminating a shaft of dust particles suspended in air. Swirling gently in the stillness, they crossed and re-crossed the light, then disappeared back into the relative darkness. Even the air smelled dry and thin.

He just lay there and listened to the city awaken. He knew somehow that a fresh new life was in gear and moving. He felt like he had some control, but also realized that the destination was unknown, was going to be full of surprises, and was going to be wonderful.

He walked into the hotel room's kitchenette and loaded the espresso maker's filter with Vanuatu and fit it to the machine. He filled the reservoir with filtered water which allowed enough steam to froth his milk. He made enough espresso for two in case Aidan liked cappuccino.

Finished in the kitchen, Finn went into the suite's living area and turned on the news. The big screen blossomed with a side-by-side glamorous photo of Mio and Kade together, the one he kept on his nightstand. He smiled for an instant and then became concerned. It wasn't like them to be public, they were extremely private. He turned up the volume. The broadcast was in Chinese, but he understood enough to know Kade was in the hospital and Mio was missing.

He rushed to the balcony. He coughed and gulped as if there was no oxygen.

Then he began to cry. He cried because he was responsible for his precious friends and he wasn't there to protect them. He knew they felt safe because of him, even when he wasn't

there. They were so innocent and had, it seemed, gotten caught up in his dangerous world.

He cried with purpose. He cried for every day that he had heard his father shout at his mother and his mother shouted back. He cried because he himself had shouted at Sarah. He cried for every time that he went to sleep and woke up in his grandma's house, and the fights that landed him there in the first place.

He cried for every child facing war overseas and war in their homes, especially those who were too angry to cry for themselves. He cried for all the parents who were too blind to see that their choices affected someone other than themselves. He cried for every curse still making its way down family lines. He cried for Mio and Kade and that their families would never understand the love they had for each other. He cried for every beautiful family dinner with friends that he had never attended. He cried at the realization that he hadn't cried for Sarah in many months.

After sorrow came hot anger. He called his contact in the Singapore police and learned that they had found Kade with terrible and life-threatening injuries and that Mio had gone missing. If they thought they'd killed Kade, he had little hope that Mio wasn't also killed, perhaps at another location.

Their apartment was only a few minutes from the hotel. Though she didn't say it, Aidan obviously wanted to go with him. On the way, he cried as he described who the girls were to him and what had happened. He was surprised that it helped to tell her all of it, all two years' worth.

* * *

By the time they arrived at the apartment building, Finn had told Aidan a very long story that made it clear how much the twins meant to him. She told him that it wouldn't be right for her

to go up, that she should stay in the car, and he should go alone. He understood and left the car, his eyes red and vision still blurred from the crying that had only just stopped.

Aidan watched an old man rush from a convenience store to hug Finn fiercely.

"Finn, I miss you so much. Why you not visit?"

"Not now," Finn said, "Not now. Okay?"

"Finn, I saw car parked, all yesterday, all last night, across street," he said in pigeon English.

Finn turned to him, inspired. It was them. He knew it.

"Can you describe the car?"

"Oh, yes, business slow last night and I draw picture of car. Come in store. I don't know they are bad men. They very nice when they buy drink or snack."

The old man showed Finn incredible renderings of an ancient automobile. He knew it was a good sign as how many of these ugly things could there be in Singapore, or even on Earth.

"This is the car the drove? Are you sure?"

"Oh, yes. That is the car. It call Ford Pinto."

"Ford." He marveled at the detail. "Were you an artist?"

He smiled proudly. "Just when free time. It's good?"

Finn nodded, "Very good." He marveled that the old man had even captured the license plate in one of the drawings. "Is this the correct license plate number?"

"Oh, yes, everything exactly. See shine on the car. I did all with pencil."

“Can I borrow these for two hours? I am meeting with the police and I think your drawing will be very important.”

“Sure, you can have. Take, take.” He shoved it at Finn and put his hands over Finn’s to show his support.

Finn stared at it hopefully. The police would surely know who the Ford Pinto was registered to, probably the only Pinto that hadn’t been melted down for an old SUV that was now melted down for a hover. Finn hoped he would learn immediately when the police were questioning a suspect. If the man was released after questioning, Finn would have one of his own follow the man, so they could carry out unpopular interrogation methods that did work.

Finn carried the drawing to Aidan and explained what it was. He then headed up the stairs that he had climbed so many times before. A sergeant was waiting for him and followed, pointing out things he should not touch. As he started for the big bedroom, the sergeant grabbed his shoulder and looked into his eyes meaningfully. Finn understood. Finn saw in the sergeant’s eyes that he wouldn’t be able to function if he saw what the sergeant had seen.

The pictures of the three of them on vacations and lounging around still stood and hung where they were when he left. He opened the coffee tin and it was full. He laughed. The Cheshire cat was missing. That was Kade’s doing. She knew he hated that cat and had finally tossed it. He would never forget that LED smile and it would hurt anytime he thought of it.

“Finn, my father called,” Aiden said, “he heard what happened.” She put her hand on his and squeezed. “Finn, he knows who is responsible.”

“How could he know?”

“He said that a man came to the yacht on the day of the attempted pirate attack. He said the man was named Gunn and that the attack was intended to ruin your reputation. He

threatened father if he didn't allow it to happen." She stared into Finn's eyes. "Finn, my father is very intuitive. He wouldn't have called me if he didn't believe it."

Finn was stunned. "Admiral Gunn?" His hands began to hurt and he saw his fingers were white as they gripped the steering wheel. He looked back at Aidan.

"Finn, I'm afraid," she said.

"I'll confirm it first, and then I'll take care of it."

Aidan was trying her best to match Finn's fortitude, but she didn't have Finn's command over her own emotions. So while she didn't question, or plead, or act dismayed, when she nodded to show that she understood, tears fell down her cheeks.

Finn used his thumb to wipe the tears from one side of her face and realized that he was already in love with this woman. He used the back of his hand to wipe tears from the other side of her lovely face. He looked into her eyes until he was sure the tears would stop. Then, nodding once, he gave her a kiss on the lips and another on the forehead and put the car into drive.

His phone buzzed so he pulled over to take the call.

Kade did not survive her injuries.

* * *

Finn walked up the pier to the Eagle pub as they were opening for business. He asked the bartender to remember his face. He ordered a bourbon and cola and told the bartender to only put a little of bourbon in his glass. He wanted to be able to taste it without getting drunk.

“Smart move,” the bartender said, “... telling me what you expect, I mean. Most fellas lose control and forget that they have to drive. Don’t worry, I’ll take care of you,” the bartender nodded proudly.

Finn wasn’t worried about drunk driving, but he was looking forward to driving his fist through a drunk’s face, at the very least.

One of his men, Sam Baker, met him at the door to the Eagle pub. Finn handed him a plain manila envelope that said simply, “Urgent, Admiral Gunn’s eyes only.” He knew that the person on watch would call the admiral right away, even though it was not the way messages were normally delivered. He called big Sam in to make the delivery because the person on watch might recognize Finn. The plan was for big Sam to stay nearby to later block the watch’s view when Finn returned with others of the CSF to sneak up the stairs.

It was Friday night and Finn found the admiral perched on a stool at the bar, as always. He was trading lies and exaggerated truth with three or four of the regulars, most Caucasians who had retired from various occupations to become ex-patriots in Singapore, but who, ironically, soon found themselves drawn to the comfortable relationships formed in this pub full of old white men.

As Finn approached the admiral who was hunched over with age, he opened his wallet to remove enough bills to pay for the first round. Before he reached Gunn, he was overcome with rage, so he turned away and walked back outside for air. He pressed his forehead to a brick wall and reached around into his back pocket. He gingerly lifted a crisp photo from his wallet. He smiled through teary eyes. It was his favorite photo of him with Mio and Kade. They

were on the beach in Pattaya, Thailand. He remembered paying a little cabana boy to snap their picture with the sunset behind them. They had it enlarged and framed when it was developed because the mountains nearly traced the contours of their shoulders and heads and their faces were lit in perfect contrast. He turned the photo over. He sucked in his breath several times and held it in to fight back his tears.

After five minutes, he was recovered enough to return to the bar and attend to the business he came here for.

“Barkeep, let me buy this great old man whatever he’s having. Hell, drinks all around.”

“Finn, how the hell are ya!” He bellowed with a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. The old man was rattled.

“I’m doing good, admiral. I saw you through the window. I hope you have time for a drink.”

“Hell, Finn! I’ll stay right here until you are tired of the babbling of an old Navy salt! Gentlemen, this is Mr. Finn Connor, ex-Navy pilot.”

The others looked around, some interested, some just looking toward a raised voice.

“He left the military to start a security company. Started out with nineteen men and, in only two months, his business has grown to thirty men. It is thirty now, isn’t it, Finn?”

He knew too much. McGuire was right. “There were thirty, but three of my men were killed. I’m concentrating on their families right now, so I turned over ops to another of our men until our lives are somewhat settled.” He leaned over and bumped the admiral’s shoulder with his own. “Imagine how many lives one life touches. Death is sad, but murder? That’s a whole different level of hurt.”

"I feel you, Finn. So how about you tell me about your world, now that you are a civilian? How are the twins?"

He absolutely could not know he called them twins. "One is in the hospital and the other's missing. I think they had a fight or something."

Gunn tilted his head and raised his eyebrows as if to say, *Aww*." Well, I'm sure she'll be back."

"You're goddamned right she'll be back, breathing or not," Finn said too quickly.

The admiral coughed into his drink. "Breathing or not? A bit dramatic."

"More dramatic than you know right now, Admiral."

The admiral turned to look at the mirror that ran the length of the bar. "Finn, I saw the girls a few times, but never spoke to them. I actually imagined you three growing old together."

"Imagined, past tense," Finn said, looking away before he became violent. "Barkeep, could we have another of the same?" Finn asked.

The bartender mixed the scotch and soda in front of them and Finn could tell that the admiral had put away a lot of alcohol already. The bartender was discreet with Finn's drink and that earned him a large tip.

"Well, I'm just sorry that the girls were beaten so badly. Just too damn pretty for scars. Awful, just awful."

The man next to him leaned over and said loudly, "Said one was in the hospital, you old goat. He didn't say anything about no beatin' and both wasn't beat up. Said the other's missing."

The admiral looked at the man and leaned back as if he having trouble focusing on him, and teetered on his stool. "I think I had better call it quits."

"Let's have one more, Admiral. I don't know if we'll have a chance to drink together again." Finn wanted Gunn's tongue loosened.

"Okay, Connor, one more."

No more Finn, now it's Connor, Finn thought, certain now. "Barkeep, two more drinks here."

Finn excused himself to go to the bathroom. When he was hidden from view, he took out his phone.

"Sam, give him that envelope."

"Roger."

Finn returned to the bar and slapped Gunn on the back a little too hard. "Gotta go, old man. See you soon."

The admiral's beeper went off just as he was draining his glass.

"Gunn here," he said. "Urgent you say? Be right there."

Finn was betting that the admiral's door was open. After all, he did have an open door policy.

As expected, it was unlocked. He felt around in the center drawer of the admiral's desk and, after he found what he was looking for, he released the clip from the handgun, pressed the bullets out of the magazine and slammed it back home.

He pulled a chair over to a table where an original Tiffany lamp sat. The lamp was the only illumination and he thought it would add a sinister effect to the conversation. He wanted the memory to be special.

It took only a moment for the admiral to arrive at the guard's desk. When he tore open the envelope, he found a sympathy card. The front of the card read,

Prison Time Heals All Wounds.

The admiral's hands began to shake. He opened the card and read,
"Will it be Leavenworth or Singapore? I WILL SEE YOU UPSTAIRS, OLD MAN!"

The admiral took the stairs by twos, pressing the numbers on his phone. He didn't care who was waiting for him, he was a U.S. Navy admiral, by God, and he was not about to be shaken by anyone. The fifth of scotch he drank did not spoil his bravado either. He stepped into a closet until his call was returned. His bought detective on the Singapore police department was only blocks away so the admiral waited.

Five minutes later, he was in his office and, after spending that time in the closet thinking about the letter and the events leading up to his receiving it, he wasn't surprised to see Finn Connor sitting near the lamp, and a gun with a silencer on the table. Gunn thought that the low light would serve him just as well, so he would let Finn enjoy his attempt at drama.

"Admiral."

"Hello, Connor."

"You know why I'm here, Admiral."

"Not really," the admiral said.

"I'm going to make you feel the pain Kade felt, old man." Finn left his chair and crossed the room to lean over the desk where the admiral sat with a smug smile. Finn didn't even act surprised when the admiral pulled the handgun from his front desk drawer.

“Don’t think so. I’ve got a heart condition, so unless you can give me a heart attack, I will be warm and cozy in my bed in a few minutes,” Gunn said smugly. “Connor, you are hard-headed to the point of sheer stupidity. You show up in this city and think you have it all figured out in couple of years. Do you know how long I’ve held this post?”

Finn nodded his head. “Yes, about six years, which is an awfully long time for a one-star admiral to be in one job.” Finn put his hands on the edge of the desk and leaned on it. “This piracy is all your doing, isn’t it? I messed up your operation and, rather than kill me, you choose to attack my friends, innocent women.” Finn shook his head slowly, driving his point that the man across from him was a simple coward.

“Wrong,” Gunn said with a smile, “killing you was my choice, but it wasn’t the final determination. What happened to Kade was an unfortunate accident. We sent a man with a grudge that we could not have known about. I’m sorry that she was injured but it was a freak accident that he didn’t find you, but found a woman that he hated instead.”

Finn leaned closer to Gunn’s face. “Not injured. Dead.” Finn said shakily. “Where, is, Mio? Anyone who really knew her would never hurt her. Only a monster would hurt the most innocent of creatures.”

“I can only tell you that she is safe,” Gunn said, “She is safe for now. You wouldn’t cave, Connor. It was the single most difficult thing I’ve had to do, but it was a necessary step to get things into your hard head. Shut down operations, leave the island, and Mio goes home to her parents and helps Kade recover.”

Finn turned and walked toward the gun waiting for him on the table.

“Stop, Connor. Do, not, make, me, kill, you.”

Finn picked up the weapon and, as he turned slowly to face the admiral, he heard the click of Gunn's handgun. The admiral racked the slide and pulled the trigger again. He racked and clicked over and over until he realized the gun wasn't jammed. Finn had found the weapon and emptied it.

"An old fool is the complete fool," Finn said.

The admiral shouted at another door. "Detective, a little help here please?"

A hard man entered the room and leveled a gun at Finn's chest.

"Well, I'll be damned. You've got the Singapore police in on it too," Finn said, turning to the detective. "Got the little runts by the balls," he said, staring at the detective, "by their tiny little balls."

The detective looked to the admiral, as if asking permission to fire.

"Gunn," Finn said, shaking his head, "when I think of the hoops you had to jump through for congress to select you for flag rank, this is almost unbelievable. You traded your soul for what? A man who truly earned that star should be able to be trusted with the lives of every man, woman and child on the planet, but you can't be trusted, and you do not possess good judgment, and you have forfeited all authority. You strengthen no one, you are cynical and entirely corrupt. No better than a worm." He turned to sneer at the Chinese detective. "So, how long has this detective – You did say detective, right? How long has this *bái chī* been working for you?"

"Oh, I don't know. Liu, how long has it been? Three years? Four?"

"Long time, Admiral. Made lot of corrupt money," he chuckled, leering at Finn.

Finn looked at them both with obvious contempt. The admiral just stared. This man was about to go to prison and that made his smug smile even more satisfying.

“Dub Gunn, your final fitness report is going to really suck.”

Fifteen men burst into the office. Detective Liu shrieked like a kitten whose tail had just been stepped on. He fumbled with his handgun and it fell to the floor where John Drake snatched it up and shoved it into his belt. Detective Liu was quickly on the floor with one knee on the back of his neck and another on the small of his back.

The admiral had quietly moved around the desk and suddenly lunged at Finn, but ran into the fist of another of Finn’s men.

Finn had not been fooled by the detective. He knew that Liu was on the admiral’s payroll all along. Detectives Chang and Gregory had all the credit for finding out that, as video cameras were positioned in twelve strategic positions around the admiral’s and secretary’s offices.

Detective Chang came in behind the Special Forces and surveyed the room as Finn fished out the tape recorder he had stashed in the admiral’s inbox and handed it to Detective Chang. The high-tech voice recording, so close to the admiral’s mouth, was a very sophisticated backup in case the camera microphones didn’t pick up all of the conversation.

Even as he was jerked to his feet, the admiral maintained a calm smile that left Finn feeling cold and confused.

“Connor, I am not the top of this food chain by any means. I have let myself become a puppet on a string. I have been working very hard for a very hard man. He has allowed us a very lucrative salary for our efforts with this piracy operation only because I have access to ships’ cargo manifests. I might spend a couple of years in relatively uncomfortable surroundings, but there will be a day soon when your world will be turned upside down and I will be placed in a position higher than you could ever imagine. This piracy is a pittance. It is only tinder for an unstoppable monster.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you’re a powerful man,” Finn goaded, hoping for more, “What does that even mean, little old man?”

“Ah, no. Anything more from my drunk ass might result in me not getting the help necessary to avoid prison.”

He was still babbling about powerful friends, even as the police dragged him away, his voice rising as the sound of his shoes receded, scuffing the high polish of the floors that once belonged to him. Then Finn heard Gunn shout desperately the name Biffle. Finn’s skin crawled as his mind raced through all that had been said about Biffle. It was too much of a coincidence that Biffle had taken such personal interest in the Connor family, had been so close to the drug trade and now was connected to Gunn. He knew that there had to be some truth to what Gunn had just shouted. How else could an obscure logistics officer know a man like Biffle? His triumph suddenly became a wave of nausea.

Chapter Thirteen

An elegant Asian man looked across the Malacca Strait towards Singapore. He held an envelope. He didn't recognized the English name on the return address, but he slid his thin stiletto along the back of the envelope and under the flap. He shook out the letter and remembered.

Honorable Abu Harapan,

I hope this letter finds you and your family well. I also hope that your efforts have been fruitful.

I have had much time to reflect on my situation during the four years that I have been in prison and I want to reassure you that I certainly remain a very valuable member of Jemaah Islamiyah.

I look forward to my release and I urge you to consider my plight and to also consider my potential value to your cause.

I realize that you are a very busy man, but I look forward to your reply and seeing a positive outcome due to the efforts by your representatives to achieve my release.

I send this letter with my utmost respect and admiration.

Respectfully,

Rear Admiral William Gunn.

Harapan read the postmarked date on the letter. Police and international intelligence knew him and his activities in Jemaah Islamiyah well, and prison officials read all correspondence leaving the prison, but he quickly determined that the letter was innocuous enough that it couldn't tie them together in the eyes of the law. This American knew nothing of their plans and had only played a part in funding, specifically through intelligence on high-value shipping so that JI knew which ships would turn the best profit from piracy. He had certainly enjoyed a profitable relationship with this man for several years, but, when he disappeared, he hadn't cared enough to learn that this American admiral had found himself in a Singapore prison.

Harapan read the admiral's letter only once before returning it to the hand of his junior lieutenant. He was certain that this letter wouldn't be the last, and further letters would become more explicit.

Piracy was unimportant to him now. Total success was nearly insured because of a very generous benefactor who promised to fund the Jemaah Islamiyah army. This American admiral had bargained for financial gain and had lost.

"Dian," he said, "this American admiral, he is in the Changi Prison Complex. He is serving his sentence with a Singapore police detective ... Liu, I think. They were processed together on the same day." He paused, considering the finality of his decision. "Please arrange suicides. For both of them."

Dian bowed and left quickly.

Harapan knew it was just a matter of time before Singapore was part of a pan-Islamic state in Southeast Asia. As the second highest ranking of Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia, he held the island nation of Singapore in contempt for its embracing of everything capitalistic. JI's ultimate ambition was to have a pan-Islamic state that would include all of Indonesia, Malaysia,

Singapore, Brunei, and Mindanao in the Philippines. But he knew he needed to take small steps. He might never see his dream fulfilled in his lifetime, but, with careful planning, his it might be realized eventually.

“Baby steps,” he whispered to himself. Looking at his watch to confirm that the break was over, Harapan returned to his meeting.

Today’s meeting had been announced earlier in the week, so that each member could research and contribute to the discussion. It was attended by the top members of JI and other less senior JI operatives.

As each man arrived, they hurried past , bowing their head in deference, some worrying they had arrived late since Harapan was already standing behind his chair.

“Gentlemen, our sister, Lin Su Bien, will not be joining us this afternoon.” He offered a smile to his trusted brothers as they took their seats around the table. “She is completing her doctorate in finance, and if Lin Su is to find money for our cause, she would do well to avoid this sorry lot of poor men.”

Nervous laughter echoed around the chamber. Underlings sat against the walls behind the men at the U-shaped conference table. Everyone could see the man at the center and his two most trusted advisors.

“The Japanese woman, Mio, she is safe?”

“Yes, Honorable Harapan, she is very comfortable. Sad, but safe and well taken care of.

Bashir nodded, pleased. Then he got to the point of the meeting.

“When we sink the aircraft carrier, we will move on Jakarta quickly while the United Nations still thinks that the Indonesian president ordered the attack.”

Harapan wasted no time and began to take suggestions as they were offered. The subject for this meeting was how best to carry out an attack on an American aircraft carrier.

There was an ambitious man present named Mukhlis Yunos, who held his tongue and was intent upon listening to the rest of the petulant presentations and recommendations, before presenting his own detailed plan that was sure to exceed all expectations.

Yunos's brilliant, though not entirely original plan, was to actually sink an aircraft carrier while he heard the rest of the attendees concentrating on simple token bombings that might disable one or both propellers or punch a hole in the side of a huge warship and perhaps kill few of the ship's men.

Yunos, on the other hand, was intent on actually sinking one of the largest warships in the world. He listened to the ideas of the twenty or so primary attendees and, only when he was sure that his plan had much broader implications, did he clear his throat to get the attention of the room.

"Gentlemen, we should sink the ship and kill all men and women aboard."

He waited for the expected commotion to die down and took note and even pride at the smiles of approval at the head of the table.

"I will present three books to you. Let me explain them before I pass them around. Over a half century ago, a truck bomb exploded and demolished the entire front of the main government building in the American state of Oklahoma, killing nearly two hundred Americans and injuring more than five hundred. The bomb was made with easily purchased ingredients. Most relevant to our plan is that it destroyed the building from the blast of a single small van.

"Amazingly, I was able to get all of these bomb-making plans and instructions from an American website. The first is called, *Big Book of Homemade Weapons*, the second is

Improvised Explosives, and, finally, there is a book entitled the *Turner Diaries: A Novel...* which is not fiction, by the way.

“The plans we have heard from this illustrious gathering thus far will simply damage the monstrous warship, but I submit that not only can we damage this American aircraft carrier, my brothers. We can sink it. We can sink it at the southern entrance of the strait, north of the Anthony pass near the shoal and a ship that large would slow, if not completely block any other capital warships from transiting the Malacca Strait.”

The room was filled with incredulous and excited voices.

“Brothers, I spent less than one hundred US dollars for the recipes that will ensure the success of this incredible act. Though the *Turner Diaries* novel received a lion's share of negative publicity, the Oklahoma bombers also referred to another book, *A Recipe For Survival*, that laid out the ingredients required for the explosives, dedicating a chapter to each ingredient – ammonium nitrate, nitromethane, and the home-manufacturing of C-4. Since the French government and our Dutch benefactor have been friendly to our cause almost from the start, we have a very large quantity of C-4 stockpiled in carefully air-conditioned facilities.”

After passing out translated scans of the relevant chapters, he produced a small-scale chart of the area and a photocopy of a diagram of the aircraft carrier that was due to transit these waters in two weeks. His contacts within the Singapore Port Authority tipped him off that the ship had made arrangements for anchorage there.

“I suggest that we have eight fishing boats cabled together, four for each side of the aircraft carrier, at proper distances, so that when they attach to the ship with electromagnets, the explosions will cause the most damage below the waterline where the ship is most vulnerable.

“Each of our boats will be loaded with four times the explosive power of the truck bomb used in the Oklahoma City blast. We can certainly come up with the chemicals and boats in time, but we will have to identify eight men that are willing to sacrifice their lives,” Mukhlis Yunos said, finishing his presentation with satisfaction.

“There are many brave men that would sacrifice their lives for Allah,” Harapan said. “They will need to be trained to drive the boats that will be used, so before we proceed, we need to tap our resources to acquire eight large boats that will hold the large amount of explosive materials that you describe.”

* * *

Harapan was awaiting the arrival of his principal advisors to watch a simulation of what would be an unprecedented attack on the seemingly untouchable American aircraft carrier, USS Kittyhawk. This meeting of JI was set up to discuss how best to practice for an attack on an American warship and thus back up maritime traffic long enough to get the world’s attention, especially the attention of Muslims around the world. A meeting was held earlier in the week and the council had decided to accept the proposal from Mukhlis Yunos.

The primary advisors knew that there was a spy in their organization and they would be sure to brag that they would sink the carrier two hundred miles north of the southern entrance of the Strait of Malacca. They would wait until the last moment to tell the drivers of the fishing boats where the ambush would actually take place and the leadership would be stationed in a yacht nearby to bask in the glory and place the blame on the occupant of the Indonesian presidential palace.

The original plan called for eight boats, but once word was out that Harapan was looking for men willing to give their lives to Allah, he had twenty-four willing men within twenty-four hours. Further, twelve Muslim fishermen were willing to donate their boats and their livelihoods to see the attack succeed. The damage would be catastrophic with twelve fishing boats loaded with very high velocity military plastic explosives.

Today, Yunos' men were rolling barrels and barrels of explosives purchased at a deep discount from the French, a nation that America had plucked from Hitler's talons. Yunos was no study of human nature, but he imagined that when the video of the blazing American aircraft carrier filled French television screens, remote controls be clicked to find something more amusing, perhaps a nude weather girl or some such nonsense.

"We have twelve fishing boats and twelve brave volunteers," Aris Munandar said as they watched the boats practice the attack on an oil tanker earlier in the year. The training the men received for a week with a boating instructor was justified as the boats carried out the simulation perfectly. The observers monitored the radios of the brave men as they communicated and coordinated their attack.

"Watch how the string is caught by the bow so that once the first boat on the string was attached to the ship with electromagnets, the boats behind are sucked alongside to attach when their cables were tight. The distances are all different and are chosen to deliver the explosive charge where the aircraft carrier is most vulnerable.

"The aircraft carrier is nearly the same length as this tanker so they will use the same length of cable that they will use during the attack. This simulation will make them comfortable with the visual distances between the boats. They will practice every day so that they do not become complacent or change their commitment."

* * *

The next day, JI senior members were enjoying the view of the harbor from the sixty foot long Azimut Yacht. Their terrorists had stolen it from a well-to-do couple from the Great Britain who had disappeared with their boat soon after their visit to Singapore.

The price of this yacht was nearly one million US dollars. It had twin diesel engines, a salon-settee, master stateroom, lower helm, galley, custom table on aft, fly bridge, and tender. It was a boat that could make royalty smile, and made holy men unholy.

The senior terrorists were watching as six fishing boats on either side of the tanker matched the big ship's speed and then slowly gained on it in order to attach themselves at predetermined spots.

The men had been practicing for several days and the senior terrorists were very happy with their ability to quickly get into position. They would position themselves at five knots slower than the target ship and maneuver so that the target ship split the two lines into six fishing boats each.

Once the ship was alongside, the lead boats would turn into the ship and latch on with their electromagnets. The next boat would then attach to the ship when the line was taut. Each of the remaining boats would follow suit.

The terrorists on the yacht watched as the last boats on the port and starboard sides of the ship attached at nearly the same time. The man in the last boat on the port side raised his radio and simply ordered, "Now, now, NOW!" On the third "NOW," each boat shot a flare away from the ship to simulate detonating their extremely potent payload. It was a dazzling show. The flares left the sides of the ship at precisely the same instant and at the same angle. This perfection added to Harapan's already incredible confidence.

Harapan smiled. His men had done very well and he intended to throw a special party for them. He would invite all the members of JI and many dancing girls. The men would enjoy a great meal and bask in the appreciation of the JI leadership.

Agus Dwikarna had been talking on his cellphone and thus he learned that an Indonesian Navy ship had fired on four Philippine fishing boats that tried to flee after allegedly being found poaching in Indonesian waters. They had confiscated their ships and deported their crew to the Philippines.

The Indonesian navy had seized a total of twelve foreign fishing boats in the past week and several officials were willing to turn their heads while the fishing boats were spirited away by the JI militia.

Dwikarna relayed the information to his comrades and they smiled with the knowledge that a total of twenty-four fishing boats would provide a much more powerful attack on the aircraft carrier. Twelve bomb-laden fishing boats on each side of the American aircraft carrier would surely send her to the bottom of the sea.

When he relayed the information to the other leaders present, there were handshakes and knowing smiles all around. They only needed to convince twelve more men that their lives here on Earth would not compare to the comfort and compassion that they would enjoy with Allah.

Chapter Fourteen

Finn was at the controls of the new aircraft and had permission to land at the government airport in Singapore. Finn was so very tired, he couldn't eat or drink and he was experiencing constant flight or flight symptoms. He was returning from a short trip to Jakarta where he was sure that a visit to the palace would give him information to find Mio but his friends in the Indonesian government had nothing to offer.

His senses were heightened, though even he realized that some of his ideas were irrational. He saw danger symbols in everything and had even sent Aidan to San Francisco against her strong insistence to stay with him to the end, however horrific the end might be. In the end, Finn asked her father to find her an important project for the cruise line that required her to be in San Francisco. She argued that her father was being insensitive, but with both men making valid arguments, she left two days after Kade was murdered and Mio went missing.

Finn knew that if JI were to take the capital city of Jakarta, it would just be a matter of time before JI made their move to make Singapore part of a pan-Islamic state in Southeast Asia, and that did not sit well with him. If JI took Singapore, his life and the lives of his men and their families would be changed forever. This was probably the most dangerous time of their lives and their motivations had to be stronger than money alone. Finn had would never consider putting his men and his organization in the hands of mercenaries who lacked team unity and direction, so he held a meeting with his men in Singapore and described the situation clearly without showing his own leanings.

While Finn debriefed with everyone who wasn't on duty in the skies or on a ship, he received a radio call from Setiawan who reported that he was following a fishing boat that had

no fishing gear on board and that had suspiciously headed west towards Indonesia when they saw the big guns on the CSF gunboat.

Piracy did not altogether stop with the efforts of the CSF and that was in large part due to spotter boats that would follow the movements of the CSF crew boats. When a team boarded a ship, a spy, usually poorly cloaked as a fishing boat, would radio to his handlers in Indonesia which ships were unattended. Some of these set-ups were ridiculous because fishing in the very polluted Malacca Strait was a waste of time for such large boats, but, as long as lines or nets were in the water, the CSF had to turn away.

The day before an OSF crew had not only intercepted a VHF radio transmission, but were also close enough to see lips moving over the microphone and then witness the boat immediately heaving to and making for the Indonesian coast without hauling in its fishing lines or nets.

Setiawan mounted the 50 caliber machine guns and shadowed the fishing boat to get a good identification, following as far as he deemed safe and waiting for reinforcements. Finn quickly mustered thirty three SPFG for two more boats that converted to gun boats as soon as they had cleared their anchorages. Within two and a half hours, three heavily armed riverine gun boats, each manned with eleven fully armed Special Forces in camouflage makeup and uniforms, drifted ominously along the mouth of the river where the city of Mojopait splits, a mere sixty miles from Singapore.

These waters were not heavily traveled and they were close to Singapore if you took an approach from the southwest. The spotter fishing boat had led them into Sungaijuntung and, as they entered the waters they found a fleet of gun ships and boats in the form of commandeered luxury yachts converted into small gunboats or armed sampans. They had stumbled upon a naval force.

This made sense to Finn. War planning experience led him to imagine that an Indonesian state under JI rule would soon need water transportation to make their military strike at Singapore, their obvious next target.

* * *

It was an angry place. The banks of the river held a dreary village at the edge of a flat, featureless plain, covered with coarse, dark green grass. The underlying soil was slippery, gray, and unwholesome looking, and, just beyond the wide bend in the river, lay the endless green and brown expanse of the fens. The village itself consisted of perhaps two dozen dun-colored buildings, huddled together around a stout wooden-framed administration building. Rickety docks, constructed of bone-white driftwood and oily logs, stuck out into the river like skeletal figures, and fishing nets hung on poles, stinking in the humid, mosquito-infested atmosphere.

Evening was settling slowly over the calm waters of the inlet, purpling the fake sails of the boats. Finn used the last bit of light carefully to examine each boat for an attack that was already formulating in his mind.

Armed men rushed to the outboard sides of the ships and held their weapons to their chests, just short of aiming at the CSF boats.

Rather than back down, Finn pressed on. He radioed each boat and ordered a photograph to be taken from each side of the cabin windows. Forward and aft 50 cal. Machine guns were manned behind armor and the rest of the crew was in protective positions. The boats were staggered at a 100 yard spacing, so that if they took on fire, the others would be able to provide cover during extraction. The three powerful gun boats slowly traveled up the river until they had reconnoitered each of the converted gun boats. It was obvious that there were no high level leadership present because there was no sense of urgency. The presence of the CSF would otherwise be taken as a very serious breach of security since much effort had been taken

to conceal this small navy from detection. None of the ships were fully manned and the crew that was on board was oblivious to their situation and flashed their yellow teeth and yellow eyes as the deadly CSF warriors slowly passed. They moved through the waters, safely into the strait again because Finn thought that he and his team could reconnoiter Sungaijuntung again on another day and then, if he could get his hands on a bottom contour chart, his Special Forces could place charges on every ship that they had photographed along the Mojopait splits.

He knew from his imbedded investigators that the Jemaah Islamiyah terrorist army numbered approximately seven thousand, but that they were still months away from sufficient training for this level of war. Once trained, these troops would take command of millions of Indonesian Aceh Rebels. Organization and training of this magnitude took money, lots of money. He knew that JI was receiving funding from a wealthy source, but he did not know who or what was bankrolling them, but he knew this for certain – there was certainly some entity that hoped to gain from the overthrow of the Indonesian government and the success of JI. They only needed enough funding to overthrow the Indonesian government with their superior numbers and then the fall of the extremely wealthy nation of Singapore would give them the financial powerful to exert ultimate power over the region and disrupt economies around the world.

Within days of ramping up his intelligence operations within the Indonesian Government and JI, Finn was hit by very troubling news from across the strait.

The news was nearly inconceivable, but the source was too reliable to ignore. He had already reported this news to the Indonesian Defense Minister and the Intelligence Chief, before meeting with the U.S. Navy Admiral stationed in Singapore, who oversaw all the logistics for the Pacific and Indian Ocean. He reported that his intelligence network concurred that Jemaah Islamiyah was going to attack the next U.S. Navy aircraft carrier to transit the Strait of Malacca and that carrier was to be the USS Kittyhawk.

Chapter Fifteen

Finn did not think that he had conveyed the urgency of the matter because Admiral Gunn's replacement just nodded politely and told him casually that he would make sure that the appropriate agencies were notified. Finn had expected him to get on the phone right then with the Commander of the Seventh Fleet to offer a warning. Finn had previously worked in this very office for a crooked admiral who was still doing prison time after his piracy operation had been uncovered. Though that Admiral was a thief and a murderer, he at least knew when to be aggressive and this was certainly one of those times.

When Finn returned to the CSF offices, he followed up his visit with an email. Finn decided that his only avenue as a civilian was to send an unclassified email to the Captain of the USS Kittyhawk. The aircraft carrier was home-ported in Japan, but was now on her way to the Persian Gulf via the Strait of Malacca. She was the obvious target.

From: Finn Connor, Malacca Security Force, Singapore

To: CV-63 Commanding Officer

Sent: Saturday, May 15, 2004 9:52 AM

Subject: Jemaah Islamiyah Threat

Hello Skipper,

My name is Finn Connor. I am an ex-Navy officer. I own a security agency serving Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. I've been in business here for over four years and employ twenty private investigators and

thirty covert agents within JI and the Indonesian government. I don't mind stating this in an unsecured email. All concerned know of my movements, but have come to accept it as one country might accept the espionage of another.

I just met with the COMLOGWESTPAC Admiral, but I'm not certain that necessary message traffic will be generated. I am not privy to the military message system, so I will tell you what I told him with this email.

A very credible source imbedded in JI terrorist camp has informed me that Jemaah Islamiyah are planning an attack on your ship as you transit the Strait of Malacca.

I can't recommend any course of action since I do not have further information, but I wanted to make sure that you were warned and I hope that your Operations Department and Intelligence Division can come up with further information.

I will certainly email any further information as it becomes available. At this time, I can only recommend that you pass this along to COMSEVENTFLT,

COMNAVIAIRLANT, and to the NSA, so they can at least have it on their radar.

Sir, I know that you cannot alter your course or your plans due to the many threats that you receive, but please know that my intelligence net is extremely accurate and I hope that you will take extra precautionary measures as you transit these waters.

Good luck. I wish you the best.

Very respectfully,

Finn Connor

Finn could not be sure that his word would get through, but he felt better that he had gotten spoken to an admiral and written to the Commanding Officer of the USS kittyhawk.

* * *

The next morning Finn was at the pier, watching the last of the three crew boats leave with twenty-four more men. For ships over 200 foot in length, he required four men to be on duty, while two slept. The day was nearly over for Finn when he saw a man in Navy uniform approaching from the head of the pier.

"Mr. Connor?"

"Yeah, how ya' doin'?"

"I'm fine, sir, the admiral wanted me to get this message to you as soon as possible."

Finn was pleased. He expected an official Navy message from only one source and it had only been one day. "Okay. Please come in and make yourself comfortable." Finn took the one page message from the "Secret" folder and read:

CV-63

FROM: USS KITTYHAWK 09360 //JJJ//

TO: COMLOGWESTPAC//JJJ//

INFO: CTF 70//JJJ//

CNO WASHINGTON DC//N2//

USS KITTY HAWK (CV 63)

FPO AP 96634-2770

CAPT MARK FELTON

CO'S PHONE: 01-0462-34-0650

CO'S FAX: 01-0462-34-0651

ACTIVITY DUTY PHONE: 01-0462-34-0648

ACTIVITY DUTY FAX: 01-0462-34-0646

N20.91

E122.22

SUBJ: REPLY TO MR. FINN CONNOR, MALACCA SECURITY
FORCE.

SECRET:

DEAR MR. CONNOR,

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR THOUGHTFUL EMAIL. YOUR
WARNING WAS WELL-RECEIVED. I APPRECIATE YOUR CONCERN
AND WILL BRING IT UP TO THE ADMIRAL. PLEASE
UNDERSTAND THAT HISTORICALLY WE HAVE ALWAYS HAD
CONTINUOUS THREATS ALL ALONG OUR PATH. IF WE ALTERED
OUR PLANS DUE TO THESE VARIOUS THREATS, WE WOULD LOSE
OUR EFFECTIVENESS AS AN INSTRUMENT OF OUR COUNTRY'S
MIGHT.

WE WILL CERTAINLY INCREASE OUR ALERT STATUS AND
LOOKOUTS AS WE MAKE THE TWENTY-HOUR TRANSIT. OUR
BATTLE FORCE COMMANDER ASKED ME TO EXTEND HIS THANKS
FOR YOUR WARNING AND CONCERN.

RESPECTFULLY,

MARK FELTON, CAPT USN

Finn was happy that he had done what he could – he would sleep well tonight.

“Sir, that is a secret document and I will need to return it to communications.”

"Of course," Finn returned the message to the hands of the young Petty Officer.

The Petty Officer turned to leave and then spun on his heels, remembering some news he'd forgotten to pass on.

"Sir?"

"Yes?" Finn smiled.

"You knew Admiral Gunn?"

"Yes, I know him," Finn replied as his smile melted into a sad stare.

"Sir, Admiral Gunn died yesterday. He committed suicide in prison. He somehow found a leather strap just long enough to tie to his overhead light and still ... well, you know."

Finn couldn't not speak. Gunn's death was meaningless on an emotional level but he realized that the hope that Gunn would tell someone where Mia was being held was gone and it left him breathless. He didn't even remember the Petty Officer walking away as he fell into a chair in the office.

He needed to talk. He called San Francisco.

"Fantasia Cruise Lines corporate office. Aidan McGuire speaking. How may I help you?" Finn was surprised that Aidan's secretary didn't answer.

"How are you, beautiful?"

"Hello, Finn," she answered. "I'm fine. It is nice to hear from you, finally."

"Well, is my Commander and Chief available?"

"I'm sure she can make time," she giggled and lowered her voice, "Watcha' wearin'?"

“Tube-top with little cutouts for my nipples,” Finn said, “and a mini skirt with black socks in shiny plastic white dress shoes.” He immediately felt guilty for the joke when he remembered Mio was still missing.

“Gawd, please stop my heart.” Aidan laughed.

“Listen, Aidan, about next week. I might have to postpone. The USS Kittyhawk Carrier Battle Group is due to make a port visit here in two days and I have information that it is going to be attacked as it rounds the horn towards Singapore.”

“So?”

“What do you mean, ‘so’?”

“I mean, what the hell do you think you’re going to do if an army attacks a navy?”

“I guess we will play it by ear.”

“Finn,” Aidan said angrily. “What in the world can you do to help that huge ship with nearly a hundred fighters and bombers on it, even if it were attacked? You know, sometimes I think that you believe you are one of those G.I. Joes on the store shelves with all the different outfits for their silly missions.”

“Actually, dear, we are trained better than G.I. Joe. He is limited to the capabilities that the manufacturers have prepared him for, and he can’t move very well because he is plastic and his arms and legs pop out of their sockets.”

“You know perfectly well what I mean Finn.”

“On the other hand,” he continued, “we have been trained for just about any eventuality and we actually do have most of the G.I. Joe outfits that you refer to.”

“Finn—“

“Listen, my sweet ass girl, the only danger I can’t handle is the fire in your eyes. Please try to understand, devil woman. It is in my blood to do whatever I can when I have knowledge about these things.”

“Pshaw,” Aidan mocked.

“Of all the men on our payroll, we have eighteen Japanese and even defected Chinese Special Forces, and if this attack took place and any of the ship’s personnel were trapped underwater, I would just wither and die if I knew that we could have attempted a rescue, but were not ready for the challenge and left them to an angry sea.”

Aidan was silent.

“I will magically appear in San Francisco after things cool down, okay.”

“Okay,” she said and he could tell she was pouting.

* * *

Finn decided that the business could easily afford diving gear for each of his Special Forces in case it was needed. Hell, they could even use it for pleasure dives. They wouldn’t be able to dive in the Singapore harbor, but if the men rounded the horn of Malaysia toward the eastern side of the peninsula, they would find fantastic diving.

Of course, Penang was ideal for pleasure diving, so he would split the numbers of dive gear between the northern office and the southern office.

He could also advertise diving along with his escort services, armored cars, and private investigation work.

Singapore is well-populated with dive shops. Diving is a bit of status symbol. Finn knew that when shopping in Singapore, if you knew the right prices and paid in cash, he would save

some serious money. When shopping there, he was prepared to haggle. Shop owners there saw tourists with dollar signs over their heads. Finn normally found their first bid laughable. The dive shops regularly undercut each other, so Finn used that to his advantage.

He would probably never have use for eighteen sets of gear. He would likely find use for five or six sets for a job, but, for now, he wanted equipment on hand in case JI successfully carried out their plans to attack the USS Kittyhawk.

Chapter Sixteen

The commanding officer of USS Kittyhawk determined that it would be best to make their approach to the southern part of the Malacca Strait at first light. Visibility would be better then and ship traffic would be light. They left night orders with the Officer of the Deck, or OOD, to wake them both at 6a.m..

The OOD stood in the skipper's stead whenever he was not present on the bridge of the aircraft carrier. It was a daunting challenge for a young naval officer, especially during late nights, being on the bridge of the huge warship. He was responsible for not only the movements of the aircraft carrier, but also the escort destroyer or frigate that acted as a plane watch, and all the other ships in the battle group.

The mid-watch on the bridge of Kittyhawk was tired, very tired. In addition to the four hours spent on their scheduled watch on the bridge, they still had their other duties waiting for them in their departments and divisions. He hoped the relief crew would arrive promptly at 4a.m., so that they might catch a little sleep until they had to be at work at 7a.m.. The only crew who were at their normal positions were the Quartermasters of the Navigation Department. They were responsible for the safe navigation of the ship. Being in a state of constant vigilance for ships and natural obstacles, and maintaining reliable visual communications with other vessels and shore stations kept the quartermasters and signalmen busy around the clock. Though one of the smallest departments onboard, their responsibilities were enormous.

The officers on the bridge began to tell jokes to help them stay awake. That meant three less binoculars on the horizon, and that was no laughing matter. The OOD had been warned at

his qualification board that he was responsible for ensuring that everyone on the bridge kept a professional watch. He was breaking that trust right now in the worst way.

The captain would carry through with his promise to Mr. Finn Connor that he would increase the number of lookouts and those extra lookouts were some very unhappy campers. These extra lookouts were not looking out for a damn thing. They curled up and pushed their faces into their sleeves.

There were several very junior enlisted crew stationed around the ship that served as the normal contingent of lookouts and they tried to make regular reports to the Boatswain's Mate of the Watch, but since no one was standing over them to make sure they were keeping a correct look out, they could hunker down and fall into a light sleep that would allow them to answer radio calls from the Bos'n when he checked up on them. They too were looking forward to being relieved. The crew came primarily from the Deck Department and their department head worked them like slaves.

The OOD, Lieutenant Barry Levy, was the first to see the fishing boats. Their running lights were particularly dim, but that did not seem out of the ordinary. If they had not been joking around and had seen the fishing boats earlier, the OOD would have had his conning officer maneuver around them at a great distance. Now, his only concern was to avoid a collision and there was a lane between the two lines that he ordered his Conning Officer to aim for. He scolded the Bos'n that the lookouts had not seen the boats earlier as the crew on the bow were nearly 500 feet closer to the fishing boats. His experience assured him that fishing boats always sped away if they sensed an impending collision.

"Lookouts!" the Bos'n yelled into his sound-powered phone. "You had all better come alive out there. The OOD is doing your jobs and his."

The Conning Officer quietly ordered, "Helmsman make your course 240 degrees."

“240 degrees, aye.”

His course was good and though he was going to pass close between the boats, it was common enough to go through many boats in a particularly rewarding fishing spot and he expected them to give way.

Two of the boats disappeared under the flight deck and he could see that the other fishing boats increased their speed to intercept the carrier. The Officer of the Deck did not know what to make of this.

Calls began to come into the Bos'n.

“Bos'n, port forward, three fishing boats are alongside, close enough to touch our ship. About nine more are also moving towards us.”

“Bos'n, starboard aft, I see about twelve fishing boats riding along the side of our ship.”

The Bos'n relayed both warnings to the OOD who did not understand the situation. Normally, small boats fear a large ship's captive wave, but these boats seemed to welcome it. The OOD had never seen a fishing boat cross that large wave and get sucked into the side of the larger ship.

The last fishing boat on the starboard side shot a flare straight up in the air.

“Bos'n, I see a flare on the starboard aft side.”

At 01:14 local time, the port aft fishing boat shot its flare. It was at that point that each boat flipped the triggers that set off the incredible blasts that nearly lifted the carrier completely out of the water. The damage was catastrophic and nearly everyone on the ship who were not

on watch were killed, injured or awakened by the terrible explosions that rocked the huge aircraft carrier.

The OOD's first thought was a good one. "Sound Admiral Quarters (GQ)," He yelled at the Bos'n.

The Bos'n turned the Admiral Quarters switch and spoke over the loud insistent gong which was sounding over the ship PA system.

"Admiral Quarters, Admiral Quarters. This is not a drill. All hands man your battle stations. Up and forward on the starboard side; down and aft on the port side. This is not a drill."

Everyone on the ship was awake and immediately in motion; their movements were automatic after hours and hours of practiced emergency drills. Those in damaged spaces struggled to their assigned GQ positions.

The Navigator was on the bridge in an instant, followed closely by the ship's skipper, whose stateroom was immediately aft of the bridge. Both men slid onto the bridge in underwear and socks.

"Gator, get us into the wind!"

"I have the Conn!" The Navigator barked.

"Navigator has the Conn!" The Conning Officer acknowledged.

The Helmsman and Lee Helmsman acknowledged in kind in accordance with naval tradition.

The Navigator took a glance at the wind gauge and wagged a course to steer the mammoth aircraft carrier into the wind. This addressed his and the Captain's immediate concern – to get their aircraft airborne.

The Navigator then concentrated on determining an accurate wind measurement for creating the required twenty five knots of wind to allow enough wind over the aircraft wings to maintain flight. He prayed for strong winds. The explosions would likely result in the shut down of one or more of the steam plants that powered the catapults that launched the embarked aircraft. The heaviest was the 33 ton F/A-18F Super Hornet Fighter Attack aircraft. They would need as much natural wind as Mother Nature could muster.

The skipper picked up the phone and called down to the Battle Group Commander's Chief of Staff.

"John, gather up the admiral, your staff and everything you need and we will have a Seahawk turning on Spot 5 when you're ready. A second will be standing by overhead. I presume you'll shift colors to the USS Vincennes."

"Yes, sir. Please call Vincennes and ask them to prepare their flight deck for the admiral and his staff to transfer from Kittyhawk to Vincennes.

"Yes, sir," The captain agreed with the radio already in hand.

"Helmsman, steady one hundred and sixty-three degrees!" The navigator ordered for sweet winds.

"One hundred and sixty-three degrees, aye!"

"Lee Helm, all ahead two thirds, speed twelve knots!"

"All ahead two thirds, speed twelve knots, aye!"

The navigator and captain both confirmed good winds on the gauges. As long as they had at least two plants on line, they would have enough steam to clear the flight deck and start moving the operational birds up from the hangar deck.

The navigator ordered one of the boatswain's mates to fetch his and the captain's uniforms from their staterooms; they would dress on the bridge.

By this time, the Air Boss was in his chair in his tower aft of the bridge and overlooking the flight deck.

"Boss, let's get everything we can into the air. I need a Seahawk on Spot 5 for the admiral's staff and another one overhead to pick up leftovers. They'll shift colors to Vincennes. Tell the pilots to coordinate with the cruiser."

"Roger, skipper."

Downstairs, Air Operations was bustling with activity. Each of the squadron commanders held flight plans and were watching the flight deck monitors from their comfy theatre seats. Subtle looks of terror played over their faces.

Air traffic controllers were passing vector information to the Paya Lebar Air Base in Singapore, while the Assistant Air Ops was on the telephone with Paya Lebar to tell a sleepy air traffic controller supervisor to be on the look out for nearly 100 warplanes to start stacking up over his airfield within thirty minutes. He'd wished he had a speaker phone so that the room could hear the shriek at the other end of the line.

The captain was still on the bridge. He was reeling with all the activity and information. In a near trance, he watched the practiced ballet of flight operations from his perch above the flight deck.

He had twice the number of lookouts stationed around the perimeter of the ship, putting a huge strain on the Deck department. He even had the Marines manning the .50 caliber

machine-guns. Hell, those young men did not even know what they were looking for. They could not be blamed for any part of this.

He had five steam plants on line tonight. Normally, he'd only have three online for a Strait transit. Again, this put the Engineering Department behind the eight ball because they needed to bring the steam plants offline to perform preventative maintenance.

He had the air wing at Alert 5, the aircrew seated in the aircraft, fueled and armed, ready to launch within five minutes. Normally, he would have the air wing in a complete stand-down so that they could relax for the nearly three day transit from their present position. Hell, they needed the rest, yet a single man had every department on his ship in a high state of alert.

He never would have taken such precautions if it had not been for that email from that Finn Connor in Singapore. If he had not taken the time to ask the Admiral's Intelligence staff to get what they could on this Connor, this could have been worse. It was still a horrible catastrophe that had and would take many lives, but still, he had been warned and for that, he was eternally grateful.

He made one more call to the flag spaces. The Admiral knew how Connor's warning had impacted the captain's planning for the transit, but he wanted to make sure that the admiral left the ship.

The Bos'n repeated the Admiral Quarters announcement for those still groggy enough to not understand what was going on.

"Admiral Quarters, Admiral Quarters. This is not a drill. All hands man your battle stations. Up and forward on the starboard side; down and aft on the port side. This is not a drill."

The condition of readiness required for a ship to go into combat is "Condition Zebra." This means the ship is "buttoned up" into watertight compartments to insure integrity and

prevent the spreading of fires or flooding. The crew moved quickly to their GQ stations before the doors and hatches were slammed shut and sealed.

At the same time, the crew were rolling their sleeves down or zipping their jackets over short sleeves. They were tucking their pants legs into their socks or taping them at the ankles and buttoning the collars of their shirts. They donned flash hoods and gloves that are standard issue aboard U.S. Navy ships. In some departments, the crew-members were also donning steel helmets and flotation devices preparing the ship to fight, both offensively and defensively, as quickly as possible. The crew worked as fast as possible to report to their assigned GQ station or work center as quickly as was practical.

After the attack, several of the carrier's generators went offiling and lighting in many passageways and compartments was extinguished, the backup kicked on automatically but they were ancient battle lanterns that provided insufficient light only for those working to put out fires.

Kittyhawk nearly instantly experienced extensive flooding inside two of the main engineering spaces with the water depth continuously changing. The escape trunks of the flooded spaces were used to dewater, and monitor the level of the flooding. It was found that single P-100 pumps were insufficient, so the crew was ordered to evacuate the space and close the hatch securely behind them.

The Officer of the Deck and the skipper listened to various communication lines as fire teams and repair parties worked hard to shore up the incoming flood of water and put out fires throughout the ship. The chatter was insistent; they could hear the terrible screams of agony as crew-members fell.

Fire Party One, normally manned by thirty-five personnel had only nine left alive to battle the blaze before them.

The skipper heard their situation and cries and ordered them to find the nearest hatch and get out of there – he ordered them to dog the hatches so that the flames could not progress easily.

He heard similar complaints from the other fire parties and the damage control teams in the engine rooms.

From his vantage point on the bridge, the skipper could see flames licking over the edge of the flight deck on the port aft side. He knew it was only a matter of time before aircraft caught fire and then the entire crew would be trapped since the “Abandon Ship” stations were on the flight deck.

The skipper messaged over the flight deck intercom and hoped that the Air Boss would answer.

“Air Boss here, sir.”

“Bill, do you have a fire party headed aft to keep the aircraft from catching?”

“Yes, sir, they are just now pulling out hoses.”

“Bill, the flight deck is our damned abandon ship position. If those aircraft catch fire, there will be mass hysteria. Are any of them loaded with weapons?”

“Yes, skipper, we have five hundred pound bombs loaded on most of the Hornets for the morning’s first sortie.”

“Dear Lord,” the skipper thought.

“We’ve got a good rhythm, Skipper. We should be able to get all of the birds in the air.”

“Keep ‘em safe, Bill. Chock and chain before it gets too bad. I want those men and women to abandon ship before a single weapon lights off.”

The Chief Engineer (CHENG) called over his walkie talkie and reported to the skipper his concerns that the steam plants might explode. He was shielding an outright request to extinguish the fires in the boilers and let off the steam.

The Skipper said, "CHENG, secure the boilers, but I want the crew safe. How is the damage control effort going in your lower spaces?"

"Shaft alley is completely flooded, so we had to go all stop to protect us from complete flooding back here. The water level is about thirty feet and there is no way for my crew to shore up the damage."

"CHENG, please think clearly. I'm just an old aviator and my knowledge of damage control is limited compared to yours. I need for you to tell me exactly how you view our situation and whether we need to prepare to abandon ship."

"Skipper, our fire parties are very low in manpower, as are damage control. I would recommend that we prepare to abandon ship. The flames and the flooding are advancing on us too quickly for us to battle with such few men."

The skipper nodded to the Bos'n. He understood the nod.

"Prepare for Abandon Ship, Prepare for Abandon Ship. This is not a drill. Up and forward on the starboard side; down and aft on the port side. This is not a drill."

"AIR BOSS, LAUNCH THE FOUR BIRDS ON THE CATS AND THE TWO BEHIND NUMBER 1 AND 2 JET BLAST DEFLECTORS!"

"Roger, sir!"

"On the flight deck, launch 1, 2, 3 and 4 and Hornets behind 1 and 2 JBDs! All other aircraft shut down. Plane Captains and Blue Shirts; chock and chain 'em down. Yellow Shirts, muster your men!"

The Skipper ordered the Abandon Ship bill complete and a securing and salvage detail was assigned.

He called down to the Combat Direction Center and made sure that they were making appropriate radio calls and carrying out the emergency destruction plan so that all classified materials would be destroyed or damaged enough that they could not serve any other country. He told them to pass along the order to intelligence as well and then he called up to Communications.

The skipper authorized the radio call on maritime channel 16:

“MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY this is the USS KITTYHAWK, MAYDAY, 002.01 north, 104.68 east, we have been attacked and are sinking. We are preparing to abandon ship. MAYDAY, this is the USS KITTYHAWK.”

“Air Boss; shut down 111, port aft!”

The Air Boss focused back aft on a Hornet that was moving forward very slowly. The Plane Captain was popping up and down as he tried to snag a tie-down point on the flight deck with the hook of his chain.

“Hornet triple sticks; shut down and go to your Abandon Ship station.”

The Hornet continued to ignore the flight deck director's frantic waving of his cross-lit wands. Another director joined him and then two weapons petty officers joined the warnings with crossed red wands. The Super Hornet continued to inch forward.

When the last aircraft was launched and the JBDs were flush with the flight deck, the Hornet increased power and lined up with the flight deck and braked. The Hornet then went into afterburner and launched down the flight deck, immediately downing a flight deck director and

seven more men and women that did not work there. They did not know that survival on the flight deck meant living your life with your head on a swivel.

The Skipper watched as the Hornet left the bow and disappeared below the front of the ship. After several moments, the phosphorescence of the ship's wake lit up the fighter as it struggled to climb into the sky. The big jet was beginning to climb ever so slightly when it rolled just enough to bury its starboard main mount into the most satisfying wave that the skipper had ever seen. The rocket of the ejection seat lit the sky and the captain watched as the seat skipped across the surface of the sea for a hundred yards, before plunging beneath the sea. The captain looked on grimly.

Without another thought about the cowardly pilot, the captain climbed down to the flight deck to make sure proper preparations were being made. He made sure that the Raft leaders took muster and the Administration Officer gave him an initial report of how many were considered dead or trapped behind a watertight door.

After he visited each raft leader, the total missing was assessed at just under eight hundred men. The embarked air wing was missing another two hundred and fifty seven. It was a catastrophe beyond the skipper's imagination.

The water was nearing the hangar deck and, once there, the ship would probably settle on an air pocket created by that. There was no way of knowing which side the ship would go. Life rafts surrounded the entire flight deck and the skipper knew that they were committed to Abandon Ship, so he used his handheld radio to give the First Lieutenant the order to deploy all of the life rafts.

The Quartermaster of the Watch determined the bearing and distance to the nearest land and he promptly passed this information over 1MC ship's intercom. "Raft leaders. The nearest point of land is the island of Aur which is 270 degrees at twenty miles."

He then made the radio call:

"MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY this is the USS KITTYHAWK, MAYDAY, 002.01 north, 104.68 east. We have been attacked and are sinking. We are abandoning our ship. MAYDAY, this is the USS KITTYHAWK."

The skipper headed below decks to urge the injured crew to get to the flight deck. He was horrified at the injuries his crew had suffered. He helped lift a man through an upper hatch. He had lost his arms below his elbows. Another man with half of his head blasted away was jabbering incoherently. The skipper did not see how this man could survive and he was fighting off any help, so they had to turn their attention to the other injured.

The skipper was in excellent physical shape. When he had won his first command of a Fighter Squadron, he determined that he would set the standard for his men's physical condition. He continued to keep the standard, even ten years after that first command, but now he was exhausted. He could not know that the ship had been fighting the fires and flooding for nearly three hours. Time seemed to stand still and now he was hitting his physical limit. He was exhausted, but found the energy to help man after man climb from the flooded engineering spaces to the relative safety of the flight deck.

"Raft leaders. The nearest point of land is the island of Aur which is 270 degrees at twenty miles."

"MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY, this is the USS Kittyhawk, MAYDAY, 002.01 north, 104.68 east. We have been attacked and are sinking. We are abandoning ship. MAYDAY, this is the USS Kittyhawk."

The skipper held his position until the water was at his chin. He had started to make his own way to the hatch when it closed tight. He was proud of the man that had to make that

decision. If he had waited any longer, he would have just sped up the flooding in the other spaces.

The skipper did not bother to try and find an air pocket to get a couple of gasps of air. He had served the ship right. Abandon Ship was in progress, classified materials were destroyed, and his crew continued to rescue those who would not survive otherwise. He wondered if he could have done more and he wondered who was responsible for this horror as he died.

* * *

The reporter and camera man were invited to what was promised to be a historical event. They were required to bring an infra-red camera on a gyro-stabilized base, as well as a news camera. It was an invitation for a late night cruise with the President of Indonesia. The two did not know the details of the assignment, but they knew it would be a very important event because the president rarely spoke to the media directly and this night-time interview on the high seas added incredible intrigue. The reporter had already stood before the camera to record her thoughts on what she thought about the setting of the impending interview and to make sure to set herself up as a groundbreaking media personality.

The reporter and camera man represented Channel News Asia (Singapore) - Asia's English TV channel that covered political, social, environmental, and economic issues in Asia. They were told by their editor to feed live images to the station. The editor had one of his private investigators covertly place a tracking device on one of the bulky cameras so that a news helicopter could be standing by just out of hearing range in case anything of visual importance occurred.

When the president's aide came up from the cabin of the 58' Azimut yacht, the cameraman fumbled with his notepad. He had never been in the presence of a member of the president's inner circle.

The man said nothing but pointed to the west. The cameraman scanned the horizon and saw a huge lens. He was instructed to keep the strange looking ship fully in frame and to be patient. He was told to use a live feed to his station.

At the time of the explosions, the yacht was stationed about one mile away on the huge warship's left side, but it still rocked from the concussions.

The camera man was using a Laseropttronix GP1 gyro platform which was based on a high-speed rotating mechanical gyro. The image of the cowardly attack was steady and clear and the pointing accuracy was very good.

The camera man continued to record the explosions and damage to the aircraft carrier, while the president's representative asked the reporter to turn on the news camera so that one of his men could be interviewed by the reporter. He explained to her that he would accept responsibility for the attack and that she could ask any questions she liked. She was flustered by the violence she had just seen, but she gathered herself to meet the challenge. After all, this was going to be her finest hour. She did not even hear the helicopter overhead.

The aide began to order men to flank the yacht's cabin door, shouting with the oranges and yellows of the murderous fires flickering over his face.

Just then the President of Indonesia climbed up from the cabin onto the deck and looked into the camera, surprise taking over his face. He paused long enough for his image to be recognized and then he disappeared below decks again. After a moment, he returned and positioned himself in front of the camera.

"I accept responsibility for this attack on the American aircraft carrier, the USS Kittyhawk. My message to the United Nations president is that we have begged for help with the impending invasion of Jemaah Islamiyah who intends to impose Islamic laws which date back over a millennia and will not worry about the neutered United Nations forces..

“I say do not be afraid of being labeled for trying to overthrow the government or for being terrorists when you are simply carrying out Islamic sharia law in full. The Indonesian government must not discredit Muslims wanting to perform their religious duties and they should not arrest clerics, religious leaders or religious teachers. That will only anger God Almighty.

“The American president vowed to help the Philippines bring Muslim Abu Sayyaf rebels to justice and to work with Southeast Asian nations to destroy the Jemaah Islamiyah group that they have accused of being linked to the al-Qaeda terrorist network.

“We are not linked to al-Qaeda and I’ve said this many times. If the American president wants to destroy Jemaah Islamiyah, he will need to send another aircraft carrier because this one will be at the bottom of the sea in a matter of a few hours.

“I call on all Indonesians, indeed all Muslims, to make a choice between Islam and the United States. I defend Islam. Now, it is up to the Indonesian government, police and people to also defend Islam, or to choose to defend America.”

“Rewind the tape and start over. I accidentally walked into the camera while you interviewed.”

“Mr. President,” the JI representative replied with a weak and cowering voice. “This is a live transmission.”

The President’s face went pale.

The JI representative slapped the camera away and the cameraman settled it on the aircraft carrier, transmitting the horror of flames roiling from the sides of the once mighty ship.

The JI representative ordered the yacht to get closer to the sinking ship, so that the video would be more graphic.

Chapter Seventeen

Finn was deep in sleep when his cell phone started ringing.

“Connor here.”

“Finn, turn on your television to Channel News Asia!” It was Eric Wright, his newest employee, a pilot.

“Okay, okay, what the hell is going on?”

“Me and Justin were watching TV, just killing time before we head out to our ride, when a shot of an aircraft carrier filled the screen. Finn, you were right. The Kittyhawk was attacked. It’s horrible, man.”

Finn had taped a note under the shop television that instructed his crew to, “Keep the television on and call me if there is any news about an attack on a U.S. ship.”

“Have you heard any mayday calls?”

“Yeah, they’ve called mayday several times.”

“Did you write down their position?”

“Yeah, Justin is looking at the chart right now. The carrier is in very deep water and it’s on fire. I know you thought that we could help if they were in the relatively shallow waters of the Strait, but there is really nothing we can do, Finn.”

“Look, Eric, I have all ex-JSFp were at home sleeping just in case a rescue was necessary. Call everyone of them in in everybody and have Justin Carrange replacements for them if they’re on the ship security schedule for the next twenty-four hours. I will be right there.”

Finn jumped into his uniform and boots and was out the door within a minute. He drove

down the hill toward his office as fast as he thought he could without wiping out. The urgency was not so much about getting his men gathered for a diving trip as it was to learn more about what had happened.

Finn sprinted down the pier. "Anything new?"

"First, a guy said Jemaah Islamiyah claimed responsibility, but then the damned Indonesian President walked right into the shot. Finn, this is really messed up. It doesn't make sense. Why would Indonesia attack one of our ships? He was definitely there because the television camera turned from a shot of him to the carrier as it burned. He must have been in another boat nearby to watch his dirty work."

"There he is again."

Finn watched as the President of Indonesia climbed onto the deck and looked into the camera. He seemed surprised, before finally deciding to rush below decks again. He watched as the president returned and stood in front of the camera.

"Rewind the tape and start over. I accidentally walked into the shot while you interviewed."

"Mr. President, this is a live transmission."

Finn leaned toward the big screen television and focused on the president's face. Finn rewound and replayed the president's appearance several times. Then Finn pushed turned the television off and turned to his brothers.

"That is not the president. That, my friends, is an imposter."

* * *

His en might grumble about a late night mission, but he was going to take two of the Eastbay Hardtop Express crew boats to the sight and offer any support that he could.

“Eric, how many Special Forces have you called in? We’re going to provide whatever help we can.”

“All eighteen are on their way.”

“Justin, please help me get all of the dive gear into the two boats.”

Once the boats were loaded, he called his Intelligence Chief.

“John, I want you to make sure that all of our intel guys and operatives get a look at the footage of the Indonesian president on the Yacht.

“Don’t say anything to influence them. Simply ask them, yes or no, is that the actual President of Indonesia, and log their answers. It might take a while, but try to get to our man inside the palace and get the president’s whereabouts at 01.15a.m. local. Call me on the satellite phone when you have a vote and again when you have the palace’s reply.”

Within the hour, he had eighteen eager Japanese-trained Special Forces SFGP ready to get in the water, each man dressed in wetsuits and waited until they got closer to their dive before putting on all of their gear. They would put on the tanks and regulators just before entering the water. .

He could not know what situation awaited him. He knew that aircraft carriers traveled with an escort so, in his mind’s eye, he could see life rafts going back and forth to the carrier to pick up personnel that had somehow gotten left behind. He decided that he would put his boat between the escort and the carrier to use all the light that the ships would provide for the rescue. He knew he needed to call the escort ships, so he took up the boat’s radio and hoped it was charged.

“Kittyhawk, this is Connor Security, over.”

There was no reply.

“Kittyhawk, this is Connor Security. We are inbound to provide diving services over.”

Still no reply.

“Kittyhawk escort ship, this is Connor Security company, over.”

“Connor Security, this is the USS John S. McCain, over.”

“Yes, sir, I bear from you two hundred and fifty degrees at twenty miles. We are eighteen ex-US Navy Special Forces running a security firm out of Singapore. We have equipment to rescue crew if she is still afloat.”

“She is up to the top of the hangar bay doors which means the flight deck is approximately at the O2 level with a bubble at the top that is probably the only thing keeping her afloat. Your help is appreciated. We have a compressor on board that we can use to refill your tanks as required. Just let us know and we will redirect one of our boats to yours to refill the tanks.”

Thirty minutes later, Finn found himself between two magnificent warships, one of which would belong to the sea in only a few hours. The rescue scene looked like a bright carnival, with orange plastic-protected lights strung between the ships and powerful searchlights trained on the garish orange life boats that were unloading the injured and dead as quickly as they could.

Four Guided Missile Cruisers and Guided Missile Destroyers took positions fore and aft on either side of the Aircraft Carrier and directed their powerful water hoses on the weapons still hanging from the wings of the remaining aircraft on the flight deck. The mist from the hoses only added to the horrific gala.

The air was barely breathable. JP-5 Jet fuel coated the surface of the water and the men were holding out hope that a fire did not ignite it. Finn instructed the men and Setiawan that, if the surface of the sea caught fire, the boat was to move southwest, away from the fire, and the divers would find him.

He and his men were already in their full gear when they arrived. They needed no direction. They knew to strap their flashlights to their forearms and dive to the hangar doors and find the air pocket. They followed Finn and his flashlight into the dark sea.

When Finn surfaced inside the ship, he saw hundreds of men and women struggling to stay afloat. They each had the fear of God in their eyes and the air was fouled by jet fuel and DFM or distillate fuel. He grabbed the closest man, told him to keep his body limp, and handed him the octopus regulator. When the man started breathing from it, Finn jerked him under and started the swim back down to the elevator doors and then back up to his boat. Setiawan had the boat's aluminum ladder overboard and reached down to help the man aboard. Finn was then immediately off on his next trip.

Soon there were eighteen men on the boat and Setiawan decided that thirty-six would be the limit and he would deliver those men to the destroyer and return for thirty-six more. The air pocket at the top of the hangar bay held breathable air long enough for Finn and his Special Forces to rescue all two hundred and sixteen men and women.

The Special Forces returned to the boat when there were no other men or women hanging onto life and they took this time to recharge their tanks onboard the destroyer.

Finn was the first to reach the landing on the destroyer. The air compressor was sitting there, as promised, and he also found twenty-two already filled tanks. Finn left one of the Special Forces to refill the CSF tanks, while he and the others took the twenty-two tanks and went looking for more lost souls.

Finn was glad to be back in the water. The agony and screams of the men being transported to the ship were deafening. He knew that he could never have a nightmare as heart-wrenching and horrific as the scene being played out between the aircraft carrier and the destroyer.

Finn split the divers into twos. It was much safer to dive with a buddy when you were going into unknown areas.

The best that they could do was to try and open the hatches to see if there were any survivors remaining, but the weight of the seawater prevented them from doing that. Several divers were clever enough to float back up to the air pocket to try the hatches and doors there. They did manage to get some open, but there was no one there to greet them.

They emptied their tanks, so Finn determined that they would find no more with their limited gear.

“John S. McCain, this is Connor over.”

“Roger, this is John S. McCain.”

“John S. McCain, we have rescued two hundred and sixteen souls from in and around the hangar bay. Please advise if you know of another good search area. In the meantime, we will remain on-station to provide diving services as required.”

“Mr. Connor, this is John S. McCain, I copy all and understand that you have searched both hangar bays.”

Finn’s jaw dropped. He forgot that the two hangar bays would have been sealed off from one another. He had only searched the forward hangar bay one. “Negative, we’ll top off out tanks and go to work on hangar bay two.”

“Roger.”

Finn directed Setiawan to drive carefully through the carnage until he found the second elevator.

“Setiawan. Same drill. You drive north if the water catches fire.”

He and his men had their refilled tanks and were already in full gear when they arrived. They had experience now and knew to strap their flashlights to their forearms and dive to the hangar doors and find the air pocket.

The CSF recovered 257 crew-members from the Hangar Bay two. Their total recovery was 473 men and women – a huge accomplishment by any standard.

“Setiawan, get us back to our tanks. I paid out the ass for those damn things and I want all thirty-six of them back on this boat.”

“John S. McCain, this is Connor, over.”

“Go ahead, Connor.”

“Sir, we have recovered four hundred and seventy-three men and delivered them to your ship. It has been three hours and my Special Forces are exhausted. With your permission, we will be heading back to Singapore while we still have fuel.”

“Connor, this is the captain of the John S. McCain. You’ve done the United States a great favor and it will not be forgotten. If possible, you could tie yourselves to my ship and kill your engines to conserve fuel. We can also bring down cans of fuel to top off your tanks. I would appreciate having divers nearby in case we find ourselves in need of your expertise.”

“Roger, sir, I agree. My men will rest here and if you need us, just call.”

Finn turned to his men and smiled with pride. “Four hundred and thirty-seven men,” he said, “Can you believe what we have accomplished? There are at least four hundred and thirty-

seven families that we have saved from the horror of losing a family member. I think that you all should try to sleep through the noise and I will take the first four hour's watch, in case we are needed."

Wayne Carter, B.J. Pagel and John Griffin volunteered to stay awake with Finn.

Five hours later, the flight deck was just above the water and, five hours after that, the USS Kittyhawk disappeared below the surface.

* * *

Dark, windowless and small, in a basement below the White House West Wing, the Situation Room already feels cramped even though only the President and ten others sat around the table that had one empty chair. There were six other assistants against the wall but they would soon be cramped as well with the implosion of the CIA director and his regional briefers. The seventeen men and women in the room could only imagine how the NSA phones had been lighting up.

The men awaited the CIA director who was undoubtedly putting the whip to his staff to put together a plausible brief for the president after a disaster that took his staff and the National Security Agency completely by surprise.

Many of the men and women already in the situation room were not at all surprised by the attack. Indeed, several deputies in the CIA and the NSA were copied a secret message from the Commanding Officer of the aircraft carrier Kittyhawk to Mr. Finn Connor who owned a security firm in Singapore. This man warned of an attack as the ship neared Singapore.

It was expected that such communications be shared up and down and across the governmental chains of communication but that has never been successful and probably never would be.

“Mr. President, you might remember Mr. Connor. You...”

“Oh yes I certainly do. First time I’ve had the honor to sign off on a Medal of Honor citation. Amazing guy! Have any of you folks had the opportunity to meet this man? Even better, have any of you men ever seen this man’s service record.”

Admiral Bradford Biffle, Chief of Naval Operations and Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, laughed. “I haven’t seen his service record but I know the man well. He was the Aide de Camp for an Admiral in Singapore when he was active duty. He’s as sharp as a needle, and a hoot to be around.

“Hell, I thought his name was Dan Singbaer for over a year. He even let me introduce him as Dan or Lieutenant Singbaer for all that time until his Admiral corrected me and told Finn to take off that damn nametag and crush it under his foot. I almost fell on my ass when I realized the balls Connor had; running around for so long with highly placed civilian and government officials calling him “Dancing Bear.” Not to mention a year’s worth of Admirals and Admirals.”

The table shook with the laughter of appreciation as did the walls where the contingent of military aides took chairs in order to take notes for their Admirals and Admirals.

The Chief of Staff of the Air Force looked over his shoulder, “Don’t you guys even think about it,” He warned the wall of Aides with a smile.

That got another round of laughs.

The chairman’s face then became somber. “You know, Finn’s own security personnel flushed out his Admiral as a murderer and the leader of a piracy outfit that even fed off of our own supply ships. Sadly, several of his friends and girlfriends were killed before he could connect the dots.”

The President focused on the wall and thought out loud “My God, could you imagine the

heartache he must have felt to lose his friends and love only to discover his ex-boss and good friend was responsible for the bottom dropping out of his life.”

Then changing the subject, “Gentlemen, the closest assets we have are two Guided Missile Cruisers, two Guided Missile Destroyers, and two Guided Missile Frigates. “Using the weapon systems on those ships would be like trying to hit cow patties by firing lawn darts from Austin into Oklahoma. Similarly, we can’t just start dropping paratroopers into that damn jungle.

“I think we are going to be in here for a while so let’s get some pitchers of water and pots of coffee.”

“Mr. President we have VINCENNES on the line now.” A staffer announce importantly.

“Captain, this is Stallings Scott. I want to thank you and your men for your heroic efforts in your efforts to assist the crew of KITTYHAWK.”

“Mr. President, This is Rear Admiral Johnson, Battle Strike Force 5. I’m standing here with the Skipper of VINCENNES. I have shifted my command from KITTYHAWK to VINCENNES and we have coordinated communications so that the Captains of each of the ships in our Battle Group each are monitoring and can respond to this conversation with your permission.

“The real heroes are the men and women on every ship of this Carrier Strike Group. The crew of VINCENNES is doing everything they can to assist but your first thanks need be directed to the crew of JOHN S MCCAIN. They were first on station and their efforts and actions have been nothing less than magnificent.

“The Guided Missile Frigate GARY has given chase to the Yacht that filmed the cowardly attack and they have reported that their Seahawks are finally overhead that boat. The helicopters report a single man at the helm and a frightened cameraman and a woman who appears to be a reporter on above decks.”

“Admiral, have one of their Seahawk crews don night vision,” The Chief of Naval Operations ordered. “Have them search the waters for a darkened speedboat with flat black colors. I doubt the bad guys are still on the yacht and I’m sure they are sprinting for a nearby cove.”

“Roger, Sir.”

“My thanks to you both: JOHN S MCCAIN, do you have a head count?”

“Yes sir, I do. We are updating the original abandon ship muster provided by the KITTYHAWK Administration Officer. The Carrier got underway with 4,806 ship’s crew and airwing, not including 70 Admiral’s staff that was successfully transferred to VINCENNES.

“Of the original 4,806, we had 1,057 unaccounted for, but 437 men and women have since been rescued from beneath the ship and waters by the Malacca Security Force which is a company based in Singapore.

“Our current unaccounted for are 620. The Malacca Security Force is manned by ex-military and they arrived about 30 minutes after the explosions with two big crew boats and about twenty divers.”

The Commandant of the Marine Corps slapped the table in appreciation. “God bless those hard-asses!”

“Where is Connor now?” The President asked.

“They’re tied up to my port side taking on fuel and topping off their air tanks.”

“Captain, do you think one of your men could get Connor to your radio?” “Absolutely sir, it will be a few minutes. Please stand by.”

The President pushed away from the table. “I can’t believe how easy it is to get our ships

on the telephone when they are at sea and at the same time I can't even get the President of Indonesia on the phone. He's had plenty of time to get from that yacht back to his palace."

"Mr President, we cannot be sure that it was actually the Pres..."

"I know, I know. I was just being facetious," He laughed. "There, I finally got to use facetious in a sentence."

That got chuckles from everyone considering the situation. The President was a genius at putting a room at ease and if ever there was a time for breaking the ice, it was now.

After a five minute wait they smiled as they heard old time cursing and commotion coming from the radio.

"Shit that hurt. Damn it, I forgot how anal you guys are about these slippery shiny decks," Finn complained loud enough for the Situation Room to enjoy.

"I'm sorry sir, here let me..."

"Naw, I'm okay. It's my own damn fault. I should have left my dive booties on. Hell if the damn ladders don't rip your damned feet up, the tile will send you across the floor like one of them pretty Japanese figure skaters."

"Bos'n, get us some towels up here," The Skipper of JOHN S MCCAIN ordered.

"Hey Dancing Bear," The Chairman leaned into the speaker phone, "Brad Biffle here."

"Hey Admiral," Finn laughed, "How the hell are you?"

"I'm fine Finn, it's taken us a while to get around to it but many thanks for the warning shout. The carrier took critical damage but the ship was in a high state of readiness due to your efforts and had all repair lockers manned and the airwing in Alert-5."

"I only wish we could have put together specific intelligence on our end. An attack at sea

took water craft and practice. My intelligence should have picked up on that sort of thing.”

“I hear you’ve been swimming Mr. Connor,” The President smiled.

Finn knew where the Admiral was and knew who populated that room.

“Yes sir, Mr. President. But, I must admit that we were weak in comparison with some very courageous sailors in this Battle Group.

“Hey Mr. President, have you fellas decided that it was not president Yudhoyono on that yacht?”

“Well Mr. Connor, this is a secure satellite phone and if the Captains can assure me that they are not on speaker phone, I can answer your question.”

“VINCENNES secure, sir.”

“CURTIS WILBUR secure, sir.”

“JOHN S MCCAIN secure, sir.”

“FITZGERALD secure, sir.”

“VANDEGRIFT secure, sir.”

“GARY secure, sir.”

“Mr. President, I’ll answer my own question at the risk of sounding pompous.

“Gentlemen. That fella that walked into that camera was not the President of Indonesia.

As he predicted, his proclamation brought silence and he could imagine the looks of skepticism his words brought. Who was he to make such a strong declaration to this room of the most powerful men in the free world?

“Connor,” The Chief of Staff of the Army began, “Would you please explain the methods

you used to assure our President that the man that stood over the catastrophic sinking of one of the most powerful instruments of our country's might was not the man that he appeared to be?"

"Sir, over the years we have recruited many ex-military and government intelligence officers from the United States, China, Singapore and Indonesia. I won't detail our specific tactics except to identify those that we find most effective. Those are Close Target Reconnaissance; Static & Mobile Reconnaissance; Covert Photography; Audio / CCTV Surveillance; Communications; Map/Photo Studies; and Armed/Unarmed Combat, which we excel at with over forty ex-Special Forces from all of the United States Armed Forces and the Chinese PLA-Special Operations Force.

"All that impressive stuff bragged about, the intelligence that secured this information was simple HUMINT, Human Intelligence.

"Before we got underway, I instructed my Intelligence Chief to ensure each of thirty Intelligence operatives found a television and give a yes or no vote whether they thought it was the President or not.

Twenty eight voted that it was not the President and one voted that it was the President. This confirmed my own certain decision as I watched the video over and over while we dressed out for the trip to the carrier."

"Mr. Connor, what reason did the one hold-out give for the no vote?"

"I'm not sure sir, I had her shot," Finn paused for a moment while he imagined seven sets of eyes growing into saucers. "Hell, I'm just kidding. Truth is; I've never assigned her to a post that would put her near the President, so she could not know him. She should have disqualified herself. I think she might be working for the other side so I have her under surveillance. Sounds harsh but that's the way it is in this part of the world."

The President tested him. “Mr. Connor, I’ve played golf with the President and if that was an imposter, his makeup artist and costumer deserve Academy Awards.”

“Sir, with all due respect, I taught the President Yudhoyono how to use his Xbox when he was Admiral Yudhoyono. I used to sit on a pillow in front of a television right next to him and kick his ass regularly, especially Grand Theft Auto...that’s his favorite. He never reads instructions so I beat him when I want. The flight controls on the Xbox controller are a little weird so I can beat him when I want but I let him win sometimes.”

There was a lot of snickering in the room and the senior Admirals and Admirals marveled at Connor’s ease and manner.

“Finn, quick math has a vote of only 29. You said you had 30 men in the field,” The Chairman challenged.

“Yes sir, I was getting to that. This might seal the deal. Number thirty is as close as you can get to the President.”

Finn had this table won over. They felt like they had known him forever and they hung on his every word.

“It took a while to get in contact with him and I just got his report while we were refueling down below. The President of Indonesia that we know was rummaging around in his refrigerator in brown silk pajamas with little white flowers on them while another President of Indonesia was on a Yacht off of the port side of a sinking United States aircraft carrier.”

As the President’s top advisers filed in, their faces drawn and shocked from an attack entirely unexpected from a region relatively quiet on the world stage, the room was quickly standing room only, with junior staffers waiting outside the doors leaning into the walls. The passageway was noisy with the chatter of fingers flittering over notebook computer keypads as

desperate staffers pulled together what information they had in case they were called in to brief the President. The desperation was stifling as they waited outside the door.

Arrayed around the table was one of the most seasoned foreign policy teams ever assembled by a President. A U.S. Aircraft Carrier was sinking in the waters off of Malaysia's southern peninsula and it seemed that the President and the Joint Chiefs were shooting the breeze with someone on the other end of the speaker phone.

"Mr. President, we have the President of Indonesia on line five," The staffer deselected the speaker phone function.

"Finally, what the hell is this? Telegraph?" he rolled his eyes, "put him through."

"Hello, this is President Yudhoyono."

"Hello Mr. President. This is Admiral Bradford Biffle. Please hold for President Scott," General Biffle still had Finn on speakerphone.

"Dancing Bear hold the phone while the President takes a call from President Yudhoyono."

"Roger."

The head of the CIA was fuming. He knew of no operative codenamed Dancing Bear.

"Mr. President, Hello, this is Stallings Scott."

"Hello Mr. President."

"We have a problem SBY."

"Yes sir, big problem."

After everyone had settled into their seats, the President waved everyone down with a smile as if to put them at ease for a moment.

Mr. President, please humor me sir. Please describe your pajamas when you were awakened with the news of the attack.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand?”

“Megawati, I am a superstitious man. After the aircraft carrier was attacked my staff woke me up and I was wearing satin blue pajama bottoms and a white tee-shirt. What were you wearing when you woke up?”

Everyone in the room, except the President plus sixteen, was bewildered with the bizarre question.

“I...I slept in a brown pajama with cherry blossom. It was a gift from my wife.

The original seventeen laughed quietly in conspiracy and the President smiled sweetly to the rest of his audience. Everyone in the room recognized the delicate white flowers that blossom from the 7,000 cherry blossom trees, gifted from Japan to the U.S. in 1917, that line the Tidal Basin near the Jefferson Memorial and the grounds of the Washington Monument on the National Mall.

“My wife bought the pajama for me. Do you remember my wife? She was beauty queen not so many years ago.”

“Mr. President, my good friend. You know well what has happened and you know that our countries must work together to avenge this cowardly act. I have enough information to stand before the world now and announce that it was an imposter that stood before the cowardly attack on USS KITTYHAWK as she transited peaceful waters. I will not announce that we know that Jemaah Islamiyah was responsible however. I do not want them to hurry their preparations. I want them to feel safe in the knowledge that they are safe from our retaliation until we can get U. S. warships and troops in the area.”

“Yes Mr. President. We will do as you ask. Tomorrow I will publicly express my country’s deep condolences for your loss and I hope that, in that time, your intelligence can clear me and my staff as guilty of any having any part in any of this and an authority figure can make this public knowledge before my public appearance. Please accept my condolences on behalf our good countrymen and the misled people of our northern provinces.”

“Well said my friend. Good bye Mr. President.”

When that line went dead the President redirected his voice. “Dancing Bear, are you still there?”

“Yes sir, I copied all.”

“Well, that’s settled. I’m sure you know where we stand. We’re about to dig into this thing but I would like to hear your thoughts before we begin. From the hip, what would you recommend for immediate action?”

Finn had been obsessing over these very thoughts during the boat trip out and while they waited below. He was not shy and he paused for only a moment before speaking.

“Mr. President, Mr. Secretary, Admiral, Joint Chiefs, Gentlemen.

I recommend that every helicopter in the KITTYHAWK Battle Group begin ferrying the remaining aircrew and airwing from the escort ships to Singapore’s Paya Lebar military airbase.

“Usually aircraft carriers conduct at-sea replenishment just before the Malaccan Strait transit so the replenishment ship is probably still nearby. If so, we can start to transfer weapons to the airbase with their Sea Knights. We need those aircrew and airwing personnel to have those birds ready to go until this thing shakes out.

“In the meantime, I would like to take the surviving members of the Marine security contingent from the carrier and post them at ferry landings south of Jakarta on the western side

of the island where there seem to be an awful lot of single Indonesian men traveling from Aceh in the north to landings south of Jakarta. These men are traveling light and without family. If we can post several Marines at the landing as a security pat-down, other Marines can wander around behind them, ostensibly on break, to plant scuttlebutt that we already have two Battalions of Marines surrounding the palace and three other Battalions in position to the south. Once the new arrivals join the rebels, word of five battalions of well-equipped U.S. Marines will spread like wildfire. Obviously these Marines don't exist but the thought of that many trained war fighters on Indonesian soil will destroy moral. Of course, that's only a band-aid that might possibly stop the blood until I can get my men close enough to neutralize the leadership. In the meantime consideration might be given to airlifting whatever Marines that you have from III Marine Expeditionary Unit from Okinawa to Paya Lebar military airbase.

"If you please, I would also point the ships of an Amphibious Readiness Group towards Indonesia and get those pilots flight deck certified. At the same time the Super Stallions and Sea Knights could start moving Marines from the Naval Amphibious ships to Paya Lebar airbase or even coordinate with the Indonesian Army for rope drops on the palace grounds. If they land in Singapore, I could have several buses to make round trips from the airfield to Diponegoro pier. I can have a shallow draft transport ship standing by for the 25 mile transit to Indonesia where I'm certain that the Indonesian Army can clear the landing site and a wide berth to the palace. It's a short transit so we can make as many trips as we need in quick succession.

"JI is probably working furiously to make their move before the United States puts this all together. Obviously, they're gambling that U.S. and Indonesian relations will be pretty shaky for a while and they are going to make their move in the confusion, betting that the U.S. doesn't really know or care who to side with. Winner takes all.

"If you can loan me a couple SEAL squads or any other similar size Special Forces unit,

I can put together a team that can wipe out their leadership and they won't know who or what hit them. Without leadership, those ferry operators will be making money hand over fist moving those ragged men back to the north and back to their homes." Finn felt bad for that request but he still had a business to run.

"Whoa Dancing Bear," the President broke in, "I'm looking around this room at about twenty pens and pencils flying across paper as fast as possible. Let's give them a chance to catch up. We'll take your recommendations to heart and use what will assimilate.

"Get back to your men Finn and pass along our country's thanks. I hope to meet them all in person on my next visit to the area."

"Yes sir. Good luck gentlemen. I hope that we can be of service."

As he deselected speaker phone, the Chief of Staff of the Army raised his eyebrows.

"I'll say this; the man has good instincts."

Chapter Eighteen

“Ricky, you’re not off the hook at all for that stupid broken leg. I don’t know what got into you except about a eight pints of beer to do something that stupid, jumping off the roof into that little thing. What is wrong with you?”

“Finn, how many times do I have to apologize?”

“That’s the last one. I think I’ve heard enough out of your trap anyway. Everyone is waiting for me at the airport and we can’t wait on our visiting help. We’re going to go ahead and take the boat over and set up on the beach.

“Have Setiawan meet the aircraft, just in case. If they’re on board, have him bring them to the pub to rest up. In the meantime, get one of the pilots to preflight the Poseidon. I’ve got enough chutes on the bus for all of them. If they don’t have any GPS units, loan them some. Ricky, can you do that?”

“C’mon, Finn, stop picking on me, I’ll take care of everything.”

“While we are out fighting bad guys – what we are paid to do – I want you to put together a smashing farewell party upstairs for our active duty Special Forces. I know you well enough that you can come up with enough money to make us all proud ... without dipping into the pub’s till.”

“I do not want them hitting on the Sarah’s and Rosie’s, so I was hoping you could find some girls that would like to attend a party in The Drunken Duck private room.”

The visiting help were experts on hostage rescue and were led by a guy named Commander Chuck Raul from SFGp Team One based in Okinawa, Japan, where Alaska had eight operational SFGp platoons and a headquarters. SFGp Team One’s geographic area of

concentration was Southeast Asia. The Team deployed platoons to Naval Special Warfare Unit ONE in Guam and conducted deployments for training throughout the Pacific and Central theaters.

Commander Rayl's men had already attended a wide variety of military schools in order to obtain the skills that would be required of small infantry units operating in the jungle, but this training met their quarterly jungle qualifications. Having been restricted to near shore operations while with the underwater demolition teams, SFGP squads Bravo and Charlie were ready to move further inland than most of their units.

Finn and his crew had waited as long as time would allow and instructed Ricky to have the CSF aircraft standing by to parachute into the designated landing area that he pointed out on a topographical map. This was not problem for Ricky, since he had personally made the drop nearly a hundred times himself. He would even accompany the active duty SFGP for their trip and call out the drops.

As Finn and crew neared the beachhead, Finn's cell phone vibrated.

"Finn."

"Finn, the active duty guys are on their way. Setiawan passed a head count of eight and we're top heavy with a Lieutenant Commander, Chuck Rayl."

"Eight is the number the commander promised. Don't know the story about us having such a senior babysitter. We're still about forty minutes out from the beachhead, so let them rest up for an hour or so and we will mark their landing area. Did you get them a pilot?"

"Yeah, they fought over it as usual. I let them figure it out, but I told them to have the aircraft ready to go in two hours."

“Thanks, Ricky.”

Ricky was not off the phone for more than a couple minutes when he heard gravel crunch and brakes hiss as Setiawan’s bus settled just past the entrance of The Drunken Duck.

Ricky pushed and pivoted himself onto his crutches and rushed to make it to the door before the first of his guests.

“Hello and welcome guys. I’m Ricky Justice. Come on in and make yourselves at home. We’re real happy to see you fellas. Setiawan, come on in for a spell.” It was not in Setiawan’s nature to come into the pub without an invitation, no matter how the men tried to make him understand that this pub belonged to him as much as any other in the company.”

The men all introduced themselves to Ricky and were happy to meet him. Over the years, the exploits of the CSF had turned become legendary and more than a few men had fantasized about an exciting life in the Far East putting their training to the test nearly daily. The next few days promised them sea stories of their own; stories that they might not even need to embellish upon.

“Guys, this is The Drunken Duck Irish pub. This is the CSF’s pub and it is a working pub. Let me introduce you to the staff before we open in about five minutes.

“Gentlemen, this is Rosie, Sarah, Sean, and Colin. Ladies and gentlemen, these men are from Coronado, California. They will be visiting with us for a while. Please put their charges on my tab.”

The staff smirked and groaned to themselves. Ricky did not have a tab. None of the CSF had a tab. He was just showboating. As much as each Rosie and Sarah had a huge crush on

Finn, they were equally revolted by Ricky. He carried himself as the big shot night club owner which was in complete contrast to the warm and friendly atmosphere of the pub.

The visiting Special Forces noted that the staff numbered thirteen, yet Ricky had only named four. They trusted Ricky, but knew to verify. They made their way around to shake hands, reading name-tags as they went and so they found that the very Asian staffers were indeed Rosie, Sarah, Sean, and Colin.

“What’s up with the cast?” A young Petty Officer asked about Ricky’s itchy leg.

The men perked up. The story was bound to live up to the CSF legend.

“Well, Finn discourages me from drinking, so I drink only occasionally. I sometimes have a few drinks with the guys and wake up a few days later as a missing person.

“We serve Guinness here and I truly enjoy it. When I am enjoying Guinness, my frontal lobes deteriorate to a greater degree than most.

“I received a very polite bet that I could not jump from the roof and land in the swimming pool in front. Well, I took that bet and won. Unfortunately, I broke my leg in the process. Finn is still very angry with me and I hope that when you see him you will say that I was a very gracious host.”

While Ricky was pleading his case, three of the men were refreshing their memories of the front of the pub and confirming that there was no swimming pool. They looked to Commander Rayl and shook their heads.

“Ricky, where is that pool again?”

“It’s on the side of the pub. Finn won’t let us use it anymore.”

The same men walked to the side of the building and when they saw no swimming pool, they shook their heads dejectedly as they started back to the entrance. They were hurt that one of their heroes had told such a bizarre lie.

Just as they passed the edge of the building, one of them laughed out loud. The others watched as he rolled a plastic children's swimming pool from the side of the pub where it had been leaning. It was barely a foot deep.

When they returned to the pub, the Commander looked at them for confirmation. The men smiled and nodded. They would tell their boss later just how crazy this son of a bitch was.

The men took their seats around Ricky and their Commander and were yearning for the incredible beauty of the waitresses when the doors opened and a flood of smiling and chattering humanity filled every table and barstool in the place.

Ricky was happy that he had the foresight to order food for his guests. Doris and Sarah carried trays of each item of the food on the McCaffrey/O'Malley menu.

Ricky had struck an agreement with the two restaurants that the pub backed on to. They agreed to provide a limited menu for a price that would allow them to make a profit, and The Drunken Duck would tack on another percentage so that the prices weren't terribly expensive, but made it worthwhile for each establishment.

"Thank you, Mama-san," Ricky said as Doris leaned over with a tray of finger food and perfectly enhanced breasts that momentarily killed all SFGP lung movement. She smiled gently as she walked away.

"Mama-san? Man, she is the youngest, most beautiful mama-san I've ever seen! What's up with that?"

“Well, she is only thirty-three, but she is still the oldest. A proper Singapore pub has to have a mama-san.”

“Eat up, guys. Ya’ll were a bit late so we need to get on the road.”

The men finished up their food and had gotten to the bottoms of their bottles when Ricky announced that he was going to make a head call before they hit the road. As Ricky crutched off to the bathroom, the new arrivals were drawn to the Butsudan.

It was obvious to the visitors that this was an altar to the men that had lost their lives while working with Finn Connor. They knew their deaths weren’t due to a lack of training or courage. CSF was well-known for near fanatical training and Finn Connor was in a position to hire only the best operators in the business. If you were a member of CSF you were automatically a made man. The men looked at the photos quietly and only imagined what kind of friends they might have been.

“All right, let’s hit it. Papa-san packed your chutes and they’re already on the bus.” Ricky was a master of the straight face.

“Did you say Papa-san packed OUR chutes?”

“Yeah, I taught him how a couple months back. He needs the extra money and I’ll tell you, he’s a natural. We’ve jumped with his chutes a couple times already.”

The men looked to their commander with earnest hope, but he could only return their stares with his own look of helplessness. His mind was in overdrive as he tried to work his men out of this situation. He was asking his men to jump with parachutes packed by a bartender!

Ricky saw the looks passed around the table and knew that the trap was set.

As the bus pulled up to the CSF aircraft, Commander Rayl saw a man pushing a cart loaded down with parachutes. He was headed into a shop attached to a hangar.

The Heywood Jablome Parachute School.

Rayl was at the bus door before the bus had even come to a stop. The commander helped Setiawan by pulling on the door bar and jumped from the bus as the door opened.

Ricky smiled as the commander sprinted to intercept the man with the cart.

"Hello, excuse me," he shouted

"Yes, sir. What can I do for ya?"

"Do you work with the parachute school?"

"Yep, I'm the co-owner."

"Do you rent parachutes?"

"No, sir, I'm sorry, but we don't."

"Listen, I'm in kind of a jam."

"I'm Alaskan Special Forces and we just got here from Guam on a mission and I found out that our chutes were packed by a damn bartender. I can't ask my men to jump with those chutes, but, on the other hand, we have a mission to complete."

"Listen, fella, you might be telling the truth and I want to believe you. Hell, I want to believe everyone, but that is bad for business. I'm sorry I can't help."

"Would you sell them to me?"

“If I sold them to you, I would have to order new ones and I would not have enough for my students while I waited.”

“I only need eight,” the commander gritted his teeth and crossed his fingers.

“Oh, hell.” Ricky’s accomplice smiled. “I thought you were talking about a whole lot of soldiers. I tell you what – I will rent them to you for a thousand dollars a piece.”

“A thousand dollars each!” the Commander thought. It was stupid expensive ... but, after the long flight over, the bus trip, the news that the chutes were packed by a barkeep, and now this long negotiation, Rayl was agreeable to just about anything. That was what Ricky was counting on.

The government credit card changed hands and the commander escorted the parachute school co-owner and his cart out to the aircraft where his men were all smiles as they went ahead and donned the professionally-packed parachutes.

Ricky worried aloud that weight and balance might be an issue and asked the “co-owner” if he would not mind storing his parachutes until he could return to get them. The man agreed happily and showed Ricky eight fingers. Ricky gave him a smile and a thumbs-up.

Soon enough, the aircraft was lined up on the runway and Ricky watched from the right-hand seat as his friend took down his fake parachute school sign. Ricky was already considering how to make the most of the eight hundred dollars for the farewell party.

Chapter Nineteen

The aircraft made one pass to familiarize the squads with the landing site and, on the second pass, Ricky’s jump calls were good and the SFGP required only minor adjustments in

the air, before landing in well-rehearsed intervals, clearing their chutes quickly before the next man landed.

Setiawan was instructed to collect all the parachutes and return them to the parachute school to get their refund. When this was explained, Commander Rayl happily ordered his men to stack the chutes in the cabin of the crew boat. He was pleased that he would not have to deal with the parachute school owner again. He had rented eight parachutes for eight hundred dollars and he might throttle the man if he saw him again.

The new additions took the time to admire the thirty-eight foot crew boat with two .50 caliber machine guns mounted fore and aft. They knew that CSF operated six of these vessels in addition to the Piper II.

Rayl was a bit surprised that Mr. Connor had not personally welcomed them yet, but he took the initiative and introduced himself and his men to perhaps the finest trained and combat-tested warriors from around the world.

John and Shihao stood simultaneously. They eyed one another and John sat and let Shihao have the honor. Shihao introduced everyone and did a fine job of describing which service each man came from and even which area of responsibility they had had while on active duty. He was about to take his seat when he remembered his boss.

“Our boss is Finn Connor. He was SFGP like you. He scout right now. He come back soon. We relax and shoot shit now.”

Everyone laughed and took an elbow and a blade of grass.

“It has been raining more than usual so he is checking our normal crossing for the water level,” John said.

“I gotta tell you guys, it’s a real treat to meet you all,” the commander started. “You probably don’t know it, but you guys are famous in the active duty special forces communities. You remember how regimented life is for us, so you can imagine how exciting your lives seem when you have so much more control over your operations.”

The young men of his SFGP team nodded in agreement and hung on his every word.

“I was in the same spot,” John said. “I’m a new guy. I heard the same stories that you guys heard and I gave it a lot of thought before I sent my resume to Finn – I mean. a lot of thought. You can’t be real clingy to your family if you want to do this. We’re a long way from Kansas. On the other hand, this is the coolest place in the world to live. The people on the other side of the water are awesome and the girls, well, you’ll see when we get out of this nightmare.”

“We met the Rosie’s and Sarah’s.”

“Well, there you go. It’s just a lot of fun ... Singapore and Penang. For the ultimate in contrasts, I present Indonesia. This side of the water is so oppressive, corrupt and violent that we will never run out of work.”

Just then, Finn came crashing out of the jungle. He knew where he was and he did not want his men to mistake him for enemy. They heard him, but he saw them first. He smiled when he saw his guests. He was always happy to see his brothers-in-arms.

The visitors heard the approaching man, but they knew it was Connor by the way his men casually stretched and began to sit up.

“Finn makes noise for us, so he doesn’t scare the shit out of us.”

When the man emerged from the thick growth, the active duty SFGP popped to attention out of respect.

Finn immediately dropped into a sprawl with his assault rifle trained in the direction that his guest's eyes had pointed out. He heard his men fall into position at nearly the same instant he did.

A second later, he heard several other men hit the deck.

Finn did not breathe for nearly two minutes. He did not move a muscle. He moved his eyes slowly, methodically, making the most effective use of his peripheral vision. He exhaled so slowly that the wing of a dead cockroach on his lip did not even flutter. He inhaled again with the same care.

His ears were as finally tuned as his eyes. If the roach were alive, he would hear it burp.

There were no unusual sounds. There were no unusual sights. His jungle was the same suffocating, angry bitch that he knew her to be every time he visited.

He thought about it for one more moment. "No SFGP member would ever jump up to face an enemy. Just what the hell were they doing?"

He stood up, arched his back, twisted some pops out of his spine and turned to the men.

"Alright, my guys stay where you are," he could see that John was way off.

"John! What the hell, man?"

"Aw, Finn, we were shooting the shit."

"Shihao, take a look at John," Finn ordered.

Shihao looked over his shoulder and saw John snuggled in directly behind him. "What you problem, John? You crotch-watch? You pecker checker?"

Finn stepped in. "Well, he said he was shooting the shit and, judging by where his rifle is, that is exactly what he was going to do. God, why do you make these guys hate me so much?"

Finn smiled and turned his attention to his guests, first shaking hands with the Lieutenant Commander.

“Welcome to Indonesia, fellas. I hope you will learn to love this stinking, hateful place as much as I do. If God is, indeed, made in the image of man, Indonesia is where he takes his dumps.”

Finn came crashing out of the dense jungle and his men popped up from the soggy ground.

“Unless Mother Nature is now in possession of a saw, they sabotaged the foot bridge,” Finn said. “The water is too deep to cross. We have to find another way.”

“A thousand meters south,” Shihao said. “My brother and I used to play in the shallows.”

“All right then. Everybody grab your gear and let’s go.”

The march went slowly as the rain came hard and steady. The early afternoon visibility was like permanent twilight as they slogged along the edge of a field. They couldn’t tell firm ground from sludge by sight, so sometimes the muck came to mid-thigh, sometimes right up to their crotch.

The rain made quick splashes in the water as the men moved with slow, heavy steps. It was sometimes hard to keep their balance because their boots sank into the ooze which produced a powerful downward suction, and, with each step, they would have to pull up hard to break the suction with smacking sounds.

Finally, Chang signaled that they had reached his shallows. Finn looked over the surface and agreed. The protruding reeds required shallower, calmer waters to thrive. Still, the men used the composite butts of their rifles to test the bottom, and then they tested it with their boots. It was a section of the stream that now was a small river.

They crossed the water, staying within arm's reach of one another, so if there was a sudden drop-off, there would be someone there to pull them up.

The humidity made every breath feel like it was half-water, and clouds of bugs would lift off from the undergrowth and settle like thousands of gluttons on every square inch of exposed flesh. Finn tried to ignore the constant bites and stings – everything seemed to feed on his blood. The jungle was alive with the noises of birds and insects who seemed outraged that other animals were entering their world.

This section of the equator steamed and stank under the boiling sun. Finn led the way and his steps often took them under the surface for a moment, but they were all trained for that. Finn's steps often put him deep enough to make breathing impossible. When he wasn't able to breathe and was tempted to bring his arms down into the water to maintain his sense of balance, he remember he did not dare let his rifle touch these murky swamp waters. When he went under, the reeking stagnant water rushed into his mouth and he felt the creeping jelly of leeches as they swirled around his tongue. He spat them out underwater.

When he finally felt solid footing in the shape of a submerged log, he almost cheered. He let his body coast gently forward, knowing that, if he put pressure on his feet too early, it would push the log away.

When he felt certain enough, he stood on it and breathed in the heavy dank air. He coughed as his lungs also sucked in a mosquito, but he was thankful to be breathing at all. It seemed as if they were finally climbing out of the swampy waters.

He saw Wayne Carter looking at him from ahead and to the right. Wayne was watching out for his boss and Finn appreciated that. It was automatic for Navy Special Forces to keep an eye on squad mates to the left and right, but Finn was thankful just the same.

Finn latched onto his new confidence and urged himself along. He soon found solid earth and the men finally climbed out of the filthy and foul swamp waters that had separated them from their quarry.

After everyone climbed out of the stream, Finn clucked his tongue just loud enough to get attention and bring them together to plan their strategy. He listened to their boots sucking and smacking as they gathered. He hoped the jungle floor would firm up before they came upon an enemy sentry. He ordered everyone to put on a fresh pair of socks. They each had several pairs stowed in their packs. It was just a thing they carried.

“Well, that sucked!” said Justin.

“Yeah, suck!” Shihao agreed.

“Listen up,” Finn said quietly then, but urgently. “I need to know which of you had the best go of the swamp crossing so that we can retrace your steps on the return trip. I was underwater most of the way and I truly considered dropping this weapon to get a breath. I thought I was going to drown. We damn sure don’t want to follow my route.”

Junde and Desheng commented that they had no real problems crossing the marsh. Finn reckoned that, between the two, Desheng was shorter at probably five foot three.

“Everybody mark this spot on your GPS. Desheng point out where you started to cross.”

Desheng pointed out a small tree that marked his descent into the river and he tossed several sticks at it to make it more obvious when they returned. They would be able to retrace their steps, now even if there were fewer men making the trip back or they were separated and made it to this point at different times. He instructed each of them to periodically save positional information in their own GPS units so that they could follow the directions provided by their handheld electronics.

After the swamp crossing, Finn noticed that the fronts of Justin Tolliver’s and John Griffin’s BDU shirts below their bullet-proof vests were stained dark. Finn brushed his hand over the stains and saw that it was blood.

“DOWN!” Justin cried when he saw it.

All of the men fell into position for a firefight.

Only Finn remained standing. His calm transferred immediately to every other man.

It looked as if John and Justin had been shot with small caliber weapons, but Finn’s experience told him that leeches had slithered into their shirts and attached themselves to their stomachs during the river crossing. After filling up on their blood, they had dropped off.

“Leeches,” Finn said quietly, “Get used to ‘em.”

Because the leech injects an anti-coagulant into the bite, it can bleed for hours, making it look like its host has suffered a nasty wound, when in fact, the bite is quite small. Although these leeches had dropped away, the men obsessed over whether other leeches might be lurking on their body. Everyone, without exception, stripped and checked each other. Fat leeches had already latched onto Justin and John and simply fallen out of their waistbands as soon as they removed their shirts. John crushed some of the black intruders onto a log and watched his own blood squirt across the jungle floor.

It was nearing twilight and visibility was limited, so it wasn’t so much the mud, the stink of the swamps, nor even the clouds of insects that hovered perpetually in the air. The real problem with this place was that fact that one could seldom see for more than a few feet in any direction. Finn had the men hold up until it was dark, when their night vision goggles would be most effective. As they neared the reported coordinates for the JI camp, Finn intended to have his men hug the ground so that they could see the sentries in the trees, although the sentries would not be able to see Finn and his men, even if they also had night vision equipment.

The night vision goggles allowed a person to pick out and identify humans against a cooler backdrop. Night vision equipment would not work for sentries in the trees because the

hot moisture trapped in thick carpet of the ground would hold its heat nearly all night. By moving along on their elbows, the CSF would ensure that no sentry would see them before Finn's men picked them off.

Shortly after setting off on their elbows and knees, hugging the ground, Finn spotted the first target of the night. A sentry was sitting in a tree smoking a cigarette, obviously thinking that his duties were a waste of time.

Finn notified his men with the walkie-talkie function of his cell phone.

"Gentlemen, we have our first bad guy directly in front of Desheng. He's about ten foot up on a tree stand.

"Justin, I want you and Matt to move forward on your end and see if there is a line of sentries. The rest of you stay put until we know what we have here."

Justin and Matt were at the other end of the line from Finn, so they started moving forward quietly. It was a long thirty minutes before they finally reported in.

"Finn, we have two guards in trees at the same height as yours. They're smokin' and jokin', Finn. These guys are amateurs."

"You had better treat them like professionals," Finn said, and, then to Wenlong, "Wenlong, move over to my left and check in that direction. Everybody spread out fifty yards apart to see just how many sentries are posted."

Finn took out his GPS and entered his present position as a waypoint. Once he had a better feel for what the sentry posts looked like, he would likely have to neutralize the man above him who had just flicked his cigarette onto the forest floor. There was no danger of fire here though. It had been raining maybe all week, maybe all month, maybe all year.

All of Finn's men fanned out approximately fifty yards apart on either side of his GPS position. They had visually identified fifteen guards. The guards had no radios or any other way of communicating with each other or with a headquarters. Finn decided it was necessary for him to eliminate the threat nearest him.

"Shihao, I need you to bring me the crossbow. My coordinates are 07°11'51", 109°32'24."

"Okay, boss."

"Gentlemen," Finn said into his walkie talkie, "I want you all to meet me at these coordinates. Make that position a waypoint and we'll come out the same way we came in."

It only took about fifteen minutes for Shihao to expertly avoid the guards and find Finn.

Finn didn't want to waste any more time. He squirmed and elbowed himself as close to the guard as he dared, and placed a bolt on the crossbow's track.

As he loaded the bolt, Finn imagined what this man's life must be like. *Did he have a family? Did he have a child that he loved?* He knew that it was unacceptable in his profession to have such concerns for such a dangerous enemy. This man was a part of an evil empire, and he was standing in the way of their objective.

He was nearly directly under the sentry when he let loose his arrow. The bolt entered the flesh between his chin and throat and exited through the top of his head. He died instantly.

Finn had hoped that the dead sentry would merely slump against the tree but, as feared, he rolled out of the tree and his tumble had him in the most unfortunate of positions when he landed. He landed face down and the rest of his body bent back over his neck, snapping loudly, so that he lay in a gruesome caricature of a human being. Finn was relieved that the forest carpet had muffled the sound of his body as it hit the ground.

Within fifteen minutes, Finn had his men gathered around the cadaver, showing quiet silence in respect for this man who was only doing his job.

Finn noticed that Rayl was rolling a lollipop from cheek-to-cheek now. Men dealt with the excitement of battle in many different ways. His own John Griffin was flapping his hands gently as if to cool them. Finn knew that once a weapon filled those hands they would steady like stone.

They moved on.

The men were still coming to terms with the sight of the guard with his neck in such a grotesque position when Finn saw a trip wire.

“Stop!” he hissed.

To a man, they stopped in whatever position they were in. They knew that it was a mine, owing to their experience with training on penetrating enemy lines.

Finn moved forward to where Justin nearly tripped the wire, and crawled to see what devastation they had just avoided.

It was an ancient but well-maintained U.S. made M18A1 Claymore anti-personnel mine that had a burst radius of a 100feet, fifty feet high and two feet off the ground. Claymore mines had been in use by the U.S. for many years, but, like most things, were for sale to any interested party.

The mine was named after the Scottish “Claymore” sword used by William Wallace, one of Scotland’s greatest national heroes, and an undisputed leader of the Scottish resistance forces during the first years of the long and ultimately unsuccessful struggle to free Scotland from English rule at the end of the thirteenth Century.

Both the front and rear of the mine were camouflaged with foliage. The detonating cord was not buried, however – it was only covered with light foliage. Finn followed the wire to one end where he found the mine set up on its legs. It was in the perfect position to have taken out the entire squad with its steel balls because the squad was traveling very close to each other during their penetration. Finn retraced the wire to the other end, where he found the arming device. He expertly replaced the safety bail and removed the arming wire from the firing device. With the mine disarmed, the squad moved on, but a little more carefully now.

Several of the SFGP were suffering from heat cramp. The cramps were caused by an imbalance of body fluids caused by their vigorous activity, and the high temperatures and humidity of the jungle.

Finn ignored his own symptoms and it was probably those very symptoms that affected his judgment so he decided to press on without letting his men rest and rehydrate. Their pace was becoming faster and the men marched with the tubes from their camel backs in their mouths. All of the men carried the “hot shot” camel back water pouches with a hose that they could drink from comfortably and easily while on the run. Finn had decided to carry more equipment instead, and that the camel back would add unnecessary weight during what he thought would be a short mission.

The unmistakable glow of powerful incandescent lights was now at the tip of their GPS pointers. Within minutes, the encampment was visible and Finn and Rayl were already working on battle plans.

They assumed there would not be a trip wire so close to the meeting hall, so they stopped watching the ground and focused instead in front of them, where they expected there to be an interior sentry barrier.

They figured wrong: Justin stepped on a wire and a bright flare shot into the air, promptly announcing their arrival.

The Indonesian fighters did not know what to make of this situation, but they soon came to their senses and raised their assault weapons. CSF fired first, killing eight of the men in the first volley, but the CSF were surprised to see Caucasian men running into a meeting room, presumably to warn their higher-ups to get the hell out of there.

Rayl led his men into a building built entirely of logs hewn from the surrounding jungle. The commander could only imagine the manpower it took to put such a building together. It was immense and he was about to lead his men in leap-frog fashion through the building until every occupant was dead or gone.

They could see through the windows that the first two rooms, left and right, were clear. They entered, three men on the left, four on the right, and listened carefully. In the opposite room, his second in command signaled that he had heard at least three voices on the other side of the wall nearest him. Rayl pointed at the light shining through the cracked chinking that held the logs together. He knelt and placed the barrel of his rifle at waist level and lowered his visor to communicate what he wanted to happen in both rooms. He fingered for both teams to step around and secure the room's entrance after firing one half cartridge. When he was sure that his plan was clear, each man took position and commenced firing.

The four M-4 assault rifles immediately penetrated the porous chinking and splintered the logs as the projectiles ripped through the adjoining room and two others besides. Gunfire and screams reverberated through the cathedral-like building as Commander Rayl and his men ensured each room was clear before setting up in the next. They changed out cartridges six times to clear the twelve rooms before they heard the engines of several cars start up at the

back of the building. They heard doors slam shut as the cars took off down a path through the jungle. They hurried in leap-frog fashion to get to the rear entrance.

Commander Rayl spat his lollipop out of his mouth and rushed ahead of his men firing all the way. He punched several holes into the bonnet of one of the three Mercedes that were fishtailing through the trees and down the dusty trail. Rayl continued to fire at the cars until they were no longer in sight. He then swung around and sprinted back to his lollipop. He grabbed it and shoved it into his mouth; mulch, sticks and all. His men watched him in amazement.

“Ten second rule,” he growled.

Back at the front of the building, Finn rushed to the left flank and left his men in a line in front of the Indonesian fighters. He trained his weapon on the closest man and fired. The man dropped like a sack.

Finn turned his attention to another Indonesian, but, this time, his weapon jammed.

“Holy shit!” Finn thought.

Finn still carried his rifle as he fled to the side of the building to try and fix the problem. He unbuttoned the holster that held his Walther P99 9mm handgun that was a gift to him from his last SFGP Team Commander. He wanted to have the handgun at the ready in case he could not fix the problem with his rifle. He knew what the problem was and it required him to field strip his weapon to fix it.

Finn was a hardcore military history nut. Carrying this weapon did not demonstrate good judgment, but he insisted on carrying an original Colt M-4, used in the Vietnam conflict, as his personal assault rifle. It was in great condition for a Vietnam- era weapon. It had survived the hot and humid climate of Southeast Asia for at least thirty years. He'd found it at a small second hand shop in Singapore and fantasized that it had been used by a very brave man. The problem

with this early model was that it had chrome plated chambers and bores which reduced the coefficient of friction between the cartridge case and the chamber. The bolt began battering the frame from the excessive velocity in its rearward movement.

Finn ran out of time. A Caucasian man in a rush turned the corner and ran into Finn's Walther 9mm. It was a sudden and comical Mexican stand off. The man seemed almost playful and smiled when he recognized that Finn might be an honorable man up for a knife fight.

The man pushed his handgun into his back waistband and produced a nine inch blade. He began to taunt Finn.

"Qui vous sont? Pourquoi sont vous ici?" he asked in the simplest French, and then louder, *"Qui vous sont? Pourquoi sont vous ici?"* Then quickly in English, "Who are you? Are you American? You are here why?"

Finn was delirious and actually replaced his Walther in its holster and drew his own blade to take up the invitation to the knife fight. It would have been so much easier to take advantage of the situation and simply put the man down with a painless shot between the eyes.

His was a black Ronin Battle Knife, a single-edged battle knife constructed of one piece of tempered stainless steel with a black, non-glare finish and a black nylon cord-wrapped trigger grip. It was sheathed in a weather-resistant black nylon sheath with a PVC liner. The Ronin's overall length was fifteen inches, and the blade length was just over eight inches long. Finn had carried this knife for several years and felt certain that he would defeat his opponent.

The Frenchman looked very comfortable with his blade, while Finn purposely fumbled with his knife to give the impression of an amateur. It did not take much effort for Finn to look like an amateur as his severe dehydration, coupled with the heat and humidity was really beginning to take its toll. His delirium only added to his confidence, however, as he approached his opponent.

Finn's body had been losing more fluids than it was replacing for several hours now, and he should have known to protect himself from this circumstance. He wiped his hand over his face and found no sweat, just hot, dry skin. In his present state, he could not even know that he was suffering from heat stroke.

His fluid debit was causing his muscles to lose their vital electrolyte balance, thus causing cramps.

Finn attributed his rapid heart rate and strong pulse to the excitement of battle, and did not realize that, by throwing down his hand gun and agreeing to this knife fight, he was demonstrating aggressive and irrational behavior, which was common with heat stroke. He should have simply shot the man and been done with it.

He took the first stab at the French man. His blade was deflected. The Frenchman lunged and, blocking his arm, Finn cut his attacker's bicep.

Finn then stabbed his attacker in the belly, while keeping a check on his opponent's knife hand. Finn went for the man's throat and, pulling the French man's knife-hand to the right side, he disarmed him. In the same movement, Finn stabbed the man's stomach and, in one flow, he cut the throat of the French man, while still controlling his opponent's hand.

Finn let the man slide down onto the ground and then staggered around in a dizzy circle.

He wanted to interrogate the Frenchman before he died. He fell to the ground and onto the man's knife that was still extended upward. He took the blade into his side and, though it was painful and deep, he thought it would be okay until he could get medical attention.

The Frenchman volunteered a gurgling whisper, "Klijnkolie will win."

"What the hell's Klinkalie?"

"Amoco will lose." The man's last breath played over Finn's hand.

“Who gives a shit about an oil company?” Finn thought – the man was raving in his last moments.

Finn felt faint and vomited all over the French man’s uniform as he collapsed.

Finn felt the warm, putrid breeze of the narrow strait flow over him as Chuck held his head up and urged him to drink from his camel back. Finn had no memory after watching the Frenchman die.

His team had obviously carried him from the jungle and somehow moved him across the river. Finn wanted a cold, dry breeze, he wanted chapped lips, he wanted to retire, and he wanted Aidan. But what he had was a bulletproof vest that didn’t cover the area where a blade could slide into his body. He had a Beretta 9mm handgun, a Colt M-4 assault rifle, and a suicide-worthy headache.

Chapter Nineteen

The platoon was crammed into the CSF office, sitting around the conference table at 3a.m.

“Guys, our fishes have scattered and I need to give our intel guys time to relocate them. I want you all to take this time to rest up. No boozing. I want you to stay near your phones, to hydrate and sleep. I purposely demonstrated what can happen if you aren't hydrated in battle.”

The room pulsed with laughter.

“No, I'm serious. I take training very seriously.”

“Commander Rayl, I did not want you and your guys to come all this way for nothing.”

Rayl and his men laughed. They had been here for less than twenty-four hours and they had already seen as much action as they had seen in the last year and they were responsible for themselves too. It was exhilarating.

“No, I mean it. Ricky has been working up an attack on a makeshift navy that these same guys have put together a little way across the water. When they make their move on the Indonesian government, they are going after Singapore at the same time. I live in Singapore and I don't mind telling you that I do not like the thought of them invading Singapore one damn bit. Besides, I promised the Indonesian President that we would destroy every ship and boat assembled there. They are camouflaged from the air, but we were shadowing a snoop and stumbled onto them.”

“How many are there now, Ricky?”

“Thirty-four, Finn – twenty one which are over forty feet long.”

“Ricky has charges all ready to go, bottom contour charts, we have the best diving gear there is. Should be a great fireworks show. Interested?”

Finn Connor could not have stretched bigger grins across the faces of the boys from SFGP Team ONE.

* * *

Finn was still recovering in his home and planning another attack when his telephone rang. It was his secretary, reminding him of a reception later that night. He explained to his men that he felt that he had to attend. He was sure that someone connected with the terrorists would be there and this might give him a chance to identify them and even possibly determine their involvement.

Finn had become a hot item on the Singapore party circuit in the last year. He accepted many of the invitations to formal and informal gatherings in Singapore and Penang. He was a wealthy man with a thriving business and a very exciting lifestyle, just the type of person that anyone would want at their party.

Since Aidan spent much of her time away from him, running operations for the cruise line, his own love life was not well-known in Singapore. This mystery resulted in Finn's reputation as one of the most eligible bachelors in the small country of Singapore.

He met with his personal secretary each day at his business office only two miles from the pier and at the small office where the rest of the CSF crew worked, and, one day per week, he and his secretary would meet to decide which social events he could attend and those that interfered with work or simply did not interest him.

This evening, he was to attend a formal reception at the Klijnkramer home; transportation was provided. He could not remember the specifics of the invitation, but he was

sure that it promised to be a nice evening. He was sure that he had not met the man, but the name was very familiar. It was similar to the last word to spill from the Frenchman's lips the day before. This gave him a thought. He selected one of his speed dial numbers on his cell.

"Yeah, Finn. How's your fancy party?"

"Haven't left yet."

"Well, we're all rigged here. I'm waiting on one more diver and then we're going to blow these tubs into toothpicks. I brought a camera."

"Hey, Ricky. Can you hold off until I get to the party? I think one of the invitees might be connected to the JI and I would love to see his face when I call in the fireworks."

"Finn, you are an evil bastard. I think I love you. We will be waiting for your call."

"It'll be an hour or so. Give us some fireworks when you see my name on your cell phone."

Chapter Twenty

This evening's reception was at the mansion that had been built on the Klijnkolie L5S oil platform. The underwater, underground dish of oil that the oil rig had been built upon had played out two years earlier and, rather than disassemble the huge oil platform, Klijnkramer converted it into a sprawling single story home.

Klijnkramer had two grown sons and a grown daughter that were all very active in the family business. Finn had never met Amos, Asher, or Aliyah, the famously beautiful daughter of Klijnkramer and his Malaysian wife, who was herself the daughter of Malaysian royalty.

Malaysia had won its freedom from British rule on 31st August 1957 and Klijnkramer and Atara celebrated by marrying on Independence Day/Malaysia Day, 31st August 1957.

The elder Klijnkramer regularly helicoptered in to Singapore from his home or from one of his oil platforms. He was a Dutch Jew of a family that took refuge in the Netherlands. Jews in the Netherlands took such Jewish names as Caun, Levi, Koningswinter and Klijnkramer, to name a few.

Finn was surprised to see a limousine pull up to his home. He thought that he would be riding his motorcycle to the Klijnkolie heliport, but he would certainly appreciate and enjoy the luxurious limousine ride.

Klijnkramer's grandfather had taken the first half of his name and combined it with the Dutch word for oil, "*ollie*." They were a small-scale player in the oil game, but they had a rich history. Klijnkolie had been in the business for nearly sixty years.

"Mr. Connor?" the driver asked.

"That's me, let me get my jacket."

They arrived at the heliport after a short drive and a Kawasaki BK117-B2 helicopter was waiting with its rotors in a slow rotation. Finn had been looking into buying a helicopter for CSF, but was still wary about the investment. He could not be sure that it would pay for itself, yet he regularly saw the opportunities that a helicopter would provide. He would not require anything like this Kawasaki model. Versatile and powerful, this expensive BK117 was a helicopter capable of many tasks, from carrying up to nine passengers to performing as the workhorse of an aerial crane. The twin-engine helicopter was capable of lifting nearly 3,000 pounds on its cargo hook.

The helicopter was already loaded with eight passengers when Finn took the last seat. He put on the headset that was hanging above. The other passengers were already wired up and jabbering away.

“It’s nice to see that you survived another brush with death, Mr. Connor.”

Finn looked around to see who might have said such a nice thing. It was Bambang Hondoco. Bambang started out as an electrical engineer from Surabaya-Indonesia. He eventually headed up gas control and was Scada’s supervisor for the transcentral Sumantra gas pipeline for many years. He was a very wealthy man who, until recently, held a high position in the executive offices of ARCO. He received a very generous golden umbrella when ARCO was absorbed by Amoco and he and his much younger wife still were regulars on the party circuit. Finn saw Bambang and his trophy wife at nearly every function he attended. Finn thought that he should get to know Bambang and his wife better since they spent so much time together. Bambang obviously knew more about Finn than Finn knew about him.

“Thank you, Bambang. This last adventure was nearly the end of me.”

Finn's day-to-day life was followed closely by the rich and famous. They envied his courage and appreciated the fact that he grew his business from the ground up and personally led his men whenever there was a great chance of danger.

The four wives looked at Finn approvingly. Finn chuckled as he entertained the thought of seducing each of these pretty young wives while their husbands flittered around the party like so many butterflies.

He was very happy to see Emilia Zhu tucked into a back seat with her Chinese husband. She was beyond beautiful and, when he spoke to her husband in her presence, he seemed exhausted with the effort of keeping her full attention.

As soon as the doors shut, the helicopter pressurized and Finn enjoyed his generous leather seat and air conditioning. He presumed that the pilot would fly at over 150 miles per hour which meant that they would arrive at the mansion oil rig in less than thirty minutes. The platform was only seventy miles south of Singapore, off the coast of the province of Jambi.

At nearly 8pm, the helicopter dropped into a hover over the oil rig's helicopter pad and, after a gentle touch down, the pilot informed his passengers that he would be their pilot for the return trip to Singapore. Finn's group was the last to arrive and would be the first to depart because the other guests came from Jakarta, nearly 400 miles away from the Klijnkrumer mansion.

The co-pilot opened the door and helped everyone out of the helicopter. Emilia seemed unfamiliar with the seat latch. She had flirted with Finn on many occasions and took more than a little joy in being a tease – she appreciated that Finn was her match in these games.

Finn climbed back in to help her. She was wearing a very provocative dress and giggled as Finn accidentally brushed his hand across her breasts to get to the harness release. She grabbed his hand so that he would have to help her from her seat and she cupped his crotch as

she stepped down from the aircraft. He let his hand fall gently to her ass as she stepped down. She was not having trouble with the seat at all; she just wanted to say hello.

There was no one to greet them, except two stern-faced men who were obviously security guards. Finn led the way to the party.

Once inside, a young woman wearing a severe business suit greeted them. She was obviously a member of Klijnkrumer's staff, and probably not on the guest list. Finn figured her for an executive secretary.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am Dawn Louise and I want to welcome you to the first home to have ever been built on a still active oil rig. I hope you will take the time and visit all the rooms in the home. Nothing is off limits."

As the group started to disperse, Finn caught her arm gently. "Hello, Ms. Louise. My name is Finn Connor and I don't really know anyone here. I'm usually too busy to go out, and, now that I'm here, I think I might be over my head. Can I hang out with you for a while?"

"You certainly may, Mr. Connor. You were the first name on the invite list. Your exploits make you a legend and I'm very happy to meet you. I don't mind hanging out with you at all. Though keep in mind that I'm on company time. I am Mr. Klijnkrumer's protocol officer."

Finn furrowed his brow.

She laughed. "I make him look good with social circles and the media. I suppose you can say that I simply make him look good and ensure he isn't embarrassed in the media or otherwise. I'm very good at my job and a party like this is going to bode well for him. You'll soon see that we've invited several of the major media and some of the local media as well. We hope the conversations here tonight will make it into the entertainment magazines, as well as the trade and business ones."

“Sounds like a blast,” Finn mocked good-naturedly.

Spreading over nearly two acres of platform, the home was an incredible accomplishment.

The house had over 12,000 square feet of living space and was designed by the famed architect, John Ocha.

The reception area was set up on a spectacular patio that overlooked the Strait of Malacca. When the guests entered a circular foyer, they were immediately stunned by the most dramatic views of the Malaccan Strait and the Greater Sunda Islands. Mr. Klijnkrumer had obviously planned his guests’ arrival to coincide with a beautiful sunset and the most impressive 360 degree views through the double-paned glass that made up the walls. The living room, family room and formal dining room all had massive wood beam ceilings.

Finn followed Dawn as she led the most recent guests to the patio to join an already crowded party. Finn recognized many of the guests, but only spoke to few and actually enjoyed the company of even less. The host, Mr. Klijnkrumer, was very comfortable in his role as host, as these men always are. As the beautiful sunset was about to play out, he began to gather the attention of his guests in order to move the party indoors.

“Mr. Klijnkrumer, if it pleases you, I’ve prepared a surprise for your guests.”

“Why certainly, Mr. ...”

“Finn, Finn Connor. I will introduce myself properly when you have a free moment. Please join us at your railing and look to the west where the sun is just disappearing,” Finn smiled at the very transparent Klijnkrumer, who had been inquiring about Finn for several weeks, according to the CSF detectives.

Finn made no effort to conceal pressing a redial button.

Finn's visitors from Guam had overdone it much to his surprise and glee. Even from twenty miles away, the blasts were simultaneous and breathtaking – literally. The concussion was enough to lightly blow back the hair of some of the ladies with finer hair. The oranges and reds were beautiful, framed against the setting of the red sun, and the just visible lights of Singapore in the distance.

The ships ruptured, splintered and began to sink. He remembered the viscous mixture of naphtha and pitch spread out across the surface of the the ocean when Kittyhawk sank and imagined the spreading slick in the distance was rainbow hued in daylight.

The river seemed to explode from fifty miles away. A sheet of blue fire shot across the naphtha-stained water, and this was immediately followed by towering billows of sooty orange flame and dense black smoke. There were volcano-like secondary eruptions from the sinking boats as the deadly petrol still in their holds set on fire. The flames belched upward and men fell or jumped from the burning hulls.

The thunderous growl of the primary and secondary explosions made the women giggle with excitement, but Finn realized the horrors being played out in those waters. Would-be terrorists, their plans, their dreams of riches and lofty positions after their battles won were now gone, but Finn truly still hoped that they did not suffer. Few men of arms wish pain on their enemy and Finn was no different. He hoped, one minute after the blast, that these men of terror were now dead and at peace.

For now, he knew that most of the guests would simply enjoy the immense power of the explosions for what it was worth, but the serious leaders would want answers, and they would want them immediately.

“Mr. Connor, please join me at the bar. Ladies and gentlemen, please enjoy the fireworks or bring the party inside, as you wish. Please enjoy yourselves. My home is your home and I hope you will tour this very unique structure.”

“It is very nice to meet you, Mr. Klijnkramer.”

“It is my pleasure. That was a very interesting show just now.”

“Yes, well we had that work to do and my men were set to go an hour ago, but I thought that your guests would like to see some old-fashioned demolition, so I told them to hold the blast until I called. It was a great success, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely, perfect timing. Almost divine alignment with the setting of the sun. So you’re in the demolition business?”

“Mr. Klijnkramer, you really seem like a nice enough fellow, so I wonder why you are so intent on acting as if you don’t know me. I have thirty-two detectives on my payroll and your Mr. Chin asked two for information about me. I authorized them to give you complete, accurate information. I held nothing back. I have nothing to hide, and nothing to fear. Yet, I’ve not inquired into your background at all, though if I wished I could have even the most mundane information on everyone in your family and anyone you’ve ever met. However, I find that sort of thing boring and even clichéd.”

“What you say is true and I am truly sorry for my behavior. I hate to change the subject so abruptly, but, I have to ask, what was it that was demolished?”

“I am a contractor and this particular client asked me to clear a waterway of some very dangerous boats and small ships. Thirty two to be exact. They posed a risk to shipping at the least and to two governments at the worst. I hope I am clear.”

“Certainly. I can understand that need, Mr. Connor.”

Finn saw a flash of anger in the man's eyes.

"Again, I apologize for the slight. Please enjoy the party. I must make myself available to the other guests."

Each of the seven guest rooms, including the very generous master suite, had their own jacuzzi tubs and luxurious walk-in showers. Each of the rooms also had plenty of closet space, a sitting room, and an exercise room. Most rooms opened onto their own private courtyards.

The lower level included a home theater with seats for fifty. There was another smaller media room and games room. There was had a small office on the lower level, but Finn was sure that there was a much nicer workspace either on the platform or at the man's offices in Jakarta.

Finn walked out onto the back deck that had nicer landscaping than most land-based mansions. Finn looked out over the deck at the Olympic-sized swimming pool. Mr. Klijnkramer was obviously a swimmer and this isolated swimming pool must be a part of his personal heaven. Below the living/entertaining level, Finn found a large wine cellar and two more guest bedroom suites and a living room that overlooked the water below the platform.

Finn glided around the home and the party, looking for a gathering that was discussing something interesting. He saw John Davidson, who was vice president for petroleum operations in Indonesia for the oil and gas giant, Amoco. Finn knew that any conversation that Davidson participated in would surely be intriguing.

"Amoco promised that its planned Tangguh liquefied natural gas project in Irian Jaya would bring benefits to the locals, yet no move has been made to compensate these people," a reporter said.

“We are sure that the citizens and communities of Irian Jaya will benefit from the project, along with the Indonesians,” Mr. Davidson replied in a practiced booming voice. “The revenue which eventually flows into Irian Jaya from the project will be significant, and then the challenge will be to improve the living standards, health, and education of the people.”

She countered, “Why did it take a meeting between your company’s president and the Indonesian president to gain progress for the compensation of these people? Did Amoco give in due to growing demands from the residents for larger shares of the revenue from their natural resources?”

“Miss Crawford, many oil and gas companies operating in this country have often been criticized for their supposed small contributions to the people living around their operating sites. This simply isn’t true. We are very concerned about the needs of the people that we work with.”

Davidson continued, “Amoco together with ARCO have been operating in Indonesia for thirty years as a production sharing contractor to Indonesia, and as investors in the country’s petrochemicals and coal industries. Together with its partners, the Amoco-ARCO combination has spent over seven billion dollars in Indonesia, with much of that money going directly into the developed and tribal communities. Amoco now produces ten percent of all Indonesian oil output, and it supplies sixty-five percent of Java’s gas needs and it generates one point three billion dollars per year in revenue. Amoco also has a fifty percent stake in the country’s largest coal mining company. You can see that we have a huge stake in the happiness and well-being of the peoples of Indonesia, the Indonesian government and all other groups. We will always do anything in our power to meet those needs. Thank you. That is enough formality. Please, let’s enjoy the party that our host has put so much effort into.”

Finn wondered who the other groups might be and whether he might have misspoken. Davidson rushed away, red-faced that he might have overstepped in his comments. The reporter was in hot pursuit, but Klijnkramer led Davidson to safety, or so it seemed.

* * *

As the interview was being conducted on the upper platform inside the mansion, a crew boat pulled up alongside the converted oil rig. As many as thirty men in black fatigues climbed the ladder that led to the top, and to the Klijnkramer home. Mr. Klijnkramer had plenty of security personnel for the party, and these newcomers were not exactly guests.

The security guards around the circumference of the house saw the men climb the ladder. They even expected them. They were prepared for the mock shoot-out that was to come.

The intruders waited until each of their men were on the terrace, facing the guards in their practiced positions. They opened fire only when each man on both sides was in position, being careful not to actually hit anyone with their live fire. The guards made a show of returning fire, but then began to fall one-by-one.

Finn immediately pulled his Walther from the back of his cummerbund. Their act was enough to fool him. The view to the outside was obscured by the inside house lights, but he saw enough to know that he had better find a safe place to hide.

He watched for a moment as the guards fell. He thought that the guards simply kept a sloppy watch and had just paid for it with their lives. What he did not know was that this scenario had been played out twice before, but with blanks for the practice sessions.

Finn and the rest of the guests went into action immediately. He knew that every room in the mansion would be filled with the partygoers who were also making a run for it. He ran around to the other side of the huge double-sided fireplace that he was surprised to see had actually seen some use, though it was probably just to add some distinction for just this type of function.

“Here goes my only tux!” he thought sourly.

Finn replaced his Walther into his cummerbund and opened the custom fireplace door. He had only to bend a little as he climbed onto the hearth and into the fireplace. He looked up and saw the oversized flue was open and only about five feet above his head. He stood up in the chimney and, pressing his back against the clay, placed a foot across from his torso, beginning then to slowly inch himself upward. When he had got both feet into the chimney, he shifted to put one foot and one hand on each side. This way, he was able to walk up the sides of the chimney until he was able to stand on the flanges of the flue.

Finn was happy to remember that he was eighty miles north of the equator. There was no real need for a fireplace and this one was purely decorative. His tuxedo might survive for another day.

Finn took out his cell phone and punched in the number for the Singapore Coast Guard. His finger hovered over the talk button, while his head reeled with all of the information and possibilities. He cleared the window and punched in the number for Tim Jackson. Tim was responsible for the upkeep of the crew boats and dive equipment.

“Tim, this is Finn. Listen, I’m at a party turned bad on the Klijnkolie L5S oil platform and the guests are being taken hostage. I’m hidden in the chimney. If you pull the navigation charts, the smallest scale chart has the position of the platform. It is about a hundred and seventy degrees at seventy three miles from Singapore. It’s marked as KL5S.

“I need you to gather the SFGP platoon we put together and help Setiawan to secure the RHIB to the back of one of the crew boats. The RHIB does not carry enough fuel for this mission, so you’ll need to tow it until you guys get to the rig.”

“Dude, why don’t we call the Polis or Coast Guard or something?”

“I know it sounds stupid, but I think this will lead us to the Jemaah Islamiyah leadership. If you guys can’t get out here in time or if it gets to dicey, I’ll go ahead and call the Coast Guard, but I really think we have a chance to work this to our advantage.

“Make sure Setiawan mounts a fifty cal on the bow and another on the stern. These guys might be smart enough to cover all bases and try to intercept you. If you even suspect another boat, just skid into them and light them up with the fifty cal. Pretty up the sky with those orange tracers.

“Seriously, Tim, you need to get out here as soon as you can. There are about thirty assholes out here, so the RHIB can’t approach too close. The Special Forces will need to approach underwater from a hundred yards or so.”

“I’m on it, Finn. Can I call you back?”

“Yeah, I put my cellphone on vibrate.”

Finn settled in for what promised to be a long and uncomfortable wait. The glass door on the other side of the fireplace was also open so Finn could hear much of what was being discussed.

“Whatever you do, I don’t want a single one of the guests to leave here with even the slightest mark,” Finn heard Klijnkramer warn a guard.

The RHIB (Rigid Hull Inflatable Boat) is an extremely fast boat with a solid hull. The CSF's particular boat was a thirty-foot high-buoyancy, extreme weather craft. It was primarily used for insertion and extraction of a SFGP onto enemy-occupied beaches. The thirty-foot version utilized a water jet propulsion system, allowing for the beaching of the craft, or close-in work if the SFGP platoon required fire support. Finn had only purchased this extremely expensive vessel six months earlier and, right now, he was glad that he had.

Each of the sixteen Special Forces were in their wetsuits, but they would wait until they got closer to their dive before putting on all their gear. They would put on the tanks and regulators just before entering the water.

They also carried another weapon underwater. Compact enough to facilitate underwater movement, the 9mm MP5N submachine gun was a perfect for using in and out of the water. It was not prone to jam after being submerged like most other assault weapons were.

Below the chimney flue, Finn could barely make out voices. He was using his cramped legs and arms to wedge himself into the chimney anyway, so he decided to descend a little to see if he could hear more of the conversation. As he neared the top of the glass fireplace doors, he noticed a small area where he could stand comfortably, out of view, in the corner of the fireplace. Finn scolded himself for his rash decision to climb the chimney without getting the lay of the land. He might have saved a lot of effort if he had just looked around. He set one foot and then the other in the gap and listened intently.

He could hear a conversation below and recognized the educated voice with a slight accent as that of Mr. Klijnkrumer. Finn was happy that Klijnkrumer was not so afraid that he could not threaten the uninvited guests.

He heard self-righteous words from most of the male guests, but heard only light crying from the women. The guards made quick work of their search of the house and soon had everyone in the large entertaining room.

A man unknown to Finn spoke to the gathered partygoers.

“Amoco is finished in Indonesia. Other boats are boarding each of the other oil platforms at this time and all Amoco personnel will be taken hostage, to possibly be released to the American government at a later date. As of today, Amoco oil production operations will transfer to Indonesian men who were schooled and trained in the United States.

“Amoco has done nothing for the Indonesian people and the time has come for foreign interests to leave the region.”

Finn bent over and knew that anyone would have to look very closely to see his mug looking through the soot-covered glass.

He looked in wonder as he saw that all of the guests were in what seemed to be a military formation, and the only people who were being loosely guarded separately were Mr. Klijnkrumer and his protocol officer, Dawn Louise.

Finn thought this was odd. Klijnkrumer and Ms. Louise were behind the other guests, so that they could not be seen, and the two were allowed to sit on barstools, while the others were herded together. Finn watched Klijnkrumer whisper something in Ms. Louise ear, and then whisper conspiratorially as well into the ear of one of the terrorists.

Klijnkramer and Ms. Louise then stood and moved to take up positions at the back of the formation, as if they had been there all the time. Ms. Louise was using her finger to make a count of the guests, and it did not take long for Finn to realize that the guest list and the hostage count would not add up – one would be missing. Finn quickly crabbed his ass back up the chimney to see about shutting the flue.

Once he was wedged into the chimney above the flue, Finn used his foot to close the heavy counter-weighted contraption. The flue groaned as Finn pressed down, and, with each groan, Finn cringed. Finally, he had the flue down on the flanges and he was standing on it. The counter-weight fell into place in the fireplace below and the flue would stay shut so long as no one thought to pull the counter-weight chain to release it. The thought of this frightened Finn enough that he quickly took off his black dinner jacket, removed his white shirt and began to transfer the soot from the chimney wall to his face, neck and chest. When he was sure that he was soot-black, he put on his jacket again and stuffed his shirt into his pants until he could somehow get rid of it.

Finn knew that he could not take on the room full of gunmen with his Walther 9mm, and he knew that his men would not be here yet as they were 110 miles from the northern headquarters. Even if Tim had gotten his men together within minutes, they were still nearly two hours away.

It was clear to Finn that Klijnkramer was working with the men who so rudely interrupted his party. What he did not know was who exactly the gunmen represented, and how were they linked to Klijnkramer.

“KLIJNKRAMER!” Finn thought.

He finally remembered his friendly conversation with the unlucky Frenchman whose throat he had cut. He remembered it all now. It still did not make sense, but this party was going to be significant in terms of unlocking this huge mystery.

“What was it the Frenchman said?”

“Amoco will lose, Klijnkramer will win.”

Before tonight Finn had never recognized the truth of this. He had thought that the Frenchman man was raving in his last moments. Now he knew that he was talking about tonight’s host, who was somehow making a play against Amoco.

Finn knew that he did not have any information or proof against Klijnkramer – just a gut feeling that rarely failed him. He did know that thousands of Aceh rebels were joining the JI terrorists south of Jakarta and were assembling for an imminent attack against the Indonesian government. The CSF and the active duty Special Forces would have to connect the dots and gather proof, and they would have to do it soon.

“Amoco will lose,” were the last words the Frenchman uttered.

“What was a Frenchman doing at a JI meeting place anyway?” he wondered. Plus, he did not see more than one Caucasian there.” Now, he remembered Dutch commands being yelled at the firefight.

Finn knew he was not dealing with amateurs here. He knew that he had to get out of the chimney and onto the roof of the sprawling home. As he was climbing out, he heard the groan of the flue being opened and knew that he had come very close to certain death. He heard the flue close again, so he decided to climb back into the chimney rather than be spotted lying on the roof counting the stars.

Before he could descend, he heard a commotion at the front of the home. Finn was dark enough now due to the soot to blend in with the black shingle of the roof, so he elbowed his way to the front of the house. He could not believe what he was seeing. The guards that had supposedly been gunned down were now changing into the uniforms of the terrorists that had earlier so rudely interrupted the party.

Finn's suspicions were now confirmed. Klijnkrumer's guards were in on the intrusion and the gunfight had been staged. Not only had their deaths had been faked, but they were now wearing the uniform of the JI.

"Klijnkrumer was working with the JI!" Finn was never more certain of anything.

Rather than be spotted by so many men at the front of the home, Finn returned to the chimney.

Down he went until he was standing on the flue again. He took out his cell phone and called Tim.

"Tim here."

"Tim, how far out are you?"

"We gathered eighteen SFGP like lightning and we will be at the oil rig in ninety minutes. I brought along a pair of booties and a wetsuit bottom - sorry I could not find a top. Oh, and I brought you one of the GPS units."

"That's great, Tim, I really appreciate the speed. I'm still hiding out in the chimney. The hostages are still in the house, so I'm thinking that they are waiting for transportation. A helicopter dropped us off, but they may be waiting on a boat big enough for forty guests and about twenty guards. Now that I think of it, a boat makes the best sense. By boat, we're only one and a half hours away from the Indonesian coast."

“We will call you when we’re about twenty minutes out.”

“Okay, I will talk to you then.”

Finn bravely opened the flue as quietly as possible. The flue was not nearly as angry now that it had been used four times. Finn made his way down to the fireplace and took his position in the small hidden area.

He saw two sets of boots on the other side of the fireplace.

“What do you mean, the boat is down?” one of the terrorists asked incredulously.

“I mean the engine isn’t turning over. It’s not starting, the battery or the starter isn’t working. They are rushing to get a repairman as we speak.”

“I can’t believe this shit! Imbecile! You should have had an area cleared for a helicopter to land near the camp and we would already have the hostages on dry land.”

“What is done is done, Captain.”

“Is that what we will tell our leader? ‘What is done is done?’ Do you know how little patience Bakar Bashir has? We will be lucky if we survive this. We should have cleared a landing area for the helicopter or at least had more boats standing by in case one had a malfunction. We put all of our trust into a single boat. We will surely die for our incompetence. I don’t even know what Mr. Klijnkramer is capable of. We may not even make it off of this oil platform with our lives.”

“The party was not to end until eleven, so we still have plenty of time to get the boat out here to pick up the guests and transfer them to the camp.”

“Well, we have no choice, but to wait and hope.”

With that, the men returned to the guests lined up on the other side of the fireplace. Finn watched as one of the men motioned Klijnkramer to the bar. Klijnkramer quietly stepped out of his spot in the formation and made his way to the bar.

Finn made a pact with himself that he would never ever again go anywhere without one of the modern digital recorders. A recording of the conversations that he had heard in the past hour would be enough to convince a Singapore equivalent of a Grand Jury to indict Klijnkramer. Even in Singapore, it didn't take much to indict, but he would need more evidence to ensure a conviction.

Finn watched the man approach Klijnkramer. He could not hear the man's report, but he had an idea how it would be received.

Klijnkramer face heated into a shade of red and Finn watched with more than a little satisfaction as Klijnkramer dressed the man down. He shook his head and turned toward his hostages and steadied himself thoughtfully.

He raised his voice so that the hostages could hear his anger at the terrorists.

"We have been here for one and a half hours. You cannot ask my guests to stand at attention for another minute. Let them sit down facing the wall, and have some of your guards bring them drinks."

"Ladies and gentlemen," the guard announced, "your transportation is running late, so please sit on the floor until they arrive. You may not talk amongst yourselves. You must face the wall. Our guards will take drink orders for you while we wait for transportation. You have Mr. Klijnkramer to thank for us letting you sit."

For the men who had been standing next to Klijnkr mer, this statement explained why he was able to leave the formation. Their suspicions about Klijnkr mer disappeared as they finally bent their legs to sit.

* * *

Setiawan made great time, and arrived at the Klijnkramer platform before the terrorist's boat. They watched as the big boat pulled alongside the platform. Tim smiled that they were running with all navigational lights ablaze. Setiawan would be able to follow them at a greater distance by watching the lights and that would make it less likely that CSF would be spotted.

A squad quietly pushed into the water and untied the RHIB. The boat was all black and the moonless night made the men and the RHIB blend into the inky darkness like gloomy demons ready to unleash their rage.

Five of the most experienced Special Forces slowly pulled on the lines of the RHIB and watched as the terrorists led the party guests down the platform ladder onto the boat. The terrorists were patient with their hostages and did not complain when some of the women were afraid to cross onto the boat. They gently coaxed them by putting a guard on the boat, and another on the platform, giving their hands to the ladies.

Several of the guards climbed onboard the party boat with the hostages and then the boat was under way. When the boat was at a safe distance from the platform, Setiawan closed to within 500 yards of the oil platform. Tim called Finn.

"Finn, here," He whispered.

"How many are left on the platform?"

"I count fourteen on the platform and maybe three inside the bar."

It was a fast swim for the eleven CSF, and the boatmen and the guards did not even notice the four heads bobbing only seventy yards away. It was too dark to see them and, with the black face paint, the CSF knew they were invisible.

Eric Wright was in the lead. He noted that there was a ladder that emerged from the water and attached to the platform. They tied the RHIB on the opposite side of the ladder between two pipes that ran down one of the oil rig's huge legs.

It was important to tie the rubber boat away from any metal surface because the up and down motion of the sea against the barnacles on the metal surfaces would destroy the craft before they could return.

One by one, the dark heads surfaced and went up the ladder. Following Eric, each man climbed and began to look over their weapons. They would rely primarily on the 9mm MP5N submachine gun. When each man was comfortable with the condition of their weapons, they began their ascent of the stairs to a certain gunfight. They knew that, unless they caught the guards completely unawares, the CSF might suffer some injuries.

"Eric is point, with Mike, Chuck, Jimmy and Sam."

There was no way to know if any guards remained on the platform, but the men felt lucky and they had surprise on their side. The men carried their Glock 17s and 9mm MP5N submachine guns.

"Alright, guys, be careful. Finn will have your ass if you get killed."

Finn was on the roof once again and could hear the high-pitched whine of the passenger boat as it moved as fast as it possibly could. They even had their navigational lights on. Finn thought it comical that the lights were hardwired and the men let them shine, when all they needed to do was unscrew the covers and bulbs. He decided to give Tim a call.

"Tim here."

"Tim, Finn. I got a better count. It looks like they are leaving about twenty guards behind."

“The squad is in the water. No way to pass that on to them right now.”

“Okay. Anyway, don’t lose that boat. There’s one Chinese trophy wife in that group that I will definitely chase down if Aidan ever dumps me.”

The terrorist’s boat was big, but it was still surely over its maximum capacity. Tim estimated that the boat was rated for forty passengers, but now held about fifty. The boat slowly drifted from the boat platform and carefully pointed toward the Indonesian coastline.

Eric motioned all to stop as he was just short of showing his head above the platform. He slowly raised his head and saw that twelve men were absorbed in a game of Pakong, one of the most popular Indonesian games of chance, which is an Asian version of the “Find the Lady” three-card trick. These men were not only gambling with Pakong, they were gambling with their very lives.

Mark spoke quietly. He was the senior man, but he let Tim take the lead since it was just good business to give everyone time at the controls. “Eric. Finn is in there and he can drop down from the chimney to give us the lay of the land.”

“Good idea,” Eric punched in Finn’s number.

“Finn.”

“Hey, Finn, this is Eric. We are at the top of the ladder. Can you give us an idea of what to expect in the house?”

“Hold on, I’ll check.”

Finn dropped down from the chimney with new confidence and saw eight men at the wet bar getting drunk.

“Eric. I will be in position at the corner of the fireplace. One of you try to slip around opposite the card players and enter the house.

“At the same time, the other three can be in position at the ladder to return fire if the guards try to stand. I will come around and take the inside guys from behind.

“Eric, if you are successful, we can take the inside guys via cross fire, while the other three take the card players by surprise.”

Eric slowly moved up the stairs and there was a continuous flow of dark wetsuits and grease black face paint. Every single man made it up the stairs without being noticed by the guards.

Eric grinned at the other men and put a finger to his lips as he motioned everyone forward. The other three had their weapons trained on the card players after agreeing on which men they would engage.

It was not until they were nearly upon them that the guards noticed their new guests. The card players shot to their feet and raised their weapons. It was too late. The CSF put a bullet into every head and there were only three return shots. The Special Forces were in close quarters and checked to see who was hit. The terrorists ‘shots were wild and no one was hit.

Eric was at the glass entry door looking into Finn’s eyes as the shots rang out. The drunken guards spun around on their chairs, two tumbling to the floor in the process.

One handgun discharged when it hit the hard tile floor and confirmed Finn’s bad luck with unprofessional opponents. The round tore through his left calf.

Finn put two bullets into the idiot’s chest and then expertly dropped three guards with his Walther 9mm, while their return fire was undirected. The others tried to back away from Finn and, when they turned to the door, they met Eric’s 9mm submachine gun. The men were too

drunk to save their own lives. He put another round in their heads to make sure they would not pose any threat later.

Two guards survived by lying still on their bellies, with outstretched legs and arms. Finn imagined that they quickly realized that they were too drunk to pose any threat. He kicked them in their heads and took their rifles and flung them away as hard as he could.

After they secured the oil rig and they set up a command post and monitored the activity taking place at JI headquarters. After all was set, Finn knew his place was back at headquarters to coordinate the SPFG and aircraft overhead.

Chapter Twenty-One

Setiawan was closely shadowing the passenger boat that carried the party guests and their captors. He was careful to keep his distance in order to ensure that the terrorists would not hear the crew boat's relatively quiet engine. When the dock came into view, Setiawan reversed the engine and put down an anchor as the forward momentum ceased.

A mist of gnats from the nearby bushes swarmed about them as they sat in the boat waiting for the passengers of the other boat to disembark and disappear into the jungle. They sat huddled in the small boat, enduring the biting of the gnats and mosquitoes until the noise of the marching died down.

After a few moments, Setiawan handed out paddles. When they were fifty yards from the dock, everyone but Setiawan quietly rolled over the sides of the boat and swam to the passenger boat. When they reached the pier, Curtis pulled himself along the pilings until he reached the bank, with Rayl just behind him. He checked the boat to make sure there was no one in the boat, and, when he was certain that no guards were left behind, he waved to his companions.

"Okay, guys, let's hit it."

"Wait," Wes said, "what are we going to do with our equipment? We can't leave our gear on the path. I'm sure everyone follows this precise path because the surrounding jungle will be booby trapped."

"Alright, let's take off our gear and weigh it down on the water bottom with our weight belts."

After each man had shed his gear and secured it on the water's floor, they each put their Glock handguns into their waistbands and climbed onto the pier. They carried their sub-machineguns at the ready and started out at a careful run to catch up with the noisy crowd that was being marched to God-only-knows what fate. They needed to fall in behind them soon because the deeper they got into the jungle, the more likely they were to fall into a trap or to trip a land mine.

They were wearing their neoprene wetsuits and booties and they hoped that it would be a quick trip to find the holding spot. If they spent too much time under this neoprene, they might soon sweat themselves into heat exhaustion or even heat stroke.

The wetsuits were black and they knew that if they took off their tops to cool themselves, they would light up the night with their light skin, except for Curtis, who was a black man. He considered taking his off, but he did not want to have such an advantage over his good friends.

B.J. remembered to give Setiawan a red flash for the all clear.

Setiawan was dead still in the water and waited until he saw this flash of red before he slowly approached and tied the passenger boat to the back of the crew boat. He punched reverse course entries into his GPS, and drove both boats a mile out into the Strait to await the flashing red light of his teammates that would signal their return. He had the common sense to extinguish all running lights and just relied on GPS points to hold the two boats in position.

The Special Forces quickly caught up with the guards and their noisy hostages and trailed them at a safe distance. It seemed that the hostages somehow knew that help was on the way because they made enough noise to ensure that the Special Forces would not have to follow too closely.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Apparently, when Finn began threatening the flow of money from piracy, they had taken revenge and Mio s a hostage to keep Connor's company away for another day or two. After a long discussion, it was agreed that Finn was too emotionally involved for the operation. Curtis, the team's senior operator and the only black man would be in charge, and their Englishman who hated being called an Englishman would be his second. They left immediately and received intelligence updates as they crossed the Strait.

The gunboat engines were idling when they approached a half mile from the dock. Setiawan reversed the engines to stop their forward momentum, and dropped anchor.

In place of the aft gun, two inflatable rafts were stacked. The men put them in the water and climbed in, wearing full SCUBA gear. Setiawan handed over their flippers and paddles and they began to row. When they were fifty yards from the dock, all but one rolled over the side of the boat to the bottom where they followed Curtis in the lead who was looking at his wrist compass for course corrections. When they reached the pier, Curtis pulled himself along the pilings until he reached the bank, with Ian just behind. He raised his head very slowly to check for guards. Then he waved to Ian who passed the wave down the line to the others. They all moved forward in an orderly and quiet fashion, placing their gear far enough away from the path that any gleam from the moonlight wouldn't be seen from the path or dock.

"Okay, guys, let's hit it."

"Wait," Wes said. He remembered to give Setiawan a red flash as the 'all clear' message.

The men entered waypoints into their GPS at every turn and made sure to walk quietly.

There was no way to know if there were other sentries guarding the trail and the approach to what they believed would be a large building bustling with JI terrorists.

If the opportunity presented itself, Curtis thought that the several of them might get in position on the inside and get video of the plans for the hostages and perhaps even for battle. Finn suggested that such information would make the Indonesian president a great ally if they could stop the palace invasion before it started.

As they awaited Finn's order to continue, Curtis was bored. He remembered the cell phone he had swiped from Commander Rayl for back up communications. He fished around in his pocket to familiarize himself with it. It slipped out of his hand and dropped to the ground. When he picked it up, he noticed the redial button and absently pressed it. He held it to his ear.

"Biffle here. What have you got for me, Rayl?"

Curtis was surprised and couldn't think of anything to say. After two seconds of thought, he mimicked Rayl's thick Boston accent, partially covering the microphone and scratching lightly to create static. "Sir, bad ... reception. We're closing in ... camp."

"Fantastic. Listen, I want those five I told you about."

"Roger."

"Make sure they are delivered to the vans. Do what you have to do to convince Finn to let you take custody, but, ultimately, their opinion does not matter."

"Copy all ..." Curtis scratched the microphone and used choppy words and was about to disconnect when he heard Biffle speak.

"And Connor's girl is in place."

Curtis caught his breath. He had no idea what to say or do.

“Rayl. Do you copy?”

“Say again, sir,” Curtis said.

“The, girl, Mio. She is in the camp. Large room, double doors. Get her before the others over.”

“Copy, the girl, Mio, is in place.”

“Roger, we have just now put her in the very last room on the west end of the structure, double doors. They don’t know she’s there, so get her first.”

Curtis decided to disconnect as that it would seem natural for a bad connection.

“Holy shit.” He couldn’t tell Finn. Rayl was with him. It was a lot to process so quickly for Curtis, but he needed to prioritize. Concentrate on the threat and worry about the non-fatal issues afterwards.

After about thirty minutes and ten GPS waypoint entries, they stopped short of a sprawling log-sided building that could have been built any time in the last twenty years. It could not be older than that because they knew how voracious termites were in this atmosphere.

Curtis estimated the building was about 5,000 square feet in size. They weren’t at all surprised that there was no driveway or road leading to it. The only way to get in and out was by foot, motorcycle or ATV.

“This is what terrorism will buy you. I will bet there are nearly one hundred of these camps scattered around Java,” Curtis said.

They knew immediately that they were gazing upon what centuries of corruption and its payoffs and kickbacks bought in Indonesia. JI was not unlike other terrorist outfits. It was founded by a bored, spoiled little man who yearned for a reputation like Osama Bin Laden had

enjoyed many decades before.

They left the scene and returned to the rest of the men to discuss what they had seen. When they arrived, Curtis didn't see Ian worrying with his wetsuit.

"Black as the ace o' spades!" Ian spat, looking down at the dirt that had poured into his wetsuit.

Curtis shoved him in the chest. "Watch your mouth, your Highness."

"Flippin' hell. Are ye daft? What was that fer?" Ian was a great addition, a fresh perspective, but the poor Yorkshire warrior still had trouble making himself understood.

"Where I come from, 'Black as the Ace of Spades' will get your ass kicked," Curtis said.

"Oh, aye? Well, I din't say that, did I? I said 'black as the face o' spades, which is t'say I got a fistful of sand down my bleeding wetsuit, and where I come from, shoving an innocent man will get your arse kicked, as you say, so pack it in, pretty lass."

Ian spat again, he knew that the sand in his wetsuit would rub him raw by the time they made it back into the water.

The three men ducked down as two elderly men walked over to a picnic table set in the lush landscaping near where the three CSF men were hidden.

"Look, the old men," B.J. said.

CSF had regular intelligence briefs by the investigative branch of CSF and each man recognized Abu Bakar Bashir and Hasam Tiro immediately. They rather expected that Bakar Bashir might be involved, but they were stunned at the appearance of Hasam Tiro.

Tiro's father was the long-time leader of the Stockholm-based separatist rebels of the Indonesia's northern province of Aceh. He had chosen to live in Stockholm, rather than be executed in his own home. Under his leadership, Aceh had seen a simmering decades-long rebellion in which at least ten thousand people had been killed.

Sweden rejected suggestions that Tiro should be expelled from their country to face trial in Indonesia. A Swedish Foreign Ministry spokesman said that if Tiro did nothing to break Swedish law or violate international law, the government would not do anything.

"I'm going to wriggle a little closer and see if I can't get a bead on these creeps with my camera," B.J. said.

"Good call, buddy, but be ready to haul ass if they spot you."

B.J. inched his way toward the picnic bench and, when he thought he might be able to hear them, but still be at a safe distance, he stopped moving and slowed his breathing so that he might record as much of the conversation as possible. Finn didn't go bargain basement for gear. This camera was probably going to pick up video and audio better than his own eyes and ears.

Chapter Twenty-Three

When Tiro had arrived the day before, he was tired from his trip and had asked to simply go to bed and meet the next day. Bakar Bashir had shown him to his luxurious suite where three beautiful girls lay naked on the large luxurious bed, enthusiastic to share their charms. The elderly Tiro delighted in the youth of the girls and, after they had made love to him, they massaged him into a deep sleep.

Tiro was feeling much better today, and he didn't know that a man had a very sensitive digital camera in place, just as their high-level talks began.

"With the generous funding by the Klijnkolie oil company and the commitment of the Aceh rebels, we will surely succeed. Our armies have rendezvoused and the individual division leaders have briefed the platoon leaders on what is expected of them," Bakar Bashir said. "However, I must admit to you, honorable Tiro, that our men have no weapons as yet."

"How can that be? Even last year, I was briefed that your financial officer had acquired rifles for each of our seven thousand infantry and training personnel! I was told that our men had been trained to the level of experts with rifles."

"The men have been training with weapons, taking turns with what they have. The funds for modern weapons have been collected over many years by various means and the weapons have been purchased. Our financial officer, Lin Su, has assured the leadership that the shipment of weapons has come under close scrutiny by several nations, but they are now finally anchored just off shore. She is contracting smaller vessels to transfer the weapons from the ships to appropriate landing sites. Trucks will then move the weapons to our men south of Jakarta and they will be distributed by the end of the week. In any event, we have our own small navy that will board every ship anchored in the area and they will begin to move the weapons in

small loads.”

“Has Mr. Klijnkrumer already transferred the funds to us?”

“Actually, we haven’t been able to establish a connection with Lin Su. We travel with one of her accountants and he confirms that eighty-six billion dollars was transferred from Klijnkrumer to our account, but that it was then immediately transferred to another account.”

“Another account?”

“Yes, Tiro. Lin Su says that this is not an uncommon practice. It would be unwise to deposit that sum directly into Jemaah Islamiyah accounts as they now total over eleven billion U.S. dollars. It is a tactic to cover large transactions from prying eyes, such as governments.” He raised his eyes for effect, at the same time concealing his own concern worry.

“I see.” The eleven billion dollars obviously pleased Tiro. “That makes sense. I would still like to speak to Lin Su myself,” Tiro said quietly. “In the meantime, we must concern ourselves with the wellbeing of our brave men who have left their families to travel so far to risk their lives for us.”

“I share your concern. However, we cannot take a chance of using cell phones since the Indonesian government monitors them carefully, but, as we speak, I have runners passing word throughout Sumatra and you can expect more men to begin arriving by the hundreds within three days. With the funding provided by Klijnkrumer, we will be prepared to berth and feed them for as long as necessary.”

“Last May, the Indonesian government launched a campaign aimed at crushing the Free Aceh separatist movement. Since then, the security forces have killed more than thirteen thousand of our people. My men are eager to avenge those deaths and many more of our freedom fighters are still holding out, but they cannot make any move from the north because

there are thirty-five thousand military and armed police deployed north of the capital in Sumatra. It is a good omen that you and your men are southeast of Jakarta, so that we can make our initial attack from the south and, when they move to intercept that attack, the others can strike from the north.

“The greatest misery for peasants in the north is being caught in the middle of a conflict, with no clear front line. Our men must move through the villages, mingling with the local population. The military follow close behind, rounding up any one that they deem to be suspicious. The government will be taken completely by surprise by an attack from the south. The palaces are guarded heavily on the northwest side, but there is only small army representation at the southeastern entrances.

“Are we still in agreement that I will head the new government with senior members of your rebellion as my immediate staff?” Bashir asked.

Tiro thought it very selfish that Bashir would worry only about his future position when the peasant rebels had suffered for so long.

“Yes, my friend, you will be our president, but I will take part in choosing your cabinet.”

“Of course, I would not have it any other way,” Bashir agreed.

“Thank you, Bakar Bashir.”

B.J. pressed himself to the ground as a young, well-armed man approached.

“Father, I am very sorry to interrupt, but dinner is ready.”

Bashir was not upset with the young man. In fact, he was pleased that he was present.

“Tiro, my friend. Please let me present my son, Guntur Rohman Bashir.”

Tiro stood and grabbed the young man by his upper arms and hugged him to his chest.

He kissed the young man twice, once on each cheek. Gunter blushed in awe and put a hand to his cheek.

“Hasam Tiro, I am very happy to meet you. I have admired you since I was a young boy listening to my father’s recollections of your exploits.”

“It is wonderful to be in the presence of one of my friend’s children. Your weapon looks like it is well taken care of. That is the mark of a great warrior. You should be proud to be in the service of you father and the partners of the Aceh rebellion.”

The older men stood and started walking toward the isolated building and what smelled to be a wonderful feast.

B.J. crawled back to his friends and his knee landed on a twig that broke much more loudly than such a small twig should.

The three men stopped and turned to listen.

Curtis and Wes cringed and their hearts stopped for a moment as they waited for the punishment that the broken twig might bring.

“Please go to the dinner,” Gunter told the old men. “I will look.”

The elderly men were happy with his initiative and walked towards the building.

B.J. quietly scrambled back to his friends and watched as the young Bashir approached.

Gunter returned to the picnic table and looked around it. He didn’t see anything, so he decided to walk around and check the path from a different direction, being careful not to hit any of the trip wires that he himself had placed and rigged.

He saw something shiny and black. He went to investigate. It was Curtis’s shaven head.

Gunter had never met a black man, so he did not recognize the sphere. Curtis made him pay for that lack of experience.

He grabbed the young lieutenant by the front of his shirt and shoved his knife into his throat. He sawed back and forth until he could feel the vertebrae and, with a twisting motion, he separated them. Young Gunter died instantly.

Curtis pulled B.J. and Wes back with the rest of the men. "Listen, I need to modify the plan. We start at the west end and clear rooms from there." He looked around at faces who didn't seem to care.

"Sounds good," Wayne said. "Also, I think we stand a better chance if we wait until after their meal. We let their food to settle in and, when their glucose levels spike, they will be too sleepy to fight well."

Curtis readily agreed. The guards would be tired or even asleep. He was counting on it. He hoped that the boy, Gunter, wouldn't be missed right away.

The going was slow and precise. B.J. had located and disarmed two mines and they weren't even ten yards into the jungle. Tim led them the remaining twelve yards and only found one other booby trap that he expertly disarmed. Now they were on the clear path that led to the building. They each had night vision goggles and they hoped that these would give them an advantage.

As they neared the picnic table where B.J. had listened to the earlier discussion, they saw a small group of guards. Now it was real. One man covered the path, while four men circled north and the rest circled south where Bakar Bashir and Tito were heading when they left the picnic table. That was surely the entrance to the building. They did an earpiece radio check before continuing.

“Four guards at the south entrance. Passageway runs the full length of the building.”

“We have three guards on the north side.”

“Only seven outside?” Curtis said, surprised at the small security. “Okay guys, the safe bet is to neutralize the outside threat, but we have to be quiet about it. These guys are full of dinner, so they’ll move slowly. Pick your targets and try to stay concealed until you strike. Pull your kill to the edge of the jungle and send one man to recon both sides from the outside windows.”

The men moved like sloths with the butt of their heavy weapons held firmly in the pocket of their shoulders and the barrels pointed down at a 45-degree angle in the low ready position.

It took nearly thirty minutes to cover as many yards. B.J. pressed his weapon close to his face, comforted by the sweet smell of gun oil. The guards never looked up from their conversations. The deadly attacks were carried out silently and savagely. The hand-picked protectors of the enemy leadership were no longer factors.

B.J. squatted down and radioed Curtis. “Curtis, B.J., over.”

“Curtis.”

“Curtis. I’m on the south side. My guys can carry the picnic table over and I can record their meeting through this window.”

“Alright, but I want two others to cover you.”

“Roger.”

“Let me know the second they stop their discussion and start to break up and I’ll bring my guys in and we will take the room down.”

* * *

"This cannot be true!" Tiro cried. "You told me only two hours ago that the men were being fed and housed and were only waiting for their weapons and the order to attack!"

"Tiro, I am as surprised as you are. We haven't been using our cell phones and the runner has only just now arrived with the news."

"Well, don't you think the time has come to use the cell phones?" Tiro asked with intense condescension.

"Use the phones," Tito ordered. Bashir had just lost command. Tiro knew the time had come for him to take command of all operations, even though he had been on Indonesian soil for less than two days.

"Call the Commander in Charge of the naval operation. Ask if they've found the container ship that holds our rifles."

The lieutenant knew precisely who his beloved leader spoke of and took out his wallet. He unfolded a list of phone numbers and quickly pushed the numbers into the keypad.

"Budi, I am with honorable Hasam Tiro and – ... yes, my friend, it is he. ... There will be time for that later. ... Please tell me if your men have found the ship with the rifles. ... Have you boarded and inspected every ship at anchor? ... Have you checked to see if any ships are due to anchor soon? ... Why haven't we been notified? ... Yes. ... I understand."

The man bowed his head solemnly. "Hasam Tiro, I have very bad news. There are no rifles. Our navy has contacted every ship at anchor and have actually inspected their freight. There aren't any other ships scheduled to anchor for two more weeks and their cargoes have been verified for other destinations. They dispatched a runner yesterday, but he hasn't arrived

yet. I'm very sorry, Hasam Tiro."

Tiro's head was swimming. It was all so clear now. So shockingly simple, the premise of thousands of silly American television movies. "Gentlemen, can one of you tell me what has happened here? Use your imaginations and tell me what has happened."

Each man felt personally responsible and could only look at the floor.

"Is there no imagination in this room?" Tiro looked around incredulously. "That is part of the problem, no imagination. How can you even begin to run any operation without proper communications? That is only one of many flaws in this operation. Think! What has happened to make everything go so terribly wrong? Do you think Allah will make things happen just because you will it?" There was still no recognition.

"Earlier today, Mr. Klijnkramer transferred eighty-six million dollars to us! His own accountant confirmed that the transfer was indeed carried out, but that the funds were immediately transferred to another account, and now we are informed that all of our funds have been withdrawn and again transferred to yet another account, but it will be a while before the accountant can track the account. Another account? Still no imagination? How about this. ... Where is Lin Su?"

No one knew where she was, but they finally understood the implication.

"My brothers," Tiro said, looking down shaking his head sadly, but chuckling "Lin Su is far, far away from her last known location ... and she is a very rich woman. My guess is that she is under the knife of a very skilled and discreet plastic surgeon and she will likely never be found. Eleven billion dollars will pay for the best security. Eleven billion dollars transferred to another account that we cannot trace and that will have been moved once again when we pay millions for an expert to locate the dust in a previous account. You sent Lin Su to America as a young girl for preparatory High School and then on to the Wharton School of Finance. You

thought you could simply uproot her from the land of milk and honey and internet chatrooms and bring her back here to our jungles. No, we live in the jungle, while she will enjoy and wonderful life.

“There are seven thousand very strong and brave men who have traveled many miles, mostly by foot carrying meager provisions to fight for their families and countrymen. These men were promised food, clothing and shelter until they received training with their weapons. They have put their trust and faith in us. We represent Islam and they fight for the fair treatment of their provinces in the north of Indonesia. They formed an alliance with us, took us at our word and pledged themselves to our combined efforts. Now, we must explain why there is no food, no shelter, no weapons and no money to even return them to their homes, which are so very far away. Without money for the ferry, we are forcing these brave men to march past thousands of Indonesian soldiers. What will become of them?”

B.J. listened and knew that morale had bottomed out in that room and they could simply walk in and the terrorists would do nothing more than look up at them like dogs that had been beaten their entire lives.

“Curtis,” he whispered.

“Yeah.”

“Perfect situation. We’re taking the JI down. Probably no gunfire.”

“Roger. We’ll start down the passageway now and, when I clear the west wing, I’ll give you the go ahead.”

Once inside the building, Curtis’ team moved in single file. They held their weapons in the high, ready position with the butt of their weapons under their armpits, and the barrels

pointed slightly up just below the line of sight, but within their peripheral vision. Curtis and his men formed Close Quarters Battle formation to clear the other rooms. The first room was behind a huge double door, as Biffle had described. Curtis pulled on it, but it wouldn't budge. He didn't see a lock or keyhole. Ian pointed out two large brass rings bolted to the center of each door. He knelt and turned and pulled the massive doors open with little effort.

Pretty, but terrified eyes looked up at these men in black wetsuits with black grease on their faces. It was Mio. When she started crying, B.J. realized that she didn't recognize them. He knelt and wiped the greasepaint from his face. When she recognized him, she fainted. She was so skinny after only a few days. What did they intend to do with her after their invasion?

"B.J., take them."

"Roger."

As they neared the room that held the loud enemy conversation, each man pushed their weapons out of their armpits and slid them up into firing position. The door to the meeting was already open and the team burst in, shouting random nonsense at the top of their lungs to shock the men into submission. When the terror leaders were sprawled facedown, the team secured their wrists with plastic ties. Though there were no visible weapons, a thorough pat down discovered leg sheathes that held vicious blades and several handguns.

They stood their prisoners up and one of Finn's men used plastic ties to connect their hands together in a short chain, so that they could not break away and scatter into the jungle.

While the Jebel Islamiyah leaders were being secured, Klijnkramer was shoved rudely and when he saw the plastic ties, Klijnkramer jerked away.

"How dare you? If you so much as lay a hand on me again, I will have you tracked to the ends of the earth."

“Gi’ over yer chelpin’,” Ian said, as he twisted two knuckles on one of Klijnkramer’s ribs and elicited a strange yelp.

“How dare you!” Klijnkramer whined. “I have been through a terrible ordeal and, though I am very happy to see you, I would prefer that you treat me with respect and return me to my family.”

“See this,” Wayne held a scope camera over his head. “This little thing films and records, and there was at least one of these in every window while you geniuses brainstormed world domination.” He laughed. “And, Bashir, you really should not have sent your boy into the woods to check out a strange noise. He seemed like he had such promise.”

Bashir buried his hands in his face and began to sob.

“Yeah, well, if I did not know how many innocent people have died at your hands, I might shed a tear myself for the kid’s bad luck.”

Curtis radioed Setiawan and was pleased to hear that he had been monitoring the radios and had the gunboat tied up broadside to the pier with both .50 caliber guns trained above the tree line. Then he called Finn with the good news.

“Finn, this is Curtis, over.”

“This is Finn, go ahead.”

“It’s Mio.”

Finn said nothing, thinking the worst.

“We got her. She’s alive. Hungry, but very alive.”

Finn said nothing, but he dropped to his knees and sobbed.

* * *

As the boat made the long trip across the Strait, Finn was snapping his fingers. He was exhausted from exertion and worry and now he knew Mio was safe. When they got to the pier, he was disappointed that Mio wasn't there so he called Biffle.

"Admiral, Finn Connor here."

"Damn good to hear your voice. How are you and your men?"

We just arrived at our pier. "We have just a single minor injury on our side, seven fatalities on theirs. Sir, we have the leaders of the JI in our custody. We have digital video of their discussions documenting their plans to attempt a coup on the Indonesian government."

"Finn, you have Mio back. She is safe. Now, I need you to escort your prisoners to the men in the black vans parked behind you. This is important – we need to move fast and I'll explain later."

Finn was confused and his skin crawled as he looked over his shoulder. There were two flat black stretch vans parked askew under a clump of tree branches.

"Curtis," Finn shouted robotically, "take the prisoners up the pier."

"What are we going to do with them, Finn?"

"The guy at the other end of this magic phone has two vans waiting for them."

Curtis knew he was referring to Biffle. "How did he do that? He's in Belgium, isn't he?"

"Yeah, but he isn't you run of the mill kind of guy."

Curtis decided to delay his story about the conversation on Rayl's phone. Like Finn said, Biffle wasn't a run of the mill guy. He could make a like Curtis Davis disappear in a flash.

They herded the men into the vans where eight stern Asian men in tailored suits stood. There was no fight left in the prisoners, so they agreed when he suggested they cut the plastic ties. They had accepted their fate and climbed into the vans – except for one.

Klijnkramer stopped next to Finn, as if he thought his position in Singapore society was as solid as ever. Finn elbowed the presumptuous elitist hard in the face. Before the arrogant idiot could stop screaming through his broken teeth and nose, Finn threw him headfirst into the van and grabbed the underside of his thighs and shoved them into Hasam Tiro's face. Some of the Asian men smiled, but their overall behavior was disassociated, as if they were required to not have an opinion of the exchange.

"So, are you guys CIA?" Wayne asked with a collegiate tone.

"No, sir, we aren't."

"NSA?"

The man shook his head.

"No, sir."

"Well, what the heck are you?"

"The good guys."

The van lurched as the sliding door shut.

Finn's instincts told him to follow. "Wayne!" he shouted at one of his men. "Do you have your car keys?"

Wayne shook his keys above his head and ran for his car. They made up the distance quickly and stayed in another lane, six car lengths behind the van with the mysterious occupants.

They pulled up at a gate at Paya Lebar airport that Finn had never seen or noticed. The gate was opened and then closed behind the van. He heard and then saw a black Lear jet with its engines turning, but all its navigation lights extinguished. The van pulled as close as possible to the small jet and the van's doors flew open, before the van even came to a full stop. There were three men at the foot of the boarding ladder holding weapons.

Finn froze and focused hard on a man just inside the cabin who was shouting instructions for the human transfer operation below.

Biffle! Finn was stunned. Too many possibilities were swirling around his brain and he was searching for a compartment he could put it all in.

Admiral Biffle stepped to the tarmac and the jet started to taxi. Very soon, Finn heard, but barely saw the jet, like a shadow, roar down the runway and climb into the night sky. When it was visible against low cloud, Finn saw it level off at about three thousand feet and turn north. They still hadn't turned on their navigation lights.

* * *

But Biffle was in Brussels. He called again, but there was no answer on his handheld set. After several attempts, Finn went into the air terminal to call Brussels by landline.

"Special Operations Command, this is an unsecured line. This is Staff Sergeant Howell."

"Hello, this is Finn Connor and I'm working with Admiral Biffle. Could you connect me with his office?"

After a long pause, the sergeant came back on the line. "Sir, I've checked the phone list

and I don't see his name. It's a common mistake and I apologize. Please tell me which office he is assigned to and I'll forward you."

"The main one."

"Sir?"

"He is Commander, Special Operations Command."

"Roger. I'll transfer you. Please stand by, sir."

"Admiral Fields' office, this is an unsecured line. May I help you?"

"Yes, Finn Connor for Admiral Biffle."

Finn remembered the name. *Fields? Was it the same Fields he once knew as Colonel Fields in the Myanmar region?*

"I'm sorry, sir, I don't have his new phone number yet. He retired three months ago, and we haven't gotten a reply to our requests for updated personal information."

Finn looked at the bulky phone in his hand and held his breath as the realization hit him. "Can you check the field contact information for Commander Rayl?"

"I'm sorry, sir, I cannot give out any information on our personnel."

"Tell you what, there is a man here in Singapore who is claiming to be a Navy Commander by the name Chuck Rayl and he claims to be working for Admiral Biffle, who you say is retired. Since Admiral Biffle is retired, I think I might have an imposter on my hands. Can you at least confirm that his name is on the books?"

After a long pause, Finn could hear a deep breath, then the Petty Officer answered. "Sir, there is nobody by that name on active duty, as far as I know. However, I can give you personal information about a man of the same name. Can I have your word that it won't come back to

haunt me?”

“You have my word.”

“I accept your word, sir. Commander Rayl was booted out of the service two years ago for illegal activities in Afghanistan.” He paused to phrase his words carefully and not show his personal outrage about the whole affair. “He was working for a drug trafficker – No, he was a drug trafficker. But he was somehow able to quietly leave the service before being prosecuted. Since it all happened during his military service, he was immune to civil prosecution.” The disgust in the young man’s voice betrayed his real opinion of this activity. “I haven’t heard anything about him since he was let go.”

“Thank you. Thank you very much for your trust. I will never mention this conversation,” Finn said absently as he lowered the phone to his side, his eyes staring at a wall. As much as he wished his suspicions could all be explained away, his intuition was too strong to ignore. He felt for the brick of a phone and gave it another attempt. Admiral Biffle answered on the second ring. “Hello, Finn, I want to thank you again and I hope you will relay my thanks to your men. You guys did an outstanding job and I never doubted you.”

“Thank you, admiral, my guys will surely like to hear that you took time out from your retirement to decide that Mio wouldn’t die like Kade almost did. I don’t know how if they would understand if I ever made the mistake to let slip that a man I loved and trusted like a father was a monster who nearly destroyed their lives.” He tried to sound neutral and took a silent, deep breath.

The long pause was horrible. He wanted to be wrong.

Suddenly, Biffle stood before him.

“Yes, I am indeed retired, and that is just how important this mission really was. I had to

retire so that our country could not be tied to this if something went wrong.”

“I see,” Finn said determined, “and was it also important for Rayl to get caught trafficking in heroin so that he could also participate in this mission, two years before this so-called mission was activated?”

“It’s true that I recruited Rayl, but only because he had the skills, experience and contacts I needed and I knew he would not waver from the end goal.”

“Who’s goal, admiral?” Finn’s voice was heated. “You betrayed men who trusted you with their very lives. You are a traitor to every man you’ve ever commanded and to the country that gave you so much.” Finn became confident now that everything was falling into place. “And how is Lin Su doing? When we were ready to move in on Tiro, we had a video camera trained on a window and it recorded the shock that the leaders felt at the betrayal of a woman named Lin Su, a woman who lived across the Malacca Strait from Singapore. An Indonesian girl who was sent to America to study finance. They could never have known just how well she learned her craft, but you recognized the opportunity quickly, didn’t you?”

“I did not seek her out. Our meeting was purely accidental and our love equals or transcends any other. It’s true that I saw the opportunity as we got to know each other, but I never possessed the skills required to even understand the workings of such a complicated financial transaction. In fact, it was she who proposed the idea, but I don’t think I want to discuss my love life with you. You have little experience in such things. How long was your marriage really? A day before you shipped out and then a day after you retired?”

--

Finn reacts about Sarah accusing biffle of causing her death and so much more.

==

“I trusted you, Biffle.” Finn would never again recognize him as an admiral. “I had no reason to question the orders of a man that is – that was a personal hero. You used that trust against me and my men – men I love and respect. And they respect me and my judgment and I will never regain that degree of trust as you destroyed it.”

“Look, Finn, I apologize for the awful thing I just said. I admired Sarah and losing her was terrible. You are a remarkable man and I manipulated you for the greater good.”

“What is the greater good that has already caused so much death? The common Indonesians followed their spiritual leaders to a place that they would wage war against their president. Do you think that all those men will be given a free pass home to their villages now? So many will die so that you will get another eleven billion dollars to add to the billions I imagine you already got from the Corsairs Doug and I lost.”

“You are mistaken if you think the money will fund a lavish lifestyle for two people with new names and new histories.”

“As a matter of fact, that is exactly what I think. You have worked together to commit the perfect crime, and I’m also certain that you and Rayl made an awful lot of money with your activities in Afghanistan.”

“It breaks my heart, Finn. It breaks my heart that I can’t tell you what this is all about, how many decades of planning and heartache that has gone into saving our world from itself. There are things you don’t know even about yourself. I wish I could tell you everything, but we are not far enough along ... so I cannot explain.”

Finn was on the verge of tears. So many men would still die for the greed of an old man and a young girl.

“Listen, Finn. I’m going to tell you the truth of the matter and, if you don’t accept it, I will

at least know that you won't forget my words." The admiral spoke with pride. "I am a patriot, Finn. I know my claim doesn't jibe with your new opinion of me, but still I am a patriot. I love a country that no longer exists, a country that we have lost control of because of citizens that would trade their children for a good orgasm.

"Humans desire ease. When someone or an organization promises an easy life, those promises create the true rulers of the world. A century ago a sociopathic senator named Joseph McCarthy ruined families and careers and blackballed entertainers and media figures with a simple premise – he claimed that they were Communists.

"And, then, just two decades later, the very same Hollywood culture teamed up with the media to use the same tactics to attack all that was good in America. In the beginning, they actually did some good for society, but it was a side effect because, when they got a taste for power of celebrity and control, they became addicted to it and their psychotic methods poisoned generations of young American minds. As they built their army, their control became stronger and more pervasive.

"They owned the hearts and the minds of their devotees, uneducated inexperienced sheep who need to belong. It's easy to belong to the group that requires the least effort, the group that would steal from others to buy their souls. The media became so corrupt that Americans believed everything they read, watched or downloaded from their selected sources, ignoring all other opinions. The Constitution was perverted and we know now that it has become just another historical document in a museum in Europe that created the most successful society on earth, an ancient society that is no more. My project is to make sure that never ever happens again to hardy responsible people of ambition and personal dignity."

"So, you are going to be the supreme judge in a supreme court of your own design? You are so positive that your beliefs are so righteous that you can force your will on those that you

consider to be no more than sheep?”

“That’s a pretty good analysis. Somebody needs to move the sheep away from the cliff.

Finn, I wish you all the luck in the world,” he said abruptly, “and I hope you will someday understand how important and honorable my intentions were and always will be.”

The admiral had failed to change Finn’s opinion of him with some vague claim about the future. This last discussion would be his legacy and Finn would make sure of it.

Chapter Twenty-Four

It had been a very busy month for Finn Connor and he had just arrived at the Drunken Duck where he sat in a corner and watched a musician who spent more time outside than on stage. He was mesmerizing the crowd with a tasteful blues solo. He was playing a Chinese fake version of a Gibson Les Paul, a so-called Chibson, but the house guitar tech had it dialed in. The tone was inspirational. He thought of his brother every time he looked at the stage, whether it was lit up or not.

He heard a hearty “Merry Christmas”, and the speaker was acknowledged by the roar of all present, “Merry Christmas!”

The initial cheer it brought to him evaporated instantly. “Christmas!” he shouted. The crowd glared at him as if he was a ridiculously boring American protestor.

Not only had he forgotten Christmas, he had forgotten December. Hell, he had forgotten winter, and that was not hard to do in Singapore.

What was Aidan going to think? It was 6:20pm and he hadn’t even called her to wish her a Merry Christmas, much less sent a gift. He wanted to crawl out of his skin and crawl into traffic. Wayne saw his boss’s face and knew that he needed immediate assistance, medical or otherwise.

“Finn, you look like hell. What’s wrong man?”

“Christmas, Wayne. I forgot Christmas.”

“That’s bad, Finn.” Wayne studied the ceiling for a way to rescue Finn. “So, Aidan doesn’t get anything from her rich boyfriend?”

Finn stared at Wayne hotly. "That's the gist of it. Yeah, my girlfriend will not get a gift, and a phone call right now would be weak."

Their heads were down, both in deep consideration with the fingers of each of their hands parting their hair in twenty places. Suddenly, Wayne straightened and dropped his fist on the bar.

"What man? What?" Finn asked with a pale face, feeling both hope and desperation.

Wayne flashed a victorious smile. "You forgot. The international date line puts San Francisco a day behind Singapore, dummy. It's the day 'before' Christmas in Aidan's world and she expects something nice."

Finn had new hope, but he would not allow a breath of relief as his brain hit high gear. He rushed to the bar and almost knocked Sean down as he dove at the telephone.

"Operator, please connect me to Northwest Airlines."

Finn didn't have any luck with Northwest. They didn't have any seats. Continental had plenty of room, but the earliest they could get him to San Francisco was twelve noon, too late to make a successful Christmas presentation.

After a few more minutes of furious calls, Finn shouted, "Yes!" His glory was loud enough to make every cheery face pull away from their mugs. "Sorry, folks."

"Wayne, you got your keys?" he shouted across the pub. "United Airlines, coach, non-stop for a 5a.m. arrival."

"I'll get my keys!" Wayne shouted, already mounting the stairs to the private room above.

Finn could explain to Aidan that he had only the clothes on his back because he wanted to shop for his sizes in San Francisco. He'd already decided on her gift weeks before and the shop

just happened to be on the way to the airport. “Sheila, can you make a call for me? I need something gift-wrapped for pick up in thirty minutes.” Three Sheilas had a short argument over who would take on such a responsibility, but it was picked up.

* * *

Aidan didn’t open her eyes, but she was aware of the discomfort. Her arm was pressing painfully on the edge of something that didn’t belong on her bed. The pain didn’t have a realistic place in her current dream, so, as such things do, the ‘thing’ pulled her out of the dream when she realized that the pain was real.

She was suddenly too frightened to move. She remembered where she was. She was home, in her bed, and there was something on her pillow that she did not put there. She turned on the delicate Tiffany lamp at her bedside and let her eyes adjust to the soft light.

On the pillow next to her was a darling lacquered walnut box carved with delicate tongue-in-groove and a carefully domed lid. This was a music box like no other. She always had a soft spot in her heart for music boxes with their sweet tinkling and beautiful ballerinas. She owned only two, said to be the finest in the world by people who knew such things. This one was by and far more interesting to her. The colors were perfectly chosen and the exposed wood was highly figured. The pedestal was ivory and topped with a silver band. She thought the band too garish, however, and that it overwhelmed the subdued colors. She would have it changed unless this was a collectable that would lose value if it were altered. It still didn’t occur to her that it was impossible to deliver a gift in this building without permission.

There was a note buried in the luxurious silk. She read, “There’s something on the other

side of your bed. It's not so pretty – in fact, it's startling to most people. Anyway, I hope you are happy when you see it.”

She scrambled over her pillow to the dark side of the bed where she looked down to see a dark shape. It was an upside down human head! And it was smiling!

She screamed. She clawed to the foot of the bed and pulled the pistol from the secret nest that Finn had built into the bed post. She had to decide whether she was still dreaming before pulling the trigger. She leveled the gun at the opposite side of the room and stood there, coughing and crying while the weapon bobbed in her hands.

“It's me! Don't shoot!” Finn pulled himself from under the bed. “It's me, girl. Shush. You're going to wake California.”

“What? Finn? Is it you? Why are you –? Finn?”

“It's me, Aidan,” he said, slowly pushing his outstretched hands up and then down. “Put the pistol down, candy girl.”

Only Finn called her that. She stared at him without blinking, her mouth agape. Then her eyes flashed with angry recognition. “Finn Connor, I should have shot you. I mean it. I should have shot you in the arm or somewhere you could recover ... so, I won't go to prison.” She plopped into a nearby love seat, trying to glare. “Maybe in that space between your eyes. That would do no serious damage. After all, you are an idiot. I've said it all along.” As she spoke, a smile snuck onto her face. She was fighting to not beam with joy. She sat shaking her head at him in false disappointment.

“I sure did miss you, sweetie,” he purred, “Don't be mad. I swam all the way over here to see you on Christmas and you're treating me so bad.” Finn scooted toward her on his knees. “Gimme some lovin'.”

“No,” she said, pouting. “How did you get in here? I paid nearly fifteen thousand dollars for that alarm system! Jesus, how much does it cost to keep people like you out of my house?”

Finn furrowed his brow and smirked. She knew that alarm system just made it more fun. “I guess I’ll have to get one of those voice recognition systems,” she said, finally showing her happiness.

“There isn’t anything wrong with that alarm, Aidan. The Home Depot didn’t have what I needed and I’m damn lucky you didn’t hear the jackhammer. It would have ruined the surprise.”

She smiled. He was her idiot and she was so happy and proud that he was here. “How much does it cost to keep a freak out of your home?” she asked the empty room. She grabbed his head in her hands and stole such a hungry kiss that she thought she could pick him up over her head and throw him onto her bed.

“Finn, will you marry me?”

“Sure.”

“When Finn?”

“Soon.”

She left her seat and knelt in front of him and held his knees.

“When Finn?”

“Aidan, we live so far apart. An incontinent marriage would be tough right now.”

“It’s intercontinental, stupid.” She giggled. Finn’s smile lit up her face.

“I love to see your diamond eyes flicker when you’re angry,” He laughed.

“It’s not a really a big deal.” She sighed. “I just figured Connor is so much easier than Kristensson. It’s impossible to get people to spell my name right. That’s really the only reason I

want to get married. There's another guy that I've been seeing. His last name is Oreo. Now that's something I can live with, 'Aidan Oreo.' I would invite you to my wedding, of course."

"Let me see you, Aidan," Finn whispered.

She knew what he wanted and she proudly stood and lifted her plain pajama dress over her head and stood naked before him. She saw it move and he shifted to ease the discomfort. She was happy and proud that she could so easily affect him like that.

She climbed onto the seat and straddled his legs, facing him, her knees pressing softly into the sofa. She closed her eyes and he stroked her soft belly slowly and let one hand slip down between her legs to cup her gently. He stroked the soft hair and touched her.

He parted her and moistened his fingers. Then he pushed his fingers into her pubic hair and pulled her to him.

She grabbed Finn's throat and pulled herself down until her teeth bit into his bottom lip, her jaw seizing up with passion.

She giggled.

* * *

She sat on the edge of the bed and stroked her man's face as he slept.

Her telephone rang and she grabbed the receiver quickly before a second ring could interrupt Finn's sleep and went into the living room.

"Hello? ... Yes, this is Aidan."

The conversation was quick and one-sided. Three of Finn's fleet of twelve armored cars

had been robbed within minutes of each other, but no shots had been fired.

“Can I tell him in the morning?” she asked hopefully, “Okay, no, I understand. Hold on,” she said, sighing.

She went back to Finn and watched his face for several moments. She knew her man as well as he knew himself. There was trouble in Singapore and he would leave her. She wanted to take these precious seconds to enjoy his rising chest, his breathing.

“Finn.” She finally shook him gently.

He came to immediately, like every man in his line of work. He saw worry in her eyes.

“What is it, Aidan?”

“Telephone.” She handed him the phone and left the room quietly.

Aidan took down a box with one of the two suits she had planned to surprise him with, but he only had what he wore last night and he would need them for the return trip. She looked down to smooth one of the collars and saw a tear fall, then bead and roll down the lapel. She didn’t know when she had started to cry.

When he finished his call, she would need to call her company travel desk to get him on an immediate flight to Singapore. She wished with all her heart that this was not happening, but she was on automatic now.

“What are you doing, candy girl? What’s in the box, got a boyfriend on the side?”

She turned around to see him grinning. “I love you,” she said, holding the boxes, the open on top of the still wrapped. “Don’t worry if you don’t like them. You have no taste. I bought them with me in mind. Merry Christmas.”

He could see that she had been crying, and he realized what she was thinking. “Miss

Oreo! I command you to stop that crying at once!" He plopped down beside her. "The one time that you weren't eavesdropping on my phone calls, you didn't get to hear me tell my guys to take care of business themselves this time because I'm with my fiancé."

She squealed and turned around and around, not realizing she was still naked. He wasn't about to mention it. "Hell, with all the detectives on my payroll, they'll figure this one out or they'll be working at street barbeque stands as soon as I get back."

"Monkey barbeque, monkey barbeque." She laughed and hiccupped. "Oh, I forgot the music box." She padded across the carpet and returned with her prize. She sat on his lap and lay her head on his shoulder. Finn opened the delicate box and asked, "How do you make her dance?"

She reached out and wound the winding key and the dancer started to spin with the delicate tinkling. They sat together and watched the tiny dancer turn. She thought again that the silver circle was out of place, then caught her breath when she realized that the silver band was meant for her hand and there was a diamond, and more diamonds.

"Still want to marry me? Will you dump that Oreo dude for me?"

Aidan grabbed the box and Finn watched her begin to spin slowly in a beautiful, accidental dance. She laughed and danced on the tips of her toes, never taking her eyes from the ring. Her breasts followed her jumps and her hair fell over her face. Everything was in slow motion for Finn now. Her happiness was so pure and innocent. He could not be happier for her. He burned this picture of her into his mind's eye. He would never forget her sparkling eyes as she smiled at the rock that meant so much to little girls, and that is what she was at that moment – a little girl living out a fantasy played out over and over in her mind. Right now, it was her time and she was dancing naked. A beautiful happy woman staring into her future and Finn knew that he had done right by her. He would always do right by her.

And then she bent forward and froze. She fell over and her fingers curled.

He held his ears tight so he couldn't hear.

Curriculum Vita

Gary Penton was born on December 16, 1962 at the Portsmouth Navy Hospital, Portsmouth, Virginia. The first son of Gary Penton and Zelma Williams Penton, he graduated from Broadus High School in 1981 and attended The University of Maryland at nights and on weekends, receiving a bachelor's degree in business administration in 1989. He attended the Naval War College and in the spring of 2016, he entered the Graduate School at The University of Texas at El Paso.

As a Naval Flight Officer flight instructor, Tactical Coordinator and Mission Commander in two patrol squadrons, he taught all squadron aircrew in all tactics and procedures to search, localize, track and attack subsurface targets. He also, taught surveillance and reconnaissance procedures while deployed all over the world. As squadron Tactics Officer, he was responsible for the modernization of tactical procedures for all aircraft roles and as Naval Aviation Training and Operations officer, the safe operation of all aircraft systems and avionics.

As Aide-de-Camp for Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Japan, he responsible for all business and personnel assigned to the Admiral's staff.

As Asst. Navigator and later as Navigator of USS INDEPENDENCE, he trained all ship's officers and air wing officers in the safe navigation and maneuvering of an aircraft carrier battle group and specialized tactical procedures.

After graduating from the Defense Information School (DINFOS), Fort Meade, MD, he was assigned to Public Affairs Center, San Diego where he was responsible for

the work and training of seventeen journalists, and created and edited both the Naval Hospital, San Diego and Hospital Ship, MERCY newsletter and website.

After retirement, he studied guitar making first with Kenny Hill Classical Guitars in Santa Cruz, then with Charles Fox Acoustic Guitars in Healdsburg, CA and John Marshall Electric and Bass Guitars in Atlanta, GA. He ran a small guitar business and ran it for a decade before selling it to become a full-time writer.

Permanent Address: 15903 Lofty Heights
 San Antonio, Texas 78232

This thesis was typed by the author.