

...WAS YESTERDAY
Another Jim Richards Adventure



by Robert E. Brisbin

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by

ROBERT E. BRISBIN

Other Books by Robert E. Brisbin

Terminal Resolve

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Deadly Errors

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FORWARD

San Diego, California

November 1970

The Center for International Development was located on a high hill above the town of La Jolla, California. CIDI occupied a two story concrete building, one of several similar buildings that were part of the University of California campus just north of San Diego.

On the second floor, in a conference room paneled in pickled ash, a meeting was in progress. Dr. Richard Holt, liaison to the National Security Council, chaired the meeting.

Dr. Holt had an inquisitive face whose most notable feature was a pair of bright blue eyes that sparkled mischievously behind round wire rim glasses. In his early fifties, he was a man of great intelligence, and high energy.

To his left at the long conference table sat Patricia Springer, a Ph.D. in Social Psychology. To her left Tom Haynsley, MBA International Finance. Across from Haynsley was Elmo Jefferson, Deputy Director - Covert Operations, CIA. But to everyone in this group, save Dr. Holt, his name was E. Robert Joseph of E.R. Joseph and Associates. To his left also sitting next to Dr. Holt, was Professor of Sociology, Clarence Clairmont III.

The meeting was at its end stage, the participants in the process of layering finishing touches to a study conducted on the impact of sociological change in Central America, and the likelihood such change would lead to full-scale revolution fomented by foreign intervention.

Dr. Holt addressed the group. "All right, we have covered the nuts and bolts of this finding. However, before I submit our conclusions to the National Security Council and the President I'd like to ask each of you to express any final thoughts or concerns you might have."

Tom Haynsley was the first to respond. "Based upon some of the data contained in our research, Guatemala would appear to be the country most ripe for revolution. However, it's my opinion that lack of charismatic leadership makes such revolution unlikely.

"Nicaragua, on the other hand, is more favorably positioned with dedicated communist leadership in the provinces and a large following of third class

citizenry. Our finding as presently written, doesn't place sufficient emphasis on Nicaragua's potential for near term revolution."

"I agree," Patricia Springer said. "All of my studies point to Nicaragua as well. That's the country from which the greatest threat will emerge."

Dr. Holt nodded, acknowledging their position. "Clarence, do you concur?"

Clarence Clairmont was about the same age as Dr. Holt. His family made wealthy by small arms trafficking. Clarence disdained his family's method of monetary accretion but did not refrain from using it to supplement his meager salary. He also considered himself the foremost authority in his field, publishing frequently through subsidy presses.

He lowered his head and peered over a pair of half lens reading glasses. "Frankly no, Richard. It 's too soon to predict on which side Nicaragua will fall, however, it's quite certain we'll continue to see insurrection in Guatemala over next five years."

Dr. Holt nodded. "I agree completely, Clarence. And I'll see to it NSC is appropriately apprised." Tom and Patricia seemed mutually disappointed, but each deferred to the experience and seniority of Professor Clairmont.

Dr. Holt gazed understandingly at the two junior members of the CIDI review committee. "I feel certain a grant for an in depth study of Nicaragua will be forthcoming in the not too distant future. You will then have an opportunity to explore your intuition in that regard.

For today, let me say thank you for your time and effort. As always it's been a pleasure having the opportunity to meet with you all here in San Diego, one of my favorite places."

The meeting adjourned and the participants gathered outside in the sunlight for a few minutes of personal chatter, then each walked to their automobiles for the drive home to their respective families. All except Dr. Holt and Elmo Jefferson.

###

The sun was low in the west. The air soft and hazy, coastal fog would soon develop, and then drift inland over the city of San Diego.

Elmo took a narrow footpath that led down the hill to a small wooden bench perched on a bluff overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Far below, a crescent of white sand, the beach at La Jolla.

Elmo Jefferson had the appearance of a Santa Clause in the making. He was a bit rotund, though he carried it well. A physically imposing man at six foot four. The setting sun cast a golden orange glow onto his closely trimmed full white beard. His hazel eyes sparkled, changing hues as the sun's light filtered through wisps of coastal stratus.

He heard the light footsteps of Richard Holt treading across pine needles on the ground around the rough skinned trunks of the Torrey pines that marched up the hill, almost reaching the rear wall of CIDI's building.

Dr. Holt had not taken the footpath Elmo had traversed; it would not have been an efficient use of his time. Slaloming between the scented pines was the most direct route, and more to his liking.

Elmo looked to his right, as Dr. Holt emerged beaming, apparently pleased with something he'd been pondering on the way down to their private meeting.

It struck Elmo that whenever he met Richard Holt, the leprechaunean professor always seemed pleased about something. Even when wrestling with a seemingly insurmountable problem he was pleased with the challenge presented, in fact, almost as pleased as with the solution he'd eventually find.

Dr. Holt sat down next to Jefferson. He was still smiling. Elmo raised an eyebrow in anticipation of hearing some new theory on how to solve a particularly nasty problem. Dr. Holt seemed to recognize the look and answered the unspoken question.

"Oh nothing really. I was just thinking a few well-placed flagstones would lead directly to this spot from the rear of the CIDI building. And if we etched them with physics formulas, then placed them in such a way to coincide with the number of days in the last month of the year, some future archeologist would come to the conclusion our civilization worshipped the setting sun on this sacred spot."

Elmo said, "Oh." Which, of course, was the best response since he had no intention of spending an inordinate amount of time exploring the implications of Dr. Holt's off hand thought. Though it would ultimately involve, he was sure, a small government grant to place the stones.

To Dr. Holt, a good practical joke was always worth the price, even when the pay off wouldn't come for several hundred lifetimes.

Elmo purposely put a serious expression on his face as he spoke, in hope of assuring his friend wouldn't get too wrapped up in the developing joke. "It seems to me we've created another perfectly useless document to pass on to our friends at the Soviet Embassy via Professor Clairmont the Third." Pronouncing the professor's title with a strongly affected New Jersey accent effectively displacing the "h".

Dr. Holt nodded in agreement. "Nevertheless, the Soviets are operating in Guatemala. And as a matter of fact our old friend Colonel Anatoly Skorokhodov is attempting to set up shop in north-central Guatemala."

Elmo frowned. "But if Tom and Patricia are correct, and they usually are, northern Guatemala is not where the Soviets will be concentrating their efforts."

Dr. Holt smiled. "Actually their Guatemalan operations have a dual purpose: To supply communist led rebels in Honduras, which in turn draws off Honduran forces otherwise assigned to patrol their southern border with Nicaragua. Thus giving Nicaraguan rebels a safe cross border haven to elude loyal Nicaraguan government forces.

"Which, two, requires us to spend millions of dollars in support of three additional Central American governments, diluting the funds available to counter the Nicaraguan communists."

Elmo grimaced, and then raised his bushy white eyebrows. "All right, that accounts for Soviet involvement in southern Guatemala. But according to your people, Anatoly is operating in the north, something our Moscow asset has failed to confirm."

Dr. Holt grinned. "Well our old friend, Anatoly, has learned to keep his own counsel since the failure of Operation Silver Cross. Not even Moscow is fully apprised of his plans."

Elmo frowned, "Then his activity may not be diversionary." Elmo thought for a moment. "You know, the indigenous tribes of southern Mexico are directly related to northern Guatemalans. Stirring up trouble in Guatemala would quickly spread insurrection to Mexico.

"Economically, Mexico cannot survive wide spread insurrection without incurring default on its U.S. debt, which in turn would ripple through our economy as American banks with money loaned to Mexico fail."

Dr. Holt nodded his head slowly. "But much worse than failure of a few banks. Before those banks go belly up, they'll call their outstanding commercial

notes throwing hundreds of businesses into bankruptcy. Thousands of Americans will be forced into unemployment, subsequently defaulting on their personal debt.

"Soon our whole economy would be in complete crisis. Gross national product would drop precipitously, calling into question our national credit reliability.

"The Federal Reserve would be unable to sell its treasury bonds at a reasonable price in the international arena, thus driving interest rates up sharply, further depressing our economy and forcing thousands more into unemployment.

"No my friend, we cannot allow Mexico to default on its loans, even if we have to throw good money after bad. And we certainly can't allow some little puissant Soviet Colonel to push the first domino over.

"The important point for you and I is we've confirmed Anatoly's involvement in northern Guatemala. And we've confirmed Anatoly Skorokhodov's not connected to any operation sanctioned by Soviet intelligence.

Dr. Holt paused for a moment, then smiled suddenly, briefly.

"Please follow my thinking on this: James Angelton is certain there's a mole at Langley, working inside the Central American section "

Elmo nodded. "He always thinks that."

Dr. Holt ignored the sarcasm. "Suppose we formulate plans for a Guatemalan counter insurgency operation. One that involved an in country operative identified by code name only, no description or background intelligence on the individual at all.

"Angelson's mole would pass the plans along to Moscow. The KGB would look for secondary confirmation and find it in the CIDI report, Clarence Clairmont, bless his traitorous heart, will pass along to the Soviet Embassy."

Elmo took up the thread of thought. "They'll search through collateral operations to see if the GRU or Fidel Castro have an operation in the area"

Dr. Holt grinned, bobbing his head with repressed glee. "And if in the process they learn of an operation that cannot be corroborated as one of their own, or one of Fidel's? One apparently controlled by a rogue officer with a previously tarnished plans record."

A slow smile spread across Elmo's face. "They'd assume he defected to us, and move against him. All we have to do is set the stage and count the bodies."

Dr. Holt's smile dropped instantly and a cold look of ice came into his blue eyes. "Precisely." Then he raised one finger. "But setting the stage requires more than simply misinforming the KGB about the nature of Anatoly Skorokhodov's operation. We'll need some props, and a few of our own assets on stage, as well, to really set the mood. We'll also need to distract Anatoly in such a way he'll not realize the approach of his own country's assets until it is too late."

Elmo nodded in agreement, a variety of possibilities crossed his mind. He was about to make a suggestion when Dr. Holt interrupted his thought process.

"I was wondering, whatever became of that young fellow, Jim Richards? The one who blew the whistle on Operation Silver Cross."

Chapter 1

August 1971

Jim Richards eased back on the control yoke, and then held the nose of the Cessna 172 five degrees above the horizon. He greased the single engine trainer onto runway. Then turned right onto taxiway Bravo, as Ground Control cleared him to the parking ramp at Dee Thurmond's Flight Service. He was the first back from the fly-in at Boonville, attended by Dee's flight instructors, and one or two select students.

The sun slowly dipped below the foothills west of San Jose Municipal Airport. He locked down the flight controls, slipping a red-flagged stainless steel pin into a hole drilled completely through the control shaft. Then climbed out of the 172's cockpit.

His first chore was to secure the aircraft. He hooked the tie down chains into steel eyelets located on each wing strut, then moved into secure the empennage eyelet with one inch nylon rope. Two chains and a rope was the tradition at Dee Thurmond's. He stood up and scanned the sky. The evening clear with only a few cirrus clouds, like pink cotton candy adrift in the upper levels of the atmosphere.

Dee Thurmond's twin engine Beech Travel Air was next to enter the downwind traffic pattern, he watched the landing gear lock down as she flew abeam the flight school.

From across the field he heard the sound of a commercial jetliner moving towards the approach end of runway Three Zero right. The odor of jet exhaust tickled his nostrils as it drifted across the tarmac on a light northeast wind. Richards inhaled deeply. The aroma of adventure pervaded the atmosphere. Tonight it seemed particularly poignant. He took another deep breath and smiled to himself, then pivoted in place as his gaze followed the Travel Air's approach. The last golden rays of the setting sun glinted off the aircraft's windscreen, as it turned from base to final.

Suddenly, alone on the tarmac, it all made sense. His love of adventure defined by pungent smells and powerful engines. An electric tingle ran through his body. Followed by a moment of total peace.

Jim Richards wished with all his heart he could hold the moment forever. But even as he tried to freeze it in his mind, as an indelible memory to be recalled at will, it seemed to slip away like sand squeezed too tightly in the fist of an eager child. The glorious epiphany faded, punctuated by the staccato squeak of tires as the Travel Air touched down. Richards sighed and thought of something his grandmother once said to him: "A golden moment lost in the sunset can never be regained." He turned and walked towards the hangar.

Jim Richards muscled open the two story corrugated metal door, rolling it along the steel track embedded in concrete. The moment he'd just experienced hovered at the back of his mind. And he knew deep down inside there would come a time when he'd recall the memory and wish it were real again. Intuitively he sensed his time as a flight instructor would soon draw to a close. His intuition had served him well before, though it was a merciless servant that took as much as it gave.

The steady thrum of the Travel Air's reciprocating engines broke into Richards' mind driving thoughts of future change away, as it came to a halt just short of the hangar entrance. Richards picked up a pair of heavy wooden chalks, then drew his index finger across his throat indicating engine shut down. When the propellers ceased rotation he stepped up to the nose gear and wedged the chalks in place.

###

The twelve thousand square foot, tilt-up concrete warehouse sat just two hundred yards west of San Francisco bay. The rumble of a tuned exhaust from a big block V-8 echoed off the walls of neighboring buildings as Jim Richards turned down the darkened driveway towards space D-4. Most of the other buildings in the newly built complex were unoccupied. The developer was ahead of the present need for industrial space.

Jim Richards stopped in front of a steel roll-up door, then pressed the button on an actuator plugged into the cigarette lighter of his 1970 MACH I, Ford Mustang. Nothing happened so he pressed it again, holding the button down a little longer. With a jerk and a clang the door began to rise laboriously, squealing in metallic agony as it slowly ascended to expose a cavernous interior. As the door groaned to a stop, lights high in the two-story ceiling illuminated automatically.

Richards pulled inside, made a U-turn and backed into a space left between a four-wheel drive Chevrolet, Blazer and a non-descript Opal coupe. Under a canvass cover one slot down from the Opal was the 1964 Mustang convertible he now drove only occasionally.

The door ground to a halt. He hit the button again and reversed the ear cringing process. Then shook his head and wondered if the opener would ever actually be built into every garage in the country as it's inventor believed it would. Adapted to the roll up warehouse door, it seemed an unlikely prospect. On the other hand, thought Richards, it beat hell out of raising and lowering the damn thing by hand.

With a clang and grump the door closed. Richards, already out of his car, had crossed the polished concrete floor to a flight of stairs that led up to a mezzanine apartment. On the way he stooped to pick-up mail, shoved through a slot and left to pile up inside the metal-sheathed walk-in door.

He'd found the warehouse when he'd made the decision to move back to the bay area from Lake Tahoe. The idea to occupy a warehouse was a whim at first, but proved the perfect compromise for his particular needs: Security and privacy.

On one side of the main floor he'd built an indoor shooting range. The blasts of gun fire silenced by the latest in sound deadening materials manufactured by Sionics Corporation. It was a long narrow room with three feet of PVC foam up against the rear concrete wall to absorb the impact of full loads fired from a variety of weapons, though most frequently an accurized forty-five caliber Colt Model 1911.

To the left of the range along the rear wall, was a compact machine shop. Next to it, an electronics bench where Richards and his friends could maintain, or even manufacture, gear without explanations or apologies to local artisans who might otherwise wonder why a flight instructor would need to develop a device for listening to one particular conversation across a crowded room.

A thick hemp climbing rope hung from the ceiling several feet in front of the machine shop, it anchored an area dedicated to physical fitness. There was a free weight gym, a heavy training bag, and several medicine balls affixed to the top of thick spring-metal rods ranging in height from three to six feet.

Against the sidewall, forward of the shooting range, was a one and half story climbing structure with pegs, ladders, ropes and various protrusions to allow ascent to the summit. On top, a platform let the user launch himself down an artificial hill composed of rolled and stacked tumbling mats that leveled out to a three layer roll-out.

Jim Richards' typical work out began as a jog around the industrial complex to warm up. A scurry or two, up the climbing rope. Then once or twice up the wall, jumping and tumbling down the mat stack. Thirty minutes on the weight pile. Followed by fifteen more, kicking the crap out of the punching bag and medicine balls.

The punching bag was a cinch, but you had to watch out for the spring-metal mounted medicine balls. The little bastards could come back and slap you silly if you weren't paying close attention.

At the top of the stairs, Jim Richards paused to open the door to the mezzanine. There was no doorknob on the steel door, no apparent way to open it. Around the corner concealed in a seam of drywall, was a thin piece of spring steel about the size of a credit card. He slid this device out and slipped it between the door and the doorjamb causing the latch to trip. This was the only possible way to open the door, short of using a cutting torch. Any attempt to pry it open would cause three spring-loaded dead bolts to actuate from the doorjambs at either side, and from the lintel above. A plastic credit card would not do, as the serrated edge of the striker plate assured it was shredded long before contact with the latch.

Inside was a rectangular space originally designed as administrative offices for a manufacturing facility. Richards had built a small apartment, sparsely furnished but adequate to his needs.

He dropped the mail onto a one inch thick, tempered glass desk as he passed through his office on the way to the bedroom. Beyond the office was a full kitchen with a central food preparation island. Then came a den/dining area, a large bedroom, and finally a good-sized bathroom.

Along the entire wall, running from room to room were sliding windows that looked out over the bay. On the far shore in the distance he could see lights glowing inside homes, the San Mateo Bridge and the Hayward airport beyond.

His quarters were neat and orderly. No souvenirs displayed. No unnecessary items. There was a bookcase on one wall filled with non-fiction works referred to as needed. Richards also enjoyed fiction, and was an avid reader, but unless the book was in truth factual, cloaked only to protect its author, he did not retain it. Once read, novels were passed on to others.

He was fond of photographs, through out his living quarters were numerous photos of places and things admired. Shots by Ansel Adams of the Monterey Coast, Yosemite, New Mexico. Stills by unknown commercial photographers of aircraft in flight. Personal photos of people and places. All hung in an eclectic mix of nature and technology.

Yet there was organization to it all, a contrasting juxtaposition that some how made sense. A shot of a lightening strike in stark black and white, adjacent to a close in view of an F-4 Phantom climbing the sixty thousand foot gray and white wall of an enormous cumulonimbus cloud.

A built-in cabinet took up another entire wall. He swung open the double doors revealing an array of electronic equipment. Then checked commercial reel-to-reel videotape linked to a series of miniaturized cameras that monitored the interior and exterior of his warehouse space.

He ran the tape on fast forward, stopping at any sign of activity. But the tape revealed nothing unusual: The mailman twice. The trash hauler emptying his dumpster. The developer's Realtor making an obligatory appearance, cruising the driveway in a Coup de Ville, a prospective tenant peering from the passenger's window.

Richards reset the tape. Then made certain his perimeter security system was armed. Before closing the cabinet doors, he tuned his stereo receiver to KJAZ-FM, setting the volume low.

He stripped down and tossed his clothes into a hole in the floor of the clothes closet located behind two large mirrored doors to the right of the bathroom entrance. A chute led to a laundry room directly below the mezzanine. It also served as an escape route in the event of fire, or other emergency. Occasionally, Richards dropped down the smooth waxed slide just for the hell of it, though he justified the whim, at least in his own mind, as a routine test of escapability.

Jim Richards stood six foot two. He weighed one hundred and eighty pounds with less than fifteen percent body fat. Most women thought him handsome, though he failed to see himself in that light. He thought his chin was not strong enough, his eyes too dark and intimidating even when he did not intend them to be. He had a small, puckered scar on his left cheek, a souvenir from his first serious adventure. Sometimes he grew a full closely trimmed beard to cover it up. Although of late, he was clean-shaven. He wore his dark brown hair short, almost military elite, though it was not the fashion. But fashion meant nothing to Jim Richards. He dressed neatly in well-tailored clothes that complimented his toned body, and most importantly were comfortable.

He slipped into the shower and luxuriated in exquisitely hot water. Toweled himself off, pulled on a pair of fleece sweat pants, then walked into his office to peruse his mail.

He found the envelope mid-way into the stack. It was a plain manila envelope, a number 14 regular. There was no return address. Inside, another sealed envelop, a plain white number 10. He looked at it for a while not really wanting to open it. He knew what it would contain: A time and place to meet for an offer of assignment, both lucrative and dangerous.

He set the envelope aside, and then leaned back in his firm leather executive chair to gaze out the window. Wondering, not for the first time, how he'd come to

choose the wilderness of mirrors. A foolish question really. It was exciting work and easy money; well quick if not exactly easy.

Richards inserted the tip of a miniature Tanto knife, a gift from his marshal arts instructor years ago, and slit the first envelope open. He gazed at the Mandarin characters etched into the blade. They were barely visible, but clearly said to those who could decipher them:

Honesty

Burden

Excruciating

Virtue

Which translated meant: To be excruciatingly honest is both a virtue and a burden.

He slid the blade along the flap of the second envelope, cleanly slicing it open. Inside Richards found an eight and half by eleven piece of plain white paper. On it was typed an address, a time, and a date. He would either appear on time, or send a message to a predetermined post office box with an alternate time and date.

He arose from his desk and walked into the kitchen; from under the sink he retrieved a plastic spray bottle filled with a mixture of vinegar and water used to clean the glass tops of his tables. He sprayed the paper and set it aside to dry. Ammonia would have worked, or urine in the field.

A ritual really, as he was certain the invitation was authentic. But he was a careful man by training, and experience. Gradually as the vinegar dried, a light brown watermark appeared in the center of the page. It was a circular symbol depicting a stylized bald eagle face on, wings spread to the side. On its breast an equilateral triangle with an eye in its center. Around the top perimeter it read: "In God We Trust." Along the bottom: "All Others We Monitor." And finally across the very bottom: "Department of Naval Intelligence"

The symbol always made Richards smile. He opened one of the kitchen drawers and retrieved a gold Zippo lighter engraved with the logo of the World Trade Club on its front. He set fire to the page. It burnt quickly and he allowed the ashes to fall into the sink, and then rinsed them down the drain.

He gazed for a moment at the lighter, and thought about the beautiful woman who'd given it to him some years before. And he wondered how Tracy was

getting on. If she'd married. If she was still a part of the community. He shrugged absent mindedly, a foolish question. Of course she was, once in - never out. He tossed the lighter back into the drawer and closed it.

Chapter 2

On a clear day, from the upper floors of the old Victorian on Pacific, ships could be seen passing under the Golden Gate Bridge. From this same observation post, visitors to the Russian Embassy below on Green Street were easily surveyed as well. But on a dark, foggy night there was little to be observed, near or far.

Jim Richards eased his battered Opal around the corner, a half block away from the mansion. He parked it parallel to the curb, under the shadow of a Sycamore tree. Attention was seldom paid to the old faded clunker; so nondescript was its appearance. In fact, Jim Richards believed it to be the perfect surveillance vehicle.

He waited inside the car for several minutes, watched the street, and allowed his eyes to adjust to the darkness outside. Fog swirled eerily around antique, frosted street lamps. Remnants of a by gone era, preserved by San Franciscans fond of such things.

Moisture gathered in globules on the leaves and branches of trees planted along the sidewalk. A drop landed with a soft thunk onto the roof of Jim Richards' Opal.

His night-vision soon reached its full potential, turning vague shadows into discernible shapes. An entrance to a home here, a driveway there. A set of granite stairs running up to a second story flat in a converted single-family residence. There was no one on the street. No surreptitious movement of curtains behind windows. Only the intermittent drops of falling moisture broke the eerie, mist shrouded, silence.

Jim Richards slipped his right hand into the pocket of the Navy blue pea coat he wore, withdrawing a section of a nylon stocking. He quickly slipped this over his head, down over his face. He then donned a Navy blue watch cap.

With extreme caution he slit two slots into the portion of the stocking that stretched across his eyes, using the razor sharp tip of a double edged Gerber boot knife kept inside the left sleeve of his jacket. Finally, before climbing out of the car, he put on a pair of tinted non-prescription glasses.

Like a predatory cat, Jim Richards paced stealthily along Buchanan, then turned right onto Pacific Street. A young couple passed him going in the opposite direction, and he heard the girl comment about his freakish appearance. As he

approached the elegant old mansion he clung more to the shadows, and kept his gaze on a particular window in a house across the street. Ah yes, he thought to himself, there you are, as the glint of a street light reflected off the end of a telephoto lens. The Soviets had their own observation post. To no avail, they'd have no better image of his features than had the couple that'd passed earlier.

He didn't hesitate at the bottom of the stairs leading to the front door of the mansion, nor did he ring the doorbell. Two soft, quick knocks. He was punctual, and expected. The door opened, darkness flowed out to greet him. He stepped inside. An unseen hand, revealed a moment later when the heavy blackout curtains just inside the entry were swept aside, closed the door behind him. Jim Richards removed his hat and nylon stocking with a single sweep of his hand, and then slipped them back into his pocket.

The doorman looked at him and grinned. "Good to see you, Jim."

Richards returned the smile warmly. "Hello Arnold." They shook hands. "It's been a while, must be something worthy if they've dragged you off your yacht. Still cruising the Caribbean?"

Arnold chuckled, "Well, you know, retirement's a relative thing. You're looking quite fit." He regarded Richards with the eye of an experienced control officer.

"Thank you. I do try to keep in shape for these little excursions you, and the mind readers back at Langle y, like to send me on."

Arnold Batiste nodded and swung his head in the direction of the living room. "Right this way, the gang's all here."

They crossed a hallway then passed through a double door into a cozy sitting room lit by Tiffany lamps on antique tables. A warm fire crackled in the hearth; after all it was August in San Francisco.

The walls of the room were lined, ceiling to floor with bookshelves. Heavy curtains like the ones he'd passed through at the front entrance, covered the windows. Simple but effective security from prying eyes, and probing directional listening devices - DLDs in the terminology of stealth.

The polished hard wood floor was covered here and there with thick, hand made Feta rugs from pre-war China. To the left, a freestanding bar.

As was his custom, Jim Richards poured himself three fingers of Johnny Walker Black then turned towards the fireplace. Four Burgundy leather wing back chairs stood in a semi-circle facing the fire. Two of the chairs were

occupied: Commander James Laughlin, United States Naval Intelligence. To his right, John Harding.

Arnold Batiste took the center chair, as Jim Richards strolled; drink in hand, to the chair on the far right. He sat down and glanced from one man to the next, a neutral expression on his face.

John Harding smiled at Richards. "Good evening, Jim. Thank you for coming tonight. I was afraid you might be off on one of your long cross-country flights. How's it going, still looking for a slot with the airlines?"

Richards took a sip of scotch, then stared into the fire for a moment before replying. "I still fill out the applications, if that's what you mean. But I think we both know the chances of my getting hired are slim to none. The economy's on the down turn, as Vietnam stumbles to its whimpering end. The airlines are ordering fewer aircraft, counting on the jumbos to carry the passenger load. And, of course, there are the high-time jocks returning from Nam..." He shrugged and let the subject hang.

Harding nodded. He understood Richards' dilemma, born a year too late or a few too soon. That was the cross he'd bear in life. "Well no matter my friend. I've a job I think you'll enjoy, with a little flying thrown in to boot."

Richards groaned, "The last time you said that, I had to ditch a perfectly good twin Otter in the Aegean Sea. Damn good time that was. Tell you what, how 'bout we split the difference? You pull some strings at Pan Am for me, we'll call it a push."

Harding held Richards eyes for a moment, the hint of a smile forming at the corners of his mouth, and then looked over at Commander Laughlin.

Laughlin reached into a leather brief case on the carpet next to his chair and pulled out a manila folder. He handed it across to Richards.

Jim Richards opened the folder to an eight by ten glossy of a man with a thin face, deep set, dark eyes surrounded by cynical lines of stress. His nose was classic Greek, underlined by a full mustache as black as the receding hair on his olive completed pate.

"Do you recognize that man?" Laughlin asked.

Richards nodded as he shuffled through seven other photographs taken from different angles, and distances. "His name's George Krystonopolis. Used teach at AdvantageFlight. Last I heard he'd left the country to avoid creditors, or something to that effect."

Harding shook his head slowly. "No. He hasn't left the country entirely. He returns quite regularly for short periods of time. Just long enough to steal another airplane and fly it south to his customers. A nice little export business."

Richards grinned and shook his head. "That sounds like George all right, but what's that got to do with us? Looks like an Interpol case. FBI/co-Intel, whatever."

Harding looked at Richards in silence for a moment or two, gathering his thoughts before he spoke again. "What do you know about Guatemala?"

Richards squeezed his eyes closed for a moment, trying to recall the little he knew about Central America. "Let's see, Guatemala: Third world country, relatively stable government assisted into place by an Agency engineered coup circa 1951. Approximately seven million people primarily concentrated in the southern half of the nation. Strong Mayan influence in the north. Mostly steaming jungles and steep mountain terrain created by volcanic activity a few million years ago, though there are several still active today. There was a failed rebel coup in November nineteen-sixty, as I recall, and since then constant pressure from Salvadoran and internal communist dissidents, with aid from Cuba and the Soviets thrown in for good measure. Otherwise its an idyllic little country full of Mayan ruins, and insects the size of small horses."

Harding nodded and smiled. "Constant Communist pressure is the key concern. They've come close on several occasions to toppling the Guatemalan government. Of course, we must limit our intervention to requests for aid from the Guatemalans. Something the entire population of Central and South America is reticent to request, since our little excursion into Southeast Asia."

Jim Richards raised his eyebrows. "Really? They have so little faith." His voice took on the tone of a radio announcer. "We will secure freedom for the people of South Vietnam even if we have to kill them all to do it." He shook his head, and lapsed back into a normal tone of voice. "Anyway what's all this got to do with George?"

Harding took a sip of cognac from a snifter he held in his right hand. "The rebels failed at their last attempt to take over the country because they had no air power. Their plan was to secure Puerto Barrios, Guatemala's only eastern port, then invite Fidel and his friends to assist. They secured the harbor, and nearly secured the airport. However, without overhead surveillance, or forward air control, they were unable to stop forces loyal to the Guatemalan regime from retaking the port within a day or two."

Harding arose from his chair and beckoned the others to follow. They moved to an adjoining room. Arnold Batiste stepped up to a display board. He opened the polished oak doors to reveal a vacuum formed relief map of Guatemala, northern El Salvador, and southern Mexico.

They gathered in a semi-circle in front of the display as Batiste explained the situation.

"Guatemala is bordered by Mexico to the north, the Pacific Ocean to the west, El Salvador and Honduras to the south and Belize to the east. Puerto Barrios is here on the southeast coast." He tapped the chart with the tip of a chrome pointer, indicating a bay protected by a narrow north-south peninsula. "Route Nine runs east to west along the length of the Motagua River direct to Guatemala City. High terrain flanks either side. Route Nine is the only land route with which to reinforce Puerto Barrios.

"In nineteen-sixty, the rebels failed to secure Route Nine at the El Rancho junction and they were easily dislodged at the Route Thirteen junction by government reinforcements. Had they secured those two choke points the coup might have succeeded, or at the least assured Fidel Castro of a foothold."

Batiste collapsed his pointer and stood for a moment thinking, tapping his pursed lips with the tip of the closed pointer. The he said: "Today we have a different scenario, more diverse, more dangerous." He snapped open the pointer with a downward flip of his wrist, then tapped the border of El Salvador south of Guatemala City. "Salvadoran rebels support the southern arm of the Pokomam, the name the Guatemalan rebels have taken in honor of one of the last tribes of Toltec-Maya to secure the region around Guatemala City in the fifteenth century. Rather appropriate I suppose, when you consider the brutal totalitarian nature of the Toltec-Maya government."

Batiste tapped his pointer on Lago Peten Itza, high on the map in northern Guatemala. "Here we have a group of non-communist aligned dissidents consisting of a loose confederation of native Indian tribes at odds with all established governments in the region. They'd like nothing better than to see their area excluded from Guatemalan control. With help from Castro's cadres, they could fully organize their brethren in southern Mexico, leaving Belize vulnerable to cross border incursions."

Batiste snapped the pointer closed again. "We have information the Pokomam intend to cut the country in half along a line running east to west from Puerto Barrios through Guatemala City to the Pacific Ocean.

"To accomplish this objective they must secure all major route junctions north of route Nine. And to do that, they must have twenty operational aircraft capable

of close air support. These aircraft must have a high payload capacity, and be capable of short field landing and take off from dirt strips. They must also be operational above high terrain."

"And with full instrument capability," Richards added.

"Exactly."

"What kind of aircraft is George delivering?"

Commander Laughlin responded, "Cessna Three-Three-Sixes."

Richards turned away from the display for a moment, his head down. He pinched the bridge of his nose as he paced the length of the room, then turned back towards the group.

"The Three-Three-Six, known as an O-2 in military parlance, or its common civilian name: Skymaster. Has the capability to meet their needs, and more. Equipped with mini-guns, rockets, or both, it could decimate company size groups caught out in the open or in a column along an unprotected road.

"George knows how to write his own instrument approaches. He devised one for Tracy Airport, so he could commute to work daily at AdvantageFlight. With portable approach locators, he could get in anywhere a three-three-six can land, even under night or overcast conditions. You've got a serious problem. How many planes has he delivered thus far?"

"We believe six. But we're coming into the rainy season down there, thunderstorms and hurricanes. He'll have to back off a little on his deliveries." Laughlin replied.

Richards shook his head in disagreement. "Not George, he'll step them up. He's probably pocketing a hundred grand per delivery. He always wanted to be a millionaire, used to say all he needed was a million dollar hit, and he'd be set for life. Retire; let his money do the work. Four more deliveries may be all he needs."

Harding nodded in agreement. "With only ten aircraft, the Pokomam could start a spring offensive. The rest could be delivered later into secured territory."

Richards frowned. "So why don't you just snatch him, then flip him over to Interpol?"

Harding shook his head. "First, even with only six aircraft the Pokomam may move forward with at least a part of their plan. Second, the aircraft are American made. Fidel and the Soviets will make the most of that, claiming we've interfered

in the affairs of Guatemala. Either way they gain, we lose. Not only do we have to apprehend George. We also have to recover, or destroy all of the aircraft thus far delivered."

Richards grimaced. "What kind of assets do you have in place?"

Laughlin replied. "We have one asset, recruited by Krystonopolis as a flight instructor to train the Pokomam elite. Also an ex-U.S. Navy SEAL, running a dive shop at Lighthouse Reef, Belize." He tapped his finger on the map. "Krystonopolis hangs out at a resort there, between deliveries."

"Do you know where the aircraft are at this time?" Richards asked.

"We believe they're all located at Sosela. Their pilots have to be trained in mountainous terrain flight maneuvers before the aircraft can be moved. We have an infrared locator in the one our man delivered."

Richards nodded. "So you need locators in the other five before their pilots are fully operational, and the aircraft dispersed. And you'd like me to deliver them?"

Batiste shook his head. "Not exactly."

Harding placed his arm around Richards' shoulder. "Let's go sit down in the living room, Jim. I see your glass is nearly empty."

Chapter 3

Sergei Korinslovik, Military Attaché to the Soviet Embassy in San Francisco stared at the eight by ten blow up taken two nights before. He shook his head slowly. "This guy's nightmarish. He has no features."

His assistant Mikail, nodded in agreement. "Perhaps he's had plastic surgery to change his appearance, and something went terribly wrong."

Sergei chuckled. "Well at least we'll have no difficulty recognizing him at the next diplomatic dinner, or anywhere else for that matter. Still, he's a strange visitor to a CIA observation post. Was he followed when he left?"

"Yes, by two of our permanent residents. He strolled quite casually down Pacific and onto the grounds of the Presidio. They followed him for awhile until he entered the shadows of a grove adjacent to the national cemetery, then seemed to simply vanish."

"Oh come off it Comrade. What is this, more of the CIA's psychological buffoonery? I suppose next you'll tell me he's a vampire in their employ, but this isn't Romania, Mikail. Did our agents have a night vision scope with them?"

"If they had they would not have used it. The Presidio is still an active military base, as you well know. How would they explain their ownership of such equipment, still classified by the American military?"

Sergei nodded. "Yes you're right, but surely they forged ahead at least to see where he turned off the road."

"Oh I'm sure they did," said Mikail, his voice tinged with sarcasm. "Why would they not, simply because he had no face and vanished into a deathly quiet cemetery?"

###

The shop on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills was known for its one off designer clothing and extravagant prices. What was less well known was the fact that many of the labels were fake, the clothing made in sweatshops four blocks south of Broadway, in Los Angeles.

The proprietor spoke halting English with a Czechoslovakian accent his customers found cute, endearing really. And those who purchased clothing or accessories from him gradually learned of his harrowing escape from eastern Europe, the loss of his wife to the Czech secret police. His sad eyes revealed such a depth of pain that buying his ridiculously expensive wares was almost a form of penance for those who wallowed in the largess of Beverly Hills.

The woman who entered One OF A Kind had a sensuous beauty found only in certain Latin American women. More than her creamy olive skin, and gorgeously curved body, it was her charisma that so dazzled men. Heads turned and eyes stared, when she crossed a street or entered a room.

Marion Milonevec was just completing a sale to one of his regular customers. He glanced at the beautiful woman who seemed to be perusing the dresses hung in alcoves through out the store. A careful observer would have noted Milonevec didn't seem to be affected by her presence. Perhaps he'd become immune to the effect of beautiful women, seeing so many each day. Or perhaps, it was not the first time this woman had entered his shop.

Milonevec smiled warmly as he approached. "Good afternoon, Madam. You are so, how do you say it, beautiful. What may I show you in my humble shop?"

The woman glanced at the prior customer as she left the store smiling, perhaps thinking to herself that Milonevec was about to sell another thousand-dollar shift.

"You can cut the crap Marion, she's gone now. I need to meet with Gnady."

Milonevec nodded. "Tonight, at the Little Daisy?"

###

She found Gnady seated in the corner of the terrace outside the Little Daisy, just four doors down from Milonevec's store. The woman was shown to a table she'd reserved earlier, coincidentally adjacent to Gnady's table.

Gnady was a tall, handsome man with an aquiline nose and gray eyes surrounded by a perpetually suntanned face, the best money could buy: It had taken three operations to attain it. He spoke perfect Americanized English, without the hint of an accent. And the only thing that worried his KGB control was that one day he'd forget for whom he worked.

No one thought it unusual that these two beautiful people would eventually share the same table, and a bottle of Tattinger's between. They leaned towards each other, speaking in muted tones. Sharing what appeared to be an intimate

conversation. Snapshots were brought from within the woman's purse, and viewed.

"There is no doubt about it, he delivers these aircraft to Guatemala. Six thus far." She said.

Gnady gazed at the color photo of a Cessna Skymaster, parked on the tarmac at Lighthouse Reef. "And you know nothing about the pilot hired for the delivery?"

The woman shook her head. "No. Only he's an American. And a flight instructor."

Gnady frowned, then thought for a moment. "One instructor is not enough. They'll want to train at least twelve pilots, more if additional planes are delivered. Two per aircraft. He'll need another, maybe three altogether."

The woman took a sip of champagne. "You forget, George is an instructor himself."

Gnady nodded. "Nevertheless, keep your eyes and ears open. Get all the information you can, and please this time get a better picture."

She smiled without apology. "The best I could do. He wouldn't have landed at Lighthouse Reef at all if the storm had not forced him to seek shelter. At least we know for sure George has hired an instructor, and he's undoubtedly American."

Gnady nodded. "Yes, that much I can see from the photo." He shook his head. "Those damn purse cameras are useless at a distance, and with the sun reflecting from the windshield it's even worse." He sighed. "Oh well, I will pass all this up the line. You've done well my dear." As he spoke he slipped an identical photograph envelope out from a pocket inside the Navy blue silk blazer he wore. He was deft at slight of hand and easily substituted the envelope filled with six one thousand dollar bills, for the envelope of photos. "It will be over soon. Then you may return to your world of art, and all those lovely little girls you adore so much."

She raised her eyebrows as she slid the money filled envelope into her purse. "Not too soon I hope. Belize is such a pretty place. And dashing young men are fun too, no?" And then she laughed so musically, that even Gnady had to smile.

####

The dark brown wig came down to his shoulders; it was tangled and uncombed. Jim Richards felt uncomfortably hot, as if he were wearing a wool

hat. His appearance: Wino scruffy, a four-day beard deepened with strategically applied make-up. He wore a pair of round, dark green granny glasses. To shade his eyes from the sun as well as heighten his disguise. His clothing suitably ragged. Jeans with holes in each leg, a rear pocket hanging loose. Worn out sneakers. An old sweatshirt rounded out the image of a homeless hippie hoping for a handout.

He'd positioned himself on the creosote pickled eight by eight that served as a toe board below the railing of Monterey's Fisherman's Wharf. Diagonally across from his position was the entrance to Mike's Harbor Restaurant.

He was to meet a SEAL Team Three squad leader, John Harding had assigned to Operation Monsoon. The code name for his assigned excursion to Central America. The meeting was at eight P.M., two hours from now. He stood up, stretched, then wandered aimlessly along the wharf, but not out of site of Mike's entrance.

At 18:30 Jim Richards identified two men from photos Arnold Batiste had shown him, part of Team Three's Bravo squad: Bob Spencer and Frank Prescott. They drifted casually into Mike's, two clean-cut guys who decided to have a beer and watch Monday Night Football. Fifteen minutes later a second pair arrived: Dave Wilcox and Ross McIntyer. Finally their squad leader: Steve Sheffield, whom Richards knew personally. But there were supposed to be six, apparently one was a no show.

Jim Richards glanced surreptitiously at the Rolex Submariner strapped to the underside of his wrist, beneath the old sweatshirt, 19:30. He needed to get back to his car, then a quick drive to his hotel to freshen up before the meeting. He walked slowly along the pier gradually picking up the pace.

He reached his Mustang, climbed in, started the engine, and then drove off. As he turned into the driveway of the Casa Munras Hotel, he glanced in his rear view mirror and noticed a faded blue Chevrolet pass by, a little more slowly than the rest of traffic on the boulevard. As the car drifted out of sight, Richards intuitively knew he'd been made, and wondered if the opposition was already aware of his involvement. Damn. He shook his head once.

At five minutes past eight, Jim Richards strolled into Mike's Restaurant, wearing blue jeans, a navy turtle neck sweater, and a pair of dark blue canvass deck shoes. Mike's had the usual nautical ambiance common to wharf side eateries. Polished wood, wrapped in rope, accessories. Including the obligatory diving helmet, and a ship's telegraph. Richards suppressed a momentary urge to pull the handle and call out: "All ahead, full!" He looked over at the bar, spotted Steve Sheffield seated at the end. His back against the wall watching the entrance.

Before turning towards Sheffield, he took in the room and noted the other team members at separate tables, seemingly engrossed in the game.

Jim Richards stepped up to the bar and ordered a Johnny Walker Black, neat. Then stood leaning casually against the polished teak, one stool down from Sheffield.

Steve Sheffield was just over six feet tall, dark complected with black hair and piercing dark brown eyes.

Richards raised his glass. "It's been awhile. How have you been, Steve?"

Sheffield responded with a slight raise of his head. He picked up his own glass, and then moved over to a vacant table near windows that overlooked the harbor. Sea lions and otters cavorted in the dark water, illuminated by spotlights shining down from the wharf above.

Sheffield took a chair facing the middle of the room. Richards sat next to him, neither wanted to have his back to the entrance.

"I hear you're spooking for the Company now." Sheffield stated when he finally chose to open the conversation. Then the corner of his mouth turned downward. "That why you quit BUD/S?" He shook his head derisively. "Shit, man, you only had three days to go in the evolution. Could've done that with one leg busted. Really pissed me off. I oughta cold cock you just for GP you little puissant wimp."

Richards looked at him in silence, then said, "That was a long time ago, Steve. I didn't quit. I was pulled out, reassigned you might say."

"Oh bullshit, Richards. You rang the bell, man, everybody knows that. Who you think you're kiddin'. At least don't give me that crap now. You just wimped out that's all. Disappointed the shit out of Little Red too. He figured we'd be goin' all the way together, you, me and L.R. may he rest in peace."

The inference shocked Richards, his face showed it. "What are you talkin' about?"

"Bought in Nam, back in '68, what do you think? What do you care?"

A wave of anguish passed over Richards. His stomach seemed to drop to his toes. Little Red kept him going through Hell Week, physically carrying him when he couldn't take another step. Hefting his end of the rubber boat when he'd dropped it on that endless, tortuous beach of self-imposed pain. They called him

Little Red in good-natured irony, in fact he was the largest guy in their class, but he had a heart of gold.

Richards reached over and grabbed a fist full of Sheffield's shirt, turning his pain into anger. He could almost feel the animosity flow from the other SEALs, but they didn't move from their positions. Still, if he'd gone for a weapon, or even looked like he was about to, they'd be all over him like flies on beached seaweed.

"Listen to me, I don't care what you say about my courage, or stamina, but don't even hint I didn't give a shit about Little Red back then, or now. Who the hell do you think you are anyway?"

Sheffield pried Richards' fist from the front of his shirt and forced it down to the tabletop, then released it. Richards looked away. He lifted the glass of scotch from the table and downed it in one gulp. As he set the glass down his eyes met Frank Prescott's for a moment, but Frank immediately looked away.

Sheffield signaled the waitress. She sauntered over, then stood in front of their table with one hip thrown out to the side. Her long seductive legs accentuated by black nylon stockings, below a black mini-skirt.

Jim Richards stared down at the table, ignoring the waitress. How many more friends would he lose before his own number came up? And who would care anyway?

Steve orders another round. When the drinks arrived, Sheffield jogged Richards' elbow and handed him his drink. "Here's to Red. Let bygones be bygones. You want to train with us, you can train with us." They clinked glasses and Jim Richards took a solid pull at the double Johnny Black.

"Harding said we may need to assist you somewhere down south." Sheffield said.

Richards took a deep breath and nodded. "We've got an asset in country who was supposed to infiltrate three weeks ago. Best guess, he's being detained. May need to do a hostage rescue, and destroy equipment."

Sheffield grimaced and shook his head. "It's the and part that bothers me. One, or the other, is tough enough. You combine two objectives, someone gets hurt. Usually the hostage."

"I hear you." Richards agreed.

"You know the asset? Is he one of ours, or some third world sleaze bag?"

Jim Richards shook his head. "Definitely one of ours. He's John Harding's son."

"Ah man, you're shitin' me. That's like being assigned to escort the Admiral's daughter, no matter which way you play it you're screwed."

Richards smiled. "Except with this deal there ain't no way its gonna be fun. And if we don't do it right, it's Matt Harding whose gonna get screwed. If he ain't already."

"Roger that one." Sheffield said.

"There's more, the mind readers back at Langley think he may have been compromised. We could be walking into an elephant pit."

"Terrific. But his old man ain't givin' up till we bring back the body parts, that it?"

"Well he hasn't put it in so many words, but what would you do?"

"I'd send in every asset I had, every which way but side ways, and leave nothin' but devastation behind if I didn't find my kid alive."

Richards nodded in agreement, then took another solid pull at his drink.

Steve said, "So what's your roll Spookman, besides being heavy baggage and a general pain in the butt."

"Well actually," Richards replied in a feigned Ivy League accent. "I have two additional functions." He slipped back to his usual pattern of speech. "One, I precede you in country with an operational recon of the no good bag of dirt who's supplying aircraft to our little brown brothers, and who, coincidentally contracted with Matt Harding to teach the little bastards to fly.

"Two, I get myself bagged, gagged, and slam dunked in with the hostage. Then we escape and evade to a link up with you, or, here's the best part, you come in and rescue us both."

Steve shook his head. "Why'd you take this on, son? You have a choice, we don't."

"Matt's a friend of mine, we graduated high school together. His dad got him into the Coastie Reserves 'cause his number was up for 'Nam. Sounds chicken shit, but you know how it was in '64."

"Yeah I do. And back then I would have called him a pussy, but not today. So how'd Matt Harding get mixed up in this deal?"

"Well he always did have a wild hair up his butt." Richards responded. "Remember that take over of the Alameda Air Station back in '65? When the hippie, dippy creeps unloaded from a moving van right in front of the Base Commander's office during the NAVCOMPAC war games."

Steve let out a single laugh. "Shit yeah. Christ what a cluster fuck. We were the bad guys that day. In fact, come to think of it, so were some of the Coasties.

"Exactly," Richards nodded.

Steve grinned. "The B.C. pulled his perimeter guards back to deal with the hippie pukes, and we came ashore unopposed. Took out the secondaries and secured the beach.

"Right. And Matt captured the Base Commander."

"Oh Christ, I remember that. Ended the games on the spot. That was FUBAR infinito. The B.C. got shipped to Greenland, ended his career big time."

"Yeah well he was an asshole anyway, a real pencil pushing, butt sniffer. No loss there. Of course Matt ended up on a breaker patrolling the Aleutians for two years."

Steve shook his head and chuckled. "Hell of a plan. One thing we never figured out: Who the hell dummied the papers to let the moving van on base in the first place? I ended up on a liaison team with the FBI, traced the paperwork back to a print shop in San Francisco contracted to run Navy blueprints, the trail died there. Apparently somebody used their equipment to dummy up the docs."

Richards just smiled.

Sheffield got the drift. "No. You're shittin' me. What the hell were you doin' there?"

"Just coincidence. As I said, Matt and I were close friends. He came up with this hair brained scheme to take the Base Commander by using an off the wall diversion that looked spontaneous. Problem was he couldn't get hold of official paper to fit the routine.

"So I slipped into the print shop as a temp worker under an alias, then grabbed some of the Orders paper they were printing at the shop."

Steve shook his head, and smiled with admiration at Jim Richards. Then frowned. "It's always the odd deal that's overlooked. Temps sent by some personnel agency. Their excluded from Navy contract work, but that doesn't mean they can't take what they want when the opportunity arises."

Richards nodded. "Exactly. FBI assigned an agent to watch the paper. He stepped outside for a smoke. All I needed was five minutes. King size ciggie takes about eight to choke down."

Steve looked at Richards, and then smiled cynically. "Bad habit, smoking." He changed the subject. "So how long you training with us?"

"Just this week. The idea is to get you and your water logged maniacs familiar enough with my face and smell, so I don't get my ass inadvertently waxed by mistake. I'm sure even you can appreciate how high that concept is on my list of priorities.

Steve nodded in agreement with a scowl and a grunt. "Yeah I can dig that, but one week's not enough to get you integrated into our fire fields. In fact, we aren't even doing combat drills until we rotate over to Kauai next week. So dig this Richards, when we go in you ain't packin' so much as a sling shot, and if I see you pullin' anything outta your pants except your dinky dick I'll waste you myself. I don't want you poppin' one of my guys in the heat of oh shit and God help me."

Richards scowled, but didn't argue. Maybe they'd have time later for some integration drills. "Where's your base of ops here?"

"You familiar with the Carmel River Inn?"

Richards dropped his head once.

"Cabin Three. We start our morning PT at oh four hundred dark. You're in luck, son, this week's a cool down evolution leading up to the Sub insertion. Tomorrow's gonna be an easy day."

Richards shook his head, "I don't think so. The only easy day... was yesterday."

###

The Carmel River Inn sat just off Highway 1, where it crossed the Carmel River. Log cabins setback in grove of California redwoods. At 03:50, Jim Richards parked his Mach 1 Mustang outside Cabin 3. He climbed out, sniffed the air, breathing in a unique earthy bouquet peculiar to redwoods. The morning was chill and damp, and would probably remain so until noon when the sun finally

burnt through the low stratus overcast. As Richards approached cabin 3, the front door swung open. Light flowed out into the early morning darkness. He stepped inside.

Steve Sheffield was seated on the floor at the foot of a king size bed, sorting through equipment pulled from two large, black canvass bags. He looked up and acknowledged Richards with an upward nod, then jerked his head toward the SEAL who'd opened the door. "Say hello to Vince Morris, Jim. He's the watcher you were lookin' for yesterday. Guess the two of you spent most of the afternoon fakin' each other out. Vinnie say hello to Jim Richards."

Vince Morris stepped forward his hand extended. "Good to meet you, Jim."

Steve continued, "Vinnie the Tourniquet we call him, or just Torque for short cause he likes to use the garrote. He's gonna be your swim buddy for this next evolution."

Steve then went around the room and introduced Richards to the other team members. He motioned to a pile of garments and dive equipment stacked on top of a small black nylon rucksack. "That's your stash there. Store it in the rucksack, you'll need it all today. Right now the only thing you're gonna need are the Gortex hiking boots."

Richards quickly pulled the boots out of the pile and slipped his feet into them. They fit perfectly, his foot size still on file at the Naval Special Warfare Group on Del Coronado Island. SEALs were careful to make certain everything fit and worked right. A man couldn't get far on blistered feet.

Richards quickly made note of the gear, as he stuffed it into the rucksack. A pair of U.S. Divers jet fins. A dive mask with snorkel attached. One U.S. Navy Mk 3 - Model O Combat Swimmer's knife. One web utility belt, a butter soft, skin in/skin out, one-quarter inch neoprene wet suit with attached hood. And one pair of hard sole rubber booties. There was no need to worry about color coordination as everything matched perfectly, it was all black.

####

The first mile rolled by easily as they jogged quietly through the mist-shrouded morning. Past the historic Carmel Mission, around the bend in the road at the River Ranch Tennis Club, then left, right, and left again, through a subdivision of ranch style homes. The rucksack slapped up and down against Richard's back. He reminded himself to pack the damn sack better tomorrow.

He kept the pace until they splashed through the shallow delta at the mouth of the Carmel River, then headed south towards Monastery Beach and Pt Lobos.

The deep sand began to take its toll; Richards soon realized his modified home training program had not prepared him for a five mile run in the sand.

By the time he'd reached Owl Rock at the north end of Monastery Beach he was seriously winded, and well behind the other team members. He clamored over the rough granite boulders then stumbled down the narrow trail and onto the last mile of sand.

When he reached the south end, he found the SEALs dressed in wet suits, ready to enter the water. The sun must have risen, because the overcast was lighter. He struggled into his wet suit, wishing the quartermaster had included a can of talc, or cornstarch, to make the effort easier. His sweat soaked skin stuck to the neoprene; it resisted his every attempt to pull the suit onto his already aching body. More than once he toppled over into the sand, adding insult to injury, as he ripped follicles of body hair out by the roots. At last, with a supreme effort of will he managed to get himself into the suit. Vinnie tossed him a canteen of water then turned and entered the surf timing his entry to take advantage of the lowest wave set.

Richards gulped down several mouthfuls, knowing he'd soon be dehydrated at the rate he was losing fluid. The wet suit seemed unbearably hot, he longed for the feel of the cold Pacific Ocean. He stuffed his hiking boots into the nylon rucksack along with his t-shirt, and shorts. Then buried the rucksack in the sand and pushed some dried kelp over the spot.

He slapped the mask and snorkel onto his face, picked up his fins, and hit the water diving below an incoming wave. He surfaced behind the swell, pulled on his fins, then rolled over and swam after his buddy who was steadily pulling away to catch up to the main body of SEALs

Richards was in his element now, water was always his friend and he could swim for hours. His steady kick never faltered, his stroke was straight and true. Within five minutes he'd joined the rest of the team, as they swam north on the surface of Monastery Bay.

They turned in to shore; body surfed onto the sand, and then clamored up the slope. Richards stumbled twice, his legs giving out beneath him. In all this time, not a word had been said by any of the SEALs.

The SEALs rested for ten minutes. Two Navy corpsmen arrived and checked each man. When they reached Richards they chuckled, and shook their heads. Then gave him a bottle of something that tasted like salty lemon aid.

Richards took a swallow and gagged. "What is this shit?"

"Electrolyte, it'll help you retain fluids. Keep your muscles from cramping," the corpsman said.

Richards took another swallow and grimaced, but as he continued to drink he became accustomed to the taste, even felt a little better.

"Electrolyte my ass," Vinnie mumbled. "Bear piss."

After ten minutes, Steve signaled and the team silently moved off down the beach again at a slightly slower pace. At the south end, they peeled off their wet suits, dug up the rucksacks, and put on their clothing.

They jogged up a path that led through ice plant and onto the shoulder of Highway 1. A half hour later they were back at Cabin 3. Richards walked the last hundred yards, wondering what Steve had in mind for the afternoon. As he reached the cabin, Sheffield came out stripped to his waist, having already changed into a pair of jeans. "You dyin' yet Richards?"

Richards didn't respond. He stood bent over at the waist, hands on his knees trying to catch his breath.

"I guess so," Steve said. "Tell you what, I'm gonna cut you a little slack, being as your a civie and useless as tits on a Bull. Take the afternoon off. We've got some gear to checkout over at the base. But I want you back here at nineteen thirty, that's seven thirty PM to you civie pukes."

Richards nodded and tried to smile but it didn't feel like he'd pulled it off. He eased his beaten body into the Mustang and headed off to his hotel for a hot shower and as much shut eye as he could squeeze into the afternoon.

###

At 17:30 Richards heard a soft knock on the hotel door. He rolled out of bed, and then looked through the peephole. Standing outside was one of the Navy corpsman that'd checked them out at the beach. He slipped the security lock, and invited him inside.

"Sorry I didn't get your name earlier today, not sure I got my own." Richards closed the door.

"Podvol, Sean Podvol. Steve asked me to come by, make sure you were doin' okay."

"Yeah, I'm fine. Thought I was in better shape though."

"Leg cramps? Headache? Nausea?"

"Naw, just a little weak. Be fine come tomorrow. Sure glad Steve let me off the hook today."

The corpsman nodded. "What did you have for breakfast?"

"Nada. Wasn't hungry. Ate late last night. Figured it would get me through to lunch. Looks like I ate sleep for lunch."

Podvol smiled. "Can't do training evolutions on last night's snack. You're gonna need at least twenty-five hundred calories a day until you jump off."

"Yeah? Well if we stop to eat every two hundred feet that should not be a problem."

Podvol chuckled. "Exactly." He hefted the small canvas bag he was carrying and stepped over to the small round table by the window in Richards' room. He set it down, opened it, and extracted several cylindrical objects that looked like tooth paste tubes.

Richards frowned. "Tooth paste?"

"Food."

"Food?"

"Well supplements actually. The latest thing to come out of NASA for the Apollo program. Meals ready to squeeze. Amino acids actually, and vitamins."

"Amino acids?"

"The building blocks of every cell in the human body. And low in nitrogenous waste; a big plus on a spacecraft without toilets. Mission friendly on terra firma as well. Hold out your index finger." Richards complied, and Podvol spread a bead the full length of his finger. "That's the equivalent of three eggs, and vitamins equal to a large bowl of greens."

Richards licked the substance off his finger. "Not much flavor."

"No matter. On the space missions they add some flavors to keep the prima donnas happy. You want flavor? Eat a snake."

"One of these tubes will sustain you for about five days in the field with a little something from the local terrain if you want to feel like you've eaten. That line

you just sucked down contains twenty-four free form amino acids immediately assimilatable by your blood stream, and all the necessary vitamins for a day's worth of labor.

"While your training, I want you eat about an inch every hour. You'll notice endurance improvement immediately. Later when you've got yourself fully loaded, a line three times a day is enough with regular food. Six, seven lines without."

"I didn't notice the other guys using this stuff." Richards said.

"You wouldn't have, they've been on it for six months now. Today was an easy day. A line with breakfast was all they needed. Tomorrow you carry the boat. Then comes the climbing, and finally the big swim."

"The big swim?"

"From a sub, two miles off shore... at night."

Richards squeezed an inch out of the tube and swallowed it, deciding it had a kind of nutty flavor. "How much is too much?"

"For the next few days don't worry about it. But it does suppress the appetite so take it easy for now. Have another line after dinner, and another in the morning." He dumped the rest of the tubes out of the bag onto the table. "After a couple of weeks you can cut back, you'll get a feel for the right daily level. If you eat too much, you'll get a sharp headache in your temples, that's the phenylalanine. Raises the blood pressure too, but you won't necessarily feel that."

"Phenylalanine?"

"One of the essential amino acids. Stimulates adrenal production, and a closely related neurohormone called Norepinephrine, which keeps you alert."

Richards nodded, he didn't know if it was purely psychosomatic, due to their conversation, or if the supplements were taking effect but he already felt energized. Still the real test would come the day after tomorrow. He knew what Podvol meant by the boat, and it would make today look like a stroll in the park.

###

At 19:30 Richards parked outside Cabin 3. No one opened the door in anticipation of his arrival. He knocked once and heard Steve invite him inside.

"Hey, Jim. How you feelin'?"

"Amazing. Podvol stopped by this afternoon. Thanks for sending him over."

"No problem. You can't run a high performance engine on low octane fuel."

"Or no fuel at all."

Steve was seated at a small rectangular table set up in the Cabin's kitchenette. Richards walked over; as he approached he reached into his jacket and withdrew a map of Guatemala.

Steve groaned as he watched Richards spread the map out on the Formica table. "Please God, not Guatemala again. They got insects there, the size of horses."

Chapter 4

Matt Harding rested in the shade of a breadfruit tree, watching leaf cutter ants, as big as his thumb, move the jungle from one point to another, one leaf at a time. Even in the shade, the afternoon heat was oppressive. Sweat formed profusely, and then trickled down his face, neck, chest, and underarms. The interminable itch of prickly heat was driving him crazy.

He could almost taste the humidity in the air. The atmosphere so thick, an air conditioner condenser, run off a diesel generator, was used as a source of drinking water. Supplementing the rock-hewn cistern that trapped afternoon thundershowers. Too bad the stupid bastards hadn't figured a way to make the rest of the unit work.

He considered his options, slim to none. On the day he arrived, he'd climbed out of the cockpit of the Cessna Skymaster, took one look at the Russian and Cuban advisors amongst the Pokomam who'd come out to greet him, and knew he'd made a big mistake.

On the far side of the three thousand foot dirt strip cut out of the jungle near the town of Sosela, six Cessna Skymasters sat under camouflaged shelters. He'd watched Russian technicians tear down one of the six. They'd worked their way through the systems, identifying and sketching every detail of the twin boom, centerline thrust aircraft.

Engines are engines, parts are parts. Any good mechanic can figure out how something works if he breaks it down slowly and carefully. Soon they'd have a rudimentary technical manual for maintenance purposes, and for ordering spare parts through resident agents inside the United States. Conveniently, every part was stamped and numbered to meet FAA requirements.

Fortunately, Matt Harding thought, they'd not chosen to reverse engineer the plane he'd delivered. Had they done so, they'd have discovered the locator within its starboard boom, and then it would've been all over. Not to mention, an immediate dispersal of aircraft to widely scattered locations. As it was, they were all being kept in one place only because of the need for flight training.

He shook his head. The Pokomam pilots had virtually no innate flying ability. So without even trying to slow the process down, it was taking him twice as long as normally would have been expected to get the Pokomam pilots anywhere near

operational readiness. Clearly, sooner or later, a decision would have to be made by their Cuban mentors to bring in outside help.

If they chose to use multi-national mercenaries, there was a chance he'd get the call. After all, he got along well enough with the leadership. There was some camaraderie. They treated him as well as could be expected, considering the inhospitable conditions under which they were all living. On the other hand, if they chose to use Cuban pilots exclusively...

Matt Harding wiped the sweat from his face with a blue bandanna. One good thing, he thought, chuckling to himself as he brushed a leaf cutter ant from his sleeve. The stupid bastards couldn't learn to fly by taking him apart; if they could he'd already be lying around in pieces.

###

For a semi-claustrophobic like Jim Richards the inside of a nuclear submarine was only one-step up from the inside of an hermetically sealed coffin. This was the final training evolution before the SEALs rotated to Kauai for tropical survival, and live fire exercises.

Tonight's exercise began with a simulated infiltration via SDB, swimmer delivery boat. The one they'd carried around for the past two days. Well actually the other guys carried the boat, Richards just sort of stumbled along holding his arms over his head.

The sea was rough but somehow they'd managed to make a pounding surf entry, then work their way out to the long shadow of the sub's hull two miles off shore. A SEAL squad wasn't only about shooting and looting, but the ability to operate under any conditions regardless of how difficult.

Thank God they didn't have to paddle the boat the entire way, Richards thought. The surf covered the sound of the muted outboard, once they were a few hundred yards off shore.

Getting onto the sub was a Chinese fire drill, but they'd managed. Their wetsuits kept their bodies from being bruised and abraded each time the sea toppled one of them onto the deck.

As soon as they were on board, the submarine dropped below the swells and into the calm silent darkness of the Monterey canyon. Now they hovered at seventy feet, motionless.

Nuclear submarines are silent. Inside, everything and everyone moves with quiet efficiency. Still there was an undertone of sound that was like nothing else

he'd ever experienced. The submarine seemed a living, breathing creature. As his hearing adjusted, subtle sounds became clear and distinct: Fluid moving through pipes, the constant white noise of electronics and air circulation equipment, the expansion and contraction of the hull. In DBs, barely recordable, but to the chemicals of the human brain that perceived volume, the submarine was a cacophony of constant sound.

They were all together in the wardroom, preparing their equipment for the infiltration exercise. Richards had checked his gear twice, was confident it would work but less confident he would do as well. Still, once outside the steel tunnel, his natural water skills would take over and he hoped he'd do all right.

The equipment they'd use was simple enough; this was not an exercise in combat patrol. They would carry no weapons, except their combat swimmer knives. Consequently, weight at least would not be an issue.

Each man would wear his dive suit, knife, and horse collar flotation device. They'd be testing new high-pressure SCUBA tanks developed by the Germans. The tank valves were threaded to secure the first stage regulator, a necessity at 5000 psi.

Richards marveled at the engineering, the tanks were no larger than a pony bottle, or the equivalent of about 25 cubic feet of compressed air in a stubby cylinder approximately fourteen inches in length. Packed at high pressure, the capacity was nearly doubled. Two cylinders held enough air for an hour's swim at thirty feet.

Jim Richards glanced from one team member to the next. Each uniquely skilled, and capable of operating alone. Yet as a team it was as if they were one. Even with Richards they'd achieved a small degree of unit integrity. At least they knew who he was, and that he was capable of keeping up, more or less, and most important, he would follow direction and move in absolute silence. But the latter was an innate talent of his anyway.

Vince Morris looked up from his gear and caught Richards' eye. "You're lookin' a little pinched there guy. This cigar tube not to your likin'?"

Richards raised his eyebrows once.

"No sweat, we'll be out in the canyon soon enough, and then the only thing you'll have to worry about are giant Oarfish, Sun fish, Giant Squid, Mako sharks, and drifting gill nets." He smiled broadly.

Richards squeezed his eyes shut, "Maybe I'll just ride this one out."

Giant Oarfish, now there was an interesting threat, Richards thought. They lived deep in the canyon and seldom came to the surface. But seldom didn't mean not ever. Little was known about the animal, other than that gleaned from the occasional carcass found along the Monterey shoreline.

The Oarfish, a long, narrow creature ranging up to fifty feet in length, met the criteria of a classic sea monster. Its flaming red dorsal fin is serrated in such a way it has the appearance of a flaming red mane. It's head, shaped a bit like that of a horse had large baleful, saucer eyes designed for sight in the dark depths of the canyon. The eyes reflected a greenish glow when hit by the slightest amount of light, such as that cast by the moon.

Occasionally it was seen near the surface. One observer described the monster as having a mouth full of interlocking stiletto like teeth. And claimed to have seen it drag a harbor seal, mewing and howling, into the depths of the five thousand foot canyon below the indigo waters of Monterey Bay.

Jim Richards took a deep breath; well that does give one pause for thought. He looked over at Vince Morris as he performed his final gear check, and wondered if Vince gave any thought to local tales of giant Oarfish.

Vince was probably the most athletic of the squad. He was smaller than the others, built like a gymnast. His compact body never seemed to run out of energy, or coordination. Topside he'd been the only one of the squad who'd not fallen to the deck in the roll of ten-foot seas.

Bob Spencer was the intellectual. Radios, electronics, and shaped pyrotechnics were his specialty. There probably wasn't a piece of equipment used by the SEALs he couldn't field strip in the dark, mix up the parts, and put back together.

Frank Prescott was closest to Richards' build and personality. He was tall, muscular, and generally reserved in his demeanor. His specialty was recon. He could blend into virtually any group or situation. He listened well and gained great insight from information heard and observed. And, like Richards, he was naturally stealthy. Once inside a target, he would ferret out every nook, cranny, and secret place of concealment to find information of value to a mission.

Dave Wilcox had the appearance of perpetual youth, he was the round, and freckle faced kid with red hair that everyone thought was thirteen years old when he showed up at his high school prom. At twenty-five he still got carded now and then. But the look in his eyes told you that youth had long since departed. He was the squad's field medic, and had seen the little value combat placed on human life and body parts. Twenty-five cents for an eye, or two for forty-three cents. An arm was worth a buck-fifty.

Ross McIntyer was the warhorse of the squad. He never complained about the load he had to carry, because so far they hadn't found a load heavy enough to wear him out. When the local Scots got together to throw their telephone poles around, McIntyer had the job of tossing them back for the retry.

Steve Sheffield was the only member of the squad that Jim Richards had known before the week began; he was older than Richards, and for that matter older than anyone else in the squad. He'd literally grown up in the Navy, having enlisted when he was sixteen, to avoid juvenile jail time for hubcap appropriation and motorcar relocation.

It had taken awhile to convince him of the error of his ways. But by the time he was eighteen, even he was proud of himself. Sheffield worked his way up through the ranks and into UDTs where he made a name for himself in the early days of Vietnam. Then back for two more tours as a SEAL. He'd even retaken the BUD/S course, basic underwater demolition/SEAL. An unheard of feat, just to prove to the younger men he'd be leading in the newly formed SEAL Team Three that he was not a lead from behind, no load dip shit. It was in that second BUD/S evolution he and Richards had first met.

Of all the guys in the squad, Sheffield had seen the most combat. And of all the guys he was the one who'd done it all, literally. There wasn't a piece of equipment, training evolution, or combat tactic he hadn't mastered. And there wasn't a man in the squad that didn't respect and look up to him. He commanded by example, led from the front, and had never left a man behind. In his entire career he'd lost only one man in combat.

These men were the elite of the elite. And they were all retired. Or at least that's what official military records showed. They were now a part of three assigned exclusively to the intelligence community.

Steve Sheffield reached over and did a quick recheck of Richards' gear set-up, then nodded once indicating it met his standard. He did this with all the set-ups even though each buddy team had checked each other's, and their own as well. He then left the wardroom for a few minutes, returning with a chart sealed in plastic and several slips of paper.

"All right men, listen up. Here's our problem tonight. The seas topside are running about ten feet as you all ready know, they'll slack off to about seven as we get more in shore. The surf's running five to six feet at Lobos and Monastery. The Captain reports a long current on the surface of one point five knots running south."

He paused for a moment to let the last piece of information sink in, as he looked from one man to the next.

"Our inbound course is one five zero, correcting for the long current we'll head one three zero. Its too rough for a surface swim so we'll stay at twenty feet." He paused again, just to see if anyone had an objection or comment.

"We'll rope at twenty-feet, its too hazardous to egress roped up, and if we take the time to rope at depth we'll use air we need near the surface to complete the swim. Each buddy team goes in on their own.

"We'll link up at the south end of Monastery, then recon through that nice quiet subdivision of million dollar homes just south of the river. That should give us some real-time thrills if the neighborhood pets get to barking and the local gendarmes show up for a look see."

McIntyre began grinning from ear to ear.

Sheffield just shook his head. "No petacide."

"Ah man," groused McIntyre. "And I was so looking forward to a little Cocker Spaniel in the morning."

Vince shook his head. "You are a putrid swabby, you know that?"

Sheffield held up his hand. "Calm down, let's get back to the problem."

This was the most excitement Richards had seen out of the team since he'd joined them. But a submarine egress into rough sea was an adrenaline rush, he knew that already because his heart was ticking over at quarter plus speed and they weren't even in the water yet.

"You've got to avoid Pt Lobos," Sheffield indicated a point on the chart just south of Monastery. "If you get sideways and end up in this area, you'll have to make it into Whaler's Cove. That's this second inlet. Forget the first, Blue Fin Cove, the cliffs are shear and there's no valid egress point. Neither option is good, so stay on course and save yourself the effort."

###

They stood just below the hatch of the submarine's forward emergency escape chamber. Jim Richards attached two chemical light sticks to Vince's gear harness, one in front and one in back as the sound of rushing water, exhausting air, and clanging metal echoed around the water tight room below the chamber.

The other buddy teams had exited; he and Vince were the last to go. He slapped Vince on the back of his tank signaling the sticks were in place.

Vince turned around and gave a thumbs up, and Richards returned it with only the slightest hesitation.

Vince grinned. "Okay, one more time. The green light comes on. You climb the ladder, drop the hatch, and then climb into the chamber. Step to the edge and give me room to come up.

"The bosun here," Vince gestured with his head towards the submariner standing at the pump station controls, "locks us in. Be sure to grip your second stage in your mouth as you go up the ladder that way you won't be looking around for the damn thing when the hatch clangs shut.

"Okay, inside its black as shit. You're gonna hear a very loud clunk and then hissing. That's air being exhausted, that's when you start using your compressed air and clearing your ears. The temperature drops instantly but the wetsuit handles that pretty good."

As Vince spoke he continued checking over Richards' gear, then looked him straight in the eyes.

"Now this is where you gotta suck up, you dig. The sea water starts pouring in, its about forty-seven degrees out there and your breathing rate wants to go up because of the cold. Then the pressure starts compressing your lungs and you're scared as shit and your heart starts thumpin' and you think you want to change your mind, but there's no goin back." Vince's voice went up a little, he was beginning to psyche himself up as well as Richards. "That's when you remember ol' Vinnie is right there with you, he's done this shit at least fifty times. The gear is working and in thirty more seconds the upper hatch is gonna pop and then we're outside and we're just SCUBA diving, and we LOVE TO SCUBA DIVE, DON'T WE!"

Almost involuntarily Richards let out loud, "Yeah!"

"Do you like to dive?" Vinnie asked.

"You're fuckin' A I do!"

"All right! Get your butt up the ladder, Mister."

Richards looked up at the hatch. The green light was on. He put his foot, enclosed in a hard sole rubber booty, onto the first rung and climbed the ladder. The chamber was only about four to five feet in diameter. There was a narrow

shelf around the inside where he could stand until the hatch was closed. Vince Morris quickly scrambled up onto the ledge across from Richards, then immediately started putting on his swim fins. Richards chastised himself for not doing the same the moment he arrived. As it was he had only one fin on when the lower hatch clanged shut, plunging them both into total darkness. He struggled into the second fin, bumping Vince several times. Then as his eyes adjusted to the dark, the glow of the chemical sticks began to have some beneficial effect and he could actually see Vinnie's face and the silhouette of his body one foot away. Vinnie reached over and pulled Richards mask into place. Richards nodded thanking him, while kicking himself for having forgotten that too. Clearly he was stressed.

Suddenly there was the clunk Vince had told him about, it sounded like they'd been rammed from outside. Then the hissing. Water rushed in up to their knees, their waist. Now it was at his neck. He could feel the icy cold ocean water seeping down the back of his wet suit. He shivered once, before his body heat warmed the trapped water and insulated him from the cold. Near the surface it would be relatively warmer, maybe fifty-three degrees but that would be enough to let them get to shore.

Claustrophobia seemed to claw at his senses, he breathed the compressed air from his tank and told himself everything was working. They'd soon be outside, just diving.

The noise stopped, silence. The chemical sticks were now of little use, just a point of light in the darkness to focus on. But a critical point because this was the only way they'd be able to keep track of each other until they reached the twenty foot level and could link up.

Vinnie reached up and turned the hatch wheel above until it popped open and flopped backwards to a near vertical position. He boosted Richards upward.

Richards needed little encouragement; the sooner he was outside in the open water the happier he'd be. He grasped the edges of the hatch and quickly egressed from the submarine into the inky black waters of the Monterey canyon.

No thoughts of phantom marine creatures crossed his mind; he was too engrossed in the problem at hand. The current, even at seventy feet was significant and he immediately drifted away from the hull of the submarine. Suddenly it was gone and he had no idea in which direction it lay. He turned in a circle allowing the natural balance of his equipment to keep him more or less upright. There, below and to the right, a tiny green glow. Vince's chemical stick. He immediately swam towards it, a point of recognition in the darkness.

Vince Morris turned in a three hundred and sixty degree circle. He could not see Jim Richards because the chemical stick on the front of Richards' gear harness had been torn off as he egressed from the submarine. But Richards was facing him not more than five feet away. Vince looked around and up, and then headed for the surface with Richards trailing behind in the darkness below.

Jim Richards did not try to catch up to Vince; he only wanted to keep him in sight. It was more important not to ascend too quickly. To maintain no more than a sixty foot per minute rate. Too fast could cause an embolism, and quite possibly death.

Richards looked at the glowing tritium coated numbers on the depth gauge strapped to his wrist. They were coming up on thirty feet now. Would Vince stop at twenty so they could link up, or would he surface for a bearing check?

Richards checked the time on his stainless steel dive watch, 22:31 at least they were on schedule.

He looked up again. Oh Jesus where was Vince? Nothing but blackness above him. How long had he been staring at the gauges. He glanced again at the depth gauge, twenty feet. Had Vince stopped? Richards stopped, hovered, and looked around. No glow from the chemical stick. He checked his gauge again. Shit. Thirty feet, he was drifting down. Oh Christ, he was forgetting even the basics now. He finned upward, concentrated on breathing, kept his ascent slow. Regained dive control, self-control.

Richards broke surface and immediately turned in a three hundred and sixty degree circle. Nothing. Chop broke over his head. A swell picked him up and raised him above the surrounding surface. He took the moment to observe all he could before he slipped into the adjacent trough. No Vinnie.

Richards looked at the compass on the swim board that hung from his utility belt. He rotated his body to the predetermined bearing and began swimming towards shore. That was the only course of action he had left.

In daylight, on calm waters he could have looked for Vince's bubbles, maybe found him waiting calmly at twenty-feet. But not at night. The only course of action now was to stay with the infiltration plan. Vince would do the same. He'd be okay. Richards was the weak link. But he'd make it too. He had no fear of water.

Jim Richards considered the option of staying on the surface. It might conserve air, though he'd continue to use it to avoid swallowing water. But the swells and wind would slow his travel, or take him completely off course. It would

be best to dive to twenty feet, and then proceed inbound. Vince would do the same. They'd arrive within a hundred yards of each other at Monastery Beach.

Just as he was about to dive, intuition told him to look around. As he did, his heart leapt into his throat. A muffled cry of primordial fear echoed inside his mouthpiece. Looming in the following swell was the most fearsome apparition he'd ever seen. The coastal clouds above parted momentarily; a three-quarter moon broke through to illuminate the monstrous form.

Exactly what it was Jim Richards could not tell, some sort of marine creature of enormous size. It appeared to have a flowing mane, like a huge horse. Near its snout there was a green glow, obscured by strands of mane. It was coming towards him.

The clouds closed again, Richards could still make out the silhouette and the green eye. Instinctively he pulled his combat knife from the inverted sheath lashed to the front of his gear harness. The monster surged closer rising on a swell. Richards raised the knife above his head and brought it back ready to plunge into the green eye as soon as the creature was within range. Surely this was the Oarfish he'd read and heard about, and he did not want to feel the bite of its teeth.

The swells brought it closer. Yet it showed no sign of aggression. He could barely make out its enormous form as it undulated in the water. The animal was within striking distance, yet it did not attack, nor dive below the surface. Richards lowered his knife. There was no need to defend himself for the moment. Perhaps it would just swim by, surely if it had seen him and wanted him he would already be fighting for his life, or eaten. Stabbing at it now might only anger the animal.

The clouds parted again. The moon shown directly down from above. The monster resolved into a California redwood tree, at least seventy-five feet in length. For a moment Richards could hardly believe what he was seeing. It was easier to believe in sea monsters than the simple evidence of a giant tree washed into the ocean from a river in Northern California. Yet it happened all the time, and Richards had seen them before, beached.

He swam closer and was surprised to find it was farther away than he'd initially thought. As he finned toward it, he sheathed his knife. A tree it surely was, but what was the green eye?

As he closed on the tree he became entangled in branches draped with kelp, and struggled along the lolling behemoth until he was within two feet of the eye. Oh Christ, it was Vince wrapped in the branches, his combat knife driven half its length into the waterlogged bark. The green eye was the chemical stick still attached to the rear of Vince's gear harness.

Jim Richards struggled to reach his swim buddy, the tree; huge in girth was stabilized by enormous branches. It lolled in the eight-foot seas but did not capsize. They were on a natural ship, drifting wherever the sea and wind willed.

At last he reached Vince, he was out cold, his regulator still clenched tightly in his mouth. Richards could only surmise what had happened. Vince had lost sight of him, surfaced for a bearing check and to wait for Richards. A swell had carried the tree into him. In typical SEAL fashion he'd responded, instantaneously burying his combat knife as deeply as possible into his attacker even as he was being knocked unconscious.

Richards felt for a pulse at Vince's neck. It was weak. But judging from the sound of his regulator he was still breathing. Probably a concussion. Richards broke operational protocol and turned on his dive light, even with the red filter it could be seen for many yards. He shined it onto Vince's dive mask. The faceplate was in tact.

Just then Vince began to come around, he struggled to pull the knife out of the tree. Richards spit out his mouthpiece, and spoke in a calm tone of voice.

"It's all right Vinnie, take it easy. It's a tree. You were hit by a goddamn tree."

Vince's body began to shake, as laughter replaced fear. And then he threw up. Richards washed his face with seawater. "You get sea sick?"

Vince rolled onto his side. "Never. But everything seems to be spinning. I feel nauseous."

"You've probably got a concussion. We should call for help, send up a flare."

"What flare? We weren't issued any. We always try to make these exercises as realistic as possible. Who we gonna signal in enemy waters?" Vince started to look around and had to suppress another wretch. "Any idea where we are?"

Richards took a bearing, and then looked at the lights on shore. Then glanced at his watch. It was midnight.

"Judging from the position of the lights and the time, I'd say we're already south of Monastery Beach. We'll have to make for Whaler's Cove."

"No can do. I'll never make that entry. Leave me here on this organic ocean liner, and make it to shore on your own. Then link up with the guys and rustle up a Coastie chopper to come pick me up."

Richards shook his head. "No way Vince. The rate of drift is too high. You'll be on the rocks before we ever get back to you."

"Maybe, but I can't dive in this condition and we can't surface swim to Whaler's Cove. How well do you know this area?"

"Well enough to know your chances of survival if you stay on this log." Richards flipped his swim board over and made some bearing calculations. He then snapped his rope into Vince's harness. "Okay, Vinnie. It's time to go for a little swim."

"Jim, we can't make it on the surface."

"And you can't make it on this log. So shut up and lets get on with it." With that he rolled Vince off the log and back into the ocean. They kicked away and began to head inbound on the heading Richards had selected.

###

McIntyer and Wilcox were the first to make it to shore, landing midway down Monastery beach. Spencer and Prescott came next. Finally, Sheffield. They soon joined up at the south end.

"Anyone seen Vince, or Richards?" Sheffield asked.

"No," responded McIntyer. "They were the last out. And Richards is the weakest link. Christ I hope he hasn't gone FUBAR on us. Maybe we should have reconsidered bringing him along."

"Richards is all right," Sheffield countered. "He's a good water man, but these seas are rough." He thought for a moment. "Mac, you and Dave recon north along the beach as far as the public rest rooms at the parking lot beyond the river. Frank, you work back and forth to mid-beach. Bob you work the south end. I'll head back to the hotel and pick up a Blazer. I'll pickup Mac and Dave. And then come back for the two of you. If they haven't shown up, we'll check out Whaler's Cove before calling the Coast Guard and writing this mission off as a failure."

###

Zero one oh one dark, thought Richards, he could hear the surf pounding against Mono Lobo rock. Vince had rolled over onto his back and ceased to fin over twenty minutes before. He must have passed out again. The last thing he'd said to Richards was to cut him lose and go on.

The swells were beginning to increase as Jim Richards finned steadily along. His legs ached with the effort and his tank was nearly empty, but that was only a minor inconvenience he could breath well enough on the surface. The outline of the rocky shore loomed ahead. His night vision, fully active now, made it possible to see rather well. The lights of Monterey and Carmel filtering through the molecules of moisture in the overcast sky added to the visibility. That and the moon. Up ahead, bobbing now and then into view as the swells lifted him; he could see the headlands on either side of Whaler's Cove. The tops of the cliffs lined with wind blown, strangely bent California Cypress trees.

The wind and current wanted to take him south, as he neared shore the strength of the southern pull increased. This would not have been a problem had they been landing at Monastery. Heading for the north end would have deposited them nicely mid beach, or even at their rendezvous point at the south end. But here it was a different story. The entrance to Whaler's Cove was relatively narrow and if they missed the correct entry angle they'd be smashed against the jagged rocks.

A lifetime's worth of water training all came down to this one moment in time. Suddenly the angle he needed appeared before him as a huge swell lifted them twelve feet above the surrounding surface. Richards pulled Vince close to him and struck off for the entrance to Whaler's Cove fining down the face of the swell to gain the momentum needed to traverse the distance. Breakers were forming to his left and right, but this was the channel they needed.

Few swimmers would have recognized the opportunity, and of those who did many would have hesitated, wondering if the swell they were on would turn into the face of a crushing breaker. But Richards knew the entrance to Whaler's Cove well, from diving excursions on many prior occasions.

In his mind he could visualize the underwater channel that led directly to the center of the cove. He'd seen the wave patterns from the cliffs above, and knew there was a narrow section where the swells rolled into the cove to form smaller waves that washed out into the kelp beds beyond. He felt a six-foot curl form beneath him, and saw the headlands rush by on his right and left.

Now for one last push, he gripped Vince tighter, put his own head down and picked up the pace again. Fining furiously, he visualized his fins beating up and down, churning a wake like a paddleboat steamer. His right calf wanted to cramp, but he willed it relax without ceasing his steady fining.

In his mind his legs were driven by inexhaustible steam boilers, pumping up and down, up and down. They caught the curl. He pulled Vince to him as tight as he could, laid his own body along side until they presented one uniform hydrofoil.

Together they surfed the last fifty yards riding the white foam of a six-foot curl edgewise into the kelp beds, and the relative calm of mid-cove. Behind him he could hear the cannon like boom of the largest breakers crashing into the headlands.

He rested on his back, stretching his toes upward to relieve the now constant threat of cramps. Vince floated near by, perhaps a foot away, still unconscious. Richards had inflated Vince's horse collar just enough before he quit swimming to keep his head out of water as he floated on his back.

Vince came to, he tried to roll onto his stomach but the kelp and gear would not let him. He flopped back and forth momentarily, and then stopped with a moan.

Richards got to his side and spoke in his ear. "Vince, hang in there. We're in the cove. Just got to get to the boat ramp, and then I can go for help."

Richards pushed the kelp aside and began the swim towards the boat ramp at the far end of Whaler's Cove. It was slow going, because the kelp hampered their progress tremendously. Every few feet he would have to stop and untangle the strands, break them really. Then move on. Below the surface it would have been a calm easy swim, wending their way between and around the tree like stalks of holdfast, through an underwater forest until they had reached their destination. But here they were like rubber suited monkeys trying to crawl through the tops of a rain forest.

At 03:15, Jim Richards managed to drag Vince Morris halfway up the boat ramp. There he rested again, complete exhaustion threatened to overcome his efforts. He struggled out of his gear, and then got Vince's off. Both sets were festooned with strands of two-inch wide giant kelp fronds.

He checked Vinnie's pulse and breathing, it was weaker. The cold was taking its course, he had not been moving enough to ward it off. And even the warmth of the wet suit had its limitations.

He dragged Vince the rest of the way up the ramp. Then left him head up, legs pointed down the slopping ramp.

The ranger station was not manned at night, but they probably had a telephone. He could break in; use it to call an ambulance. He began to jog up the road. A wolf howled. He stopped, listened. Another howl came from the dense woods to the south.

Pt. Lobos, of course. It was not just a clever name after all. He looked back at Vince's prone body lying on the ramp. What would the wolves think when they came upon it. Fresh meat. Richards turned back.

Near the ramp was an aluminum boat sitting on a light trailer, chained to a steel post. Richards somehow managed to get Vince into it. Cushioning his head with the top half of his own wet suit, which he cut off with his combat knife. It was too hot to run in anyway. The wolves howled again. No good. They'd find him here as well, if they weren't already watching from the tree-lined cliffs that looked down into the cove.

Richards pulled on the chain solidly attached to a steel post anchored to the ground. Suddenly, he became angry, he was more than exhausted, more than frustrated, and most of all, feared for his friend's life. That was how he thought of Vince now; he hadn't come all this way to leave him like carrion to the wolves.

In an instant Richards went maniacal. He rushed to the ramp, grabbed one of the compressed air packs. Then rushed back to the boat. Raised the SCUBA tank above his head and began slamming it repeatedly onto the chain that secured the boat. It only took three tries to tear the aluminum eyelet completely from the bow of the boat.

Cussing and swearing like a drunken mad man, he tied one end of the buddy rope to the front of the trailer then clipped the other end to the back of his gear harness, having discarded the dented tanks.

He then began jogging up the road towing the boat and trailer with Vince inside. He was calm again, only the steady in and out of his breathing and the slap of his hard sole booties could be heard in the still night. The wolves had long since ceased to howl. Carrion was one thing, a crazy human was quite another.

###

"No way, Steve. No way could they have made to Whaler's. The sea's running twelve feet down there." Bob Spencer said.

Steve turned onto the dirt road that led into Point Lobos National Reserve. He stopped short of the gate and nodded to McIntyer, who immediately jumped out and cut the padlocked chain with a pair of bolt cutters as easily as a kid would cut a piece of string.

Steve pulled forward, McIntyer jumped back in as the Blazer rolled by. They drove slowly, no sense killing a deer or running over Richards and Vince if they happen to be coming this way.

"Jesus what the hell's that?" McIntyer asked.

Steve hit the high beams. The apparition ahead came into full view. It was Richards, mouth open in labored breathing. Eyes wide, arms pumping, legs pounding, coming towards them.

Prescott exclaimed, "He's draggin' a goddamn boat!"

The SEALs piled out of their vehicle and ran towards Richards. They had to grab him to get him to stop, and then grab the trailer to keep its momentum from running him over.

"Richards what happened?" Steve asked.

"Vince.... concussion.... tree..." And then he collapsed.

Chapter 5

Lighthouse Reef, Belize

"Aye ets bloody out today. Most be pushin' ninety it tis." The bartender slid a Pimms Cup tankard across the mahogany bar to Jim Richards.

He smiled and nodded. "This should hit the spot."

"And what's it that brings you to this godforsaken spit o' paradise?" The bartender asked.

Richards shrugged. "Just killin' time. Maybe get some diving in, someplace where the tourists haven't destroyed the reef."

"Aye well if its skin divin' you're after, you picked the right spot, lad. Fact of the matter, we got a top-notch dive shop right down the street just off the wharf. Fathom eighteen run by a yank, like yourself. If you go down there you tell 'em Tom Dorsey sent you."

Jim Richards smiled broadly. "I'll do that." He swung around and slipped off the barstool. Then sauntered out onto the veranda to watch the light fade on the Caribbean. To a Californian, sunset was always a little strange on the east coast of anywhere.

He sat down in a deeply cushioned rattan arm chair, propped his feet up on the veranda's railing and gazed out across pure white sand at the calm turquoise water.

He'd arrived earlier that day, after a long flight from San Francisco via Mexico City. Belize was a British protectorate, a new age term for colony. Exotic woods and Mayan ruins were about all it had to offer, other than exquisite diving along a reef second only to Australia's Great Barrier. Another former British colony. Richards took a deep pull from the thirst quenching Pimms and smiled, maybe it was the barrier reefs that attracted the British.

The Blue Hole Bar and Grill was beginning to fill up with tourists and locals. In an hour or so the band would begin an evening of Belypso, a unique Belizean blend of British pop tunes set to reggae rhythm. The majority of the patrons filtering in were couples, though there were a few singles. Construction workers mostly, over from the Belize mainland.

Richards returned to the bar for another Pimms. He began to think about having dinner, though he wasn't particularly hungry. Still, he needed to eat properly whenever possible. The amino acid formula he'd begun in Monterey was definitely an appetite suppressant.

He stood at the end of the bar, took a pull at his second drink. The Blue Hole was a typical tropical water hole. A thatched roof overhung the perimeter to prevent afternoon down pours from splashing the interior. One side was completely open, the other completely closed to the prevailing off shore breezes that blew each evening. Mahogany columns supported a conical roof, and divided the room into sections for drinking and eating.

As Jim Richards stood at the end of the bar, a gorgeous woman of about thirty came in and took a stool near the cocktail waitresses' station, three spaces away. She was of average height, but appeared taller because of the regal and confident way she carried herself. She had long dark hair that complimented brown eyes set in a sculpted face, with a smooth olive complexion. She wore a loose fitting silk blouse that could not conceal the fullness of her figure. A sarong clung to her well-toned body. Richards stared unabashedly. And she returned his smile, when he caught her eye.

Every guy in the room had looked in her direction when she entered, as did the women but for entirely different reasons. One of the virtues Richards had learned years before was patience. The quickest way to land in a bar fight was to approach a beautiful woman the moment she walked in the room. It was unlikely a woman of her caliber would be in Belize alone.

Several minutes elapsed, some of the guys were beginning to egg each other on to make the first move. Richards looked over at the stage and noted the musicians were starting to set up their equipment. He left his spot and stepped confidently over to the young woman.

"Like every other man in this room I couldn't help but stare at you." He held her eyes for a moment, and smiled disarmingly, then glanced quickly around the room noting the expressions of jealousy from those less bold. "I apologize. It must be disconcerting to be so beautiful."

She returned his smile again. "Why thank you. Although I have never considered myself beautiful, I do enjoy the attention. But there are occasions when it is burdensome." Her voice melodic, and seductive with a strong Latin American accent.

"Are you waiting for someone, or may I keep you company for awhile?" Richards asked.

"No. And yes."

Richards bowed his head once, and touched his glass to hers "I'm honored. I was thinking earlier that someone as ravishing as yourself would surely not be in Belize alone."

She smiled. "Oh well, alone is a relative term isn't it? I am alone... tonight." She cocked her head to one side and looked at Richards discerningly. "You are an interesting looking man, a bit mysterious, or perhaps dangerous."

Richards frowned skeptically. "Why do you say that?"

"Just intuition, or perhaps its your eyes." She smiled and touched his cheek; a spark of electricity seemed to pass between them. "How did you get that scar?"

Involuntarily Richards ran his hand down the left side of his face and felt the puckered scar from a splinter of wood that had punctured his cheek years ago. "It's a long story, and unfortunately not very exciting. I thought it had faded."

She took a sip of her tropical drink. "I'm sorry, I've embarrassed you. It is barely noticeable, but I'm a painter and I guess I notice such things." Then she laughed and touched Richards' forearm where it rested on the bar. The band began to play Ticket to Ride. "Let's dance." She said, and took his hand to lead him to the dance floor.

They danced to three fast songs, and then clung to each other through a slow one. Her body pressed close as if they were already lovers. They returned to the bar, followed by eyes that were becoming bleared from tropical drinks and tropical heat.

"Can I buy you another drink?" Richards asked.

"Actually I'm hungry." She raised an eyebrow and cocked her head.

Richards took a deep breath. "And where would you suggest we dine?"

"Definitely not here. There's a small restaurant in town, we can walk to. Do you like it hot and spicy."

"The food, you mean?" Richards asked with raised his eyebrows.

"Of course the food. What else would you have in mind?"

####

Their table was in an enclosed garden next to a little fountain that trickled water softly over patches of moss. Her name was Stephanie. She told him she was from Guatemala, though raised in Mexico City and Los Angeles. For now she was in Belize to paint images of quaint fishing villages. She lived well, or so she said, from commissions paid by galleries in Newport and Laguna Beach. And yes she had a friend, as she called him. He came and went on business of his own. They had known each other for a while.

She daintily licked Guava sorbet from her spoon. "Tell me about Jim Richards. What brings you to Belize?"

Richards looked at her for a moment; a hundred cover stories ran through his mind. The trick was to choose the one that would prove interesting enough to move the evening to the next level, for ultimately that was the game that was being played tonight.

Finally he replied. "I fly airplanes because I love the freedom it gives me. Because it's an occupation that's totally involving. But every now and then I have to get away from it. Get away from the pressure of constant awareness and concern for the safety of those within my care."

He took some sorbet, waiting to see if Stephanie would pursue the airplane angle but she only smiled and waited for him to reveal more about himself. Jim Richards knew the technique well. Ask a question, then wait awhile after the answer is given to see if the person will become a little nervous and begin to give away more than they ever intended. So he used the time to polish the rest of his cover story, there might be more than Eros involved in their seemingly chance meeting. He looked away for a moment then back at Stephanie.

"I'm not satisfied to just sit on a beach in a tropical paradise, sipping Mai Tais. I need total involvement, that feeling of on the edge commitment where the sense of intuition is more important than knowledge learned. And so I dive beneath the ocean, when the air above has become too oppressive." As he spoke he held her eyes, yet he could not help but notice her nipples becoming hard beneath the fabric her silken blouse.

###

They walked with their arms about each other's waist towards the Blue Hole Bar; just before they reached it she turned and led him along a lane towards bungalows that nestled in the palm groves behind the beach. When they reached one of these, she put her arms about his neck and slowly drew him to her. They

kissed, gently at first, then more passionately. When she broke off the kiss, she stared at him for a moment as if to decide the fate of their evening.

"Would you like to come in?"

She opened the door. It was not locked. Apparently she had no fear of burglary, or perhaps there was no crime in Belize. She did not turn on a light, but lit a hurricane lamp instead, on a table near the entrance.

It was enough, the bungalow was small and the single flame softly illuminated the room. To his left was a tiny kitchenette. At the back of the room a canopied bed, and a door to the right that most likely led to the bath. All about the edges of the room were canvasses in various stages of completion. And one in progress on an easel next to the table.

She drew the drapes across the single window, then took his hand and led him to the foot of the bed, gesturing for him to sit down by placing her hands on each of his shoulders and applying pressure.

He tried to kiss her but she turned her head away and stepped away from him. In the distance he could hear music from the Blue Hole Bar drifting to them on the evening air. She began to sway to the music. Slowly she unbuttoned her blouse, revealing her full firm breasts. She came sensuously towards him until she stood between his legs, her thigh pressed firmly against his swollen member. He kissed her gently on her breasts, running his tongue around each nipple, erect with desire, she moaned with pleasure.

And then they were together on the bed, kissing each other with wild abandon, their hands exploring each other's bodies. She tugged at his shirt pulling it over his head; her hands caressed the muscles of his chest, as she marveled at the size and strength of his arms. The solid firmness of his rippled abs.

He unwrapped her sarong and caressed her inner thighs, until she shuddered with pleasure and tore at the buttons that still secured his denim jeans.

Then all at once time and pleasure seemed to blend into an exquisite singularity of pure passion, neither could tell who was making love to whom, as their bodies merged into one unending moment of ecstatic tension and release.

###

Jim Richards awoke alone. The sun was just emerging from the sea. Outside, morning doves cooed while other harsher calls filtered down through the upper

fronds of the high palm trees. A note was on her pillow. "I swim with the rising sun. If you awake in time, join me at the Blue Hole for breakfast."

Jim Richards showered and dressed. As he picked up his jeans an intuitive thought struck him and he opened his wallet, then smiled. Of course she was curious, and why not, but why had she removed each document then returned them so carefully? Unaware that the single brown hair, now missing, trapped between his driver's license and pilot's license had not fallen there by chance.

###

Fathom Eighteen was housed in a thatch roofed, wood building on stilts, fifty yards from the ocean. A red flag with a white diagonal slash fluttered from a pole that jutted out at an angle just to the right of the entrance. Jim Richards climbed the steps to the open door, and then entered the dive shop. It was cool, and dark inside. It took awhile for his eyes to adjust to the dim light, even after he'd removed his dark green aviator glasses.

Directly in front of him was a wood and glass display case containing a few dive related items. Regulators, masks, and snorkels. To his left, an alcove filled with rental equipment: Tanks, shorty wet suits, weight belts, fins and masks. To his right, an area where the equipment could be tried and fitted. Running along one wall were shelves with souvenir T-shirts for those who wanted to take home more than just a memory of their adventures in Belize.

Some of the T-shirts on display, festooned with air brushed art and slogans: "I dove the Blue Hole beyond the eighteenth fathom." Or "Life's a bitch, and then you dive."

Behind the counter was a man in his early thirties, six feet tall with sandy blond hair, combed by the wind, cut a little long. He wore a loud Hawaiian shirt over a pair of denim cut-offs. His skin was tanned a deep golden hue, he appeared fit and muscular.

As Jim Richards approached, the man looked up and smiled. "'Morning. You lookin' to dive. Or just lookin.'"

Jim Richards returned the smile. "Oh a little of both I suppose. A friend of mine, Arnold Batiste, suggested I find someone by the name of Ian Cay. Said he was the best dive master in Belize."

The man smiled broadly, but his deep blue eyes took on a more than casually interested demeanor. "Ah that Arnie, always with the blarney as the Irish say. I am Ian Cay. And what is your name?"

"Jim Richards."

Ian stepped around the counter and approached Richards his hand extended; they met mid-way in a firm handshake with just a hint of unintentional grip competition. Richards liked Ian immediately.

"So what kind of divin' are you interested in?" Ian asked.

"I hear the Blue Hole is bottomless." Richards replied.

"For those who go below the eighteenth fathom it may well be."

"Then we'll stay above it." The sign and counter sign were seamlessly exchanged, by which each identified the other. And Richards did not skip a beat as he continued. "In fact I'm more interested in seeing some of the southern reefs and islets, perhaps a night dive or two. Arnold indicated it might be possible to charter your boat for a day or two, longer if we could agree on a mutually convenient time.

Ian smiled and nodded. Just then a couple came into the shop and he was called away to help them choose rental gear for a nearby shore dive. Richards amused himself looking at the latest in consumer dive equipment.

Once the realm of the lucky few, primarily military and scientific divers, SCUBA was rapidly becoming a major tourist attraction. Equipment manufacturers were beginning to respond accordingly. It required no stroke of genius to see where it would all end up.

As Ian's customers left the shop weighed down by tanks and gear, Ian returned to their conversation. "Let's get together this evening after I close the shop. Meet me on the dock around seven, that's nineteen hundred for you froggers."

Richards shook his head. "I'm afraid I'm just a tadpole wannabe."

Ian slapped Richards on the back good-naturedly. "That's not the way I hear it. You see, Slasher Steve and Vinnie the Torque pulled me out of Cambodia back when the pukes who took over Operation Phoenix had left me for Kimchi pickle fodder. You did good Richards."

Richards smiled, but felt a little embarrassed. No need.

"Which is lucky for you Ocean Man, 'cause if you'd cut the Torque loose I'd be showin' you the bottom of the Blue Hole for sure."

There was a deadly gleam in Ian's eyes, and Richards returned the look evenly. "Tonight at seven." He glanced towards the rentals. "I'll need some gear".

Ian shook his head. "Already handled. And it ain't no tourist shit." He gestured with his thumb over his shoulder towards the gear behind him. "Bring a sweat shirt. Believe it or not, you'll want it on the ride back.

###

Night diving in the clear warm Caribbean was nothing like the experience of Monterey bay. Here the visibility ranged up to one hundred and fifty feet during the day, at least thirty feet at night, or the reach of a dive light. Though even without lights there was plenty of ambient illumination from the moon and stars by which to navigate.

The colorful reef fish, active during the day, were asleep. It was even possible to gently handle species that would be impossible to get close to in daylight. Only the Moray eels remained active around the clock.

Parrot fish wrapped themselves in mucous cocoons, and slept on the very reef they gnawed for food. Living coral that looked like nothing more than calcium bicarbonate rocks in the day, came alive at night as their multi-colored polyps bloomed to feed on microscopic organisms that drifted on the evening tide.

An hour elapsed too quickly, Ian Cay and Jim Richards rose slowly to the stern of the Mako Flyer.

To those uninitiated to the beauty below the surface of the sea, it might seem odd that two men whose lives were forever tied to intrigue and danger, would be so thoroughly enamored by the simplicity of gliding weightless through silent ocean realms. But such was their nature, to understand that beauty and tranquility were rewards given for deeds done so others could lead peaceful sedentary lives, unaware of the constant threat that impinged upon their seemingly secure world from powers and forces aligned to greed and avarice.

As with other moments that Jim Richards wished he could hold onto forever, the beauty of their dive tonight would be a memory to which he could return when his duties placed him in harms way, when the fear of discovery or death hovered above him.

They broke the surface amid a flurry of bubbles, and then climbed the sea ladders at the stern of the converted patrol torpedo boat that served as Ian's dive platform.

Later, after they'd rinsed and stowed the gear, they relaxed in the cockpit drinking hot coffee and eating the sandwiches Richards had brought along. The moon had set. High overhead a million stars glistened like rhinestones in a velvet gown. Ian Cay broke the silence. "We can speak freely here. There's not a boat around for miles and these islets are uninhabited. Tell me about your mission, and how I can be of assistance."

Richards took a deep breath, and then began. "As you know, Matt Harding is in country. My job is to confirm his location by getting myself involved with George Krystonopolis, then delivering an aircraft to the Pokomam if possible. I carry a transmitter, but unlike Harding's it will be controllable not simply active. Steve and his squad from three will facilitate a rescue. Also, if I can get sufficient evidence on Krystonopolis, he's to be detained, then returned to the United States after we've secured Matt Harding."

"And if Harding is not where you expect to find him?" Ian asked.

"Then our mission will be to do what ever's necessary to locate him. As well as destroy all aircraft we cannot fly out."

"And if Harding's dead?"

Richards looked up at the stars. "I'd rather not think about that right now. Matt's a friend. But I think you know what we must do if he has been murdered."

Ian poured them both another cup of coffee. "Okay here's the lay of the land. That hot little enchilada you were with last night is Krystonopolis' girl friend."

Richards sighed. "Terrific."

"Not to worry, they have a very open relationship. She screws around on him all the time when he's away. Frankly I don't think he gives a shit as long as she's available when he returns."

"That sounds like George all right, doesn't think much of women anyway, except as a vessel for his recreational fluids."

Ian chuckled. "Then they're a perfect match. Rachel, one of the cocktail waitresses at the Hole, and Stephanie get their hair done at the same place in town. Rachel claims Stephanie hates men but loves the power sex gives her over them. The stronger and more dangerous she thinks they are, the more she wants to sleep with them."

Richards thought about what she'd said to him when they first spoke.

"How much time usually elapses between George's visits?"

Ian thought for a moment. "He's usually gone a month, but on one occasion he did not return for three months. In any case, eventually he shows up with whatever he's scrounged. Lately it's been one of those O-2s Cessna made to handle forward air control in Viet Nam.

"How many O-2s has he delivered?"

Ian got up and stretched, then lay down on the transom adjacent to the port railing. "Six counting the one Harding delivered for him."

Richards changed position, scooted down to the end of the starboard transom where he rested his back against the cabin's aft bulkhead. "Has anyone else besides Harding delivered aircraft to the Pokomam?"

"Only Krystonopolis."

"After deliveries, how does he return?"

"I assume he's flown, or driven, to Puerto Barrios. Then hops back here on a commuter."

Richards was silent for a moment. "Did Matt Harding tell you what he hoped to accomplish by going in?"

"He said Krystonopolis recruited him to teach flying, when he found out he was a flight instructor fluent in Spanish."

Richards looked over at Ian; he could just make out his silhouette in the starlight. "Makes sense, the Pokomam would still need training in the three-three-six even if they already had their primary flight training behind them. Which is encouraging, it's not likely they'd waste an instructor before their training was complete."

Ian Cay shrugged. "Maybe, but it wasn't his intention to actually fulfill that role. He planned to sabotage the aircraft, one by one, using several different mechanical methods. Thus giving the Pokomam the impression they were completely unreliable. Then steal the last one and make his way back."

Richards shook his head. "Very ambitious undertaking."

"My exact thoughts, and I told him so at the time. Matt agreed, but pointed out the alternative, to refuse the offer and go home empty handed."

Jim Richards took a deep breath, and then let it out slowly. "Okay, here's the plan as I see it. Steve and his band of merry marauders will arrive next week. If George hasn't returned, or if I can't manage to rope him into another delivery, we'll insert and pull Harding out doing whatever it takes to succeed. But if George cooperates with my scam, maybe we can solve the problem without bloodshed."

Ian snorted. "And maybe Fidel Castro will see the light and turn Capitalist."

Chapter 6

Matt Harding concluded his talk on density altitude. His students found it difficult to accept the concept that heat and humidity were as detrimental to aircraft performance as high altitude. In their minds, hot humid air was clearly thicker and heavier, than the thin cold air of high mountain terrain. They shook their heads as they left the classroom. One of the better students, Roberto Alejandros, remained behind. He was a slightly built young man not much over five foot six, with dark hair and eyes. Fluent in English, Spanish and Mayan.

"You seem frustrated with our rate of progress, Matt."

Harding ran his fingers through his thick blonde hair pushing the comma that always seemed to fall forward back into place. He had a classic All-American look, reminiscent of John Elway, the famous Denver Bronco's quarterback. Tall, broad shouldered, athletic. His honest hazel eyes and easy smile made friends wherever he went.

Matt Harding smiled. "I'm sorry, I need to be more patient. But it's difficult trying to teach without printed materials. My credibility is questioned, when the logic of common belief contradicts the laws of physics. Yet if the others do not grasp the implications of what I'm trying to explain, your small fleet of aircraft will have a very short operational life indeed."

Roberto nodded, "Yes, but then that's likely in any case."

Matt frowned. "Yet you're committed to this course of action? Even though you're relatively certain it's futile."

Roberto shrugged. "Sometimes it's better to take a stance than to continue to live under unacceptable terms. I come from northern Guatemala. My people are looked down upon by those who hold power and prestige in our country, because we're Mayan. We're treated worse than the ethnic races in your country. And how should this be? We were here first. It is the Spanish, and their descendants, that are the usurpers of our land and our life."

Matt listened, and nodded understandingly but in the back of his mind he searched for an opening, looked for a weakness. He would need an ally if he was to accomplish his mission. "But you are well educated, you at least could choose a path that would not involve a war that may not be winnable."

"Oh, I do not believe it isn't winnable, if I did I would not have joined the Pokomam. In the end we will win because this is our land, and we have time and tenacity on our side. The United States will not always support the current government. My study of your history indicates sooner or later the money you are spending to maintain an unpopular government in Guatemala will be withdrawn, perhaps when your current President leaves office. And without U.S. support, the government will collapse.

"In the meantime we can only do what we can to make it as difficult and expensive as possible for the United States. But I'm boring you, obviously you feel the same as I, or you would not be here training us as you are."

Matt smiled his most disarming smile. "The United States is made up of many different people, many like yourself, or myself. We do not all condone what our government does, yet we're not the only ones attempting to influence your country. Clearly, Cuba and the Soviet Union are deeply involved. Does that not concern you?"

Roberto extracted a pack of Cuban cigarettes, and offered one to Matt. He shook his head declining the tobacco.

"Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Not at all." Matt said. "Used to smoke myself, but found it didn't agree with me after awhile."

Roberto nodded his head. "It's not a healthy habit. But in my case, I will not die from smoking." He smiled wryly. "The Cubans and Soviets are necessary to our cause. Afterwards, we will still be our own people. And they'll quickly lose interest when the United States has been defeated. For them this is not a war against our government, it is a war against yours. We're just using them to attain our own ends."

Matt frowned, "Others have thought the same, only to find they are trapped within an iron net once they've won their cause; Cuba for instance."

Roberto shook his head in disagreement. "Make no mistake, Fidel is a Marxist through and through. I'm not, and neither are most of my compatriots. But let's be realistic, capitalism is not a viable concept to a peasant unable to live off his own land. We must first win back that which is our, and then we can decide how to best govern it." "Perhaps," Harding said. "But first you must win."

"Exactly."

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George Krystonopolis sat at the end of a long wooden bar and sipped a plain soda water with a twist of lime. He was not opposed to alcohol; in fact, he almost considered it a God given right to tie one on at least once a month. But when it came to flying airplanes he was careful to always follow the rule: Twelve hours from bottle to throttle. Well it had been at least that long, more like thirty-six.

As matter of fact he could use a real drink, but that would have to wait. If all went well he'd be in Belize the day after tomorrow, and then he could rest and recuperate. R and R, or as he preferred to think of it, I and I - Intoxication and Intercourse.

The tavern he was now in was located a mile or two west of Lawrence, Kansas. He looked around, nothing fancy. A half dozen oak tables, wood floor, rough hewn wall paneling. A few neon lighted beer signs for decoration. And a play for a quarter pool table at the back.

He glanced at the Rolex GMT Master strapped to his wrist, one AM, and time to head on out to the airport. Tonight should be a piece of cake, he thought, he'd chosen his mark carefully. A cattleman in deep shit from poor judgment in the futures market. He needed cash fast. And he needed to get out from under the burden of an airplane that cost as much to maintain as most people spend just to get by.

George took another pull at his soda water. Of course, not everyone fit the profile of his current partner; sometimes he actually had to steal the airplane, but not tonight. It would be left at an uncontrolled field. A check from the insurance company sure as hell beat trying to sell the damn thing.

George tossed five dollars onto the top of the bar, then slipped off the stool and headed out the front door into the chill night. It was about an hour's walk to the airport.

Even if he were unlucky enough to have the case assigned to an adjuster who gave a damn, the insurance weenie would never think to check out the bar and query the barkeep, or any of the regulars. Nope he'd spend his time checking car rentals, flight plans, and motels. No way he'd figure someone to walk an hour in the dark to steal an airplane. After all, thieves were lazy bastards. That's why they stole stuff instead of working their butts off for it like good people do. George chuckled to himself.

He stayed just off the highway. He'd use the natural cover all about him if a car happened along. Dressed in black from head to foot, he wasn't even concerned about a sheriff's patrol. Besides he'd watched the route for a week,

there was virtually no chance of a patrol car cruising this stretch of road before he got to the airport.

By zero two-fifteen, he'd reached the red and white Skymaster. He unhooked the tie downs, unlocked the door, and climbed into the cockpit. He'd forgo the pre-flight, one of the risks of the business. The engines turned over. George taxied towards the take off end of the runway. He did a brief run-up while taxiing, checked the instrument read outs. At zero two twenty-two, the Skymaster lifted off runway twelve and turned southwest, climbing into a clear starlit sky.

Tomorrow afternoon, at a private strip in New Mexico, it would be repainted, repapered, and readied for its flight south. By the time an insurance adjuster arrived in St. Joseph, Missouri to investigate, George planned to be sitting at the Blue Hole Bar drinking an Eighteenth Fathom - four ounces of rum, one-ounce of Grand Marnier, and just the right amount of Pineapple juice to make it interesting.

###

Jim Richards sat on the veranda of the Blue Hole Bar and Grill, sipping a Ramos Fizz. He knew, sooner or later, George would make his way down to the restaurant for breakfast, and Richards wanted to make sure he'd be seen.

Jim Richards and Stephanie had managed several more liaisons since their first night together ten days ago. Fortunately, she was not particularly enamored of him though he did his best to perform adequately. She was one of those women who wanted to choreograph his every move. Actually he figured she was as a frustrated porn director, based on all the direction she gave him during their marathon encounters.

He smiled cynically thinking of Krystonopolis, he was famous around Advantage Flight for the stories that circulated about his lovemaking escapades. He'd roomed with a friend of Richards, and whenever he had a girlfriend over for the night he'd hang a tie on his bedroom door. Really a redundant signal because the music wafting from his bedroom was enough warning, the William Tell overture.

Richards shook his head and chuckled to himself. He looked to his left and spotted Stephanie with Krystonopolis walking towards the entrance, their arms about each other's waist. As they entered the restaurant George looked in Richards' direction, but Richards pretended not to notice. He kept his head turned partially towards the ocean, while he glanced sideways at George from behind dark aviator glasses. George recognized him immediately and excused himself from Stephanie, then walked over to Richards.

"Jim? Is that you?"

Richards turned towards Krystonopolis, then smiled broadly as he removed his glasses. "George! What the hell are you doing here?" They shook hands vigorously. "Sit down and let me buy you a fizz."

"No thanks. I've got a hot little number with me." He motioned towards Stephanie who was being seated at a table near the open windows. "But let's talk after breakfast."

"Sure man, no problem. I ain't goin' nowhere. At least not this morning."

Richards ordered another fizz and ignored George and Stephanie while they ate. They were too far away for him to hear any of their conversation anyway. He wondered if she would acknowledge meeting him, and how he should play it if they were introduced. He was certain she'd say nothing about their encounters, but might indicate they'd met at the bar, or in town. He'd just have to play it by ear and see if or how the issue developed.

Richards was working on his third fizz when Krystonopolis came over and sat down next to him. "Hey man, good to see you. Though I'm surprised as hell to find you down here. I thought you went back to Dee's after Advantage Flight furloughed us."

"Yeah, well I tried that for awhile. Boring. So I said screw it, and came down here. Figured I'd do a little diving. The airlines aren't hiring anyway."

"Yeah that's for sure," George agreed. "But if you hang out here too long you're gonna get rusty real quick, you gotta keep your hand on the stick." George gestured with a grin, grabbing his crotch.

Richards smiled and nodded. "How 'bout yourself, you doing any flying?"

George smiled conspiratorially. "Best deal I've ever fallin' into. There's a group a guys over in Guatemala starting a medivac service. They're buying Skymasters as fast as I can deliver them."

Richards raised an eyebrow. "Really, maybe they need a pilot too."

George looked at Richards in silence as if he were appraising the possibilities. "Maybe, but they're a pretty proud bunch. Besides their getting seed money from the Guatemalan government, the catch is they got to use nationals for all their pilots. Might need an instructor though. You speak Spanish?"

"Un poco."

Krystonopolis shook his head. "Got to be better than that. Sorry man, but let's get together for a couple of drinks." George got up to leave.

Richards scrambled for an opening. He'd already blown the opportunity to get into the camp the easy way but maybe there was another avenue. "I'll go you one better if you got the balls, George."

Krystonopolis stopped and cocked his head to one side smiling.

"I'm divin' the Blue Hole below the eighteenth fathom."

George shook his head. "Been there, done that."

Richards was undeterred, he tried another approach. "It's a night dive, George. You done the Blue Hole at night?"

George smiled, "Nope, doesn't appeal to me." He turned to leave.

Richards called after him. "No guts, no glory."

Krystonopolis stopped and turned back towards Richards. "Just what do you think you're going to find down there?"

"Don't know, that's why I'm going down. One thing for sure, won't be the same thing as in the day."

George grinned. "That's squid country below the eighteenth fathom my friend. Giant squid."

"Like I said, no guts no glory. I'm taking the Mako Flyer tomorrow."

"Who else is going?"

"Just Ian Cay, and he ain't goin' below eighteen."

George smiled cynically, "Neither are you, alone."

Richards raised an eyebrow. "Only one way to find out, George. But whether you make it or not, I will go below eighteen. But that's okay; it's a once in a lifetime shot. And I know an old guy like you don't want to push his luck."

"Fuck you very much, Richards." George shook his head. "Okay asshole, tell Ian to fill a couple more tanks. What time you leaving?"

"Sixteen hundred. That's..."

He turned on his heel, and then walked off with a wave of his hand. "Yeah, yeah I know. Twenty-two hundred Zulu."

###

"Seems damn dangerous to me, Jim. Got to be another way to get next to Krystonopolis." Ian Cay said as he lifted a double fifty rig out of the hold, twin tanks, each with fifty cubic feet of compressed air.

"Nothing like a little fright to make a man get religion, or become your life long friend." Richards replied.

"No doubt, but if it don't work out he's a goner and he might just take you with him. Hard to tell how a man's going to react in a panic situation."

Richards shrugged. "Worse case scenario, I cut him loose and he's history. Then I go in with Steve and his maniacs and bring Matt out the old fashion way."

Ian smiled cynically, "I take it you don't care much for ol' George."

"Back at Advantage Flight he was always trying to bump me off the schedule. Or create some situation that would get me grounded so he could add more students to his roster. Now he's sellin' out to the communists, just to make a few more bucks. What the hell, world ain't gonna miss George in the slightest."

"Well hell, let's just weight him down and dump him over board. Paper work will be same either way."

Richards shook his head. "Too easy. I always like fate to play her part. Seems more sporting. Besides my orders are to use him to get into the Pokomam camp if possible, so that's what I'll try to do. If it don't work out, so be it." He bent down and examined the O-ring on the double fifty rig. "Now how are we going to work this?"

Ian hunkered down and popped the O-ring out with the tip of his knife. He made a very small cut along the edge of the ring then reinserted into the first stage regulator. "That should blow between fifty and eighty feet. There'll still be plenty of air to get to the surface but the blow off noise ought to put a hell of scare into George. Matter of fact, he'll probably wet his pants. It'll vent at full pressure all the way back up.

"Give him your pony bottle and he'll think you're his guardian angel."

Richards nodded. "By the way, George mentioned something about giant squid down there."

Ian chuckled. "Old wives tale. The hole's four hundred and eighty feet deep, based on soundings. No inlet from the sea as far as anyone knows. Nothing down there for squid to eat. I don't know what's down there, but its not likely there are any giant squid."

Richards nodded, relieved.

"Less of course there is an opening." Ian laughed at the look on Richards' face.

###

They anchored the Mako Flyer on the lee side of the Blue Hole. A nearly full moon shone down from a clear starlit sky. Even at night the profound blue of the hole could be discerned. The Blue Hole was a phenomenon, although not the only such place in the world, it was probably the most famous, and the deepest. The second largest barrier reef in the world runs along the east coast of Belize, just north of Lighthouse Reef. A wide perfectly circular hole exists in the reef, approximately one thousand feet in diameter. There was speculation by scientists on how it was created, but little agreement and no proof. It just is and that's enough reason to dive into it, and see what secrets it might hold.

Ian Cay turned on the down lights at the stern of the Mako Flyer. Normally when diving on the reef at night the lights would reach all the way to the bottom illuminating a small section directly below the boat. Not so with the Blue Hole, the lights lit exquisitely clear water down to about forty feet. Beyond the beams of light the abyss yawned back.

George took a deep breath as he stepped back from the railing. "It does look a little less inviting at night. Exactly how far below the eighteenth fathom are you thinking of going?"

Richards was busy getting his gear ready making certain everything was perfectly set up, he didn't want any surprises when the O ring blew. There'd be enough confusion with the unexpected event. He stopped his gear check for a moment and looked over the side of the Mako Flyer. "Oh let's say twenty-one. That'll be a hundred and twenty six feet. Well within scuba range but deep enough to see the demarcation between the critters of day and the critters of the perpetual night that reins below."

George grunted. "You coming down Ian?"

"Not tonight. I've absorbed all the nitrogen I'm allowed today. But hey there's no getting lost here, it's straight down, and straight back up. But pay attention to your gauges. You've got five minutes at that depth, and then you've got to start back up.

"I'll hang extra tanks at twenty-five feet for decompression. No matter what, don't forget to decompress. The nearest chamber is on Cuba, and right now their not too inclined to treat injured Norte Americanos, so stay well within the tables."

They each wore a three-millimeter shorty wet suit. The reef was warm enough to dive in T-shirts and trunks, but the water at one hundred and twenty six feet would be no warmer than seventy degrees, probably cooler. Richards helped George into his back pack making certain his single regulator hose passed over the top of the horse collar flotation device worn in case an assist was needed on the surface. Ian helped Richards into his rig. In addition to the double fifty, he'd attached a single thirty cubic foot emergency tank to the back of the rig. It nestled between the two fifties with its own regulator hose as a back up in case of an emergency. They could buddy breath off of Richards' regulator but passing the damn thing back and fourth while ascending through a hundred feet of water was an iffy proposition at best, better to have a couple of dedicated first and second stage regulators just in case.

Each diver carried a single high-powered underwater light capable of illuminating a narrow corridor in front of them out to about thirty feet. Although the underwater visibility potential was much greater they'd see no further than the beams of their lights.

They synchronized their watches, and verified the depth gauges strapped to their wrists were reading sea level. The new submersible air pressure gauges were still not fully reliable, so they'd agreed on making a timed dive.

Making certain air was flowing freely when they sucked on their regulators, both men stepped to the aft rail of the Mako Flyer. Then descended the twin sea ladders, and slipped quietly into the water. They dropped slowly to twenty-five feet, where they'd pre-planned their weight system to produce neutral buoyancy. There they hovered and checked each other's gear in the bright down lights of the Mako Flyer.

Richards led the way over to the west wall of the hole, its face covered with brightly colored coral polyps undulating in the mild surge created by surface water lapping over the outer reef into the hole.

Richards signaled to descend, George nodded his agreement. They both exhaled and began to slowly fall towards the bottom. At sixty feet they stopped their descent, the wall had changed from coral to rock as the creatures that lived at shallower depths gave way to the submarine basalt that made up the foundation of the deeper wall. There were few fish about them now. Down to about fifty feet there were colorful reef fish, though most were asleep. Now there were moray eels, but few other fish of any size.

They continued on down through ninety feet, where little fauna of any kind seemed to exist. Sun light would only penetrate at noon; it was perpetually twilight the rest of the time. What little they found growing, were scraggly soft corals and tubular sponges mostly yellow in their hand held lights, though some were a deep ruby red. Richards wondered why color existed at all down here. Without artificial light everything would appear gray.

###

In her world it was always dark. She had two iridescent saucer like eyes that saw movement independently the way a bird would see. She did not hunt down here, for there was little to eat. This was one of her sanctuaries, a place to rest and sleep without fear of attack. For even the greatest of predators had enemies, and it was no different for the giant squid. She'd found her sanctuary years before while foraging along the deep-sea trench that runs to the east of the barrier reef. The entrance was narrow, and entry only possible for her because she was able to elongate her soft body, and use her powerful feeding tentacles to pull her self through to the deep lair beyond.

But tonight it was noisy above, strange metallic sounds echoed down to her place of refuge. The sounds were not entirely unknown to her. She'd heard them once or twice before and always they had provided her with an interesting meal. They were tasty creatures, what ever they were, though clearly not from the sea. Tonight she was not particularly hungry as she had eaten well in the past week which is why she'd chosen to sleep in her southern lair for a couple of days. But the noises were irritating. At the very least, she should rise and see if these were the creatures she had dined on before. Perhaps a morsel or two would be acceptable.

###

At one hundred feet, Jim Richards slowed his descent. He looked over at George who signaled everything was okay by making a circle with his thumb and forefinger. Richards wondered why the O-ring had not blown; surely it would go at any minute. Typical, best laid plans and all that. He looked past George's head to the first stage regulator mounted between the double fifties, not even a dribble of

bubbles. Oh well, they may as well complete the dive plan and earn one of the T-Shirts hanging on Ian's wall.

At one hundred and twenty-six feet they stopped their descent. Their regulators had become difficult to breath through. Richards thought about the engineering of the unbalanced single hose regulator, but couldn't help wondering if the increase in resistance wasn't an indication of having used up more air than anticipated. At shallower depths this much resistance would have foretold they were getting low. He looked at his watch; they were still well within their usable limits.

There wasn't much to see down here. A few soft corals even more scraggly and thin then those up higher, but there was one point of interest. The wall curved under creating a shallow cavern. They drifted inside and played their lights about the under surface. Hundreds of beady little eyes reflected the light, like the eyes of a thousand bats in a land cavern. But the eyes belonged to shrimp, and good size ones at that. Of greater interest were the stalactites.

George seemed positively excited; he waived his light from one to another pointing at them as if they'd made a major discovery. Certainly the stalactites gave credence to one theory of origin. It was the collapse of a cave system beneath the ocean's floor that created the Blue Hole.

Jim Richards looked at his watch. Five minutes had elapsed since they'd reached the twenty first fathom. He signaled to George and tapped his watch then pointed upward. George nodded his understanding; they turned to exit the cave.

It felt like soft velvet about his ankle. Jim Richards' first thought was he'd become entangled in kelp, but that was ridiculous. There's no seaweed at one hundred and twenty six feet. He tried to fin upward. Now it was encircling his leg. He felt a sharp prick on the skin of his thigh. He shined his light downward and looked.

What he saw was terrifying. Worse than any nightmare he'd ever faced in paralyzed sleep. At first he thought it was an octopus. For it was pink and soft, but terribly strong. Then he saw the large saucer eyes and parrot like beak with its pink serrated tongue. Absolute panic overtook him. He thrashed and kicked with both legs, trying to get free but barely managed to maintain his depth.

Instinctively, he grabbed for his combat swim knife and slashed at the feeder tentacle that fully encircled his right thigh. The knife cut deep into the soft tentacle and the creature with drew it momentarily.

As Richards swung his light downward to see what it was that ensnared him, George also looked down realizing his dive buddy's beam had changed direction unexpectedly. He stared aghast at the creature below. Clearly it was a giant squid, but it was not gigantic.

Perhaps fifteen feet in length from the tip of its feeding tentacles to the end of its arrow shaped mantle. Nevertheless, large enough to drag Richards to his death, already he was below their maximum depth. He saw Richards slash at the first feeding tentacle; it was withdrawn, immediately another replaced it. The first returned to grasp at Richards tank, and air hose.

George knew about squids, in fact George Krystonopolis knew about a lot of things. He was highly educated, widely read. He was not a criminal because he could do nothing else. He was a criminal because he loved the challenge; he loved to beat the establishment at its own game. And this was truly a worthy adversary.

He did not contemplate the consequences. Already the squid was releasing ink into the water. Soon it and Richards would be obscured, and any chance of rendering assistance would be gone forever, as would Jim Richards.

George finned downward; he drew a ten-inch dive knife from the sheath he wore along his right thigh. He came at the squid from the side, banking on one of two options: His attack would cause it to release Richards in a cloud of ink and retreat to the depths below, or he would blind it, perhaps kill it, as his knife penetrated the soft tissue of the huge round eye.

As he approached he could see intelligence within that eye. It was not the flat, dead sort of eye seen in sharks. Nor was it the kindly eye of wisdom seen in the whale. It was an eye full of malice and hatred. More ink swirled about the squid as George shot towards his target. He aimed both the powerful beam of his light and the tip of his knife at the beast's left eye.

Fortunately for Jim Richards, and for George Krystonopolis, the squid could not stand the brilliance of the light beam. It released Richards and shot downward, leaving a cloud of slimy ink in its wake.

Had George hit the squid and blinded it, her rage would have gone unchecked and she would have scythed them to pieces with hundreds of beak like hooks imbedded in the suction cups of her feeding tentacles. True she may have died, but they would have died with her.

Except for the Sperm whale, there were no creatures in the sea capable of doing her any great damage.

She'd attacked divers before, but they'd only struggled for a little while, usually one would attempt to escape while she killed the first. This was a lesson she would remember. She must be wary around these strange creatures for they did not always run, sometimes they fought together. Like dolphins, they did not all abandon each other. And they had a brilliant source of light that brought blindness and pain to eyes that were meant to see in the abysmal dark.

As George turned out of the inky cloud towards Richards, he heard a loud bang and felt a small concussion near his neck. He could hear air venting loudly from his SCUBA tank. Suddenly he could draw no air through his regulator. Now it was his turn to panic. He was breathless from the sudden exertion to save Jim Richards. He could not stop himself from drawing on the regulator as his lungs reflexively gasped for air though none could be procured.

Richards was still reeling from his near brush with death. The sight of the squid had brought primordial terror to his entire being. He heard the concussive report as the O-ring blew on George's tank, but for a moment he had no idea of what had happened. Just as his brain began to function at some sort of normal conscious level, he saw George rushing towards him reaching for his regulator. Before he could take another breath George had yanked it from his mouth and began to swim upward dragging Richards along, while Richards fumbled for the back up regulator that ran to the pony bottle. It seemed forever but he finally located the hose and followed it to the mouthpiece.

He grabbed George's weight belt and yanked, pulling him down to his level. Then spun him around and stared into his eyes, shaking him and telling him with hand signals to slow down. George understood and soon they were under control, swimming slowly upward.

They looked at their depth gauges at the same time. One hundred and twenty feet. Then they looked at each other; there was no need to signal. They each knew what the other was thinking. How deep had they gone while fighting the squid? They'd been swimming upward in a panic until Richards had gotten them back under control, and they were now only at their maximum planned depth. Would they have enough air to reach their decompression point? They both slowed their breathing, and continued upward.

The down light from the Mako Flyer looked like the moon, far away and dim. They seemed to swim upward forever, and in the back of each of their minds was the same thought: Would the squid return?

Gradually the light grew brighter, and the circle enlarged. At fifty feet, George signaled that Richards' primary tanks had gone dry. They began to buddy breath off the pony bottle. Just as they reached their decompression point, where two

spare tanks hung suspended on a down line from the Mako Flyer, the pony bottle ran dry.

Ian Cay swam down to meet them. Pointing to his watch and depth gauge, asking by signal what had happened. Richards signaled they'd talk on the boat. Then pointed to his maximum depth indicator, and signaled a question as to how long they needed to decompress.

Ian Cay shook his head in disgust at their inability to stay with the dive plan. He indicated he needed to go up to calculate the decompression time. When he returned he brought more tanks and showed them forty minutes on his watch, then signaled they needed to gradually surface a bit more every ten minutes. He left them to contemplate their dive.

By the time they had decompressed they were both hypothermic, shivering uncontrollably. Ian Cay helped them climb the ladders, which they were too weak to do without first removing their dive gear. Finally they managed to crawl on board.

"Jesus, you guys. What the hell were you trying to do?" Ian asked disgustedly, as he wrapped them in wool blankets then poured hot coffee he'd made in the galley while they were decompressing. "I got amateurs that can follow a dive plan better than that."

Richards teeth chattered as he tried to answer, "Thh thh there's a gi giant squid down there."

Ian Cay nodded, "Yeah right. And you got the biggest dick in Belize too."

"No he, he don't." George stuttered from the cold. "I do."

Chapter 7

Jim Richards and George Krystonopolis sat in deep cushioned rattan armchairs on the veranda of the Blue Hole Bar. The quicksilver reflection of a full moon glinted off the midnight blue swells that curled in to caress the sandy shore. Ian Cay had left over an hour ago, finally convinced they'd actually fought off a giant squid the night before.

They nursed their seventh Eighteenth Fathom.

"Shit man, I owe you one," Jim Richards said. His speech somewhat slurred by the alcohol he'd consumed. "You saved my miserable life, George."

"No way, man, we're even. If you hadn't brought that pony bottle along neither of us would've made it back."

Richards shook his head, ashamed of himself for setting up the artificial emergency. If the O-ring had blown a few seconds sooner the squid would have taken them both, well at least himself. "You know something, George? I think that's the most scared shitless I've ever been."

Krystonopolis nodded several times, the alcohol clearly taking its toll on him as well. "You were scared? I'll be dreamin' about that thing for the next six months. Can you imagine? Those bastards grow to eighty feet, maybe more."

Richards nodded his head up and down excessively in his turn. "Yeah man, confirmed eighty foot squid off Newfoundland. Why not a hundred and fifty? Nothing down there to keep 'em from growing as big as they want. The Vikings used to call giant squid Kraken, mythical sea god that pulled down ships. 'Course those old Norse boats were puny. A hundred foot squid take one down, no problem."

George took a sip of his drink. "Far as I'm concerned, ain't no myth."

Richards looked at George. "Why'd you do it? Anyone else would've said adios and took off."

George chuckled. "If I'd thought about it for two seconds, I would have too. But the bastard pissed me off. When I was a kid, I was a skinny little guy. Still am I guess. But back then; every asshole in the neighborhood would push me

around. I'd run home crying to mama, and she'd tell me to go back and stand up for myself. But I was too scared.

"One day this kid, Ralph was his name, still remember him, big fat kid. Used to hit me in the stomach all the time, then laugh about it. Anyway he stole my coat. We didn't have much, Ma and me, and that coat was important. I knew my Ma had to scrape together the money to buy it for me, so I'd have something for winter." George looked off in the distance for a moment, his eyes misty from alcohol and childhood memories.

"The fat kid wouldn't give it back to me, so I grabbed a shovel that was laying on the ground, 'cause the landscapers were working on the flowers around the school, hit that little asshole square on top of his pudgy head. Cold cocked the cocksucker, took my coat back." He gazed at Richards for a moment or two, an intense look in his eyes. "From that day forward something changed in me, I didn't take no more shit from nobody.

"Thing about the squid that pissed me off, he's just like the bully. Come sneaking up with all his arms wavin', take whatever he wants from the little guy, shit, take the little guy too. Course you ain't so little, but you get my point."

"Thing I get, is you saved my butt. Thank you." He clinked George's glass.

"Your welcome." George thought for a moment, getting warmed up to a little alcohol philosophy. "It's like the goddamned IRS. The Fed's like that squid. Got all these arms, agencies they call 'em. But they're all designed to do just one thing, take everything they can from the little guy. And what can the little guy do? Nothing." George took a deep pull at his drink. "That's why I quit working the old fashioned way, you know what I'm sayin'? Payin' half my earnings to Uncle Shithead."

Jim Richards took a sip of his drink. "I hear you, man. But you gotta have a deal going for yourself. I ain't got shit, you know? All these years I been working my butt off trying to build time, get on with the airlines. It ain't gonna happen."

George shook his head back and forth. "Man you don't wanna do that anyway. You got too much talent. I'll tell you something 'cause I'm drunk, and tonight we're thankin' God for still breathing and all that good stuff. But I tell you what, back at Advantage Flight I used to give you all that grief, try to get you bounced outta there. You know why? 'Cause I was scared you'd make me look bad."

Jim Richards looked askance at Krystonopolis.

"Really. Don't look at me that way, I ain't shittin' you. You got talent, Jim. You got balls too. And you're smart. But you gotta make your nut. Money talks,

bullshit walks. You make yourself some real money, you got power. Then you call the shots, everybody listens."

Jim Richards nodded in drunken agreement, but somewhere in the back of his semi-soused mind he saw an opening beginning to develop. If he could only keep his thoughts together long enough to take advantage of it. "Good advice, George. But so far I ain't done too good a job making my nut."

George laughed, and slapped Richards on the back. "Course not 'cause you're too straight. You gotta loosen up, take a flyer now and then."

Jim Richards smiled. "Okay, now I'll tell you something. Since this is show and tell night, and I'm about as snookered as I've ever been. I've always admired you, 'cause you aren't afraid to take a chance. Like what you're doing now. I wouldn't know how to make it work. I mean getting the airplane's no big deal, but getting paid, now that's another story."

George looked hard at Richards for a moment. "Well that's the whole thing, you see. But where you gonna find a three-three-six? And where you gonna get the money to buy it if you do?"

Richards took a deep breath, and looked at George seriously. "I didn't say I'd buy it."

George laughed out loud, and then shook his head derisively. "Man, you wouldn't steal a sandwich if you were starvin' to death. You're too honest, like I said, too straight."

Jim Richards sat up a little taller and looked George squarely in the eye. "You're right George, I wouldn't steal a goddamn sandwich, 'cause if I can't manage to feed myself then I am a pathetic bastard. And I wouldn't rob a bank for a few hundred bucks either. But I'd steal a Skymaster for a hundred grand. The problem isn't the acquisition, it's the sale."

George stared at Richards for several seconds, and then spoke. "You know Jim, I believe I've misjudged you. Would you steal one for fifty grand?"

"Richards kept his eyes locked on George's. "Sixty."

George smiled, "Okay sixty, but you got to deliver it to the customer direct."

"No problem." Richards said, almost too quickly.

"How soon can you procure the aircraft.?"

Jim Richards thought for a moment. "Assuming it's still hangared where it's been for the past six months, next week."

George looked away, took a sip of his drink. "Where's that?" He looked back at Richards when he got no response. Richards just smiled and shook his head.

George shrugged. "Okay. Here's the deal: We get straight tomorrow." George shook his head. "Maybe need one more day." He chuckled. "Then we make our way back to the states separately. I'll give you a number to call when you've procured the aircraft. You'll need to identify yourself with a phrase that I'll teach you before we part company. The person on the other end of the line will give you coordinates to where you'll take the airplane. That's where it gets repapered. From there you'll get coordinates for delivery."

Richards took a long breath through his nose, hoping the oxygen would clear the cobwebs a little. "How will I get my money?"

"Our money. I'll have it right here for you."

Richards nodded, then thought for a few seconds longer than necessary. "And how do I get back from where I deliver this aircraft."

George smiled. "They'll fly you here, you dummy. What do you think? It's only a three-hour flight. Gives 'em a chance to check out the merchandise they're buying. They pay me cash. I pay you. We go get laid. Or at least I do." Then he smiled, magnanimously. And as he did, Jim Richards had a flash back. He'd seen a grin like that on someone else a long time ago. And it was no more sincere then, than it was now.

Richards stuck out his hand and George took it. "You got yourself a deal, George."

"Time to make your nut, Jim. Like I said, money talks, bullshit walks."

####

The paintings from Stephanie arrived in narrow wood crates flown from Belize to Galveston on a cargo flight. Then reloaded onto Braniff Airlines for the final leg to LAX. Marion Milonevec drove his El Dorado around the perimeter of Los Angeles International to the freight terminal located on the south side. He parked outside Braniff's hangar, and then went inside to take delivery of the art.

He opened the crates inside the four-car garage at his home in Beverly Hills. Taped to the back of one of the paintings was a roll of exposed film.

####

Gnady Lebedonev walked down a rolling metal stairway that had been pushed up to the front passenger door of a Pacific Southwest Airlines 727. He crossed the tarmac, then entered concourse B at the San Francisco International Airport. He turned right, and made his way through the crowd waiting at the gate, then strode confidently to the main terminal.

He rode an escalator to the lower parking level, then stepped onto a moving passenger conveyor. A Taxi driver who'd been leaning against the wall reading the sports section of the San Francisco Chronicle put down the newspaper and stepped onto the belt just behind Gnady.

Gnady looked around and glanced down at the shorter man, then nodded once. At the end of the conveyor they stepped off, Gnady slowed his pace to allow the Taxi driver to draw abreast of him. They walked side by side in silence for approximately seventy-five feet. To their right, cut into the concrete wall, was a steel door marked: "Taxi Drivers Only".

Gnady fell in behind the driver, both men passed through the door. They stepped into a closed section of the lower level parking area where numerous cabs awaited their time to join the queue on the Arriving Passengers ramp above. The driver led Gnady over to his cab; they did not speak until they were both safely inside and under way. But when they began to converse, it was entirely in Russian.

"Good day, Comrade Lebedonev. How have you been? We have not seen you up this way for quite sometime."

"It has been awhile. How have you been Boris? Still enjoying the hills of San Francisco?"

The driver laughed. "They can be very interesting for someone used to the flats of Moscow. But I've learned to enjoy them over the past five years. This has been a particularly interesting six months; there has been a lot of diplomatic activity, as well as, the usual conventions. I am able to pick up some very good economic intelligence from the drunken fools that ride with me. The big capitalist businessmen, always looking for a little nookie on the side.

Boris took the Fourth Street off ramp into San Francisco. "That little escort service you set up has certainly proven its value, if an old operative like myself may be so bold as to say."

"Do not defer to me, Boris." Gnady said. "We go back too far. You know how much I respect your opinion. Yes the call girls have done well for us, even if we did get off to a slow start with the loss of our first manager."

Boris glanced in the rearview mirror and grinned. "He was too quick to sample the wares, no?"

Gnady chuckled. "That's true. But we spent so much on him in preparation for the job." Gnady shrugged. "But all's well that ends well, and the main thing is we are not only gathering good intelligence, but finding marks to blackmail. With the Americans' lead in technology, that extra bit of insurance will prove most beneficial."

The taxi pulled up to the front of the St. Francis Hotel, and Gnady climbed out. On the front seat next to the driver, he left an envelope containing his most current field report, as well as, the photographs taken by Stephanie."

####

Jim Richards parked his Mustang on Folsom in San Francisco. He crossed the street, and then headed downhill towards the Embarcadero. The streets were nearly deserted in the old industrial area south of Market. There were few people about on a Sunday afternoon.

He'd driven around aimlessly for a while, pulling over from time to time to see who might turn up. No one did, apparently George had swallowed his story hook, line and sinker. On the other hand, in a deal like this, either he delivered the goods or he didn't, pretty simple. Clearly, George was not concerned about how he acquired the aircraft, as long as he could do so quickly.

Jim Richards surveyed the old Klockar's Blacksmith shop, now an historical building that housed an architectural firm, for five minutes before crossing the street. The door was unlocked.

Inside, he climbed a flight of stairs to an office placed where the old steel loft used to be. As he reached the loft, the first thing he noticed was an old block and tackle hanging from the open rafters. Once used to off load steel, now festooned with decorative ivy. The second thing he noticed was Arnold Batiste sitting at a draftsman's table waiting for him to arrive.

"Afternoon, Jim, you're punctual as always. We received a message from Ian indicating you'd made contact with Krystonopolis, and were in need of a Skymaster."

Jim Richards sat down on a drafting stool across from Batiste. "Exactly, I need to get it down to Belize as soon as possible."

Arnold nodded. "No problem, we've got one lined up for you over at Oakland Aviation. Do you want to buy it, or just go ahead and steal it?"

I'll steal it. Matter of fact that's what I told George I'd do. Hate to disappoint him.

Batiste smiled. "Okay. For the record, the owner can be traced to this firm should that be necessary. He's a friend, an ex G-2 officer, Korea. We'll get him a new one, unless of course you can manage to get it back to us?"

Richards snorted. "Right. And I'll bring back some Belizean dancing girls too."

Arnold smiled. "We've equipped the aircraft with a transponder that can communicate with our satellites. There's an auxiliary battery pack to power it when the engine's shut down. We'll know where you are at all times."

Jim Richards nodded, but the corners of his mouth turned downward. "You mean you'll know where the aircraft is at all times."

"Yes, I suppose that's more accurate. In any case we'll be able to follow your flight path all the way down."

"Good, because George wants me to deliver it directly to the camp. I'm to fly to a destination he'll disclose after I've acquired the aircraft. It will be repainted, renumbered and repapered. From there directly to the training camp, hopefully the one where Matt's located."

Arnold thought for a moment, and then shook his head. "What's to prevent George from wasting you, then taking the aircraft on to the camp himself?"

Jim Richards shrugged. "No guts, no glory. Besides, I know George fairly well. That's not his style; he's actually rather non-violent. His whole thing is snookering people. Anyway, he won't mess with me here in the states, its inefficient from his point of view. My exposure is going to be at the training camp, after I arrive with the aircraft. Same as Matt Harding."

Batiste shook his head disgustedly. "Foolish effort. Wasn't his assignment. He was supposed to surveil Krystonopolis, take us one step closer, that's all."

Jim Richards nodded his understanding. "Yeah, well you know Matt. Always trying to impress his father and catch up to his big brother, Ty."

Batiste looked at Richards for a moment. "Very astute. I think you're quite right. Unfortunately the only thing he's accomplished is to convince his father he doesn't belong in this line of work."

Richards shrugged. "Maybe so. But he's a friend, and if I can get him out of there, I will."

Batiste smiled. "I know you will. But don't go in with your heart on your sleeve, and your head up your ass. It's just as likely he's history, and your flying down the same glide path."

"Maybe." Richards face turned serious for a moment. "Promise me one thing, Arnold. If I do buy it, blow the shit out the assholes."

Batiste nodded once. "You can count on it." He took a breath and let it out slowly. "How soon will you have the coordinates?"

"Right after I make the snatch. George is afraid I'll get cold feet, so he's keeping an out for himself. Won't give me headings or coordinates until he's sure I'm committed, then I've got six hours to make the body shop. It'll be the same deal goin' south, I'm sure. So I'm countin' on this equipment of yours to do the job. I don't want to spend the next two years in Guatemala."

Arnold shook his head slowly. "No. Nor the rest of your life either."

####

At the Russian Embassy, the economic attaché placed the photos, Gnady's report, and his own analysis into the daily pouch. The pouch was carried by courier to New York on Trans World Airlines non-stop from San Francisco. In New York the contents were reviewed by the KGB station chief, encrypted and forwarded by diplomatic pouch to Moscow. Another copy was taken by courier to Toronto, from there direct to Cuba.

####

Over a secure line linking Cuba and Moscow, Col. Vladimir Vaygaukas, Commander, Special Operations Cuba spoke with Klop Agayants, Directorate Plans and Operations, Caribbean Section, KGB, Moscow. Each man had the same set of photos, reports, and orders.

"Colonel, what I am about to tell you is highly classified. We have confirmed your counterpart with GRU, Colonel Anatoly Skorokhodov has been working for the Americans for over five years."

Col. Vaygaukas involuntarily raised both eyebrows. "I find that impossible to believe."

"So did we when it first came across our desk, but we have confirmed this fact beyond a doubt. His operation is not in support of the general uprising we are attempting to spark. In fact, he has developed a splinter group on his own with full support of the Americans."

"What exactly is he doing?"

"Developing a clandestine forward observation and control air wing inside Guatemala."

"Do you want me to arrest him?" Vaygaukas asked, still finding the concept that Anatoly Skorokhodov committed treason difficult to believe.

"No, just keep him under surveillance." Agayants said.

"Even if he tries to leave the island?"

"Yes. We want to monitor his contacts and methods of communication. However, shortly I will have operational orders for you prosecute. We cannot allow this operation to go on with impunity."

Vaygaukas smiled to himself, his troops would welcome the break in their routine of simulated battle training.

"We've identified all the people involved in the conspiracy except one, George Krystonopolis. He appears to be nothing more than a capitalist profiteer. But we're still working on this connection. He may in fact be a decoy." Agayants voice gargled through the secure system, barely understandable.

Col. Vaygaukas shook his head with irritation at the quality of transmission. "And the others?"

"The pilot in the first group of photos is Matt Harding, a CIA analyst according to our asset in Washington. Doesn't usually do field work. His father is John Harding, former O.S.S. operative, long since retired. Though we suspect he carries on in some sort of consulting capacity. I want you to take Matt Harding alive. He'll be a valuable bargaining chip in a future trade."

Vaygaukas shook his head and rolled his eyes upward; glad it wasn't a face-to-face meeting. "We'll do our best, Sir. But you know the vagaries of battle."

"Do whatever it takes, we want him alive."

Col. Vaygaukas scowled to himself. He hated operations that required him to segregate one target for capture while slaughtering the others. Especially when, as he suspected, Moscow would want the raid to look like a clash of opposing factions. "And the other American in the second group of photos?"

Agayants growled, "James A. Richards. He was supposed have been eliminated following the destruction of Silver Cross."

Vaygaukas looked intently at the photos of a young man with a close cropped military haircut. "So this is the elusive Jim Richards. He doesn't look as indestructible as legend would have him."

Agayants barked a short laugh. "Of course not, he's just been lucky. Otherwise, there's no way an amateur like Richards could have eluded, and then eliminated the field team we sent after him."

Vaygaukas spread the photos out before him, six taken at various angles with a purse mounted Kiev 30 camera. "Do you want him alive also?"

"Actually I want him dead, but the Directorate would like him alive. They have several unanswered questions they would like to ask him. Do your best. He is nothing more than a low level operative who happened to stumble into the middle of Silver Cross, and now this little scheme of Anatoly's."

###

Steve Sheffield and Ross McIntyer disembarked from the twin engine Beechcraft at the Puerto Barrios Airport on the east coast of Guatemala. They stepped single file down the narrow stair ramp to the sweltering tarmac, then on across to the single story terminal. Inside the temperature was slightly cooler, but one hell of lot more humid from sweat and exhaled breath, as passengers transited through the complex.

They passed through customs without a hitch, using forged passports and visas describing themselves as archeological researchers on their way to an established dig in Xutilhá.

In keeping with their cover, they carried very little luggage, just two small backpacks containing a change of clothes, personal toiletry items, and reading material appropriate to their supposed occupation. Once outside, they began walking along the road towards the city of Puerto Barrios. They looked out of place in the way all travelers in a foreign country look out of place.

They wore khaki Bermuda length shorts with large button flap pockets on the front. Dark green T-shirts, overlaid by a khaki photographer's vest. To keep the sun off their heads, khaki boony hats. And dark green aviator glasses to keep the glare of sun out of their eyes. On their feet, leather hiking boots with soft padded ankle collars.

They'd walked less than a mile, when an old Land Rover stopped just a ahead of them. As they approached an American got out from the driver's side. He was older than Steve or Ross, and dressed more in the vain of the locals. A white cotton shirt, tucked into loose cotton chinos, no socks, his feet shod in sandals.

"Downtown's a long walk in the sun. Would you boys like a lift?" The driver asked.

Sheffield waited until they were nearly up to the driver before answering. "Thank you. I thought today was going to be easy."

The driver smiled as he motioned with his head for them to walk around to the other side of the car and get in. "No, that was yesterday." Sheffield nodded once to McIntyer who'd hung back at the rear of the Land Rover.

They both looked up and down the road for watchers, none were seen. It was the reason they'd chosen to make contact on the road rather than at the airport where the number of people made discrimination between a watcher and the simply curious impossible.

"My name's Tom Lovell," the driver said as he accelerated to the speed limit. "Company's had me down here for about eight years now."

"I'm Steve, and that's Ross taking up most of the back seat. How much have you been briefed on our mission?"

"Only that I was to put you up in a decent hotel, and give you any assistance you requested."

Steve looked out the window at the shacks of the disenfranchised that bordered the road on the way into town, and then looked back over at Lovell. "We'll need reliable transportation. And a briefing on any rebel activity you're aware of along our route of travel."

Lovell nodded. "No problem. How many people will you need to transport?"

"Four plus ourselves."

"I'll rustle up a van. There are a few Econolines around, or maybe a Vanogen. The rebel question will have to wait until we can sit down with a map and go over your route of travel. Anything else?"

"Personal weapons would be nice." Steve said. "A couple of side arms, and combat knives. Just in case a problem develops before we rendez-vous with the rest of our team."

Lovell nodded and thought for a moment or two before responding. "If you have to pass through a check point, weapons could pose a problem. How 'bout we get you a hunting permit and a couple of shotguns. Maybe with fleshettes. A pair of good hunting knives."

Steve thought for a moment. "Okay, but make the shot guns as short as legally allowed."

"Length isn't dictated." Lovell said. "But its pretty hard to justify a hunting trip with a sawed off ally sweeper stuck in your belt. Better go with a twenty inch pump, and a folding stock."

Tom Lovell turned left down a boulevard, and then pulled over to the curb in front of the El Cid Hotel. "This place doesn't look like much, but it's clean. Typical place students and researchers stay before heading north to the Mayan ruins. I'll need a couple days to put your requisitions together, so enjoy the city and try to keep out of trouble. Any messages you want me to relay?"

"Tell mother we arrived safe, and to have bravo team packed and racked. We'll signal a jump off time when you've put our package together."

Lovell nodded. "Good enough. I'll leave word at the front desk: Time and place for our next meeting. Take care in the mean time, the building across the street intermittently houses a Ruskie observation post. Usually when the desk puke thinks he has something worth watching, or just needs a little extra cash. So try to look as mild mannered as possible, especially Tiny back there." Tom craned his neck around and grinned at McIntyer who just stared back apparently unamused. Lovell looked over at Sheffield. "There's a bar three blocks southeast of here called Loco del Gato. Kind of a mercenary hang out. Be careful if you go in there, it's always watched and filmed."

###

Jim Richards turned the Skymaster from base to final, then lined up on the runway at Cancûn, Mexico. Approaching Cancûn, he was able to see Cozumel and Isla de Mujeres and thought about the adventure that first brought him into

the business of stealth. And he wondered how different his life might have been had the diving expedition he'd signed up for then been legitimate.

He crossed the runway threshold and put the aircraft down in a solid crosswind. No greased landing this time. With crosswinds, control was paramount. One could not afford the luxury of allowing the aircraft to float until it felt like making contact with the runway.

He responded to the tower's instructions and taxied to the south end of the terminal, where transient aircraft were parked. After an interminable wait, he was able to make contact with the proper airport official who oversaw private aircraft activity. Richards did not waste time playing dumb. He made it clear he wanted to pay whatever fees were required up front as he would be leaving the following day, and didn't wish to inconvenience the official. He generously, and graciously, added a gratuity to the fee as a thank you to the official for doing such a fine job of handling the duties any high school student could have done more efficiently back in the states. Still, the bottom line was, he'd to remain on schedule.

Another fee assured the aircraft would be hangared for the night. Richards oversaw the refueling himself, after checking to assure the fuel was fresh and uncontaminated. After securing the aircraft, he caught a taxi to the hotel he'd booked for the night.

The La Playa Hotel was built to resemble a Mayan stepped pyramid, its pink exterior was swathed in hanging *Lineas* growing from each balcony, and trailing to the one below. He'd had no idea of the quality of the accommodations when he'd booked them, but had simply told the Company's travel agent to put him in the newest accommodation on the beach at Cancûn.

Jim Richards adhered to one golden rule, he always traveled first class. Not only were the accommodations more pleasant, but the usual dirt bags hired by the KGB to surveil the opposition stood out like Limburger cheese at a wine tasting party, which made Jim Richards' job of watching his own butt infinitely less cumbersome.

George Krystonopolis had said he'd be contacted in Cancûn, all Richards had to do was check in and make himself comfortable.

The check-in ritual went smoothly, he allowed a bellboy to show him to his room even though his only luggage was a small overnighter. His room overlooked the pool, and out to the azure blue Caribbean beyond.

Richards laid down on the plush carpeting, and then performed a series of stretches before taking a short nap. When he awoke the sun was beginning to set.

He showered, and then dressed in light cotton pants, a short sleeve pull over, and tennis shoes without socks. He called the front desk, checked for messages and requested a six-pack of bottled water from room service. The desk clerk indicated he'd received no messages, so Richards went down to the lobby, and out to the poolside bar where he ordered a Dos Equis.

He'd just finished his first, when a lovely girl sat down next to him. Her fine shoulder length blonde hair framed a pair of sparkling deep blue eyes. She wore a short blue summer dress that flattered her exquisitely long legs. The dress dipped low at the back, less so in the front. Jim Richards caught a glimpse of firm tanned breasts as she repositioned the low backed bar chair a little closer to the bar.

"You look thirsty, may I buy you drink?" He asked, once she'd settled onto the chair.

She looked at him and smiled. "Thank you, I'll have a Pina Colada."

Richards nodded once, then signaled the bartender, gave him the order adding another beer for himself. When the drinks arrived he toasted the girl and clinked her tall glass with the neck of his beer bottle. "Salüd. My name's..."

"Jim Richards. George described you well to me."

"Ah, I see. And all this time I thought the winds of fate had brought you to my side. But fate would not send one so beautiful."

She blushed a little and smiled brilliantly. "You are as charming as he warned me you'd be."

Jim Richards smiled deprecatingly. "And what else has he told you about me?"

"He said I was to give you a message."

Richards raised his eyebrows. "I'm all ears."

She reached into the right hand patch pocket of her dress, then handed Richards a scrap of folded paper. He opened it and found coordinates written in a steady legible hand.

"I have no idea what the numbers mean," she said. "I hope they mean something to you, because if they don't, I can be of no assistance."

Richards looked at the writing for a few seconds, then looked into her eyes and had to catch his breath. He smiled. "They are directions to a place I must go

tomorrow. But the night is young and I'll be dining alone, a prospect I do not relish. Will you join me, it would make the evening pass more easily."

She did not reply immediately, and Richards began to get the sinking feeling a line of rejection was being conjured up. "George is your boyfriend?" He asked tilting his head to one side as he spoke.

She laughed suddenly, a release of pent up nervousness perhaps. "Oh heavens no. He's just a friend. Well only an acquaintance really."

Jim Richards said nothing but continued to look at her directly, waiting for further explanation.

She recrossed her legs, and took a sip of her drink through a long straw. Richards noted the inside of her right thigh was now facing him. He took her unconscious body language as a sign of encouragement.

"How did you meet George?"

She sat up a little straighter in her chair, having slouched a bit as she was sipping her drink. "I work at U.S. Investments, Chia. That's the equivalent of incorporated in the states. C-I-A pronounced chia."

Richards nodded, he recognized the term, and it was how the CIA got its nickname The Company, probably because it did so much business south of the border. "I didn't know George was into stocks and bonds?"

She took another sip of her drink, then looked sideways at him through silky strands of hair that had fallen forward as she drew on her straw. She brushed the strands away from her face. "It's hard to take cash into the United States without customs asking a lot of questions, harder still to keep it in local currency since its value can fluctuate wildly. George, like hundreds of other wealthy businessmen, brings cash to our offices, and we in turn invest it. No questions asked."

"You seem young for an investment banker, but as I have often said: Looks can be deceiving." Richards took a long pull at his beer.

She smiled again. "To be honest with you, I'm just the secretary. My greatest asset is that I speak Spanish fluently, and several other languages as well."

Richards looked duly impressed, but shook his head. "That's definitely not your greatest asset. What's your name?"

"Shannon. And I think I will have dinner with you after all."

Chapter 8

Steve Sheffield and Ross McIntyer strolled into Las Taverna Machacas. Located on the better side of Puerta Barrios, the tavern catered to a crowd cosmopolitan enough not to make them seem out of place.

Their first errand yesterday, after checking into their hotel, had been to secure a change of clothes to fit more easily into the upper working class population. Their second was to reconnoiter the city from their hotel to the harbor. To determine the good, bad, and ugly sections. Like cities everywhere the good and the bad were only a stone's throw away, in one direction or another.

They also checked out Loco del Gato, the bar Tom Lovell had warned them about. They surveyed the surrounding area until they'd located the observation post he'd referred to, then set up one of their own to watch who came and went. Clearly the place was more than simply a watering hole, it appeared to be a recruitment center. At one point someone entered the front door, only to be thrown out the back a few minutes later. He lay quietly on the ground for a while, until able to get up and hobble off. Apparently not everyone met the standards required.

Now at the Machacas Tavern, they sat at a table near an open window that looked out across the boulevard toward the harbor of Puerto Barrios. Ships from many nations were anchored there, including one from the United States. Steve thought about a recon mission he'd made to Havana two years before. That harbor was also filled with many ships, but most of those flew the hammer and sickle.

They were about half way through their beer when Tom Lovell came in through the back door. He did not walk directly over to their table, but rather stepped to the end of the bar and took a stool, then ordered a beer. After a few minutes, he took a book of matches from an ashtray and attempted to slip them into his pocket, but missed, they fell to the floor. Steve had finished his beer; he got up to order another one, and politely bent down to retrieve the matches. The contact sign was standard operating procedure. Had the meeting been inopportune, the matches would have successfully dropped into Lovell's pocket.

Steve Sheffield handed the matchbook to Lovell, as he stepped up to the bar. "You dropped these." He said in Spanish.

"Thank you. I'm getting clumsy in my old age."

They began to chat about current events, then sports, soon Steve invited Tom Lovell to join he and Ross at their table. There they carried on about sports until everyone within earshot ignored them. When the moment was right, Lovell segued into the topic he'd come to discuss.

"You seem to attract an unseemly crowd, my friends. There's an unusual level of mercenary activity in the area. Something's brewing, but I've no solid information as yet." He took a pull at his beer. "What's the nature of your assignment?"

"Rescue." Steve answered. "We're to assist in retrieval of an asset that got in a little too deep. What can you tell us about the Pokomam?"

Tom Lovell looked around to see if anyone had overheard the name. "Careful, that's a superstitious word among the locals." He kept his voice low. "They're mostly disenchanted students, and others, who want to split the country at the Cahabon River. They claim to be direct descendants of the Toltec-Mayans who ruled the area around Guatemala City, before it was taken by invading Spanish conquistadors. There's a lot of ritual and superstition surrounding the Pokomam tribe. But the locals believe one day a descendent of the last tribal king will arise to unite all of Guatemala."

Lovell took another pull at his beer; his gaze darted quickly about the room. "Mostly they're propped up by capital from the Soviets, via Fidel. Cuban field teams are working with the dissidents in an attempt to pull together some sort of guerrilla force with which to harass the Guatemalan government."

"And Guatemala takes no action?" Ross asked.

Lovell shook his head. "Perhaps a wise move. Trying to pursue them into the mountains is futile. They've won the hearts of local peasants who see in these young rebels a glimmer of hope their country will once again attain the dignity of the early Maya." He shrugged his shoulders. "Of course, that's the Maya of their fables. Not the Maya who had so little knowledge of crop rotation they planted crops to extinction. Then moved on to another location, and another, until the soil could no longer produce food. Then tried to regain the favor of their Gods by sacrificing the best of their offspring, until there was nothing left with which to build a lasting civilization."

"You are a cynic." Steve said.

Tom Lovell took a long pull at his beer. "Actually I'm a pragmatist. The Pokomam represent no real threat, unless they actually succeed in stirring up the

entire population of Guatemala against the present government. But they do offer a foothold for Fidel."

"Getting back to the mercenaries, who's buying their time?" Steve asked.

Lovell shook his head. "I'm not sure. Possibly Cuba. I sent an asset in yesterday to see what he might learn, he was tossed out on his ear, literally." McIntyer and Sheffield glanced at each other. "Poor bastard's gonna have a damn sore set of cajones for a week or two. Good job he was a local, if he'd been one of us he'd have lost them altogether."

"Sounds like your cover's blown, my friend," offered Steve.

Lovell laughed. "What cover. You don't think I go to all these pains to avoid observation all the time, do you? It's never worked that way for a resident asset, and it never will. Maybe for you guys, in and out. But when you live in a place, it's only a matter of time 'til you're made. What bothers me is how my man was treated."

Ross nodded his head. "No shit, José. Bothers me too. Maybe we're just strokin' ourselves with all this sneakin' and peekin', while the opposition is laughing up their sleeves."

Lovell scowled at McIntyer. "You're missing my point. I know who's watching me. I can avoid them when I need to for short periods of time, like tonight for instance. Besides, do you think the only people who visit me are spooks? I've got a nice little import business; sales reps come down here all the time.

"You come you go, nobody cares. You come and hang around, you visit the wrong places, that's of interest." He shook his head and sighed. "My concern is that the people directing this most recent merc recruitment effort may not in fact be Cuban. It may be KGB is running the show themselves."

Tom Lovell glanced around the bar before continuing. "Granted their using locals for ferrets, which is why my man got made. Nothing less than I expected, but I figured he'd hang back for a while, pick up some scuttlebutt before they politely asked him to hit the road. That's the way we do things here, works better for everyone. But not this time. My man walked in the front door, and flew out the back."

Sheffield frowned. "Doesn't bode well for our mission in any case. We don't need to be sneakin' and peekin' through the woods to grandma's house, only run into the KGB's knew contingent of boy scouts."

Tom Lovell nodded in agreement. Sheffield sighed, and then downed the rest of his beer. "No use crying about it. Can you survey them and get word up to our control when they're on the move?"

Lovell nodded. "I've already started the process. We keep a sterile back up unit in country. It's a use once and replace team. They're already swinging into action. Monitoring overt progress is a no brainer. We'll try another penetration as well. But not before the end of this week."

Sheffield took a deep breath, and thought for a moment. "Good enough. Did you secure transportation?"

"Yes. A Ford Econoline van, with four students heading north to the ruins at Xutilha."

"Oh terrific," Ross groused. "And what do we do when we reach our rendezvous, shoot the juvies, then carry on?"

Lovell shook his head. "For a guy the size of King Cong, you are a pessimist, you know? I've got a bus waiting at El Relleno, where you'll pull a spark wire and have a breakdown." Lovell raised his hands in mock surrender. "Try to stay calm, Ross. I meant the van would break down. But, by golly, there's this bus. And for a small fee, which you'll be happy to pay, it'll take the kiddies the rest of the way."

Steve Sheffield frowned. "How does this help us? The last thing we need is a half dozen, dope smokin', draft dodgers to brighten up our drive."

Lovell wagged his head back and forth. "I beg to differ, they're just what the doctor ordered. You see, these kids are very well liked around here because they bring the kind of expertise the country needs to uncover the secrets of the Maya. Consequently, they're completely ignored by the police, mercs, and bandits. Well most of the bandits anyway. Main point is, you won't have any trouble making your rendezvous, and no one's gonna think anything about it.

"On the other hand, you two try to drive that van north by yourselves. Everyone's gonna wonder who the hell you are? Where'd you get the money to spring for a van, and make the drive without lots of friends to split the costs? How come you know your way around so well without someone who's been to the dig before to guide you? See my point?"

Steve nodded, "Unfortunately, yes. Just don't tell me I gotta listen to all the hell no we won't go and make love not war, shit."

Lovell chuckled. "Naw, these are a bunch of nerds solidly into old pottery and stepped pyramids. I can assure you nobody wants them in any kind combat unit, least of all yours."

"Got that right," Ross grunted.

"So where do we meet up with these kids?" Steve asked.

"Right in front of your hotel, tomorrow morning, oh eight hundred sharp. The rental company will deliver the van. I'll make sure they ask for you."

Steve nodded. "Okay, so what's my explanation to the peace niks: I'm Rockefeller's long lost son?"

Lovell smiled. "Something like that." He reached into the small portfolio he was carrying and extracted an envelope. Read this and memorize it, then just keep it in your luggage. It explains you're on a grant from the National Endowment of Historical Sites. That will be sufficient to explain the van to the kiddies, if your luggage is searched at a check point it'll suffice there too."

"You mentioned bandits." Ross asked in a serious tone.

"Shouldn't be a problem. At least not as far north Chocchoc. Beyond that point, it gets a little wilder."

Steve looked at Tom Lovell for a moment. "I take it the hunting gig is off."

Lovell nodded. "Fraid so, but you'll find I had a little parcel delivered to your room. Couple of nice field knives. The cover will get you linked up with the rest of your team, but I wouldn't screw around much after that. Not if these new mercenaries are heading north, as I suspect.

####

Jim Richards awoke alone. He'd tried to entice Shannon to spend the night after an evening of excellent food, conversation, and cheek to cheek dancing, but was unsuccessful. He'd not expected he would be, she was not the type to leap into the sack on a first date. Just as well, it would have only complicated matters. Perhaps there would be time after the assignment. They shared many mutual interests, not to mention exceptional body chemistry.

He stretched all of his muscle groups then rolled out of bed, the sun was just rising. It was still cool enough for an early morning run. He looked out across the ocean from the terrace of his room, just peeking over the horizon were the tops of cumulus clouds. He wondered if a frontal system might be headed his way.

He took the stairs to ground level, jogged along the beach for thirty minutes, then returned to his room for a cool shower.

Jim Richards ordered breakfast from room service. Fresh fruit, yogurt, a basket of muffins. He'd started a prescription drug containing an antibiotic formulated to combat the intestinal bacteria he'd encounter along his route of travel. It required three days to reach prophylactic effect, today was the third day. The telephone rang just as he was finishing breakfast. He glanced at his watch, 08:30, and then picked up the receiver. "Hello."

"Good morning Mr. Richards." He smiled, immediately recognizing her voice. "I thought I'd give you a wake up call, but you sound as if you were up with the sun."

"Actually, I haven't slept a wink all night, just thinking of you."

She laughed. "I'll bet. When do you leave?"

"Soon."

"I had a wonderful time last night, thank you. I don't suppose you'll be coming by this way again?"

Richards did not hesitate. "I'll make a point of it."

"I shouldn't say this, I mean he's one of our best clients, but I suspect George's business is not completely on the level. Do be careful."

Richards smiled. "I will."

She was silent for a moment. "Well I guess I'd better go. I just wanted to say thank you and.. I hope I see you again."

"Tell you what, it's a definite date. If all goes well, I'll be calling you in ten days."

Her call had reminded him of something he should have done first thing this morning. He crossed the room to the small rucksack he'd brought with him. From inside a zippered compartment he removed a Naugahide case that contained what appeared to be an electric razor and a universal outlet adapter. He removed the blade head, underneath was a small meter that measured radio frequency output. George would not have known ahead of time in which room Richards would be placed, but Shannon was a lovely diversion allowing plenty of time to place bugs

the night before, if George was in the area. Very carefully, Jim Richards made his way around the room looking for voice transmitters. He found none.

Next, Richards picked up the adapter, it had an output side and an input side. From the zippered case, hidden behind the lining, he extracted two wires. One allowed the telephone receiver cord to be connected. The other ran into the telephone base. Before connecting these two wires, he rang the front desk and placed a long distance call to Arnold Batiste in San Francisco. His secretary answered the phone.

"Arnie's Wines and Liquors, Inc. how may I help you."

"Jim Richards here, may I speak to Mr. Batiste?"

This request resulted in several events at the other end of the line. Arnold's secretary immediately put Richards on hold. She then rerouted the call into a secure system that constantly rotated the incoming transmission through a series of trunk lines making it impossible to trace, as well as scrambling the outgoing transmission. Jim Richards used the few minutes it took to establish a secure link to connect the portable descrambler. When Arnold Batiste finally answered the phone, he sounded like Donald Duck on acid but at least they could communicate. Richards wondered when they'd finally perfect a system that retained voice integrity.

"Go ahead, Jim. Can you understand me?"

"Yes, Sir." Richards lisped, like Sylvestre the cat.

"Terrific. I take it your having a high old time down there. You get laid last night?"

"You been peekin' at me again? You pervert." Richards said jovially.

Arnold chuckled, it sounded like a five speed transmission coming apart. "You're incorrigible. What've you got for me?"

"Ever heard of a guy name Roland Pollock?"

"Can't say as I have. Who is he?"

"Runs an investment firm down here called U.S. Investments."

"Oh yes, we've been winking, and looking the other way on that one for quite sometime. Brings in a lot of loose capital."

"Yeah, well George is laundering his earnings through there."

"Really? Probably a mistake, Pollock's into some pretty shaky stuff, and when it all comes down he'll be the only one that comes out smelling like a rose."

Richards nibbled at a muffin. "Serves him right. Listen, I don't want to tell you how to run your show but..."

"Oh bullshit, you'd tell the President of the United States how to run the show if you got the chance."

"Well of course, who wouldn't? Anyway, why don't you do a real close audit on U.S. Investments? But do me a favor don't nail the secretary."

Batiste laughed. "Okay hotshot, we'll leave that to you. You got the coordinates?"

Richards read them to Arnold Batiste.

"Got it. Now listen don't try any heroics when you get there. Steve is on his way. He links up with Bravo squad tomorrow night, then recons straight to your location via the transponder signal."

"Sounds too good to be true, but I'll keep a good thought anyway. Just remember getting rid of me is like trying to beat the common cold, it just keeps coming back."

"Take care, Jim. It gets serious from here on out."

"I hear you, Arnold. Ciao."

"Ciao, Richards."

####

The route north from Puerto Barrios was a decent two-lane asphalt road. Steve handled the driving, heading east out of the city along Highway 9 until they reached, La Ruidosa. There they all took a break.

The students were just as Lovell had advertised, except one. She was older than the rest, with a masters degree in anthropology, working on her doctorate.

She had brown hair cut short, a no nonsense length. And dark green eyes that were not easily charmed, or fooled. She was not beautiful, but there was an attractiveness about her that Steve Sheffield could not ignore. She was tall with

strong well shaped legs that looked good in hiking shorts, and were clearly used to climbing up and down the steep pyramids she would soon be visiting.

Her upper body was muscular as well, more so than most women, and Steve wondered if she lifted weights to train for the equipment she must have to carry on digs in remote places. She had large breasts, but they were in proportion to the rest of her well-toned body. Sheffield could not help wishing they were going to the same place, and for the same reason.

"So what takes you to Xutilha?" She asked.

He smiled and looked down at the ground. It's going to be tough trying to fake this, he thought, the eyes are too honest, too discerning. He looked up again. "I've always wanted to see Mayan ruins, but it's hard to get a tourist visa. Researcher, well that's okay."

She nodded. "If an institute will vouch for your validity."

"Oh well, that's not as hard as it seems. Just adds to the cost of the trip."

She laughed. "So we're your cover, is that it?"

"Cover?" Steve asked, as if the word made no sense to him in the context given.

"Excuse, alibi. You know, if you're seen with us you're less likely to get asked questions you can't answer."

Steve's eyes went wide. "Oh... except by beautiful anthropology researchers that is."

She smiled and cocked her head to one side. "I don't think anyone has ever called me beautiful. Big is usually the adjective most frequently used."

Steve stepped close to her, his six foot two frame towered a good four inches above her, she looked up into his dark eyes. "I guess it's all in your perspective." He said.

Just then one of the students came up to them, a tall thin fellow with a sallow complexion, and wiry arms. "Sylvia, would you settle a dispute for us? It seems Ben..." They turned away and walked towards the other two students who were grouped around an urn that stood outside the cantina where they'd stopped to take a break. He watched her walk away, a slight sway in her walk. Ross stepped up beside him.

"The answer is yes, but we don't have the time."

Steve glanced up at Ross. "I know. I may have to take up anthropology one of these days."

Ross smiled and nodded. "I loosened one of the spark plug wires while everyone was inside the Cantina. It should pop off in few miles and start running rough. By the time we get to El Relleno they'll be happy to take the bus."

###

Jim Richards stared gloomily at the towering cumulus clouds on the horizon. They were not the puffy little fellows that frequently came up in the tropics then faded away later in the day. This was a serious frontal system, and if he didn't leave soon, he'd be stuck at least another day, which would throw the timing of the rescue off entirely.

One major problem with the rescue plan, he had no way of communicating with Bravo squad except through Arnold Batiste, and Batiste had no way of reaching them once they began to recon towards the rebel camp. Richards picked up the telephone receiver, and then made another long distance call. This one to the FAA Flight Service Center in Brownsville, Texas. A weather briefer answered after several rings. "Brownsville Flight Service how can we help you."

"Cessna November 166 Hotel Sierra." Richards gave the new numbers of his aircraft. "I'm planning a VFR flight from Cancún, Mexico to Placentia, Belize. Can you do me a favor and take a look at what's brewing along my route. I'm looking at a line of towering Qs to the southeast at this moment."

"Hold one, while I check that sector." The controller put Richards on hold for a couple of minutes. "Okay, let's see now. Nope it doesn't look good for VFR flight past fourteen hundred local time. Those clouds you're looking at are the leading edge of hurricane Emile. Sustained winds in excess of 80 miles per hour. Expected to increase in strength through out the day.

"If it continues on its present course, it's likely to make landfall just south of Placentia by twenty-four hundred local time. You'll be bucking tremendous headwinds after twelve hundred local, with ceiling estimated at three thousand feet. Winds one two zero at five zero and increasing, moderate to severe turbulence. Estimated visibilities one to three miles in heavy rain. Recommend you park that bird of yours somewhere secure, and stay where you are, or turn around and bring it home until this thing passes."

"Thank you Flight Service, that's good advice."

Jim Richards hung up the telephone. He looked out at the horizon, it seemed as if the clouds had grown taller, which meant they'd moved closer while he was on the telephone. He reached into his flight bag and pulled out a chart of the Yucatan, then matched it up with one of Belize and Guatemala. He'd planned to follow the coast down to Belize City, land and refuel. Then go on to the camp. He now plotted a more direct course, measured off the distance and checked the estimated flight time. Assuming the winds were as predicted, he could put the aircraft down on the rebel strip at 15:00 that afternoon.

However, if the ceiling was also as predicted, he'd be flying at tree top level the last one hundred miles of his flight with a fifty not tail wind. His ground speed would be in excess of two hundred knots. Good for getting there fast, bad for picking out airfields in the middle of a tropical down pour.

At the airport he was surprised to find his aircraft parked out on the ramp, ready to go. He'd called ahead and explained the whether situation to the official, but that was only in the hope of expediting matters a little. Apparently his largess the night before had been remembered. He tipped the official again on the way out to his plane. Then performed a thorough pre-flight.

Inside the cockpit he fired up the rear engine, then the front. Ran an instrument check as he taxied. Did a quick run up at the take off end of the runway, and then called the tower for clearance to take off.

As he climbed into the clear blue-sky overhead, he looked to his left; the clouds were even more ominous from altitude. Slate gray towers of cumulonimbus clouds stretched from horizon to horizon. Ahead of the front the sky was clear, and the water below a deep lapis blue. Under the clouds it was as if night had fallen. A curtain of rain fell to the dark water, but from this distance it looked like an opaque wall of silver gray mist. Here and there, Richards could detect flashes of lightning.

He verified his ground speed between his first and second checkpoints, clearly a headwind. But it was not yet as strong as predicted, or perhaps it was because he was not flying directly into it. As the flight progressed he found himself having to crab more into the crosswind in order to stay on course. And he noted that both his fuel and ground speed were dropping steadily.

Forty-five minutes out of Belize City, he began to pick up turbulence. An occasional bump at first, but as the flight progressed so did the turbulence, until anything not tied down in the cockpit began to jump around. His kneeboard slipped to one side. He found he had to constantly return it to the horizontal position in order to read his chart. Finally, he took it off altogether and tossed it

over his shoulder onto the back seat. He slipped the chart under his right thigh where he could refer to it, as he needed.

By the time he had Belize City in sight, the frontal system appeared less than twenty-five miles away, beyond he could just make out the higher clouds of the hurricane Emile.

He called the tower at Belize Airport. It was gratifying to hear the response in English. With all the turbulence and noise in the cockpit, he was happy he'd not have to further tax his concentration by trying to figure out what the controller was saying.

He landed in a fifteen-degree crosswind, thirty knots gusting to forty. Then kept his speed up until he was able to turn into the wind and taxi over to the fixed base operator, where he'd be able to refuel for the final leg of his trip.

He entered the flight office and quickly got through the necessary port of entry paperwork. Then headed over to the weather briefing office, while customs officials took a perfunctory look at his aircraft.

One man who appeared to be quite harried manned the weather office. Jim Richards glanced at his watch; 11:30 he looked outside, scattered clouds were rapidly drifting over the airport. It would soon be overcast.

The office was small, furnished in metal, painted government green. There were two desks facing each other, each with three telephones. Flight navigation charts were pinned to the walls, their edges overlapped to create one huge map of Belize, Guatemala, Mexico and the Caribbean out to one hundred nautical miles. At the eastern edge of the collaged chart was the island of Cuba.

The weather briefer hung up the receiver then swiveled his chair around to look at Richards. He ignored a light that began to flash on another telephone, and pushed himself up out of his chair, then stepped over to a wooden counter that stood between he and Jim Richards. "And what can I do for you," he asked in a distinctly British accent. "Don't tell me you plan to try and out fly this thing."

Richards smiled. "Fraid I've no choice. I'm heading inland to Poptun, Guatemala. What's the latest on hurricane Emile?"

The briefer shook his head. "Trust me on this one, you can't out run this storm. It's pushing warm humid air in front of it like a bulldozer. When that air mass hits that Maya Mountains, orographic lift is going to turn it into an instant cloud mass. You'll have ceilings starting at four hundred meters. At your back will be the main mass of the storm packing eighty mile an hour winds with severe turbulence.

Your aircraft would be destroyed. Forget it, stay on the ground and ride this one out."

Jim Richards shook his head. "I've got to push on. How about Sosela, ride out the storm there then fly north to Poptun tomorrow?"

The briefer scowled at Richards. "Possible, but very dicey. Step over here to the map."

Richards walked around the end of the counter and followed the briefer over to the charts pinned to the wall.

The weather briefer ran his finger along a route from Belize City to Sosela. "You'll have to stay just east of these foothills. As you turn more westerly you'll pick up a significant tail wind, certainly in excess of forty-five knots. That should get to your destination just ahead of the main storm mass. But you're still going to have to contend with turbulence along this whole route, which means keeping your airspeed down in the maneuvering range. You ever flown into Sosela before?"

Richards shook his head. "Nope."

The briefer did a double take, and then looked at Richards as if he were daft, or just plain stupid. "Okay, I still recommend you ride it out. But if you're going to go ahead, remember you'll have to land at Sosela. If for any reason the airport is closed, or you can't find it, there'll be no time to search for an alternate. Just put down where ever you can.

"The air strip is here," the briefer pointed to a bend in the Chiyú River. "You'll be flying up this river valley. The river takes two tight switch back turns as it runs through a deep sheer walled gorge. The sides of the gorge are 300 meters, about 1500 feet as you yanks figure things. If you're lucky you'll be able to stay above the gorge. Just past the ravine is a relatively wide bend in the river; the airstrip sits on a plateau next to the river at the north end of the bend.

"The standard approach is to over fly the air strip and head west. The river appears to split just past the airstrip; actually the fork is a confluence of the Semanazana and the Chiyú. You fly about a mile north of the split, turn around and line up on the V formed by the two rivers. That'll bring you straight in on the runway heading.

"Normally, if you can't get into Sosela, you'd be able to continue on to a strip just south of the highway about twenty-five kilometers west, but that won't be possible with the speed of this storm. That alternate will be socked in solid. You

miss Sosela, you're dead meat if you don't land immediately. Best shot will be the highway itself, near Finca Sacuitz."

Richards looked carefully at the charts; retracing with his own finger the route the briefer had shown him. Then he nodded. "Good enough. I'd better get going, the longer I delay the tougher it's going to be." Richards turned and headed for the door.

The briefer shook his head, but called out to Richards. "Have a safe flight, Yank, or at least a lucky one.

Chapter 9

The nuclear submarine lay motionless at a depth of seventy feet, just past Punta Manabique, in the Bay of Amatique, well inside the ferry route that ran from Punta Gorda, Belize to Puerto Barrios, Guatemala. The sonar operator listened to sparse boat traffic on the surface.

Captain Gregory Young looked at his wristwatch, 21:00 hours. The last ferry from Punta Gorda had passed overhead a half hour before. He gave the order to bring the submarine to periscope depth. Silently the black leviathan rose to a depth of thirty feet.

Captain Young used the night periscope to search a 360-degree area around the boat. Their radio antenna had been floated to the surface over an hour before, and had scanned all known military channels for unusual traffic, any hint they might have been detected. All was quiet. Captain Young spoke softly into the intercom, linked directly to the forward air lock where SEAL squad Bravo waited for orders to launch. "All right gentleman, we're all clear topside. I'll bring the boat to the surface; you have five minutes to disembark. Good hunting."

The seas topside was moderate. Long period swells portended of a storm to come. They'd received a weather briefing at 18:00 hours, and were aware hurricane Emile was on its way, and expected to make landfall tomorrow afternoon. But tonight was calm and moonless.

Bob Spencer, Frank Prescott, Dave Wilcox and Vince Morris scampered up the hatchway and along the deck to begin the process of deploying an inflatable swimmer delivery vehicle stored in a watertight locker, secured to the deck. They worked in practiced unison, and quickly loaded and launched the boat. Vince started a fifteen horse sonically muffled outboard motor, then pulled away from the black submarine as it silently sank below the surface of the bay. Approximately a mile and a half to their southwest were the lights of Livingston, at the mouth of El Gulfette, a narrow body of water that led directly to Lago de Izabel. At the eastern end of Lago Izabel was the town of El Relleno.

###

Steve Sheffield and Ross McIntyer parked the Econoline in a stand of trees amongst a dense growth of tropical ground plants. They moved from the van to a

point where they could observe the shoreline of Dulce, the narrow channel El Gulfette became just before reaching Lago Izabel. Near the water's edge Steve placed a low powered transmitter that sent a narrow band signal, tagged to five random alternating frequencies. Bravo squad would be able to home in on the signal using a scanning receiver slaved to an ADF locator.

At 05:30 Steve heard the soft rustle of grass, he turned in the direction of the sound. Suddenly Vince Morris appeared before him with a big smile on his green camouflaged face, he seemed to have grown out of the very ground.

"Morning Steve."

"Morning Torque. Where are the others?"

Frank's waking Mac up who's apparently even more asleep than you were. Bob and Dave are around the bend waiting for the all clear."

Steve grinned, "Hell I knew you were about, just didn't want to upset your ego by calling out: Hey Vinnie time for breakfast."

"Yeah, right. That's what you always say... afterwards."

As they bantered back and forth in whispers, Dave Wilcox and Bob Spencer beached the inflatable. Then with help from the rest of the team carried it silently into the foliage beneath the trees. They unloaded the boat, and then carefully covered it with camouflage netting and shrubbery. It would be left as a backup escape option.

They moved farther into the forest for a briefing, though they kept the van in sight just in case someone happened along. It was unlikely; they were well away from the shore and local footpaths.

"So far so good, " Sheffield said. "We'll need to maintain cover until we get well inland. Bob do you have our documentation?"

"Roger that. We're under an archeological visa. He passed ID packets over to Steve and Ross. These will match up to the material the Company's asset in Puerto Barrios gave you. All our gear is stored in false bottom crates, with archeological tools, charts and other paraphernalia on top. It'll pass a cursory inspection. Have you had any problems thus far?"

"None," Steve replied. "We observed a number of mercenaries in Puerto Barrios. However, to this point the trip's gone fine." He pulled a chart from one of the zippered pockets in his photographer's vest. Ross shined a small red light onto the chart as Steve spoke to the squad. "We came north with four student

researchers as far as El Relleno. After faking engine trouble we put them on a rented bus Tom Lovell had arranged for.

"From here." He pointed to El Relleno. "We'll drive north along the main highway to Modesto Mendez then bang a left west towards Sosela. We'll stash the van east of Gracias a Dios and cross the river, then make our way west until we reach the rebel camp. We should be able to pick up Jim Richards' transponder from the elevations on the north side of the river."

"Looks like rugged terrain between Dios and the camp." Vince said, pointing to the chart.

Steve nodded. "Got that right, but it's passable along foot trails under the canopy. Has anyone heard from Jim Richards?"

"No but we got word from Arnold Batiste," Bob Spencer replied. Richards will depart Cancun this morning. Unfortunately, we've got a hurricane moving on shore by fifteen hundred this afternoon. If it dumps inland, the river could prove unfordable."

Steve sighed. "Well we're only seventy kilometers from our crossing point. Should be no problem getting there before flood crest. But we need to observe the local customs. No one moves on the highway at night, 'cept of course the bad guys, bandits and so forth. And we don't need to clean anyone's clock unnecessarily. So we'll rest up here until 0-nine-thirty, then ease on back to the highway just north of El Relleno. That should put us in Modesto by eleven hundred or so. From there its about two hours to our crossing point. Let's hope the storm isn't in any hurry to be on time."

###

Jim Richards flew south along the foothills of the Maya Mountains. A velvet canopy of jungle flowed beneath his aircraft interrupted here and there by rivers and lakes, or Mayan ruins. He'd passed over Nim Li Punit, its tall sculpted monoliths swept below his aircraft like a cluster of gigantic fence posts.

The air rough, exactly as predicted. Clouds formed as warm, humid air raced up the slopes of the Mayas, then precipitated on the upper elevations. A microclimate of rising moist thermals and cold falling shears. The ceiling held at three thousand feet. The terrain below varied from one thousand to fifteen hundred, leaving Jim Richards roughly 800 feet of clear air. Within that space, constant turbulence pummeled the aircraft.

Ahead Richards was just able to identify the outline of a karst spur that thrust into the valley, south of another Maya archeological site, Pusilhá. He banked his

aircraft slightly to the left setting up a heading designed to bring him to the junction of the main north-south highway at Modesto Mendez in Guatemala. There he would turn right and follow the river west until he found the Sosela airfield.

The storm seemed to be closing in faster than anticipated. He checked his watch, high noon, he should still be a couple hours ahead of the hurricane but there was no way of telling with certainty. He'd tuned his ADF receiver to a radio station in Belize City to monitor the local weather reports but as he progressed the signal became weaker until it was unintelligible.

Now he was heading on dead reckoning, an appropriately named method of navigation, especially in conditions like these. Below the aircraft was green jungle, and blue-green marsh. He passed a karst spur that rose to 1800 feet, then cranked in a little more left wind correction as cross winds began to take him close to the rising terrain, increasing his exposure to turbulence.

Twelve-thirty, military or civilian time it read the same. The ceiling had lowered; he was now flying at five hundred feet above the terrain. The heights to his right completely obscured. No land marks. Only a compass heading to maintain, and the need to stay away from the lowering clouds. He could hear Dee Thurmond inside his head. "Never force a flight. If the weather deteriorates, put it down and wait it out. There are no old, bold pilots."

Suddenly a river appeared. Flying this low with slant visibility down to maybe three miles, there wasn't much time to identify checkpoints. He looked to his left; a mangrove swamp seemed to run on forever. He glanced down at the chart sticking out from under his right thigh, must be the Sarstoon River, or Chiyû, as it was called above Sosela. Richards banked hard right, then leveled out over the river. He then eased up to eight hundred feet, flying just below the ceiling.

Forward visibility grew worse as he headed west up the river. Ahead he saw the junction he'd been looking for, slightly to the south a town. He glanced at the chart, Modesto Mendez. He was on course.

He eased back down to 500 feet threading the needle through a riverine pass, with shear walls on either side rising to at least fifteen hundred feet. His ground speed picked up as the wind fell onto his tail.

As he over flew the road junction he looked down at the ground, there were several vehicles stopped at the junction. Some appeared to be military. A bright yellow school bus stood out like a neon sign. The people below looked up.

Just past the junction a white van appeared to have pulled off the road hurriedly, it was parked at an odd angle. He noted two people crouched on high ground above the road where the van had stopped.

As Jim Richards looked forward to begin his race through the gorge, his heart dropped to his stomach, and fear rose in his throat. One moment he saw a silver rushing river, sprinkled here and there with white rapids and sheer walls to the north and south, the next he was inside a rain cloud with zero visibility.

Soon the gorge would turn right, then left, with Sosela at its west end. At a ground speed of two hundred miles per hour, less than four minutes remained before he'd impact the northwest wall, unless, he drifted right in which case he'd impact a little sooner.

###

Steve Sheffield stood watch, while the rest of Bravo squad slept covered with mosquito netting from head to toe. The bug repellent helped, but failed to completely deter the little vampires. And nothing stopped the incessant sound of chirping crickets. Or croaking frogs, that grew to the size of footballs. Still they managed to catch a little shuteye, enough to recharge their batteries for the next leg of the mission.

At 08:30 Steve roused the squad, most were already awake. They washed the camouflage paint from their faces and hands, then dressed in civilian clothes that befit researchers heading north to the Mayan ruins.

At Sahilá they stopped for breakfast at a small cafe. They did not want to draw attention to themselves so they came in two at a time, spaced at five to six minute intervals. Each pair explained in halting Spanish they were on their way to the ruins at Sebôl.

Although they spoke haltingly, in fact every member of Bravo squad was fluent in Spanish, and some of the local Indian dialects as well. By dispersing themselves through out the restaurant in pairs they were able to listen to the conversations of locals and in that way pick up more intelligence then would have been possible as one large group. The fact they appeared to speak the language only slightly, lulled the patrons into talking more freely.

The topic of conversation this morning was primarily the impending storm, whether or not flooding would occur as rain fell on the higher elevations then drained into rivers swollen beyond capacity.

By the time they reached Chocchoc, it was evident the storm was rapidly approaching. Slate gray clouds drifted overhead driven by a moist, warm wind

blowing from the east, gusting to fifty miles an hour. The van was difficult to control, McIntyer wrestled with it as they forged ahead along Highway 13.

As they approached the junction at Modesto Mendez it became apparent a roadblock had been set up. Traffic for the most part was being turned back. They turned left into the main part of town and circumnavigated the junction, crossing an empty field to regain the road heading west. As they were about to drive out onto the highway they noticed a military vehicle to their left preventing traffic from heading in that direction. They hastily pulled the van over to the side of the road.

Steve Sheffield was riding shotgun, he looked over at Ross. "Welcome aboard, Mr. Murphy."

Steve turned in his seat and looked back at the rest of the squad. "Okay, Spence, you and Dave reconnoiter west along the ridge and see what our chances may be of getting past the road block tonight. Frank, you and Vince set up on the high ground where you can see the junction and the van. Everyone take silenced side arms, keep them concealed."

Steve looked over at Ross. "Let's take a walk, and see what gives."

They climbed out of the van and walked west towards the junction, keeping to the low side of the roadway and using the natural cover to remain hidden from view. Rain spattered down, sporadically. Big heavy drops that fell from the clouds. To the north they could see steady rain on the higher elevations.

Fifty yards short of the junction they stopped to observe the roadblock activity. Most vehicles were being turned around, but parked on the other side of the road was the bus that was supposed to take Sylvia and the other researchers north to Xutilhá. Sylvia was engaged in a heated discussion with a military officer.

Sheffield and McIntyer used the foliage to close on the junction, then turned south and stealthily crossed the road behind a lorry waiting its turn to do a one-eighty. They walked up to where the bus was parked.

Clifford, the kid with the skinny arms was leaning against the bus looking downtrodden. He brightened measurably at the sight of Steve and Ross approaching.

"Hey kid," Steve said. "What's going on?"

Clifford peeked around the front of the bus and took a quick glance at Sylvia. Then turned back Steve. "They want to commandeer the bus for evacuations. Sylvia's trying to persuade them to let us continue north. Apparently flooding has

already started in the mountains, she figures we can be of more service if we get closer to the problem. I guess the only thing the Colonel wants is to evacuate his garrison."

"Where's the garrison?"

Clifford gestured with his hand, pointing. "Just up the road. They watch the Belize border."

Steve nodded and patted Clifford on the shoulder reassuringly. He showed a hand signal to Ross that indicated he wanted him to circle to the right, and to watch his back. Clifford noted the gesture but did not understand its meaning. He soon figured it out by observation. And for the second time since meeting Steve and Ross, he had the distinct impression they were not what they pretended to be. He wasn't sure whether that was good, or bad.

Steve walked around the front of the bus. He stepped over to Sylvia, put his arm around her shoulders and kissed her gently on the nape of the neck. This naturally caused her to lean into him in an intimate fashion even though she was quite taken aback as she turned and recognized him.

"Pardon me, Colonel," Steve said in perfect Spanish. "But this is my fiancé, we have been separated by mechanical delays. And now I find the weather has brought us together, so much sooner than expected. May I speak to her alone for just a moment?" Steve smiled disarmingly, and the Colonel nodded.

Steve immediately took Sylvia to one side before she could protest; in fact she was still sorting the whole thing out as she felt him swing her around. Her feet were off the ground momentarily, and then they were moving in unison to the side of the bus, but in that moment Sylvia realized Steve was unusually strong, and clearly not a tourist.

"Fiancé? I don't recall being asked."

Steve smiled. "Sorry. Needed to say something to satisfy the Colonel, before he started asking any questions."

"Well you seem to have succeeded."

"Clifford says the Colonel wants to appropriate the bus. What gives? You all should have made it to Poptûn by now."

"Never got past the junction, been here since eight this morning. Hurricane Emile is expected to hit about three this afternoon. There's flooding in the north. The good Colonel claims he may need the bus to organize an evacuation as they

expect the river to reach flood stage by early this evening. Funny thing, he hasn't commandeered any other vehicles."

"Maybe its you he really wants to commandeer?"

"Oh poleease," she said, but blushed in spite of herself.

"Tell you what, we've got the van up the road and papers to get us to Sobel. What say we make a deal with the Colonel for the bus, in exchange for passage to Sobel. I'll need your help to verify my credentials, but we'll offer to evacuate those we find along the way west to higher ground. And throw in a little first aid for good measure."

Sylvia looked at Steve skeptically. "What's your real story? First you were going to Xutilhá, now its Sobel."

Steve took a deep breath and looked away for a moment. "Let's just say an American's life is at stake. And Sobel is in the right direction."

Sylvia's eyes narrowed momentarily, and then she nodded. "Let's go talk to the Colonel."

Just then a Cessna Skymaster flew low overhead, they both looked up at it. From behind they heard Clifford's voice echoing their thoughts. "Guy must be crazy."

###

All of Jim Richards' instincts told him to firewall the engines, and commence a climbing one hundred and eighty degree turn, but he knew he'd never out climb the terrain. He cut the power, lowered the nose, lost a hundred feet and popped back out of the cloud.

None too soon, his fear of drifting into the north wall caused him to add the slightest downward pressure to his left wing, he came out of the cloud drifting into the south wall. He corrected on reflex, lifting the wing to clear the top of a pine tree that clung to the vertical wall of stone.

Horrendous turbulence slammed the aircraft up and down; it was like riding inside an NBA basketball. He'd gain then lose fifty feet instantly. The airframe creaked and groaned. Thank God, Cessna over built everything. A lesser craft would have come apart. It was brisk, brutal flying. The instruments a blur before his eyes, his brain unable to compensate for the dynamics of vertical transition. The incredible feeling of speed was at once thrilling, and terrifying. He jinked left to avoid an outcropping, then right to hold the centerline. Moments later he rolled

into a sixty degree left bank to follow a dog leg, then wings level to line up with the end of the gorge.

Now he was skimming the trees, jinking left and right to avoid their tops. On the edge of his vision, eagle's nests whipped by in the trees below. Ahead a cluster of houses, a small church. Then gone, below and behind. He strained his eyes searching for the runway but it was nowhere to be seen.

The terrain widened out. No time to relax. Farther ahead, the ground began to climb again and soon disappeared into ominously dark clouds. Jim Richards reduced power, and then raised the nose to maintain altitude. He dropped ten degrees of flaps, brought his air speed down to eighty knots. His ground speed, though still high, was slower compared to the run through the gorge. It seemed as if time had almost stopped.

Now he was over the fork in the river. Nothing to do but follow the briefer's advice. Set up a procedural turn, and then approach the unseen runway. Jim Richards banked gently to the right, then rolled level. He was now headed towards the northern elevations. He dropped another ten degrees of flaps and put the aircraft into slow flight at sixty-five knots.

Flying as near to the ceiling and rising terrain as he dared, he rolled into a standard two hundred and seventy degree turn to the left gradually bringing in power to hold his altitude, hanging the aircraft on its props. It was still bumpy, but after the gorge the turbulence seemed light as a feather. He rolled out on final headed directly for the fork in the river.

Backing the power off another increment, he began a very gradual descent. His knuckles white, as he gripped the control yoke. He consciously told himself to relax. Sweat beaded on his forehead, his armpits reeked, his back felt glued to the seat.

He set up a missed approach in his mind, dreading the thought. If he failed to find the runway he'd have to fly the canyon again into the approaching storm. And then what? Where would he set down? He had enough fuel to make Puerto Barrios, but he could not out run the storm even if he managed to raise someone and obtain clearance.

The fork in the river passed under the nose. Up ahead the entrance to the gorge yawned at him like the gapping jaws of a primordial shark, drooling in anticipation of an unexpected meal. Suddenly in the gloom of steady rain, he saw two lights flash then hold steady. He still could not see the runway.

Richards' mouth was dry, it tasted like old copper. He knew the taste too well; it was the taste of adrenaline brought on by fear. And too many times in his life he'd savored it. Strangely that thought buoyed his spirits for he'd always prevailed.

Then, all at once, it was as if the runway had always been there. How could he have missed it before? A wide green swath of closely cut grass, green as the terrain all about, but clearly man made.

Jim Richards took a deep breath and let it out slowly, as he brought the throttles all the way back. It occurred to him he may have been holding his breath for the past half hour. If so he'd definitely set some sort of world record, either that or asphyxiated himself and gone to his version of heaven: A short grass landing strip in the middle of a jungle.

The Skymaster glided over the threshold, its ground speed down to a walking pace in the forty-five knot headwind. He stalled the wing with the wheels inches off the ground and settled onto the turf, the soft grass absorbing the landing shock, giving Richards a fake greaser. He could have cared less.

He'd made it once again, against all odds. And he laughed out loud to himself. And it occurred to him, not for the first time that it was moments like this he lived for. The Skymaster rolled out, as he gently applied the breaks slowing the aircraft. He noted camouflaged tie downs to his left. Under each, another Cessna Skymaster.

He wondered why they hadn't been flown out before the storm arrived, but then he answered his own question. Where could they have been taken? Nowhere. They weren't even supposed to be in country.

A military clad figure flashed a light, and directed Richards towards a recently prepared tie down. He swung his light in an arc pointing to where he wanted Richards to taxi, and then gestured with his arms to show how he wanted the aircraft angled into the wind. Jim Richards followed the man's directions, applied the brakes and shut down the engines. First the front and then the rear.

He secured the cockpit, and then opened the door. The wind slammed it shut again. Outside a small army of men were working the tie down lines and strapping on camouflage. One of them stepped over to the pilot's door. Leaning into the wind, he managed to get it open, and then hold it so Jim Richards could climb out.

Richards dropped to the ground, his legs buckled under him. He hadn't realized how tense he'd been on the rudder pedals, constantly correcting for the wind currents as he kept the craft in coordinated flight. One of the men nearby caught

him by the arm. Richards turned to acknowledge the assistance just as the man spoke, and it took all the will power he had to hide his elation.

"Nice landing." Matt Harding said with a wide grin.

Jim Richards didn't respond immediately, but looked from Matt to the other man.

The one who'd held the door for him, he echoed Matt's compliment in Spanish heavily laced with a Cuban accent.

Jim Richards responded, "De nada." Then smiled his most magnanimous smile, "and if you believe that, there's a bridge in New York City I'd like to sell you."

The Cuban grinned and slapped him on the back. "When we win the revolution, it will belong to us for nothing." He laughed again and Richards joined right in, what the hell.

They crossed the open space between the aircraft and the trees. As they walked, Richards looked from side to side. Hidden amongst the trees were guards with AK-47 assault rifles. He was no anthropologist, but they did not appear to be Guatemalan. He glanced over at the Cuban walking beside him, then back at the nearest guard, definitely Cuban.

They passed through the outer perimeter of trees, the rain seemed to lessen, the canopy acting like a leaky roof. Built among the trees were several tent buildings.

They appeared to be heading for one at the west end. He glanced over at Matt, but kept a neutral expression on his face. Their eyes met and he knew they were both in deep shit.

In single file they climbed three narrow steps, then entered the first of the buildings. Inside four men stood around a rectangular table on which was displayed a relief map of Guatemala that appeared to be made from materials readily at hand. Richards quickly recognized the scale, one inch to seven miles. They must have used satellite photos at one inch to seventy miles, and then enlarged the scale by ten to fit their needs. No need to guess where they got the photos, sure as hell wasn't from NASA.

As they entered the building, the men inside looked up then stepped back from the map. One of them came forward, he too was Cuban. Richards looked at the others. Two were Guatemalan, the fourth was much larger, perhaps German? No. Russian.

"Welcome to Sosela. My name is Commandante Hernando Reyes." He extended his hand and bowed slightly. "You are a courageous and talented pilot. Our friend Jorge Androus said as much, but we did not believe you would present your craft to us in the teeth of a hurricane."

Jim Richards smiled deprecatingly. "I believe in keeping promises. It's what separates those who succeed from those who fail. But I must admit there were times today when I had my doubts."

Reyes smiled in turn. "You would be foolhardy, not brave, if you were not afraid. Courage is measured by those who know the risk, but nevertheless choose to forge ahead."

"Jorge indicated you spoke only a little Spanish, but it seems quite satisfactory to me."

Richards thought for a moment before answering. "Well you know our friend, Jorge. He prefers to make things seem a little worse than they actually are, so he can appear that much more successful when all is said and done."

Reyes smiled, "Yes. Except, of course, where his own performance is concerned, and then there are no limits." They laughed in unison. "Do you know your countryman here, Matt Hayward?"

Richards looked over at Matt and nodded to him, then spoke again to Reyes. "We just met out at the airplane. Perhaps we can speak together later."

Reyes nodded, "But of course, in fact you will be, how should I say, rooming together."

There was something in Reyes' voice that made Richards translate roommate to cell mate, he smiled non-committedly. "Right now my greatest concern is the storm."

Reyes shook his head. "It will not make it this far inland as a hurricane. We are at maximum wind speed now, and that's only because of the pressure difference as the storm approaches. The Maya mountains will protect us. It's flooding I fear most. We are twelve meters above the river, it should be enough but one never knows for sure."

"Matt, would you show Senior Richards to your quarters. I am sure he would like to freshen up, perhaps even rest awhile." He turned to Richards. "We will speak again at the six o'clock mess. Would you be so kind as to be my guest at our table?"

"I'd be honored," Richards replied. He gave curt bow of his head, and then nodded to the other men in the room as he turned to leave with Harding.

They walked along in front of the buildings until they reached the middle one. It was smaller than the others, with only four cots inside. Jim Richards found his flight bag sitting on one. He looked at Matt who put a finger to his lips. Richards understood, there could be listeners posted anywhere. The wind might cover their words if they spoke softly and stood close to each other, but that would only serve to alert the listeners they had something to hide. For the moment they must maintain the demeanor of two people who had just met.

Matt Harding signaled with his head for Jim Richards to follow him, they left the barracks, circled around back, and then climbed a narrow foot trail. They topped a hill and started down again; in the distance Richards could hear the roar of a waterfall. They slipped and slithered down a muddy trail to the base of a bowl like depression and stepped out into a clearing. Before him a spectacular waterfall fell at least five hundred feet to a deep pool at its base. They stripped down and went for a swim; the water was at least eighty degrees.

"There's a volcanic vent below this pool," Matt said. "Heats rock at the bottom which transfers warmth to the water."

They relaxed for a while in silence. Then left the water. There was no point in trying to dry off, their clothes were soaked. They'd change into dry clothes back at the barracks. For now, they sat under a ledge near the falls where they could watch the path that approached the pool.

"We can talk here," Matt said. "The falls will cover our words in any case. Damn I'm glad to see you, Jim. But it was not wise for you to come here. There's no escape, that's why we have this limited freedom. As I indicated back at the barracks we must be careful. Many of the Cubans, and a few Guatemalans speak English. I suspect the Russians do as well."

Richards raised his eyebrows. "How many Ruskie's?"

"Two. Technical advisers assisting the Cubans.

Harding asked, "Who sent you in?"

"Who do you think?" Richards replied.

"Dad?"

Richards nodded.

"I suppose he's pissed?"

"You were supposed survey George, and report." Richards said in response.

"Not exactly, that's Dad's version. I'm the one who pegged this operation in the first place. But that's neither here nor there now. I've gained some solid intelligence about their plans listening to conversations, and perusing documents as time and opportunity allowed, but it'll all go to waste if I can't get it out. You got any bright ideas on how we exfiltrate?"

"What you mean, we Kimo Sabe?" Richards grinned. "There's a SEAL squad headed in this direction. Though I'd hoped we could just fly out."

Matt shook his head. "Not that simple. There are twenty Cuban expeditionary troops guarding the perimeter. Each day one Pokomam rebel and three Cuban professionals patrol out three or four clicks, to make certain the camp is not under surveillance. Whenever I fly, an armed Cuban rides along."

Richards raised both eyebrows. "Then this isn't just a redo of the sixty-one coup, with a little help from the northern tribes, and maybe a diversionary assist from El Salvadore?"

Matt shook his head. "Total armed insurrection of the Guatemalan populace is the goal, instigated by Cuban trained mercenaries, and financed by the Soviets."

Richards frowned. "Including the territory north of here?"

Matt shrugged. "Certainly a possibility, but it appears the focus is on central and southern Guatemala. This is as far north as we've detected serious activity. Not much population in the extreme north of Guatemala. Nothing strategic up there either. No ports, no agriculture to speak of, pretty arid terrain. Also Mexico acts as a buffer, and probably will indefinitely, as long as we keep paying her to. Matt paused a moment. "There was something we picked up from one of our archeological assets working the area, which indicated a small splinter group of Pokomam involved in ancient Mayan rituals. We've haven't identified any significant outside support. No indication of funding, and without funding they're a non-threat." Harding chuckled cynically. "Except maybe to the occasional tourist."

Richards pursed his lips. "The northern territory has the most accessible Mayan sites, brings in a few tourist dollars as well as archeological activity from Universities all over the world. Take out too many rich tourists, or their doctorate seeking off-spring, it just might stir up a little more response than Fidel and his friends are willing to absorb."

"Makes sense." Matt agreed. "Anyway, getting back to the primary Pokomam threat. The section I was assigned at Langley developed a finding that showed Cubans planned to use aircraft in Guatemala as a communications network for an uprising. Thus avoiding signals detection. However, once hostilities broke out, they'd switch to forward air control and possibly combat support. The group at this airfield is only a test wing to see if locals can be used as pilots. If not, then other options would be considered. Most likely mercs with their own aircraft.

"Through out central and southern Guatemala there are cadres of locals, trained and led by Cubans. Soviet cargo aircraft are used to deliver weapons and ordinance to remote bases via airdrop. In good weather, it's no problem to drop into a valley and kick the supplies out the door.

"Cuba has set up resupply bases down in Colombia. Drug traffickers assist the operation because it helps them to move their own goods north as well. Typical routing is out of Cuba to Columbia, with arms and ammunition covered by manifests of normal trade goods. Legitimate cargo is off loaded, contraband picked up. The flight comes north on its way to Poptûn. They request an early descent, then divert, shielded from radar by the Maya Mountains." Harding shook his head disgustedly. "At Poptûn they off load the remaining legitimate goods, refuel and head north to San Benito. Colombian drugs are off loaded there. That contraband travels north by private aircraft to the southern border of the United States, where it gets smuggled in fifty different ways. Meantime the Cuban supply flight dead heads home."

Richards took a deep breath, and then let it out slowly. "How many flights a week?"

"It varies, sometimes one, maybe two. Sometimes none."

Richards thought for a moment. "What about fuel for the Skymasters?"

"That's the weak link." Matt replied. "It's trucked from Puerto Barrios in fuel tankers delivering fuel to gas stations along the way. Instead of high-octane auto fuel in one section, it's Avgas.

"To avoid alerting inventory control, Avgas is gradually pilfered from the fuel dump at Puerto Barrios airport. It's stored in drums, then loaded into the tanker truck just prior to the run. Very time consuming, but gradually the fuel reserve is building. Storage is in an underground tank at the approach end of the runway."

Richards shook his head, "Geez man, how'd you get involved in this shit? You're supposed to be riding a desk at Langley."

Matt's mouth turned downward. "Yeah and lovin' every minute of it too." He shook his head and looked away for a moment. "Deputy Director Operations - Central America, had lunch with an old pal from Eagle Property and Casualty. They insure a lot of private aircraft. Seems Cessna Skymasters were taking an inordinate number of hits from aircraft thieves. Eagle became convinced they were leaving the country."

"D.D.O. asked me to look into it. I had NSA run a profile on three-three-six communication traffic monitored around the time of the thefts. Eventually a pattern resolved, and I traced them down here.

"It seemed to mesh with the insurrection intel we'd already developed, so I slid on down to see what I could dig up, ran into your old friend, George, tying down what appeared to be a brand new Skymaster. We started talking, one thing led to another, a few drinks, next thing I know he's talking about a flight instructor's gig, teaching some Guatemalans how to fly Skymasters for an air medical service.

Matt chuckled to himself. "I figured it'd be a quick in and out. Then bag ol' George for grand theft airplane. Nice little diversion from the idiots and assholes back at the Fort."

Richards nodded. "So how long did you plan to hang out here?"

Matt shrugged. "Actually, I thought an opportunity would present itself by now. It's only fifty air miles to the Belize border, twenty-minute flight. Problem was the right time never came, at least not so far."

"Maybe we can do something about that in the near future." Richards thought for a moment. "Any weakness in the Pokomam group?"

Matt shrugged. "Not from a commitment standpoint. However, they're all piss poor pilots. They'll never get proficient enough to fly the prevailing conditions."

Richards looked away, and then back at Harding. "Seems obvious the Cubans will have to replace the Pokomam pilots."

"Yes," Harding agreed. "But they still want the insurrection to look completely spontaneous. So they're stalling around, building up the local myth Pokomam are led by the reincarnated prince of the last Mayans to rule the area we now call Guatemala." Harding paused for a moment. "I figure they'll wait until after the rainy season. If the pilots aren't ready then, they'll bring in Cubans. And I'll be out of a job real quick."

Richards looked sideways at his friend. "So what do you figure the retirement benefits are?"

Matt shrugged. "Oh I imagine I'll get a nice hole in the ground to sleep in.forever.

Chapter 10

The Econoline van bumped along the partially paved, heavily rutted road. They'd left Modesto Mendez two hours before, and should have made Gracias a Dios by now, but the storm and road conditions conspired to keep their forward progress to a snail's pace. The rain rattled steadily on the metal roof, creating a din that made normal conversation impossible. Ross craned his neck forward trying to pierce the downpour, between rhythmic sweeps of the windshield wipers.

Vince, Dave, Bob and Frank rode side by side along one wall of the van, seated on the two aluminum cases that held their gear. Clifford, Julie, and Benjamin sat along the opposite wall. Sylvia was seated on another box of archeological gear fitted between the two front seats. Steve Sheffield rode shotgun. It was muggy, stifling inside the van. The rain fell so hard they could only crack the side windows, opening them wider would only assure a thorough soaking.

Ross looked over at Steve for a moment before returning his eyes to the road ahead. "I'm getting a bad feeling we haven't shaken Mr. Murphy yet. You notice there hasn't been any traffic in the opposite direction?"

Steve nodded.

"Should be a few people headin' this way."

They rounded another turn, and found the answer in the form of a mudslide that blocked the highway. Ross stopped the van. "Looks like we'll be walking from here."

Ross turned the van around, and then headed back down the road a few hundred feet to a place where they could safely pull over. Steve glanced over at Sylvia and smiled, then swiveled around in his seat and looked to the rear of the van. All the team members were alert and ready to get started, while the researchers looked down trodden, wondering when the miserable journey would end.

"Gentlemen, time for a little walk in the rain."

Vince stood up into a hunched position, then kicked open the doors to the back of the van. He hesitated for only a moment, before jumping down onto the flooded

gravel turn out. In seconds, he was soaked to the skin, his clothing sticking to his body then sucking away with a sigh, and a soft pop, as he moved about.

Dave and Bob opened the lids to the aluminum cases, removed the superfluous archeological tools stored on top, and stacked them forward in the van's cargo area.

Dave glanced over at Clifford. "You're welcome to the tools."

Clifford nodded, but didn't look particularly enthused. It was difficult to ride along on a mission he knew nothing about; fearful they'd be arrested by the local militia.

The SEALs slid the equipment cases to the rear of the van, then jumped out and quickly disappeared into the jungle to the north side of the road.

Ross slipped out of the driver's seat, and then disappeared as well, following the others.

Steve looked at Sylvia. "Thank you." She nodded once. He then looked to the rear of the van. "Y'all have a safe trip."

"How will you get back?" Julie asked.

"Oh, we'll hitch a ride along the way." He smiled once at everyone, and then slipped out of the van and headed for the jungle path the others had taken. He was just about to duck into the foliage, when he heard Sylvia call to him. He turned around; she was only a few steps behind. He stopped, and she walked up to him.

She was completely soaked; her fine red hair was matted to her head, water running down her face in rivulets. Her shirt clinging to her body, the chill causing the nipples of her ample breasts to protrude against the wet cotton fabric that clung to her like a second skin.

"You'll catch a cold running around like that," Steve said.

Sylvia's face remained serious. "I.. I'd like to see you again. But I don't know if ..." She threw up her hands. "Oh this is silly..." She started to turn away.

Steve reached out and caught hold of her arm, turning her gently back towards him. "So far you've been the only bright spot of this trip. I'll find you when our job's accomplished."

They looked at each other in silence for a moment. Sylvia had no doubts he was sincere. He kissed her gently on the lips, then turned and disappeared into the

jungle. She did not see him stop just inside the low canopy to watch as she made her way back to the van. Nor did she know he waited until they had driven away, heading back towards Modesto Mendez. As Steve turned away from the road, he bumped into Ross, who'd come up silently. He was already dressed in close quarters jungle gear, it too was soaked.

"So what you think, Slasher? We bag the op, and you two can live happily ever after?"

"Well, first we bag the op. Then we'll see what comes next." Steve said with a grin.

"You mean who comes first." Ross grinned in return.

The squad had found a spot to throw a tarp over some branches, creating a make shift lean-to. Frank and Bob completed the weapons check while Steve struggled, as quickly as possible, into his gear.

Dave crowded in under the tarpaulin, he'd reconnoitered down to the river. "We've got a problem. That mudslide runs all the way into the river. It's altered the channel, creating serious rapids. No way we're crossing here. The slide itself is about a hundred feet wide, very unstable. I can't see far beyond, the road turns to the left. But there's no activity on the other side of the slide.

"There's no place to cross the slide between the road and the river. We've only one option: Recon down stream until we find a place to cross, then move west towards our objective."

The team made their way carefully along the steep trail to the river. They could hear its roar long before they were able to see it. The river was high, running extremely fast. As they watched through a break in the undergrowth, a tree toppled into the water with a groan and a snap, as the ground at its roots was washed away.

"We'd better stay well above the edge of the river," Steve said. "Or that's likely to be our fate too."

They struggled through the undergrowth. Ross moved into point position and began cutting a path for them with a machete. It was slow going. Gradually the dim light began to fade as true darkness descended upon them. Now and then, a spike of lightning would illuminate the forest in blinding light, trees would momentarily cast grotesque shadows.

All at once the terrain began to rise and the forest thinned, it was no longer necessary to chop a path in order to make headway. Unfortunately, this meant

more rain reached their level. The steady down pour had been constant the entire time. Gradually the ground beneath their feet turned to stone. They climbed until the terrain flattened out. The noise of the river seemed far away now, but they knew that was only because they'd climbed so much higher above it. It's timbre had changed, the flow of water had increased in speed.

Vince, who'd replaced Ross at point, raised his hand. Everyone stopped and knelt, weapons unslung pointed in opposite directions, alternating left and right. Steve moved forward until he was hunkered down next to Vince.

"I think we're at the narrowest point in the gorge, or very close to it." Vince pointed to the chart he was carrying; he illuminated it with a small red-filtered flashlight. "Also I'm picking up Jim Richards' transponder signal." He showed Steve the face of his receiver, its arrow pointing to a course line that ran northwest from their position. "Based on the terrain in this area the transponder is no more than three miles line of sight from here, which would put us right at this point on the chart."

Steve nodded. "We'd better spend the night here. The morning will tell us if we can cross. Hopefully the storm will let up a little as well."

###

It had taken nearly an extra hour to return to Modesto Mendez. The rain and wind increased, buffeting the van back and forth across the road. It required all of Sylvia's skill and concentration to keep from being blown off the road. Mudslides obstructed their way on two occasions, but fortunately they were able to make their way around them. It was nearly dark when they reached the western checkpoint.

The guard on duty recognized them, and shook his head as he waved them through. He'd told them earlier, they'd not be able to make it all the way. He did not bother to check the van, to make certain it contained the same number of occupants as when they'd departed. It never occurred to him anyone would have chosen to get out and walk.

Sylvia turned right on Highway 13 and headed south for a half mile before turning again, into the center of town. They'd find a place to spend the night, and then make another run at crossing the Sarstoon in the morning.

###

Jim Richards awoke suddenly from a deep sleep. Matt Harding was standing at the door to their barracks staring out into the night. The rain continued to pour

down onto the canvas roof in a steady rattle. Richards rolled off the bed, and walked over to where Matt was standing.

"What's going on?" He asked in a whisper.

"The roar of the river is louder. I think it's risen even further than expected. There's a lot of activity about the camp."

"Then let's go take a look. If the aircraft are in jeopardy we need to make certain we keep at least one intact."

Jim Richards pulled on his hiking boots, and then followed Matt out into the rain. In a matter of moments they were both soaked to the skin. Richards became chilled; he'd not had time to fully awaken.

They made their way through the trees, down to where the aircraft were parked. The river was already up to the runway and seemed to be spreading like a pond towards the tie downs. Clearly something had happened down stream to block its flow. Commandante Reyes, along with the two Russian advisors, and a half dozen Cubans were standing near one of the tie downs.

"Looks like we've got a serious problem," Richards said in Spanish.

Reyes turned and nodded. "Yes. I don't suppose there's any way to fly these things out of here, at least one or two?"

Jim Richards and Matt Harding both shook their heads in unison. "Even if we could get them airborne, the turbulence aloft would make flight impossible." Matt said.

Jim Richards looked around, the water rapidly spreading closer to the aircraft. "It looks as if the river is simply backing up, creating a temporary lake here. If we work quickly we can save some, but probably not all of the aircraft. Get your men to help. Bring all the wood and other buoyant material you can, we'll create floating platforms for as many aircraft as possible before the water gets too high. Once afloat we can tether them to trees.

Those we don't have time to float should be left tied down, as long as they aren't struck by debris the damage can be repaired with normal maintenance tools.

Jim Richards pointed to the Russians. "Those two should pull the radios out of the ones we can't float. Start with the ones closest to the water. It's the electronics that'll have to be replaced if they get flooded."

The Commandante nodded. "Yes, that's an acceptable plan. We should be able to save three or four aircraft at least." He immediately gave orders to the Cubans, the Russians had already moved off to start on the radios. If an American coming up with a plan angered them, they did not show it. Once they understood the concept, and it was clearly seen as the only option, they put aside any personal feelings and got on with the job to be done.

The flooring in the barracks would make an ideal platform; one of the Cubans pointed this out to Reyes. Immediately it was decided to cannibalize two of the barracks buildings, taking seven by six foot slices of flooring still nailed to the foundation joists.

They used gas-powered chain saws. With seven men carrying each section of flooring they were able to get four aircraft afloat within a half hour. By that time the water level was already past the tie down points. As the slope increased closer to the trees, the water ceased to spread and began to deepen. But the Russians managed to extract the communications and most of the sensitive electronics gear from three of the four remaining aircraft.

Jim Richards made certain the aircraft he'd flown was salvaged first, and then he and Matt went to work on the electronics in the remaining aircraft. They managed to pull just about everything, when they noticed water seeping into the cockpit from around the co-pilot's door.

Wrapping the electronics in ponchos, they were about to jump from the plane and attempt to wade to higher ground holding the gear above their heads, when they heard a clunk against the side of the aircraft. One of the Russians had paddled out in a small dugout, used by the Guatemalans to negotiate the river when it was not raging. They passed the gear out. Then abandoned the rapidly flooding aircraft, swimming along side the dug out until they could wade ashore.

On shore, the Cubans were ordered by the Commandante to make certain the salvaged aircraft did not drift away. As Matt Harding and Jim Richards turned away from the river to head back to their barracks, one of the Russians came up to Richards and held out his hand. Richards took the bear like grip. The Russian addressed him in broken English.

"That was good plan, Amerikan. Before you came, Das Cubanas were arguing about how to stop the water from getting higher. Stupido." He gave Richards a big grin, then turned and walked off towards his barracks.

Matt Harding looked over at Jim Richards, and scowled. "Why didn't we just let them all go?"

Richards shrugged. "Flying one out may yet be our only means of escape. The method of saving one, applies to saving all. Only manpower, and time, prevented a full salvage."

###

On the island of Cuba, in a house that once belonged to Meyer Lansky, Anatoly Skorokhodov monitored weather reports tracking the path of hurricane Emile. Other field intelligence information also came to him via courier delivery.

Emile had not so much as brushed Cuba, but its movement and severity greatly affected his plan for Operation Pokomam. The eye of the storm had crossed into Guatemala just north of the Sarstoon River.

Anatoly was well aware of the flooding it was causing farther up stream. He wondered how many of the aircraft so recently delivered would survive. But there was no way for him to acquire a sit-rep before their scheduled airdrop, which would not occur until after the storm passed.

Chapter 11

The dacha was set back from a paved two-lane road. The house hidden from view by a stand of conifers, and a seven-foot concrete wall built across the front of the property. It was reached by a driveway that wound through the trees, ending in a wide a circular space where several cars could be parked. Today only two were present.

The house, once owned by a well to do Moscow family before Communism made everyone equally poor, had a comfortable living room warmed by a stone fireplace that burned wood, cut from nearby forests.

On this day, two high ranking officials: Ivan Moskalenko from the Committee for State Security, KGB, and General Fedor Serov from the Special Operations section of the GRU, Military Intelligence, were in the living room. The two officers sat in large comfortable leather chairs near the fireplace. Double doors that lead into the living room were closed, a guard posted in the hallway to assure privacy. Between the chairs stood a small round table made of maple, on which rested two tall glasses of sweetened tea that the men would occasionally sip as they conversed.

"So, Fedor, you are absolutely certain Anatoly Skorokhodov has not authorized an operation in northern Guatemala?" Moskalenko asked.

"Yes. I've read his reports on a weekly basis. He's concentrating his activity to the south, in support of our activities in Nicaragua and El Salvador. However, Cuba does have an operation in support of rebel forces in central Guatemala. We are providing technical assistance."

Moskalenko took a sip of tea. He looked intently at the GRU officer, over the rim of his glass, trying to decide if the man were telling the truth, or not. There was no question in his mind that Colonel Skorokhodov had gone over. But had the United States stretched its tendrils all the way to Moscow? Was Serov also in league with the west?

Moskalenko set his glass down. "We've intercepted intelligence, which has been confirmed by two independent sources, indicating the United States has set up a training camp in north-central Guatemala to train pilots in Cessna O-2 Forward Control aircraft."

Fedor Serov took a deep breath then let it out slowly. "And what is their purpose for doing this? "

"As you know, they are secretly training forces in Honduras to counter our efforts in Nicaragua." Moskalenko replied. "Honduras allows this, but they do not allow the United States to train pilots, or maintain a permanent air base. Honduras would not be able to deny such level of activity. So the U.S. is training pilots in Guatemala. Later they'll move the aircraft closer to the Honduras border. And finally once their forces are engaged, they'll move the aircraft all the way to Nicaragua using fields in Honduras for fuel stops only. Honduras cannot reasonably deny flight training, but they can deny knowledge of operational flights that only hop in and out of their country."

Serov nodded. "The Cessna O-2 is very versatile, very well adapted to Central American terrain, and to close support missions. Such air support would definitely affect the course of our campaign adversely. We must do something."

Moskalenko shook his head. "Of course, but maintaining deniability is essential. That's why I've asked you to meet me here today. What I am about to tell you must go no further than this room."

Serov raised his eyebrows, "Certainly."

Moskalenko nodded once and thought, if our conversation does go beyond this room then I will surely know where your loyalties rest. He took another sip of tea. "We've launched an offensive against the American's flight training facility," Moskalenko said. "I've ordered a small contingent of our special security forces into Puerto Barrios. They're posing as mercenaries."

"I do not want Anatoly Skorokhodov to learn of, or get involved in, our activities." Serov began to protest, but Moskalenko raised his hand, palm outward. "I know he's one of our most trusted people, but we're fairly certain CIA has compromised his apparatus."

Serov took a deep breath, then exhaled as he got up from his chair, shaking his head in disgust. He walked over to the fireplace to stir the wood, and then tossed a small log onto the rekindled embers. "What is your plan?"

"We'll destroy the training facility the Americans have built. Then use their aircraft to fly our force out."

Serov raised a pair of dark bushy eyebrows, and then furrowed his brow. "That's a bold plan, and dangerous. Are you certain the anticipated results are worth the risk?"

Moskalenko nodded, "Our intelligence indicates even though there has been only one confirmed sighting of an O-2, eight have been delivered. At present they have only one flight instructor, though a second flight instructor may have piloted the last O-2 flown in. If we hit them fast and hard now, we can take out the threat before they are up to speed and able to disburse the aircraft should they by chance get wind of our approach."

Serov sat down again and took a sip of his tea. "How many men are you sending against the camp?"

"Only fifteen, but they are the best we have. Six are pilots."

Serov nodded. "Fifteen hand picked troops. Should be sufficient assuming you can manage to keep at least four of the O-2s in tact."

Moskalenko smiled and nodded. "Oh yes, Comrade. We will keep at least four intact, maybe all them."

Serov chuckled, and gestured with his arms, indicating that Moskalenko was a bit grandiose in his estimate. "Then you are short two pilots my friend."

Moskalenko shook his head; there was a twinkle in his eye. "No, no not at all. If we can salvage all the aircraft, there will be two CIA pilots more than willing to fly the other two out as opposed to dying with a bullet to the back of the head. Later they'll prove most valuable to us as they willingly, or unwillingly, give us the many secrets they've promised never to tell."

Then both men laughed heartily.

###

At the Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas. NASA meteorologist, Paul Goodell, tracked Hurricane Emile using satellite and high altitude aircraft photographs. Plotting its course on a computer that projected direction and intensity. He noticed a rare phenomenon. Emile had run ashore just south of the Belize border, dumped twenty-five inches of rain north of the Sierra Santa Cruz mountains, then turned east and tracked back out to sea.

His calculations indicated the hurricane was rebuilding over warm Caribbean waters. All that was required for Emile to retrace its steps back into Guatemala was for the weak high-pressure system over Sierra Santa Cruz to drift southwest.

Goodell queried his computer for the latest data forwarded from weather stations and buoys throughout the region. Conditions appeared to be developing favorably for the return of Emile.

####

Steve Sheffield awoke at first light. The rain had stopped, the sky nearly cloudless. He took a deep breath, the air smelled fresh and clean with undertones of a verdant earthy scent unique to tropical jungles.

He raised himself on one elbow and brushed the mosquito netting from his head. Dave Wilcox and Vince Morris had pulled the last guard shift. He looked towards their positions, but could not see them concealed as they were within the foliage. Steve got to his feet, the other squad members began to stir and awaken.

They gathered in a prone position near the edge of the ravine and looked down at the rapids roaring below. Several trees had toppled in the storm. As they looked eastward along the river, they noticed one had fallen completely across, bridging the gap that separated them from the other side.

"You think that thing'll hold you, Torque?" Ross asked.

Vince grinned, "Only one way to find out."

"I hate to do this in broad daylight, but we can't afford another day. No tellin' what Jim Richards' status is at the camp." Sheffield said.

Vince nodded. "They may be interrogating the hell out of him right now." He scooted forward and leaned out over the precipice, Ross reached over and pinned his feet. Then helped to pull him back after he'd surveyed the problem.

"I can keep us in the shadows for the descent, we'll stay in our night gear then wait at the bottom until the other side is in shadow. This is a steep east-west ravine, it'll only be sunny for an hour or so at the bottom."

"And the river?" Dave Wilcox asked.

"We can use our line to stay above the torrent," Vince said.

Sheffield nodded, "Good enough. Let's get to it Torque."

They ate a quick breakfast of Musili washed down with water from their canteens. Then did a line, or two, of the amino acid paste, before making their way along the edge of the cliff to where they estimated the tree was located. They did not want to silhouette themselves on the rim, so they stayed back from the edge and moved through the forest. Every now and then they'd stop, Vince would move out to the edge and take a look over. Then return with another

estimate of the distance left to go. In this fashion they reached a point directly above the location of the fallen tree.

Vince began setting up his rappel harness, while the others broke out sufficient rope to get him down the sheer side of the cliff.

He crawled on his belly to the edge of the cliff and looked over. Then returned to the squad waiting in the underbrush.

"Looks like a little over a hundred feet to the bottom. There's a large boulder at the water's edge the tree roots are resting on, another boulder mid-stream is supporting it's mid-section. We'll set a piton on top with a three-way anchor. These ropes are only a hundred feet each so we're gonna need to set another piton about half way down if we want to take the rope with us."

Steve nodded, "Definitely."

"Okay. I'll make sure the tree is stable then give a tug on the line. One tug means it's no good, two, we can make it. If it's two, you'll belay me back to the mid-point and I'll set another piton and hook into it. We can then stage down."

Steve sent Dave Wilcox to a sniper position west along the ridge, just in case anyone showed up to pot shot Vince on the way down. Dave would be last down if the tree turned out to be stable.

Vince set a piton, while Ross rigged the anchors. As soon as the rappel base was secure, Vince stepped into a rappel harness, slipped the rope into opposing carabiners then dropped over the edge.

The wall was vertical for the first fifty feet, then it began to kick out at an angle, cutting under and dropping vertical again for the last thirty feet or so. He reached the over hang in three rappels, then fast roped to the bottom landing amongst the tree's root system just before he ran completely out of rope.

It appeared stable but he could not tell for certain without proceeding out onto the main body of the tree. He unslung the second rope, which he'd carried down draped over one shoulder and across his chest, then drew it through a piton he drove into a crack in the wall with the haft of his combat knife.

He held the double strands as he made his way out onto the tree until he'd reached the boulder in the middle of the river. So far so good. As he made his way from the middle of the tree towards its top the trunk became slimmer and less stable. Still with care they could all make it. He scrambled back to the middle boulder and looked up at the rim of the ravine. He could just see Ross peering over, and knew the tug he'd soon give on the rope would be superfluous.

It took another twenty minutes to get everyone down to the river. Once down the crossing went smoothly with the assistance of a rope railing Vince set up, in case the tree collapsed as someone was crossing.

The problem now was to climb the north wall, which would take at least two hours assuming they chose the correct route on the first assault.

###

A column of vehicles moved in both directions along Route 13, many of those heading north carried relief supplies for the victims of Hurricane Emile. Amongst the vehicles, was a large semi-truck with a temporary red cross made of plastic material affixed to the trailer with tape. The rear quarter of the trailer was filled with surgical supplies. The first quarter with munitions and lethal equipment if someone searched too far forward from the rear of the truck, they'd encounter fifteen Special Operations soldiers long before they ever reached the lethal supplies.

At Modesto Mendez the driver provided papers to the guards on duty. He was cleared to proceed to the Sosela to provide relief to those injured by flooding.

The guard took a cursory look at the paper work, and then handed it back to the driver. "The road is blocked five miles east of Sosela, we are working on it at this very moment. Proceed cautiously, and be prepared for a wait when you reach the mudslide. I will call ahead to our next check point to let them know you are to be allowed to pass."

"Muchas gracias," the driver said.

The men waiting inside the semi-trailer were comfortable. There were furniture pads on the floor to soften the surface, and lights rigged to provide illumination as they packed and prepared their gear. And since the trailer was normally used to haul produce it had a refrigeration system, which when run on low kept the interior quite comfortable.

It was three in the afternoon when the truck reached the site of the mudslide. Bulldozers were in the process of reopening the road, but it would be awhile before it would be clear enough for the truck to pass.

###

"What a mess." Matt Harding shook his head. He and Jim Richards surveyed the scene in the early morning light. Everyone had been detailed to repair the

damage done to their camp by the previous night's storm. Richards and Harding were down at the tie down sites assessing damage to the aircraft.

The four aircraft that had been successfully floated, now sat at awkward angles on the steep embankment still strapped to their wooden platforms. As the water receded no one thought to release the tether lines. The weight of the aircraft soon impressed the platforms into the soft mud making it impossible to drag them to level ground.

Three aircraft could be rolled off safely, but would sink to their wheel hubs in mud. The fourth, unfortunately the one Richards had flown, toppled as the water receded and was now braced by its wing, the tip buried seven inches in mud.

There was no way they'd be able to taxi any of the aircraft from their current locations until the ground hardened sufficiently.

"We're going to need block and tackle," Jim Richards said. "To get these aircraft into stable positions." He looked into Harding's eyes. "And we'd better start with the one I flew. We don't want to lose that one, nor have anyone else inspect it."

They looked out toward the other tie downs where the aircraft that had not been salvaged were located. Those were mostly above water, but imbedded to the tops of their wheels in mud.

Beyond the aircraft, where the grass runway was previously located, a lake shimmered. The water had receded part way back to its normal course, but then ceased its withdrawal leaving a shallow lake.

They walked over to one of the Cuban officers in charge of construction. "Good morning, Sir," Matt said. "What do you think, will the lake eventually recede entirely?"

"Given enough time, yes. But we cannot wait. Weather reports indicate the storm is rebuilding at sea. It may strike again within the next forty-eight hours."

Jim Richards ran his hand along the side of his face feeling a three-day growth of beard. He looked over at the aircraft, then back at the Cuban officer. "There's nothing we can do with the aircraft until the ground hardens."

The Cuban nodded. "I know."

"Perhaps the water will recede enough for us to get all of them on platforms," Matt suggested.

"Only if we can break the dam that has caused this lake." The Cuban replied. "Yesterday several mud slides occurred east of here. One carried debris all the way to the river partially blocking the flow. Last night more debris piled against the obstruction, creating greater blockage. The water can recede no further. If we do not break the dam, and the storm returns, all will be lost."

Chapter 12

The semi pulled to the side of the road. The passenger door opened, a man jumped to the ground. He moved towards the rear of the truck, and then ducked under the trailer midway between the fore and aft sections. They'd finally passed the mudslide after four hours of delay, and were now only two kilometers from Sosela. The man under the semi-trailer waited for a moment or two, checking for traffic before he reached up and knocked twice on the trap door cut into the underside of the trailer.

Three troops dropped through the opening to the ground. The four men scurried from under the trailer and into the jungle that bordered the north side of the road. The trap door closed, the truck remained stationary, its engine at idle breaking the stillness of the jungle

The four men joined up under the canopy of trees, about a hundred yards from the road. Then silently made their way down the slope towards the river. Their leader was a large man, six foot four with the build of a lumberjack. He had a full head of dark almost black hair cut very short. He signaled a halt as they neared the river. Immediately, the men behind took up defensive positions facing in different directions, hunkered down to the ground with their assault rifles ready.

"This is strange," the leader said. "We are near the river, I can smell it. Yet we do not hear it. And the river flows swiftly here. We'll go forward carefully."

They had gone only a few yards farther when they came suddenly upon the river. It was wide and flowed slowly. Looking across to the far side they could see the water was much higher than normal.

"The slide must have blocked the river." He pulled a chart from a large pocket sewn into the thigh of his pants, then partially unfolded it. The other three men gathered around their leader. "We are here, the slide was right about here." Tracing the road with his finger. "If the river is obstructed, it will fill this area." He traced a circle around the area just below the confluence of the two rivers. "Right where the air strip is located." He stopped to think for a moment, before continuing.

"Flight from the field may be impossible, and we may be severely encumbered as well." He looked the map over for a minute or two, and then made his decision. "We'll continue to Sosela, and a little beyond. Then use this secondary road if it is passable. It will bring us above the camp from the northwest. With any luck at all,

they'll be busy cleaning up the mess made by the storm, and will be taken completely by surprise."

####

Elmo Jefferson sat at his desk on the seventh floor of the CIA building in Langley, Virginia. Spread out before him were the latest photos and field reports received from Tom Lovell. The Soviets had accepted the disinformation, exactly as Dr. Holt had predicted. Unfortunately, they were moving to attack the camp sooner than anyone had anticipated.

Tom Lovell had identified a special operations force, posing as mercenaries, moving north via trailer truck. It was photographed by a U-2 fly over, after the storm had passed.

Elmo bowed his head and closed his eyes for a moment. He could do nothing for them. In some ways the photographic images were more depressing than helpful. The sequential stills showed the truck heading rapidly towards Sosela, impeded only by a mudslide that was being rapidly cleared.

The data printouts generated from transponder monitors indicated the aircraft Richards' had flown was still at the airstrip. So there was not even a faint glimmer of hope he and Matt Harding had managed to escape by air.

With all the collateral intelligence at his fingertips, he had no idea how close the SEALs were to their objective. If only they could transmit a sitrep without fear of interception, but that technology was yet to be perfected. There was nothing he could do, but wait and hope. He sighed and picked up the telephone, John Harding had requested a sitrep over two hours before. The least he could do was keep him apprised, though the information would bring no comfort.

####

It was two in the afternoon by the time all six SEALs were safely on top of the north wall of the ravine. They rested for a half hour, eating dehydrated food and amino acid paste. A little past fourteen-thirty they continued their westward march along the rim, using the jungle canopy to cover their progress.

At about three-fifteen in the afternoon a deep rumble shook the ground. It seemed almost like thunder, but to the SEALs there was no mistaking the sound. Someone had set off a high explosive charge. They ceased their forward progress. Bob Spencer made his way with care to the edge of the cliff using the foliage for cover; he crawled the last few feet on his belly.

When he reached the edge he peered over. The river below seemed to be boiling. It flowed a dirty brown, capped with dingy foam. Logs, stumps, and other debris were carried down stream at an enormous pace. He looked west towards the head of the ravine, there clinging like flies to the rock wall were the tiny figures of three men. Spencer took a small telescope from his pocket and focused it. Draped over the shoulders and across the back of one were several loops of prima cord. Spencer withdrew from his observation post, and then returned to the squad.

"Looks like someone blew the dam."

Sheffield frowned. "What dam?"

Vince spoke up. "Been thinking about that ever since I first reached the bottom of the ravine this morning. The river seemed too slow, considering the rain last night."

Ross nodded in agreement. "That's right, I noticed a change in its sound on my watch, not long after we'd settled in for the night. Figured it must have stopped raining up stream."

Vince shook his head. "I'd say that mud slide eventually blocked the river, probably with help from trees and other debris that came down stream with the storm."

Steve Sheffield pulled out his chart and several air reconnaissance photos. He looked them over carefully. "We'd better pick up the pace a little. This cliff comes to a sudden end before we get to the airfield. I want to reach that point before sunset."

He looked up at the sky, white puffy clouds were moving west at a rapid pace. "Or perhaps I should say before the rain starts again."

Vince looked over Sheffield's shoulder at the photos. "I'll take point. We'll need to use caution as we approach the headlands." He pointed to the prow of the cliff shown in the photos, and two tiny specks poised near its leading edge. "Even if the camp is in shambles, I'd post a couple watchers."

Steve nodded. "Agreed. What's our ETA?"

Vince looked at his watch. "No later than sixteen hundred. Should have an hour of light left."

Steve refolded the chart. "Good enough, Torque. You've got point. Let's move out."

####

"Looks like that's about all we can do for now," Jim Richards said.

He and Matt Harding had finished loading the last of the aircraft onto platforms. They'd demolished their entire barracks building to accomplish the task. Which meant they'd share the building assigned to the student pilots.

Harding and Richards rested, sitting on the treads of a backhoe. The dam had apparently been successfully blown. Around three-thirty that afternoon the water began to recede. Most of the mud between the trees and the river was silt from up stream. The Cuban's dozer made short work of it. Below the silt, the ground was not as soft as it seemed that morning, mainly because of the turf.

At the moment the dozer was busy creating a levee to direct the water away from the landing field if the river rose again. Just this side of the levee a trench would carry runoff. Of course, the engineering would be futile if the river became clogged again.

"They're hard workers." Harding observed. "We tend to think of them as lazy, because they've embraced communism. The implication being they want the state to provide for them instead of working for themselves."

Richards nodded in agreement. "They believe fervently in a system we know cannot work. Most of these Cubans are second-generation communists, they still believe in that ideal. Isolation has probably contributed as much as anything."

"No doubt, but such is the position the United States has taken for right or wrong." Harding said.

Richards shrugged. "We've no choice, if we open up trade we'll only delay the inevitable failure, while providing the means for their economy to appear viable beyond the normal course of fiscal evolution. Of course, the Soviets are the key, without their hard currency Cuba would have failed by now."

Matt looked sideways at Richards. "You think so?"

Richards made a downward gesture with his hand. "Definitely."

"Here come the sappers back from the dam." Harding lifted his chin in the direction of the river. "Only three, and they're looking grim. They must have lost one of their team."

Richards nodded. "I should be glad, one less to deal with, funny thing though, I'm not. That's the problem with working together in a crisis, it starts to humanize the enemy."

Matt nodded. "Works both ways."

Richards glanced over at Harding, a cynical look on his face. "I wouldn't count on it."

They jumped off the treads in unison and started towards the approaching men.

###

Vince slipped under the ferns, a furlong back from their objective and rejoined the rest of the squad. They communicated silently using a twig in the dirt to draw a simple picture. The ravine ended abruptly at a precipice that overlooked the valley where the airstrip was located. Two guards, one was asleep, the other reading a manual of some sort. There appeared to be one assault rifle between them. Each had a field knife.

Sheffield signaled Vince to return with Wilcox and neutralize the guards.

Vince took point, the two SEALs slowly and silently made their way back to the precipice. The foliage ended ten feet from the edge of the cliff. The guard who'd been dozing was now awake, standing off to the side taking a leak into the ravine. He seemed pretty happy with himself, and commented to his partner about how far he could piss.

Vince and Dave lay concealed in the brush waiting for the guard to finish, and return to his prior position. This took longer then expected because he began to pace around stretching this way and that, trying to workout the kinks from sleeping on hard ground. Eventually he returned to his post, and sat down next to the first guard.

Both targets sat side-by-side looking out over the valley, talking casually to one another. In unison, Vince Morris and Dave Wilcox aimed two Beaman air guns, and then fired simultaneously. The darts crossed the space to the targets, impacting the back of their necks. Both guards let out a frightened yelp, and slapped at their necks as if they were trying to drive off an angry bee. One succeeded in knocking the dart free, but not before it had injected the necessary dose of tranquilizer.

The first guard looked over at the second, a stupefied expression on his face. He noted the dart sticking out of his companion's neck but seemed unable to

comprehend the implications of his observation. The second guard stared dumbly at the ground between his legs. Ten seconds later without making any further sound or movement, the two men toppled over into fetal positions.

Vince and Dave scrambled forward. Then pulled the prone guards away from the precipice and into the brush. They retrieved their darts, then tied and gagged the two men. As they completed trussing them up the rest of the team joined them.

Frank Prescott and Bob Spencer moved to the look out post and quickly perused the documents and equipment they found there. A Russian made field communicator, a pair of binoculars, an AK-47 assault rifle, and a manual on flying.

Spencer brought these items back to where the rest of the team waited in the cover of the underbrush. The two guards appeared to be of different nationalities, one Cuban, the other Guatemalan. Judging by the manual they'd found, one of them was a student pilot, apparently not trusted enough to be issued his own weapon.

Sheffield removed a Quastar spotting scope from his rucksack then moved forward to the lookout. He set the Quastar up, assigning compass headings to the azimuth by placing his field compass on the ground next to the tripod. The view from the out post was gorgeous even to the naked eye. From the top of the cliff, he looked westward into a lush valley. Two streams came together just west of the airfield, which appeared to inundated with water gradually receding back to its normal course. Two miles beyond the confluence lay Sosela. The valley was a mixture of pasture, tilled fields, and forest that grew into the mountains on both sides.

Sheffield gazed through the Quastar's eyepiece to survey the airfield. The telescope could resolve the eye of a goat on the side of a mountain, three miles away. He slowly panned the scope from left to right, and noted men feverishly working to salvage aircraft. He focused carefully on the men around each aircraft and soon identified Jim Richards. Working next to him, Matt Harding.

Sheffield smiled, so far so good. Richards and Harding were both alive. His spirits rose measurably, they'd not be on a mission of revenge. He scanned into the trees north of the airfield. Counted buildings, personnel and equipment; reading off his observations to Frank Prescott while drawing a diagram of the camp's layout himself.

He then observed the south side of the valley; a truck caught his attention as it moved slowly west along the main highway then turned off onto the gravel feeder road that led to Sosela. The truck's trailer was marked with a large red cross.

Presumably it was bringing relief supplies. He swung the scope to the right and focused on the small hamlets in the valley. There was storm damage visible, but not enough to warrant an entire semi full of supplies. It was an anomaly that tickled his mind, but he quickly justified it as some sort regular welfare delivery perhaps only coincidental to the storm.

Sheffield completed his survey. Then withdrew back into the underbrush. Prescott remained on watch.

The two guards were still unconscious and would remain so for several minutes longer. He told the squad about spotting Jim Richards and Matt Harding, then sent Vince and Ross to set up near the trail that led from the valley up to the guard post, in case others came to relieve, or check on the two guards. Sheffield surmised the post would need to report to camp on a regular schedule. If they were not heard from as expected, someone would most likely come out to check on the situation. Hopefully, they'd try a radio call first.

The Cuban guard began to regain consciousness, the Guatemalan shortly thereafter. They struggled to get up not realizing, at first, what had happened. When they were fully conscious, and aware of their predicament, Sheffield began the field interrogation in fluent Spanish.

"Gentlemen you're under our control. We have questions we would like to ask you. If you cooperate, you will not be killed. If you do not cooperate, we'll kill you with out a second thought. Do you understand?"

Both guards nodded in unison, grunting behind their vocal restraints.

"I'll remove the restraints from your mouth, do not cry out for help as it will cost you your life."

He then removed the bandannas used to gag the two guards. He waited a moment to see if either of the men would become nauseated and start retching, a common response to fear coupled with the effect of tranquilizer. He then poured some water from a canteen, and offered a little to each man. Holding it to their lips so they could drink.

"Not too much at first, but you'll be welcome to more in a little while. Are you ready to begin."

The Guatemalan started to nod in agreement, but stopped when he saw the Cuban said nothing, maintaining a neutral expression on his face. This immediately confirmed two points Steve had already surmised. The Cuban was in charge, and the Guatemalan was not a trained soldier. He was frightened by the prospect of being interrogated by Americans. They would get little or no voluntary information

from the Cuban. He looked the Cuban directly in the eyes and asked him again if he was ready to cooperate, and again there was no response.

Sheffield looked up at Bob Spencer. "Take him to the cliff and throw him off. Make it look like he slipped while taking a piss." He said in Spanish.

The reaction was instantaneous; both men began to struggle and protest wildly, but were choked off in mid-sentence when a strong hand was clamp tightly over their mouths.

The Guatemalan was gagged, but the Cuban was allowed to continue to struggle, and every now and then to spit out a word of anger. Sheffield looked at Spencer, and then raised two fingers making a plunger movement with his thumb. Wilcox went with Spencer to make certain they kept the Cuban under control.

They dragged him to the edge of the cliff and showed him the view. Then Wilcox jabbed a hypodermic into the side of his neck, just as Spencer released his hand from the Cuban's mouth and pushed him hard toward the precipice. Adrenaline from fear of death coursed through the Cuban's veins, masking the sharp prick of the hypodermic needle. He felt himself falling through space and screamed horribly once.

Just as his legs collapsed, and before he actually fell from the cliff, Spencer who had hold of the Cuban's belt the entire time, yanked him back and dragged him into the forest well away from the place where the other guard still sat in terror with Steve Sheffield.

Spencer gagged the Cuban, then in a touch of humanity, pulled mosquito netting from the Cuban's pocket and swathed his head. Next he made certain the Cuban was laid in a dry spot with his head on the up slope. He would be unconscious for at least twelve hours, and then it would take another two, to free himself. By then their mission would be completed.

There was the chance the Cuban's heart could not handle the double dose of tranquilizer, and would stop sometime in the next few hours. But that was just a matter of luck. As far as Spencer was concerned the guy was now living on bonus time now anyway. Had their mission been to eliminate as many Cubans as possible, he'd have thrown the bastard off the cliff without a second thought.

Spencer and Wilcox rejoined Sheffield. The Guatemalan was visibly shaken; he could not see what had actually happened because of the intervening foliage. But he heard the Cuban's scream of terror, and readily imagined his cart wheeling to the rocks below.

"Now, you see I was not pretending." Sheffield said to the Guatemalan. "If you do not cooperate," he picked up the dog eared flight manual and showed it to the Guatemalan, "you will learn a new way of flying. Do you understand?"

The Guatemalan nodded vigorously. The anger that flared in his eyes earlier was replaced by unmitigated fear.

"I have less time now to ask the questions I need answers to, so I advise you to answer quickly and completely.

"What is your name?"

"Alejandros. Roberto Alejandros."

"How many Cubans are in your camp?"

"Twenty."

"Does that include the officers?"

"Yes, there are three officers."

"How many Guatemalans?"

"Twelve."

"What is the purpose of the camp?"

"We are learning to fly."

"Everyone is learning to fly?"

"No only we..."

"You mean the eleven Guatemalans?"

"No all twelve of us."

"What kind of aircraft?"

"Cessna Skymaster."

"Is this the first airplane you've ever flown?"

"Yes."

"Then you must be brilliant pilots. The Skymaster is a high performance aircraft, not a training plane."

Roberto smiled, "We are the best. Chosen from a selection of many of my countrymen."

"Really? Well you must be very proud to have been selected. How many hours do you have now?"

"I have forty-two hours already." Roberto said with pride in his voice.

"Well that's wonderful, Roberto." Sheffield smiled. "Congratulations. Tell me, when did you first fly by yourself?"

"Oh, I have not yet flown by myself as yet."

"Has anyone?"

"No, we are scheduled soon."

Sheffield detected a bit of defensiveness in Roberto's voice, so he changed the subject.

"I'm sure you will, you're doing very well." Sheffield said reassuringly, but thought to himself: These Guatemalans have no talent for flight; even in a 336 they should have soloed by now.

"Why are you learning to fly?"

"We are going to provide a flying medical service to our countrymen in isolated places, like they do in Australia."

Sheffield detected a change in the frequency modulation of Roberto's voice, it seemed to flatten out.

"Really? That's a much-needed service here in Guatemala. But tell me what do the Cuban soldiers have to do with all of this?"

"They are assisting us, and protecting us."

"From whom?"

A wry expression crossed Roberto's face. "Who do you think?"

"Roberto, don't try that line of bullshit here. Your little air force is not for medical assistance, we both know that. And I told you at the beginning of our interview what would happen if you lie to me. So don't do it again."

Roberto blanched and swallowed, his breathing quickened a little.

"Just calm down. I have only a couple of more questions. Answer them truthfully and no harm will come to you. But no more bullshit, understood. I am very good at my job and I will know if you are lying." Sheffield paused for a moment to let his last statement sink in. "Are the American flight instructors being kept under guard?"

"Certainly, but we are isolated, and there is nowhere for them to go, and they know that. Their only route of escape is by air, so when we fly there's always an armed guard to assure they do not attempt to leave before we've been taught to fly."

"And then what do you plan to do with them?"

Roberto hesitated; he looked down at the ground considering how he should answer the question. "We are in disagreement on that. Originally it was understood the flight instructors would be released, or perhaps would choose to remain with us. But the Cubans and the Russians say it is too great a risk."

"Russians? How many?"

"Only two."

"And what is their role?"

"They are advisers to the Cubans. They also are creating a repair manual for the aircraft."

"How do you maintain communication with the outside? What kind of communication do you have?"

"Only the field radios, like the one you took from...from Rafael before you..."

"And when are you required to report in from your post?"

Roberto did not answer at first.

Sheffield shook his head slowly, "Come on Roberto, this is not the time to get cagey on us. When are you required to report in?"

"There are no standard reports, the radio is only for an emergency. We've been told to maintain radio silence at all times."

Sheffield looked very skeptical, "Nonsense. How do you coordinate supply deliveries and other logistical details?"

"I'm telling the truth. We maintain radio silence that is what the Cuban's require. We receive our supplies by air, I have no idea how that is coordinated."

"You have spoken of flight instructors, how many are there?"

"Only two."

"Are they quartered together?"

"Yes."

"Take a look at this diagram of your camp. In which building are the instructors housed?"

Roberto nodded when Sheffield's finger came to rest on one of the buildings shown on the diagram as partially demolished."

"How can that be? The building is wrecked. It looks as if the storm destroyed it."

Roberto shook his head. "That is where they were quartered. But as I left for my lookout duty today, the building was being torn down to provide protection for the aircraft in case the floodwaters return. The storm is expected to come back."

"How would you know of the storm, if you are maintaining radio silence?"

Roberto looked annoyed. "We do not talk on the radio, that does not mean we cannot listen."

Sheffield nodded to Wilcox and made the plunger sign with his thumb and forefingers. Roberto suddenly became very agitated, he struggled to get away. Tears filled his eyes, but they were tears of anger and frustration.

"North American bastards, untie me and we will fight mano a mano. You said if I told you the truth, you would not kill me."

Sheffield slammed Roberto to the ground with a resounding thud. "I will keep my promise. We are not going to kill you. But we cannot allow you to go shooting your mouth off either, not until we've completed our mission."

Sheffield motioned with his head and Wilcox showed Roberto the hypodermic needle. "This will put you to sleep for awhile. When you awaken, it will take a little while to get free. But you will eventually get back to your compatriots, by then we will be gone. Try to remember this much: Tell your friends the United States will not allow Russians or Cubans to turn Central America into another Vietnam.

"If I were you I'd find another career. The Pokomam are doomed if they continue to pursue the idea of dividing Guatemala. Today you are being spared because our orders are not to kill anyone unless we have no other choice. You had better rethink your political priorities, Roberto."

He nodded once to Wilcox who then plunged the hypodermic needle into Roberto's biceps. He winced but did not cry out. There was anger in his eyes, then the stupefied gaze of the drugged just before he slumped into a deep sleep.

Chapter 13

They made their way back to the lookout point, leaving Roberto trussed up. Frank was working the Quastar.

"How's it look?" Sheffield asked.

"Their still screwin' around down there," Frank replied with out taking his eye from the scope. "Trying to get the aircraft positioned for the next down pour. You learn anything worth while from those two back there?"

"Primarily a confirmation on the personnel count we took earlier." Sheffield said. "There are two Russian advisors in there as well. Steve paused for a moment, thinking. "Tonight's the night Jim Richards is expecting us. We'll get in as close as possible, then look for his signal."

Steve moved over to the Quastar. He peered through it for a minute or two, then pulled away and looked over at Frank. "Where's that semi with the red cross on it?"

Frank nodded in the direction of Sosela. "It moved on through the town, then headed north. I didn't pay much attention, been watching the activity at the airfield."

Sheffield began to pan the scope very slowly, moving it little by little until it's focus fell on the truck. "That's strange, it's parked in a stand of trees." He pulled his head back. "What do you make of this?"

Frank looked through the scope, stared at the truck for several seconds. Then glanced over at Sheffield. "You ever read the Iliad?"

Steve shook his head.

"Heard about Helen of Troy?"

"Yeah the face that launched a thousand ships," Steve replied. "But what's that got to do with the semi."

"I think we got ourselves a Trojan Horse. Take another look."

Sheffield moved over to the scope.

"Notice it's a Referbox, but the engine's not running." Frank continued. "Now if they were carrying anything that required refrigeration, why'd they park it with the diesel shut off so's the Refer can't run? Another thing, look at the grass to the right of the cab. It's all crushed down. I'd say a sizable body of men dropped out of that trailer, then moved off into the forest."

Sheffield withdrew from the scope and started breaking it down. "I'd say you're exactly right, but who the hell are they?"

"Don't matter," Prescott replied. "If they were expected at the airfield, they wouldn't be taking the great circle route."

Steve nodded. "Got that right. Let's move out. The sooner we get into position down below, the better. He swung the CAR-15 assault rifle off his shoulder and pulled the cocking mechanism back, then released it. "Lock and load lads, we'll get lethal before this night's over."

###

The two Cuban guards trudged up the steep muddy trail towards the lookout. It was nearly dark, deep twilight had fallen all about them. It had begun to rain again. They wore ponchos to keep the rain off their bodies, with felt hats pulled low on their foreheads to keep the rain out of their eyes. The ponchos covered their AK-47 rifles, hampering their ability to use them quickly. Clearly they were not well versed in small team operations. They walked with their heads down, stopping every now and then to look around.

The SEALs saw them long before they reached the kill zone. Sheffield signaled to use the air guns. One of the guards actually managed to pull the dart out of his neck, but the tranquilizer had already begun to reach his brain. He stood in the middle of the path transfixed, staring at the dart as if it were the most remarkable thing he'd ever seen in his life. Then toppled face down in the mud.

McIntyer couldn't help but laugh as he hefted one of the fallen men over his shoulder, then carried him to a spot well off the trail.

"You know something, Steve?" Dave Wilcox said. "I don't think our young friend Roberto was completely candid about their communications routine. Looks like these two were sent to check out a possible problem."

Steve nodded. "No doubt. But all that sawing and hammering today must have worn them out. Nothing like too little sleep, and too much work, to really fuck up the thought processes. Well anyway, that's two less to worry about later."

"Or two more when they wake up," Ross retorted. "Let's make certain we pack their weapons and ammunition with us."

Steve nodded in agreement "Definitely."

###

Ten Cuban Special Operations troops led by five KGB field operatives formed five three man squads. Each had a specific assignment. At 23:00 they moved silently towards the airfield.

###

Jim Richards awoke. He glanced at the luminescent oversized dial on his dive watch, 23:35. He'd set a clock in his mind before going to sleep; he was awake on time as always.

He arose silently from his cot, stepped quietly over to where Matt slept, and then clamped a hand over his mouth rudely awakening him. He whispered in his ear. "Time to go."

They'd bunked for the night with the student pilots, since their own quarters had been torn down to float the aircraft. All around them Guatemalans slumbered in deep sleep. Exhausted from the day's work, and little sleep the night before.

Outside, Jim Richards and Matt Harding moved quietly around the back of the building. Guards were posted at the perimeter of the encampment but they were mostly concerned about aircraft security, their attention directed towards the airfield. The rattle of rain on the canvass-topped barracks covered any noise Richards and Harding created as they evaded the guards and made their way towards the northeastern perimeter of the bivouac area.

###

At 23:35, the first squad of Spec Ops reached the perimeter of the airfield. They halted just inside the tree line west of the airfield to allow the other squads time to move into position.

A three quarter moon floated high above the overcast occasionally breaking through holes in the clouds. Although rain fell steadily, the return of Emile was apparently not as severe as predicted; it had come ashore farther north leaving them outside the area of heaviest rainfall.

The perimeter guards were half asleep, not expecting trouble. They foolishly believed the secrecy of their operation and its remote location was all the

vigilance required. The KGB adviser smiled cynically to himself, this should prove an easy operation.

He and the other Soviet advisers had reckoned to the very perimeter of the encampment earlier in the day, studying and observing their targets, which all looked exhausted from a day of heavy labor in warm humid air, most likely preceded by a night of little sleep. A deadly combination.

The adviser looked at his Russian made field watch, worn on the inside of his wrist to assure the glow of its tritium impregnated face would not give him away. 23:40.

Squad Four reached the pre-determined back-up position selected during the recon. The KGB adviser leading the squad noted two persons emerging from the pilot's barracks. In the dark he was unable to determine who the men were; however, as is often the case when the mind is uncertain, the knowledge gap is filled with a logical explanation. In this case the squad leader concluded the two were relief guards, headed for the post north of the airfield.

Squad Two continued east, skirting the north perimeter towards its guard post. The KGB leader also noted the two men who emerged from the barracks. It occurred to him they could be Jim Richards and Matt Harding, as they were clearly larger than the Guatemalans. Or possibly they were the Russians. Hard to tell in the dark, both being about the same size. Either way both pairs were to be taken alive for interrogation.

Squad Two's leader picked up the pace, he wanted to take out the north perimeter guards before their relief arrived. No sense dealing with four men, if they could take two at a time separately.

Squads Three and Five linked up and moved in unison, acting as the spear point of the night attack. The operation's commander led squad Five.

Earlier, squad Four had silently overwhelmed the western perimeter guards. Now Two and Three would eliminate the flanking guard posts, coming at them from behind where any noise of their approach would be thought to come from their own relief.

Squad Four remained at the back-up position in reserve for a flanking attack, in case significant resistance was met.

Once the guard posts were down, Squads One, Two, Three and Five would make their way through the camp with silenced weapons, killing everyone except those few they intended to capture. If all went well, the aircraft would not be damaged, a bonus into the bargain.

###

The SEALs reached the north perimeter just after dark. Vinnie set up a studies and observations post high in a tree over looking the barracks area. He'd waited for a sizable downpour before climbing, as a result he was neither seen, nor heard.

From his observation post he identified the Spec Ops recon team through a Starlight scope. Sighting the recon team was a bonus; he'd climbed the tree to scan for the device Jim Richards was supposed to have left that afternoon. A small infrared strobe carried into the encampment concealed in the false bottom of a shaving cream can, the concealment engineered in his warehouse prior to his departure. He'd set the strobe just inside the perimeter at around 17:00 that evening.

###

The sound the north perimeter guards heard was nearly identical to a can of soda being opened. The pain they felt not unlike a bee sting. The first guard slapped at his neck, and then fell forward onto his face into the mud. For the second guard the stinging seemed to continue. He tried to brush it away, but his hand would not make contact with the skin on his neck. While to an observer he'd appear to be fanning himself. His legs buckled, he too sagged to the ground.

Steve Sheffield and Ross McIntyre moved forward, pulled the darts out of each guard's neck, and then set them into seated positions. Their heads nodding forward, onto the sandbagged revetment, in drugged sleep.

###

As they crept forward inch by inch toward the north perimeter guard post, Squad Two's adviser could not believe their good luck. Both guards were sound asleep. He signaled his troops to crawl forward and slit the guard's throats.

The two soldiers nodded, and then stepped forward one silent foot at a time. They were almost to the guards' when they heard the sound of fabric tearing, followed almost simultaneously by a muffled grunt, and a soft crunch like walnut shells cracked inside a wet dishtowel. Fear seized their hearts. They looked at each other, and then turned to look behind.

Their assault rifles were slung at their back. The knives they carried to slay the rebel guards were held low to one side. The first of the pair thought he'd bumped into a tree as he turned towards the sound. That's odd, he thought, it had not been there a moment before. Perhaps he'd stumbled in the dark. Odder things

had happened when moving through uneven terrain at night. He tried to step back, his shirt seemed to snag on something. Oh God! He tried to bring his knife upward in a desperate arc, but his arm did not move.

There was no pain at first, just the feeling that someone had punched him hard in the stomach. A dull thud reverberating inside his chest cavity. Involuntarily he grunted, as his breath seemed to evaporate. He gasped for air, nothing. And then there was a burning pain in his chest, like the worst case of indigestion he'd ever experienced. His legs buckled, but he did not fall. In fact he felt himself lifted upward for a moment. Then a sudden stop, a downward jerk. Piercing, excruciating pain in the center of his chest. He stared in total terror into ice blue eyes. The man was huge, his face jungle green. In his mind the Cuban screamed, but only a gurgling moan escaped his lips.

McIntyre rocked his combat knife left, then right, making certain he'd severed his opponent's aorta. Then yanked the knife out. There was a sucking sound followed by a gurgling sigh of air, as the Cuban's diaphragm collapsed upon itself. A bubble of putrid stomach gas wafted upward. He released the Cuban's shirt, and then shoved the body off to one side.

Just as the second Cuban started to turn, he felt a hand clamp over his nose and mouth. A burning pain seared around his side and exploded into his stomach. Immediately he shit his pants. He tore his head to the right, breaking the grip on his face as he tried to suck air, but could not. Pain immobilized him.

He knew what he must do, instinctively he tried to swing around and thrust his own knife into his opponent. His mind visualized the concept, but his body would not respond. For a moment it was as if he were outside himself. The pain so intense, it seemed as if he'd left his body, unable to withstand the onslaught any longer.

Steve Sheffield yanked his combat knife from the Cuban's right kidney just as the terrified man twisted his head free of his grip. He then slashed downward across the Cuban's forearm, cutting muscle and tendons to the bone. His opponent's knife dropped to the ground.

Finally, Sheffield drove his knife deep into the side of his opponent's neck, forward of the sinewy support muscles, taut as a rope in reflex agony. Then ripped outward, cutting through the windpipe and severing the carotid artery in one powerful stroke. Blood sprayed and splattered the foliage. He then pushed the body forward; it landed with a thud and lay twitching next to his compatriot, who'd struck the ground only a moment earlier.

The two SEALs stared at each other, separated by less than two feet, eyes wide. Then Sheffield blinked, and took a deep breath. The lust of combat left their

eyes, as both men turned to move in the direction of where Vinnie had taken down Squad Two's Russian leader.

###

Jim Richards led Matt Harding up hill behind the barracks; he silently counted his steps remembering where he'd left the infrared strobe. They were barely into the tree line when they were tripped, then pulled quietly into the foliage.

Frank Prescott unclasped his hand from Richards' mouth; he'd not resisted expecting something of the sort. But Matt struggled with his unseen captor. Finally, Bob Spencer whispered, "Stay the fuck still!" Harding calmed down.

Prescott rolled Richards over. "You okay?"

"Sure, except for a slightly wrenched neck." He rolled away from Prescott and rose to his haunches. Then looked over at Harding who was groveling on the ground, flailing his arms about until Spencer spoke to him.

Prescott did not waste time making any introductions. "We've got trouble, the camp's under attack. We'll withdraw beyond the perimeter, then circle west."

The SEALs and Jim Richards moved off silently. Matt Harding did his best, but compared to the others he was about as stealthy as a bull elephant. Fortunately, the rain continued to fall, covering their retreat. They moved up the hill, well beyond the perimeter, and then settled down under the forest canopy with Dave Wilcox and Frank Prescott on look out. Steve Sheffield, Ross McIntyer and Vinnie soon joined them.

"What's the status on the aircraft?" Sheffield asked.

Richards tried to wipe the mud from his face, but only managed to smear it more. "Four are operational, but unflyable."

Sheffield frowned. "What kind of moronic statement is that?"

Richards grinned. "Four were flooded, they're useless until they've been completely overhauled. And we can't fly any of the others until the storm passes and the field dries up enough to allow taxi. So I hope you've got a back up plan."

Sheffield nodded. "I do." He grinned broadly. "Our feet."

Richards groaned. "You got to be shitin' me."

"Shhh." The warning came from Matt Harding. "Listen."

Off in the distance they heard soft popping sounds, and cries of injured men pleading for mercy suddenly cut off.

"Jesus." Matt Harding had a look of anguish on his face. Just then Frank Prescott scrambled into their midst.

"You'd better check this out, Steve."

They all scrambled forward to where Frank and Dave had set up their observation post on an outcropping of rock overhung with thick foliage. Steve took the sniper's rifle from Frank and aimed it towards the barracks.

He counted men with weapons as they moved from one building to the next, their muzzle flashes flaring with exaggerated brightness in the Starlight scope. He passed the weapon over to Jim Richards.

Chaos ruled below. A few men, probably Cubans, as they were the only ones with loaded weapons, tried to defend themselves. The Guatemalans tried to flee towards the forest, they died in mid stride at full run, or were blown through the walls of their canvas buildings. While the student pilots who tried to surrender, died with their hands in the air.

Richards passed the rifle back to Frank. Harding did not want to look. The gunfire lasted less than five minutes

####

Smoke from the gunfire laid down to neutralize the camp's occupants drifted in miniature clouds through the compound, wending its way about tree trunks like ghostly wraiths. A disgusting odor of blood, feces, and cordite hung in the moist humid air. It had stopped raining.

Even with suppressed weapons, a significant amount of battle noise had ensued, and when the weapons ceased to fire an eerie silence prevailed, broken sporadically now and then by the pathetic moans and whimpers of dying men.

The Spec Ops troops methodically counted and cataloged the killed in action, finishing off those still living with a nine millimeter round to the head. The attackers had taken no casualties inside the encampment.

####

"Reporting as requested, Sir." A Russian adviser saluted his Commander smartly"

"Give me an after action report?"

"Twenty four dead. We've captured two technical advisers, both Soviet comrades. There's no sign of the Americans. Also Squad Two has not checked in."

The Commander frowned. "They were assigned to neutralize the northeast perimeter guard post. Correct?"

"Yes, Sir."

"We counted thirty residents in the main camp, plus our two comrades and the Americans, so we have six residents unaccounted for, and the Americans." The Commander thought for a moment. "Contact Squad Three. Have them recon forward to the northeast perimeter guard post. Tell them not to engage the enemy, only observe and report conditions."

"Yes, Sir."

####

Steve Sheffield pulled his eye away from the Starlight scope, and then pointed to Dave Wilcox, Vince Morris and Frank Prescott. "We've got a three man squad headed for the northeast guard post. Hit 'em hard and loud." The three men nodded once in unison and melted off into the dark.

####

Squad Three moved forward with extreme caution. Their Russian adviser took point. It was a slow laborious process, perhaps one foot forward every thirty seconds. Look. Listen. Step. Then repeat the process. Their Russian adviser did not expect to find the guard post occupied. Perhaps Squad Two had somehow alerted the guards and they'd run off with Two in pursuit. Worst case now was to come upon Squad Two making its way back and end up shooting each other. He checked his watch, 03:30, two and half hours of dark left.

Gradually the guard post resolved into view, the guards face down on their revetment. The adviser stayed still, observing, listening. His two Cuban troopers knelt behind him, weapons facing left and right. Where was Squad Two? The adviser signaled for the Cubans to move forward and join him. Soon all three men hunkered together. Their senses alert for the slightest movement about them.

####

"I swear, we are not in league with the Americans." Aerotech Alexki Strasinkov said. "Our job was to develop maintenance manuals for the Cessna Skymasters. The only Americans here were the pilots. They each brought an aircraft, then stayed on as flight instructors."

"Were they captives, or here of their own free will?" Commander Rostov Karlin asked.

"They were not captives, exactly." Strasinkov replied. "And I was under the impression they supported Guatemala's bid for freedom."

"Where did they get the aircraft?" Commander Karlin asked.

"I don't know, a profiteer perhaps. And unfortunately, Sir, your men have killed the only person in this camp who had that information. All we know is Commander Reyes referred to him as Jorge Androus."

At that moment, Commander Karlin's first lieutenant, the adviser to Squad Five, entered the Maintenance shack where the interrogation of the Russian technician was taking place. "Excuse me, Sir. We found these documents in the Commandante's office. Also a mud and clay relief map of Guatemala.

The Commander opened the documents, and began to read. There was silence in the compound for several minutes. Then his face began to turn beet red. He looked up from the document, anger smoldered in his eyes. The Russian technician blanched, more fearful than ever of his own fate.

"We've been duped into killing our own allies." Commander Karlin said in a soft voice. He thought for a moment, and then spoke in a commanding voice. "Recall Squad Three now. Then set up defensive positions about this Command Post. Put two snipers in the trees. Order the squad leaders to report to me here, for a briefing."

####

The radio crackled in its holster, it startled Squad Three's adviser. Radio silence must be maintained in the field, unless there's a grave emergency. A chill ran down the adviser's back as he reached for the radio. His two Cuban compatriots went prone on the ground looking wildly about them. They too knew something was wrong.

"Pull back, now." The order over the radio came from their second in command. The adviser pressed the button twice, no need to answer with voice, no need to further complicate the situation. Two clicks on the transmit button was

all required. His thumb was still holding down the second click when the flashes appeared.

Ninety rounds from three Colt CAR 15 .223 cartridge magazines were expended with deadly accuracy at a fire rate of 800 rounds per minute. Before the roar of gunfire arrived at his position, the Russian adviser saw bright winking muzzles flashes. Then heard the slap of bullets striking cloth and tissue. The snap and crack of teeth and bone shattering mixed with the delicate sound of red and clear fluid splattering soft green foliage. And then the roar reached his ears.

The adviser twisted, and writhed involuntarily. His nerves and muscles reacting to the searing impact of rounds traveling twice the speed of sound, as if such gyrations would take away the pounding pain.

Then, as the roar subsided, he found, quite suddenly, he couldn't even twist. And everything below his shoulders was numb. He inched forward, grunts and moans escaped his lips. No thought of using the weapon, which had been knocked from his hands, crossed his shocked mind. No thoughts at all really, only the involuntary wish to survive. His fingers clawed mud dug tiny furrows as he tried in vain to drag his broken body to safety.

The last sound he heard, was the scraping of used ammunition magazines, being ejected from red hot weapons, followed by the metallic scrape and click of fresh ones sliding into place, and bolts dropping into position. He never heard the final, single rifle crack that mercifully ended his life.

###

The gunfire came first over the open channel, an instant before it echoed through the camp, a weird stereophonic amplification of carnage out on the hill. The radio ceased to broadcast moments before the last echo rolled past the Command Post. And then there was a single crack.

###

Frank Prescott peered through the infrared Starlight scope; he softly described to Steve what he saw. "Okay we've got seven armed defenders, formed into a staggered perimeter about the maintenance shack."

Steve thought for a moment. "We've got six confirmed KIAs. That should leave nine out of the original fifteen, seven in foxholes, two in the maintenance shack."

"Roger that, wait. I'm picking up a heat reflection in one of the trees. Can't get a good reading because of the intervening branches. Could be a snipe."

Sheffield frowned, "Can't be more than nine left, maybe the condors are already on line for a little road kill."

Ross shook his head. "The stink birds don't fly at night, or while there's lethal activity. They're wary bastards."

"There were two Russian mechanics working on developing an aircraft manual. Maybe they were spared?" Matt Harding said.

"Could be. Keep watching, Frank. Let me know what you see."

Prescott ever so carefully moved the sight picture in slow methodical adjustments. Right one inch. Up one inch. Down one inch. Five minutes elapsed.

"Yep, got another hot spot in the trees. This one's definitely human."

"Can you pick him?" Sheffield asked.

"Maybe, but just as likely to spike a round. In any case, number two's sure to see the muzzle flash. Next thing you know, a hundred angry lead hornets will be arriving on our butts."

Sheffield nodded. "Okay, let's pull back from this outcropping, and do a little brain storming."

###

The six SEALs, along with Jim Richards and Matt Harding sat in a circle.

"Listen up." Steve Sheffield said in a low voice. "Right now we've got eleven defenders set up in a staggered perimeter defense. Two of them are the Russian mechanics, Matt referred to earlier. The attack commander, and his second in command, appears to have established a command post inside the maintenance shack.

"My guess is the foxhole grunts have been told to expect an attack. If one does not occur before sunrise, they may assess their chances of using the aircraft to escape." Steve paused for a moment, then looked at Harding. "Do you know of any weapons, or ammunition reserves?"

Harding nodded once. "In the maintenance shack. Fifteen crates of AK-47 ammo. Three crates of rocket propelled grenades, a couple crates of assault rifles, some hand grenades, nine millimeter and .45 caliber pistol ammo, and I believe pistols as well. I wasn't able to get a full count on everything. They were

covered with tarpaulin most of the time, though I did manage to get a peek underneath for about two minutes at one point."

Steve thought for a moment. "These guys are either expecting an imminent attack, or waiting for reinforcements. Frank, what do you figure our chances are of taking them before dawn?"

Prescott thought for a moment. "I've used the scope to check out each position. They've set up a corridor that leads down the natural slope of terrain. To the left and right, mines with trip wires and electric detonators wired to the trees. Their backs are to the airfield, which means they're expecting an attack from this direction. Our best shot would be to flank."

Jim Richards asked: "If they're so concerned about making it through the night, and then hauling ass, why don't they just blow the aircraft now? Then use the same transportation out they used coming in."

Ross spoke up. "Fuel and time most likely, probably not enough of either to make it all the way to their out-country exfiltration point. We found no ID on the three we took down silently. But clearly none were Guatemalan. Two were most likely Cuban, and I'd lay you ten to one the other was a Ruskie. "

Steve nodded in agreement "Exactly. The truck they used to ingress is too slow to get far before word spreads among the Pokomam rebels. These guys will be hunted, once news of the massacre gets out."

"Unless, they come up with some sort of alibi." Richards said. "A tale about having intel on an imminent American attack. A desperate effort to reinforce. Arriving too late."

McIntyre nodded in agreement. "They'll find the guards we drugged. Eyewitness proof. Americans did the deed."

Sheffield raised his hand palm outward. "Maybe, but they've got their butts in a sling for now. They know some sort of force is out here. They know the United States has been using covert operations teams in country to hunt down rebel leaders, and their foreign advisers. What they don't know is how many we are, or if we'll attack. Their best option is to make it 'til dawn, then use the aircraft. Much simpler than trying to manuscript justification for a slaughter."

Matt Harding frowned. "But why would they massacre their own people? The air wing was a Soviet sanctioned operation."

Steve Sheffield shrugged. "No tellin'. Bad intel maybe. Could be they thought the base was ours."

Jim Richards and Matt Harding looked at each other in silence. There was no need to speak; they each knew what the other was thinking. They'd been conned.

Chapter 14

Sunnyvale, California - April 1971

David Pershing, was an entirely unremarkable twenty-two year old, of average height, with crew cut red hair, and freckled fair skin that sunburned easily. His eyelashes, and eyebrows, were somewhat lighter than the color of his hair, which did little to enhance his pale blue eyes. He was not particularly athletic, consequently he'd found little companionship during his school years, when athleticism was of great importance.

He dreamed of one day being as successful as his father, who'd made a sizable fortune selling computer systems, before sales territories were carved into sub-territories, and quotas were designed to be the equivalent of the proverbial carrot on a stick.

Unfortunately, David lacked his father's extroverted personality and empathy for a customer's needs. And although David tried his hand at sales, as with the athletic programs he gone out for, he'd failed miserably.

But David Pershing had an ace in the hole, he had the ability to recognize the value of information. And he began to visualize himself as a data broker - dashing handsome with a daring he chose to hide beneath an unexceptional exterior.

Ten miles north of San Jose, California in a rapidly developing industrial park, International Technologies Corporation occupied a modern three-story concrete and glass research facility that covered the equivalent of two city blocks. The complex consisted of three separate buildings, one of which was entirely off limits to the general public.

When David Pershing asked his father to help him land a job at ITC, Harold Pershing was proud, and more than happy to comply. In fact, as luck would have it, ITC needed someone to fill a vacancy in their black vault. Who would be better suited than the son of a man already vetted? The son of someone familiar with the computer technology used in the operation. Why it was almost like getting a new employee with a personal trainer thrown in for free.

At first David was excited by the fact he could now afford his own car, and apartment. But the little Ford Pinto wasn't exactly a girl trap, and the Corvette he knew he had to have was a little outside his budget.

As is always the case, if you seek you will find, though seldom does the opportunity come in quite the way expected.

Not far from ITC's Space Communications Division, where satellite photos were developed before being FAXed on to the photo analysts at CIA, was a watering hole called The Sextant. It had a spacious cocktail lounge, made to seem intimate with soft lighting, red leather booths, and partitions decorated with maps of constellations that glowed beneath forty-watt black lights.

David Pershing sat at the far end of the bar drinking his fifth Beefeaters martini, and staring at the ample cleavage displayed by one of the nubile young things that occupied a spot in the ITC information management center. The current terminology for a secretarial pool.

David had exhausted all possible come-on lines long before he'd finished his first drink. In fact, he'd used the lines only in his own mind. He was about to extract himself from the grip of the barstool's sweat inducing Naugahide seat cover, and wobble into the dining room, when a man in his early forties sat down next to him.

"My name's George, George Williams." Gnady Lebedonev stuck out his hand. "Yours?"

"David Pershing." He shook the proffered hand almost reflexively.

"Pleased to meet you," Gnady said. "I was in the other night. One of your colleagues at ITC indicated you were the person I needed to talk to. I'm a writer. Novels. You may have read one of them?"

David looked at the man askance. He was having a difficult time switching from the internal dialog he'd been running before Gnady introduced himself.

"Winston McFee, my pen name. Most recent release: The Excelsior Connection, spy novel, you know?"

"Haven't read it" David said, shaking his head. "Sorry."

"Oh don't be, its really just run of the mill for a man in your position."

David frowned, "My position?"

"At ITC, Space Communications."

David smiled deprecatingly. "Oh, well its really just a clerical position."

Gnady smiled charmingly. "Now, now don't be so modest. Black vault and all that? I'm writing a character into my next work. The hero of the story actually. In a position just like yours. He's a modest young man, working in obscure desperation, unable to share the critical tasks he performs on behalf of an ungrateful nation. Lonely for the soft touch of female companionship. Until one day a crisis presents itself that only he can resolve." Gnady looked at David's glass as if he'd noted for the first time it was empty. He signaled the bar tender to pour them both another round.

He smiled at David. "You see I need a young man to provide me with a feeling for the true environment inside the vault. May I buy you dinner?"

One month later David Pershing delivered the first classified photographs and data tapes to Gnady Lebedonev for the sum of \$15,000.00 dollars. He was on his way to Corvette heaven.

####

In September 1971 the Satellite Reconnaissance Center at CIA's Langley, Virginia headquarters was located in a windowless room. The room had a series of illuminated work surfaces partitioned into free standing cubicles that prevented glare spill over. To assure good contrast, no ambient, or overhead light was allowed in the room. As a result, when someone first walked into the room, they had the disconcerting feeling they'd suddenly entered Alice's Wonderland. Everything seemed upside down, as light from the illuminated surfaces spilled upward into the darkness.

Each cubicle was designated by the quadrant of the earth reviewed by the assigned analyst, and by the cubicle's position in the room. The analyst assigned to Central America occupied cubicle A-14. He'd just received the most recent photographs from ITC satellite over-flights, as well as data tapes from ground sensor readings emanating from the Pyramidal Remote Sensor and Communications System. Fred Hopkins noted two items of concern, and immediately contacted Deputy Director - Covert Operations, Elmo Jefferson.

####

Dr. Richard Holt parked his Saab sport coupe in the lot adjacent to D'Arbor Grill, a quaint little restaurant in old Georgetown, Virginia. He entered the back door, then passed down a narrow hallway that ran past the rest rooms. He turned

left just before he reached the main dining area, then climbed a set of stairs to a private room on the second floor of the old historic building.

He did not knock on the door when he reached it, but entered briskly. Elmo Jefferson was seated in a leather-dining chair at a round table laid with white linen, and sterling silver.

"Afternoon Elmo, thank you for taking the time to meet with me."

Elmo nodded and smiled his Cheshire cat grin. "My pleasure, Richard. Besides you know I would never pass-up a lunch at the Grill."

"One of the small perquisites that makes this thankless job of ours tolerable." Dr. Holt said. "Let's eat, and talk business after. I'm famished."

They each had the luncheon special: Rack of lamb with a Dejon mustard glaze, saffron rice, and petit peas. A bottle of St. Emilion to compliment the excellent meal. Over espresso and a fine Macanudo wrapped cigar they got down to business.

"I've reviewed your report." Dr. Holt sighed audibly. "Its always the unexpected problem that messes things up." He took a puff on his cigar then looked at the tip, noting the wraith like appearance of the smoke. "What's this business about a SEAL Three squad operating in the area?"

Elmo nodded, his eyes twinkling. "John Harding ordered the operation. His son Matt is a guest at the rebel camp."

Dr. Holt shook his head with irritation. "What the hell's he doing down there. And how does John Harding come by the authority to run his own op out of country. I thought he ran a domestic proprietary?"

Elmo shrugged. "Matt uncovered a scheme to supply Pokomam rebels with the civilian version of Cessna O2s. Guess he got a wild hair up his butt to cowboy it alone."

Dr. Holt got up from his chair and walked over to the window, he opened it by swinging the old window frame outward, then took a deep breath of air before turning back to Jefferson. "If that collateral operation fails, and SEALs are killed or captured, our operation will fall apart."

Elmo shrugged. "I wouldn't worry about it too much if I were you. Take a look at these photos." Jefferson produced a manila envelope from a brief case that stood on the floor next to his chair. He handed it to Richard Holt.

Holt quickly reviewed each shot. "Jesus, looks like one hell of a fire fight."

###

Matt Harding and Jim Richards gradually made their way forward, careful to stay well clear of the advancing SEALs twenty-five steps ahead.

A round was fired by one of the Cuban snipers in their general direction, it struck an intervening branch and went wide. They both dropped face down in the mud. Richards pulled an old forty-five autoloader out of the waist band at the small of his back. He and Harding crawled forward until the terrain shadowed them from the sniper's perch.

Harding looked over at Richards. "Where'd you pick that up?" He said in a soft whisper.

Richards grinned. "First night in camp while you were sawing logs, I reconned the maintenance shack, liberated it, along a few dozen rounds. Figured it might come in handy."

Jim Richards glanced at his dive watch, the second hand glided over its iridescent face. Each numeral winked out momentarily as the orbiting pointer passed over. Richards was reminded of another mission whose end game was played out in the early hours of the morning.

Oh five hundred dark. Dawn was near at hand, the sky turning a gun metal gray, visibility improving. Ahead and slightly to their left was an enemy position, both occupants of the foxhole appeared to be asleep. Richards frowned, he glanced to the right and farther ahead, another position. One soldier clearly awake on guard, the other dozing. His eyes searched left, right, left. Another position, same situation. He came back to the position closer to them, both guards asleep. Something wasn't right, it tickled the back of his mind.

He shrugged his intuition off, then thought logically. The Cubans had used a few of the dead as dummies in their foxholes. Probably one live defender and one dead in each, to double the apparent strength of their forces.

###

It began with a single rifle shot fired from the seven millimeter Weatherby, Frank Prescott carried. The round found its mark, one of two snipers perched in the trees let out an involuntary grunt, then fell to the ground with a resounding thud. As expected the men in the foxholes keyed on Frank's muzzled flash and opened fire. Bad idea, Frank had dropped behind the boulder he'd used to steady

his weapon. The only thing the Cubans accomplished was to announce their positions in flickering yellow muzzles blasts.

The SEALs were spread out, they returned fire in a seemingly random pattern. For the next forty-five seconds, Jim Richards and Matt Harding were treated to a spectacular pyrotechnics display.

The Cubans had raided the maintenance shack, supplemented their silenced firearms with AK-47 assault rifles loaded with full metal jacket military rounds, every third a tracer.

The SEALs fired no tracer rounds, and maintained absolute fire discipline. Their fire pattern, a specific order of attack: Two rounds by one SEAL, then roll to another position before return fire could key on his muzzle flash. Two more rounds by another SEAL at least ten meters distant from the first. Two more rounds by another on the opposite side of the first and thirty meters from the second.

To Harding and Richards the fire fight looked almost like a staged light show, the audience a forest of trees armed with flash cameras. At first the roar of the AK-47s was indistinguishable as individual gunfire, the Cubans blasted away on full automatic. Their tracers arched left and right, splintering into shards of multi colored sparks, or whining off at odd angles in ricochet.

But the SEALs' accurate fire quickly took its toll. Jim Richards saw a Cuban's head split apart silhouetted in the light of tracer rounds from another position. Other Cubans went down in silence, or with one last agonizing scream of pain. Gradually the roar subsided to short bursts. Cubans rose momentarily from a concealed position to fire, wary to expose themselves more. Only three foxholes appeared to be operational.

Suddenly, the maintenance shack blew. A grenade thrown through the doorway had landed amongst weapons and ammunition. A man came running out on fire, screaming. He fell to the ground rolling about in agony until a burst of two rounds silenced his misery. In the back ground the ammunition cooked off sending bullets, tracers, and shrapnel in all directions.

Shrapnel, or a stray round sizzled by Jim Richards' head. He ducked and pulled Harding down beside him, they rolled back into the depression.

###

"When were these photos taken?" Dr. Holt asked.

"This morning, 'bout five AM." Jefferson replied.

"Who's attacking who?"

"The tracers are coming out of fixed positions, so I presume they are the Cubans at the camp. The SEALs appear to have convinced them they are a superior force."

Dr. Holt continued to look at the photos. "Looks like they blew an ammunition dump as well. What about the aircraft?"

Jefferson shrugged. "Don't know, that's all we got on the look down. The next pass was partially obscured by cloud cover again."

"Have you heard from the SEAL team?"

Jefferson shook his head, "No. But that's not necessarily bad. They were to maintain radio silence unless they were in a dire emergency. We've got a Sea Stallion helicopter ferreted away at an airport just south of Dolores, Belize. About twenty-five miles from the camp. British SAS are cooperating, but would rather we pulled this off without having to use the field."

Holt nodded his head vigorously. "Absolutely, we don't need anyone identifying American or British helicopters. That Cuban raid on the camp was supposed to destroy a rogue element set up on its own with our financial support. This rescue bullshit throws a crimp into the manuscript."

Elmo's mouth turned downward. "You can forget the original scenario, Dick, regardless of whether or not we use the Sea Stallion to extract our people."

Holt winced visibly as he watched Jefferson reach into the brown briefcase, fearful of what calamity would be extracted next.

###

Sunnyvale, California - July 1971

It was the new Corvette that caused Sheila Demming to look twice at David Pershing. Her first look confirmed everything he'd put on his application. Her second raised the question: Where'd he get the money for the Corvette?

The National Security Agency paid Sheila twelve hundred dollars a month on top of her pay at ITC, which raised her income to the same amount she'd made at NSA headquarters before being hired by ITC as an entry level personnel clerk. The nature of the information ITC employees were privy to was too sensitive to

rely exclusively upon the questionable vetting offered by a private sector Human Resource Department.

###

Dr. Richard Holt sighed and set Sheila Demming's report aside. "You got anymore misery in that briefcase of yours?"

Elmo chuckled as he poured another espresso for Dr. Holt. "No that's it for today. But regardless of how things turn out with Harding's rescue, you've got a serious flaw in your disinformation scenario. We must assume Soviet analysts will soon realize the rogue operation their special ops guys attacked was in fact a legitimate GRU black operation."

Dr. Holt nodded in agreement, then took a long draw on his cigar. He blew smoke slowly towards the window, and watched as it was sucked out into the clear Virginia air. Unconsciously, he calculated the pressure differential between the warm air in the room and the cool air outside that created the outflow phenomenon. He continued to stare out the window for a few moments, then turned back to Elmo.

He smiled, his owl like eyes twinkling. "Everything has an upside, you know?. From the KGB's point of view, Colonel Skorokhodov's the only person with knowledge of the true nature of the Sosela operation. They may decide to take him out anyway just to save face. Either way we get the same payoff.

His eyes turned cold again. "What are we doing about David Pershing, and the Pyramidal system?"

Elmo looked visibly annoyed. "Pyramidal's history, of course. I wasn't able to get an executive sanction approved for Pershing. His treason hasn't cost any lives."

"Yet you mean."

Elmo nodded in agreement. "For now, Pershing's just being watched. His access level's been altered without his knowledge. So we can use him to disinform. Then he gets passed over to the Bureau, who, with our evidentiary help, should have no problem building an airtight case."

Holt thought for a moment. "How has he been passing the data?"

"Dead letter drops. We've identified all of them, and photographed his contact. Kind of unusual though."

"How's that?" Richard Holt asked as he exhaled a puff of smoke.

"The contact flies up from Los Angeles to San Francisco International. Rents a car to visit the drop. Then departs from San Jose Airport, after the pick up is made. We figure the Soviet embassy in San Francisco has tumbled to our O.P. on Pacific Street, so their not using a local. Anyway, we're working on this L.A. connection. Should have a name and address before long."

Holt took a sip of his espresso, then stubbed out his cigar. "Well good enough. I'm off to M.I.T. this afternoon. Ring me up if anything significant happens. Otherwise, I want to know as soon as the SEAL team is back, with, or without, Harding. I'll run some alternative scenarios to see what we can gain from this mess."

###

The firing ceased as suddenly as it had begun. There was a deathly quiet to the forest. Jim Richards raised his head just enough to peer over the depression in the ground where he and Matt had concealed themselves. The morning had grown brighter, he peered about their position looking for the slightest movement, still gripping the unfired forty-five pistol in his hand. From the corner of his eye, where all movement is perceived he saw the slightest indication of animation. Turning his head he looked directly at the point from which it came, one of the Cuban positions. A soldier's arm twitched, otherwise he was stone dead.

Richards looked to his left at the fox hole where both soldiers had been sleeping. No change in their body positions. He frowned. Must have been dead already.

Farther ahead and to the left, a soldier lay pitched forward. Another was a few feet behind the hole, as if he were trying to sneak away. One leg moving up and down in a crawling motion, going no where, post mortem muscle contractions.

He looked farther to his right, two more were out of their hole. One missing an arm, the body jammed in the crook of a tree. Richards's eyes came back to the two dead soldiers closest to their position, the light was improving but not enough to distinguish uniforms, most of their clothing torn, bloodied and muddied.

"One, clear." Steve Sheffield called out.

"Two, clear." Ross McIntyer called out.

One by one each of the SEALs checked in, except Frank Prescott. Slowly they began to stand, or step forward. Even then it was really only their movement

that revealed their positions, festooned as they were in all manner of natural camouflage and tiger striped grease paint.

The smoke of battle drifted low, weaving about the tree trunks, forming pockets here and they're, mingling with the early morning mists from evaporating pools of water. The smell of ignited cordite masked the earthy smell of the Guatemalan forest. As Jim Richards' scanned a three hundred and sixty degree field of vision, he noted the incongruities of battle revealed in the gradually improving light of dawn.

A small tree trunk snapped off six feet above the ground, where a claymore mine had detonated. A Cuban soldier upright against a tree, his feet a foot off the ground, nailed to the bark by seventeen fleshettes delivered from a twelve gauge shotgun wielded by a SEAL at close range.

Other soldiers face down, arms and legs akimbo. One crouched in his hole, sure he'd avoid being seen. Two round black holes equidistant between each shoulder blade.

Richards's eyes returned to the first foxhole. Why were two dummies in one foxhole?

Matt Harding rose from his position, stepping forward. Steve Sheffield looked in his direction. Ross McIntyer and Vince Morris began to join the group. Dave Wilcox and Bob Spencer rose from concealed positions nearby.

Harding began to say something about a clean sweep. But Jim Richards was not listening, instead he looked beyond Steve and Ross. Movement in the bush, a rifle barrel coming up. No time to give warning. His hand a blur. The forty-five out front, two handed grip. Four rounds fired in rapid succession. Past Sheffield, to the left of McIntyer. "Behind you!"

McIntyer responded bringing his weapon to bear on Jim Richards, his finger depressing the trigger. In his mind Richards had lost it. Behind him a Soviet adviser screamed as Richards' rounds slammed home, spinning the adviser left, his weapon discharging harmlessly into the air.

McIntyer squeezed tighter on the trigger, nothing. The most basic mistake, he thought to himself, he'd neglected to reload upon cease fire. No he had reloaded. What was happening?

Sheffield looked over at Jim Richards, he noted the adrenaline pump by the look in his eyes. The forty-five still smoking, still on target for the first threat. He glanced around momentarily at McIntyer staring dumbly at his weapon. Then

turned to look at Jim Richards again. "I thought we agreed, you'd not be comin' in here armed."

Richards nodded once. "We did. Found this in the maintenance shack, night before last. Couldn't resist the urge." He grinned sheepishly, the adrenaline receding. He lowered his weapon as his hand began to shake.

Sheffield nodded. "Sometimes the urge can get you killed. On the other hand, this time it saved our butts. Nice shootin' Ocean Man." He glanced at McIntyer. Who'd lowered his weapon. He started to say something, but stopped.

McIntyer shook his head almost imperceptibly. It was just one of those things, dumb luck, this time in both their favor. His weapon was on safe, probably snagged on something just after he'd popped in the new magazine, sometimes it happened. It was why he always made certain it was in the fire position after each reload. Well almost always, apparently not this time. A mistake either way.

He glanced over at Jim Richards, watched him drop the magazine out of the pistol, and pop in a fresh one. He slipped the forty-five into the waistband at his back. Then reloaded the first magazine to full capacity. It was then, perhaps for the first time, Ross McIntyer realized Jim Richards was a professional, one who'd seen combat before, another kind perhaps, but just as deadly. Richards had taken the ultimate chance, reacting first to save the team.

"All right men," Sheffield said. "Let's count 'em." He looked over at Richards. "Jim, you and Harding check out the airfield, and the aircraft. See if we can use anything to fly our butts out of here."

Just as Sheffield finished, a single rifle crack was heard not far off. Everyone flinched though it was clear the aim was not directed at them.

"Let's move it, guys. We've all heard William Tell before, he'll be back with a sitrep soon enough."

Matt Harding looked at Jim Richards, and shook his head as they strode through the demolished compound toward the airfield. "You nearly got your ass waxed back there, my friend."

Richard nodded. "Shit happens, don't it. Wasn't intentional, and no harm done."

They stepped out of the forest and walked out onto the airfield. It was still wet, but at least they didn't sink into the mud more than a inch or so.

"What do you think?" Richards asked.

Harding looked up at the sky, broken cloud cover but no rain at the moment. "We'll need two aircraft, light as possible. Full power, get the nose gear up right away, keep rolling. Take off down wind if we have to. It can be done."

Richards nodded. "I agree. Let's see if any of these birds will fly."

They turned back toward the tie down area. Walked over to the aircraft Jim Richards had flown in, there were four bullet holes through one of the booms, but the controls moved fine. The next aircraft looked bad. Shrapnel, probably from the maintenance shack explosion, had penetrated the cabin, blown off the rear cowlings cover. Oil flowed freely down the aft cabin fuselage. "This one's a no go. Too bad, it had a full load of fuel."

One by one they checked the aircraft. All were damaged to some extent, but two were usable. One had a full load of fuel, the other probably enough to make it well into Belize.

They'd just finished their inventory when Sheffield and the other SEALs stepped out of the trees. As they approached, Jim Richards looked to his left and noted Frank Prescott coming at a trot from the west.

The entire team arrived at the same time.

"We've got problems, Steve." Prescott said. "There's a convoy on the other side of the river, looks like some sort of local militia with a few professionals scattered amongst them. Variety of uniforms and weapons. The storm washed out the ford and the bridge. They're forming up to cross in boats, then move this way on foot."

Steve looked a little worried. "What do you make their ETA."

Prescott looked back over his shoulder as if his gaze could penetrate the intervening forest. "Maybe twenty minutes on the short side for the scouts. By the way, I took down the Soviet commander making his way back towards the semi."

Sheffield nodded. "Good that accounts for all their special ops guys." Sheffield looked at Richards. "What's the good and the bad, Ocean Man?"

Richards glanced at Harding for a moment, then back to Steve. "We've got two flyables, this one right here, and November four, eight Bravo over there. Bravo's got a full load of fuel, no detectable damage. Charlie here's got a half load of fuel, and four rounds through the port boom. No detectable control cable damage, but we won't know for certain without pulling inspection plates, which we don't seem to have time for in any case. I'd say if the bandits are twenty out, these two birds are our best bet."

Steve nodded in agreement. "What about field conditions?"

Harding spoke up. "We'll need to load light as possible. Myself, Frank, Bob, Dave, and Vince in Bravo. You, Ross, and Jim in Charlie. Ol' Ross counts for two."

"There you go pickin' on me again." Ross grouched.

Matt continued. "Emergency packs, side arms, one assault weapon each plane, that's it. It'll take four of us on each aircraft to push them onto level ground."

"One more thing," Richards said without enthusiasm. "The field's too wet to make a turn. Once we get the birds rolling, it's straight for the river at a forty five degree angle; take off down wind. We'll be no more than five hundred feet off the ground when we pass over the troops headed this way. If they've got decent shooters, we could take a few rounds in the belly. So we'd better load some body armor onto the seats and floor. Then sling it out the windows once we clear their field of fire."

Sheffield grimaced. "Terrific. Okay Spence, you and Vince booby trap the rest of the birds. Run a series link so if any one of them is messed with, the whole shebang goes. No sense leaving anything for them to repair and use. Everyone else lend a hand getting the aircraft ready for take off, then shed the non-essentials. We'll stash 'em in one of the wired aircraft so they cook off when the explosives blow. Like Matt said, sidearms, survival pack, minimum ammo. Let's do it, we've already wasted five of our twenty."

The SEALs leaped into action, helping Richards and Harding get the aircraft headed in the right direction on level ground. Then they packed the interior with flak jackets and fiber glass body armor. Ten minutes later they were ready to roll.

Everyone climbed into the aircraft. Richards and Harding kicked over the engines. Both of Harding's engines came alive right away, but it took two minutes for Richards to get his rear engine started. The fuel pressure kept fluctuating. Rear fuel pump weak, probably approaching failure. As long as it got them into the air they'd have enough power on the front engine to limp out and down the gorge if necessary. This would not be precision flying, just balls to wall, get the hell outta there, and turn east for Belize as quick as possible. No time for contingency plans.

Richards brought the power smoothly towards take-off. As the RPMs passed through 2000 he released the brakes and yanked back on the yoke. The Skymaster jumped forward, and the nose came up, blocking forward visibility.

The wheels sloughed around in the mud, the nose swinging left and right, the wheels sticking then releasing. He and Harding wallowed forward like two drunk drivers trying to decide which white line to follow. Harding's plane crossed in front of Richards', twice they nearly collided with each other before enough forward motion was attained to get some lift, lighten the load on the wheels.

Now they were both moving forward maintaining a more or less steady track. Harding to the left and slightly ahead. Jim Richards continued to bring the power up on both engines. Right to the firewall, twenty-five hundred and seventy-five RPM front and rear engines. Speed coming up nicely. The roar of the propellers thrummed in their ears. The aircraft began to skip, trying to fly. Richards relaxed a little back pressure, steadied the aircraft. Held the proper angle of attack for lift off.

Suddenly they were off the ground. Airspeed picking up rapidly, skimming over the mud in the ground effect. Maybe six feet off the muddy field. All at once they cleared the forest on their right, soldiers were strung out in a line running towards the camp, towards the sound of aircraft.

The river disappeared from Richards' view. He knew the edge of the bluff was only seconds away. Instantly they'd lose ground effect and if the aircraft were not ready to fly it was all over, they'd go down in a heap on the other side of the river. Slamming into the far bank at maybe 80 miles an hour.

Off to the right the soldiers were firing at them, muzzle flashes winking brighter than the morning light. A round thunked into the port boom, another ricocheted off the rear cowling. They couldn't hear its whine but Richards sensed the impact.

The edge of the bluff swept below them. Richards held the angle of attack steady, felt the airspeed increasing, the plane climbing.

More rounds slammed into the underside of the aircraft, a slab of body armor bounced upward absorbing the impact. A puff of dust came off its covering and drifted around the cabin.

A stand of trees ahead, Richards lifted a wing over the top of the tallest tree, the aircraft banked east and continued to climb. Six hundred feet, one quarter mile from the field. No more impacts from the shooters. One thousand feet, one half mile. They looked out the windows, muzzles winking. No hits. They were clear.

Richards watched, as Harding climbed in a slow easy turn then took up a heading east towards Belize. Jim Richards continued his turn, then glanced at the instruments. The rear engine's RPMs had dropped to 1800, then 1500. Something was wrong they were losing power. Fuel pressure fluctuating. Harding continued to pull away from them.

The soldiers below had ceased to fire. Ross looked back towards the field.

"Oh shit. They've got a Stinger." Then he started laughing.

"What the... Ross, what's so funny about a Stinger?" Sheffield exclaimed. "If they get it off we're cooked."

Tears were running down Ross' face he was laughing so hard. "Ah man...I can't stand it. They fired it backwards. Took out the damn semi."

Richards allowed himself a chuckle and a grin, but kept worrying about the rear engine. Three thousand feet came up on the altimeter, they were well above the gorge punching through fluffy white clouds, and still climbing. At five thousand feet, Jim Richards declared they were home free. Then the rear engine quit.

"What happened?" Ross asked. "Mighty quiet behind me all of a sudden."

"Lost the engine." Richards said without emotion. "Not a problem, this thing'll fly just as well on one, slightly lower service ceiling and little slower. Save some fuel too."

"That's a good thing," Sheffield said. "Cause we got something coming out of a little hole in the wing and I don't think its water."

Richards leaned forward and looked out at the starboard wing, then shook his head slowly. He looked back at the gauges. The right fuel tank, which had been at about half full when they took off, was nearly empty. "Must have taken a round, or fragment from the ground fire. Good thing it wasn't a tracer."

"No shit." Ross said from the back.

Jim Richards turned the fuel selector switch to the left tank.

"How much flight time we got," Sheffield asked.

"Bout an hour, maybe a little more," Richards replied. "Plenty of fuel to get us into Belize. Problem is those clouds up ahead on the horizon. Towering cumulus, thunderstorms left over from the hurricane. No way around, and we can't fly over, or through."

Richards shook his head slowly, a disgusted look on his face. "Not a lot of choices." He took a deep breath, let it out slowly. "We can't penetrate weather in this condition. Our best shot is to fly route 13 north towards Poptun, then set her down in a field well off the highway."

Steve nodded in agreement. "We can make our way into Poptun, get to a telephone and arrange an extraction, or maybe just board a commercial flight." He glanced back at Ross, who rolled his eyes upward. FUBAR infinito again.

Forty-five minutes later, Jim Richards identified a check point on the ground, then did some calculations on an old E6B computer.

"Not lookin' good. We've got a hell of a headwind. Probably comin' off the low pressure center that used to be Emile. Fuel's goin' down fast." He pointed to a town on the map. "We're right about here, west of Nactun." Richards pointed west about ten miles. "That stepped pyramid over there is Xutilha."

Steve glanced back at Ross, and smiled. "Fate."

Ross shook his head. "Fate my ass, you planned this, you scumbag."

Richards looked over at Sheffield quizzically.

Sheffield pointed towards the pyramid. "Why don't you see if you can find a spot to put it down over there, near the pyramid. Ross has a friend doin' archeological work at the site." As he spoke, he glanced over his shoulder again at McIntyre who just rolled his eyes upward once more.

Richards shrugged his shoulders, and banked thirty degrees to port, then rolled out line of site for Xutilha.

Chapter 15

"Not a sign." Vince said, shaking his head in dismay.

"Damn." Matt shook his head once. "We don't have enough fuel to circle back and look for them."

Vince nodded in agreement. "Might do more harm than good in any case, circling overhead without armament to provide cover." He continued to look behind, out the window, as did Dave Wilcox on the other side of the cabin. "Damn shame, all the communications were pulled from their aircraft."

"We don't know anything actually happened, they might have taken a different route." Dave offered. "Steve knows Guatemala pretty well. Best thing we can do is get to a secure base and prepare to make an extraction, if and when he gets word to us. What's our flight plan?"

Matt pointed ahead. "We can't penetrate those thunderstorms, but they're a little lighter to the south. We've just crossed over the Belize border. I'm going to put this thing down on the deck and haul ass direct to the coast then head north to refuel at Placentia. Then you guys can check in. After that, consider me your personal pilot, where ever you want to go. Including back there." He motioned with his thumb over his shoulder.

###

The Skymaster passed low over the stepped pyramid, then Jim Richards banked the aircraft into a thirty degree left turn, and lined up on a dirt road south of the site. He put the plane down with less than a gallon of usable fuel in the tank. They taxied off the road, and parked near a stand of pine trees.

It was mid morning as they climbed out of the aircraft. The elevation was about 1500 feet. The ground covered with a kind of soft limestone known as karst. Here and there, odd formations of the stuff stuck up three or four feet like little misshapen monuments, or badly carved statues. Richards walked over and examined one. Sheffield stepped to his side.

"Good thing we found the road," Richards said. "This crap would tear hell out of an airplane if we'd set down in a field."

They looked north towards the pyramid. It rose above the surrounding trees, a mottled gray monolith that dwarfed everything in its vicinity.

Ross joined them. "Seems awfully quiet, amigos. I didn't see any activity around the pyramid when we flew over. Could be those archeologists we're looking for never got this far. That hurricane hit not six hours after we parted company."

Steve nodded. "Let's check it out. We can always hike into La Caoba for the night, maybe catch a ride to Poptun tomorrow. We won't be hearing from the boys back in Sosela in any case."

They walked back to the aircraft, then removed the few items they'd brought with them.

"What do we do with the plane?" Ross asked.

"Torch it I guess." Steve replied.

Jim Richards shook his head. "Might set the forest on fire, bring half of Poptun out here."

"Got a point there Ocean Man." Sheffield agreed. "Maybe we should just permanently disable it."

"I ever mention these things can fly on automobile fuel?" Richards said with a grin.

Ross and Steve both looked at Richards as if he were nuts. "Naw," Ross said.

Jim Richards started walking towards the pyramid. "Just got to be leaded is all, preferably premium."

"Hey you shitin' me, or what?" Steve asked.

Richards stopped, and turned around. "No, I'm serious. It won't run too good, and our altitude will be limited, but it'll fly. Get us at least as far as Belize City, maybe even Cancun. Then we drain the tanks, flush the system with some injector juice, and continue on our way."

"Yeah but we got no rear engine and the right tank's leakin' like an old man with prostrate trouble." Ross said.

Richards chuckled, then walked back to where they were standing, "That's prostate. Anyway, we can fly outta here on one engine and one tank if we have to; maybe the other tank's fixable."

He looked over at the Cessna Skymaster. "Why don't you two hobble on up to King Tut's tomb and see what's cooking. I'll pull some inspection plates and fart around here like Terry and the Pirates. See if chewing gum and duct tape will fix her up.

Richards kicked over one of karst formations. "Maybe when you're through rewriting history, we can rustle up thirty gallons of something resembling fuel, then make it on over Punta Gorda for some fish and chips."

Ross and Steve looked at each other and shrugged. Steve said: "Tell you what. We'll rustle up the juice, but if this pile of crap don't fly we're gonna hook you up to it and you can drag us home like you did Vinnie in that aluminum boat back at Point Lobos."

Ross guffawed a couple of times. "Ah man that was outta sight. Outta sight."

####

They closed, quietly and carefully, on the temple. The forest silent, except for an occasional cricket's chirp, or the croak of a tree frog. They heard no sound of activity from within the pyramid. Ross and Steve ceased their forward progress at the edge of the forest, and gazed into the deserted clearing that lay before what appeared to be the front entrance of the temple.

The top of the hill was flat, as if someone had taken a machete and sliced off its crown. The pyramid stood towards the west end of the cleared space. A dirt road wound its way up the north side of the hill. Steve Sheffield made a sign with his hand indicating they should circle the entire complex, staying within the cover of the surrounding forest.

Their recon gave them no additional information, other than to note the road continued around to the north side of the pyramid, then halted abruptly at a solid steel door that apparently sealed a tunnel into the pyramid. Tire and wheel tracks indicated several vehicles had come and gone recently. No guard was posted, and no sounds echoed from within when Sheffield placed his ear to the steel door.

They continued on around the base of the temple, until they once again reached the side facing east.

"Appears deserted." Ross said in a horse whisper.

Steve nodded in agreement. "Perhaps. But there were people and vehicles here recently. Let's move in a little closer, take a look."

They left the cover of the forest, walking warily towards the entrance of the pyramid. Steve bent to examine the wheel tracks as they crossed the road. They climbed oversize steps that led up the east face of the temple. Each step spaced appropriately for a person... who stood twelve feet in height. Midway up, they came to a flat landing that lay before an open doorway leading into the pyramid. An eerie silence prevailed. No sound came from within the cavernous entrance that gaped dark and foreboding.

Ross slid the safety mechanism on his weapon to select fire and nodded to Steve, then covered him as they moved inside. As their eyes adjusted to the dim interior, lit only by sunlight that spilled inward through the entrance, they found they were inside a square entry hall approximately twenty feet across.

They flattened themselves against the stone work, then eased completely around the interior perimeter searching for a way farther into the main body of the temple. They were almost back to the entrance, having found no sign of any other passage way, when suddenly a huge steel door slammed to the floor with a rasp and clang that echoed through out the chamber. It blocked their route of escape, and cast the room into total darkness.

###

Jim Richards removed a circular inspection plate from the underside of the starboard wing. He used a flashlight to peer around inside, then pulled two more plates. Behind the last one, he found a small hole about the size of a beebee in fuel tank just below the bend that conformed to the interior shape of the wing's leading edge.

He used the wing strut and the front cowling, to climb on top of the wing. Then laid out flat to spread his weight evenly across the surface. He pulled himself along the wing, by grasping the leading and trailing edge, until he could begin to access the upper surface inspection plates.

After removing all the plates, and visually checking as much of the tank as he could, he opened the fuel cap and peered inside, one eye closed. Gradually as his vision adjusted, he was able to see light coming in through the hole at the bottom of the tank, but no where else. Good, thought Richards, there's only one hole and it's accessible.

He replaced the upper surface inspection plates, then slid off the leading edge of the wing and dropped to the ground.

####

Inside the entrance hall lights recessed into the ceiling suddenly flooded the interior in brilliant light, momentarily blinding Steve and Ross who stood side by side facing in opposite directions. They looked down for a moment allowing their eyes to adjust to the sudden change in illumination. Soon they were able to look all about the entry hall. Vividly detailed, and brilliantly colored, pictographs and carvings in relief were all about the empty chamber. There was no one in the room with them, and no way out. Then a voice echoed in the hall. They were addressed in English, spoken with a heavy Latin accent. "Put your weapons on the ground and step away. You will not be harmed."

Steve and Ross did not lay down their weapons.

"If you do not comply, you will be killed. There is no cover in the chamber, no place to hide and no means of escape. Do not waste your lives foolishly."

Steve scanned the room looking for the source of the voice. A loud speaker, or perhaps a hole in the wall. He heard stone scrapping on stone. And looked towards the sound. Then saw the barrel of a rifle protrude. Immediately the lights went out as a shot was fired. The round impacted the wall above Ross' head, then ricocheted about the chamber without striking either one of them.

The lights came back on, again their eyes were dazzled.

"This is your last chance. Put your weapons down and step away."

With no one in sight and no options except to become a moving target in a very small space, Steve reluctantly placed his thirteen round Hi Standard auto loader on the floor, then signaled for Ross to do the same. He laid the CAR-15 down. Both men stepped away.

"What do you want with us?" Steve asked.

"That remains to be seen," the voice replied. "Look across the chamber. Do you see the carving of a serpent?"

Steve nodded.

"Go to it, and wait."

They were almost to the wall when a section of floor gave way, a trap door opened, and they dropped through.

####

Jim Richards cut a short piece of leather off the end of his shoelace. He tied a small, tight knot in one end, then stuffed it through the hole in the gas tank using the awl on his Swiss Army knife. He then pulled on the remaining tail of the shoelace until the knot partially protruded back through the hole.

He trimmed the tail from the knotted lace, then placed a square piece of duct tape over the plugged hole, forming the tape to the surface of the tank. When fuel was added, the leather would swell, effectively sealing the hole for awhile. Long enough to get them to safety.

Satisfied with his Rube Goldberg fix, he tightened all the inspection plates he'd previously removed, then turned his attention to the boom. Removing all the plates on the port boom he peered inside. The stabilator's control cable had been nicked by one of the rounds that passed through, but it too would hold long enough to get them back. He reattached the inspection plates, then turned his attention to the rear engine.

###

They landed with a thud on the stone floor, fifteen feet below the entry hall. Fortunately, both men landed paratroop style, knees flexed, then rolled to dissipate the vertical energy. They suffered no injury. The light below was dim, and grew dimmer as the trap door closed over their heads.

They looked at each other, and then around the rectangular room in which they'd landed. Three of the sides were solid stone, the fourth steel bars. Lighting was provided by torches that burned in ancient holders attached to the walls of the hallway beyond the steel bars. At one end of the cell, three people sat on the floor. Legs drawn up to their chests, mouths agape in astonishment. Clifford, Julie, and Sylvia. All three were dirty, disheveled, and pale. They looked like three frightened animals awaiting their turn for slaughter.

Steve stepped over to Sylvia, then knelt beside her. "Are you hurt? What's going on here?"

She clung to him, sobbing. "No, no, oh God no. I prayed you'd come, but now you're trapped too. Better we alone should die. You shouldn't have come. There's no escape."

Steve held her and comforted her. Clifford and Julie looked back and forth between Steve and Ross, staring dumbly. Giving no indication they recognized them.

"What's this all about?" Steve asked.

Sylvia, answered haltingly. "We arrived on the second night after we last saw each other, and were immediately captured. The next night we were forced," tears began to run down her face again, "to watch them sacrifice Ben. Oh God..." She began sobbing again.

Steve waited a moment or two, before asking: "Who are we dealing with here?"

Sylvia regained some of her composure. "The Pokomam, at least, that's what they call themselves. They claim human sacrifice brings the favor of their god of war. We've been only temporarily spared. They're waiting for a certain sign, exactly what I don't know. Then They'll sacrifice more of us, to please their war god."

Steve looked over at Ross, and shook his head derisively.

"What kind of weapons do they have."

Sylvia sniffed, tried to wipe her eyes but smeared more dirt on her face. "Some have rifles, like the ones carried by the Guatemalan border guards. Others have crude weapons, spears and battle axes made of obsidian, or other stone."

"How many?" Ross asked.

"I'm not sure, at least twenty. But there may be others I've not seen."

###

Jim Richards examined the fuel pump on the rear engine. There appeared to be nothing obviously wrong with it. He had no tools with which to pull the pump, and no way to reseal the gasket assuming he could fix it. No matter, the Skymaster would fly on one engine. He glanced at his watch, two-thirty in the afternoon. He was dead tired. The adrenaline of last night, and their escape today, had long since worn off. He climbed into the spacious back seat of the aircraft and stretched out, within minutes he was sound asleep.

###

The hangar stood on the far side of the field. Well away from civilian traffic at the Punta Gorda airport. Outside, a maroon and white Cessna Skymaster was parked on the tarmac. The SEALs had landed just after noon. British Flight Service directed them to the hangar. There they'd contacted Commander James

Laughlin over a secure line provided by the British. Then caught some shut eye. During the late afternoon a black Sea Stallion helicopter arrived. Later, a Lear 25.

###

They gathered inside the hangar for a briefing. Vince Morris, Frank Prescott, Dave Wilcox, Bob Spencer, Matt Harding, the two Sea Stallion pilots, and two NSA briefers flown down in the Lear.

Tim Dodd, one of the NSA briefers, placed reconnaissance photos on a table at the back of the hangar. As he spoke, the SEALs, pilots, and Matt Harding looked at photos that had been taken by U-2 fly over. On a bulletin board behind the table was a map of northeastern Guatemala and Belize.

"We've been tracking a locator installed in the aircraft Mr. Richards flew from the airfield at Sosela. His route took them north along Highway 13. But right here, at about Nactun, they turned west. And apparently landed just south of the Xuthila pyramid."

Dodd pointed to the photos as he spoke. "These photos were taken twelve, fourteen, and sixteen hundred hours. This other series taken last night, between twenty and twenty-three hundred hours."

Frank Prescott frowned as he looked at one of the photos shot the night before. "This temple appears deserted during the day. Yet last night," he chose one photo out of the group, "there appears to be some sort of ceremony, or feast going on."

The briefer nodded his agreement. "CIA lost a resident agent in the area, two weeks ago. We've been using U-2s day and night hoping to see something that might give us a hint as to what might have happened to him.

"Central Intelligence suspects Pokomam rebels captured their agent. Based upon these photos, it would appear they're using the temple for some sort of ritual."

Vince Morris shook his head slowly. "Some of the ancient Mayan rituals involved human sacrifice. This temple was one of the sites where such ceremonies took place."

The briefer nodded. "That's what we're concerned about." He placed additional photographs onto the table. "These were taken with infrared film. The bright spots are torches and fires. The smaller shapes people, looks like twenty-five to thirty participants."

Dave Wilcox spoke up. "Today's photos show someone working on top of the starboard wing of Jim Richards' Skymaster. Then no one around the aircraft on the next fly over." He paused for a moment. "Early in the mission, we used a student archeological team as cover to get close to our target. I seem to recall something about them planning to drive on up to Xuthila if road conditions allowed."

"Exactly, right." Bob Spencer agreed. "If Jim Richards' aircraft had some sort of mechanical problem, Steve and Ross might have chosen to have him set down near the pyramid in hope of linking up with the students again. Then getting assistance to Poptun, where they could arrange for a ticket home."

Vince spoke up, "And if these Pokomam buffoons were still hanging around the temple..."

###

Jim Richards felt something poking at his leg, he awoke with a start from a much deeper sleep than he'd ever intended. Three men armed with Beretta AR-70 assault rifles confronted him. They wore green fatigue jackets over blue denim jeans, their faces covered by colorful bandannas like bad guys in an old western movie. The one poking him spoke in broken English, "You, hombre, come out. Put hands on head. Come out now."

Richards feigned a greater sleep hangover than he felt as adrenaline coursed through his body. He pretended to slip off the seat and onto his knees in the cabin, taking the opportunity to look quickly outside. There were only three of them, for some odd reason bunched together peering in through the starboard cabin door. Probably curious about the airplane.

As Jim Richards began to get to his feet. He placed his hand behind him on the seat to gain additional balance, gripping the 45 autoloader he'd set between himself and the seat back when he'd stretched out earlier. As he moved cautiously towards the door, his captors backed away. The one nearest the door bumped into the wing strut, momentarily diverting his attention.

It was over in a heart beat. The blur of Richards' right hand gripping the autoloader thrust out in front. One round through the blue bandanna into his captor's mouth, blowing blood and cranial contents out a massive hole in back of his head. His legs buckled, the Pokomam rebel dropped to the ground.

The second captor took a .45 caliber slug through his heart, his rifle pointed upward discharged on reflex, blowing a tight three round burst through the underside of the wing, knocking silver dollar size holes in the upper surface after passing through the near empty fuel tank. Miraculously, the tank did not explode.

The impact of Richards' .45 round knocked the second rebel back into the third just as he was bringing his weapon up. The collision caused him to discharge three rounds through his compatriot's back. They exited his chest, blowing blood and bone matter all over the instrument panel, followed in turn by the slugs smashing through the altimeter and compass. The third punched a fist sized hole through the Plexiglas windshield.

Even as this was occurring Jim Richards pulled the trigger again on the old autoloader and put a round through the left eye of the third rebel, causing the entire right side of his head to split open as he spun away from the aircraft and fell face down onto the ground. The second rebel came to rest across his legs, staring with the fixed stare of the dead upwards at a brilliant blue sky.

In one continuous, fluid motion that had begun with his vicious attack, Jim Richards leaped from the aircraft, diving over the fallen bodies of his would be captors. He rolled away, taking cover behind a tree. Then stayed motionless, listening to the sound of his own gunfire ringing in his ears, scanning all about for additional threats. There were none for the moment. He scurried over to the fallen rebels, then quickly went through their pockets, but found no identification, only additional ammunition.

He pulled a load bearing vest off the first rebel, it had the least amount of blood on it. Then stuffed all of the ammunition he could recover from the others into its pockets and all around his own belt, twelve magazines altogether. He grabbed their assault rifles. One of the men carried a Bowie style field knife, Richards took it as well.

Leaving the bodies where they lay, he retreated farther back into the trees. Then assessed the situation while familiarizing himself with the three weapons he'd recovered. He checked their mechanisms, all were well kept but one seemed smoother than the others. He then reloaded his own weapon, bringing the used magazine up to full capacity. He checked his stores. Three tubes of amino acids left. One canteen of water. And approximately three hundred rounds of NATO 5.56 ammo.

He could not carry all the ammo and all the weapons. So he removed the bolts from two of the assault rifles and slipped them into his belt. He stood up. The load he hefted was significant, but bearable. If he ran into anymore rebels it would lighten up all too soon.

He took a sip of water and splashed some on his face, wiping away the blood and tissue that had splattered on to him as a result of his close range kill. The stand of trees in which he was concealed continued for approximately a hundred yards in the direction of the pyramid. Then there was a hundred yards of open

meadow, before reaching the trees at the foot of the hill on which the pyramid stood.

Jim Richards moved forward, stopping at the edge of the meadow, concealed within the trees. He began to consider a variety of scenarios, trying to figure out what had become of Steve and Ross, and why the rebels had come to the aircraft. From where might they have originated?

There was no vehicle in sight. They carried no field rations. Therefore, they must have come from somewhere near by, near enough for others to have heard the gunshots?

Steve and Ross may have hiked into town for fuel. If so they might return at any moment, though the aircraft was useless now. On the other hand, perhaps they'd been captured? Perhaps the pyramid was being used as some sort of base. Bottom line, stay or leave. Check out the pyramid, or try to make it to town. Find a telephone. Call for assistance as he'd been trained to do in this type of emergency: "Never attempt to engage the enemy alone. Your chances of success are extremely slim. Escape and evade until you can make contact and receive the necessary assistance." That was what he'd been taught so many years before.

###

Six men stood with AR-70 assault rifles pointed towards the interior of their cell. The weapons were in fact not at all like the ones carried by Guatemalan border guards, but Steve could forgive Sylvia for not understanding the finer points of weaponry. He and Ross were in opposite corners of the cell, remaining as deep in the shadows as possible. Each still had secondary weaponry, field knives, wire garrotes embedded with diamond chips capable of cutting through steel, and small auto-loading pistols in their boots. None of these options was useful in their current situation.

Three unarmed rebels entered the hallway carrying a small wood table. They set it down in front of the cell, ten feet away from the bars. Then placed a single chair on the opposite side of the table. The men withdrew standing to one end of the room, well clear of the field of fire projected by the armed guards.

Finally a short, dark complected man with the distinct features of Mayan ancestry, high cheek bones, a wide slightly hooked nose, strode into the room. He looked into the cell, then made an upward motion with his hand, as if turning on a switch located in thin air. Immediately, flood lights brightly illuminated every inch of the ten by thirty foot cell. The prisoners blinked their eyes shut, dazzled by the brilliant light. Then gradually reopened them as they adjusted.

The rebel leader stepped behind the table and sat down in the chair. He pointed to Ross and Steve. "You and you, step forward."

Ross looked over at Steve, who nodded almost imperceptibly. They moved forward near the center of the cell.

The rebel leader smiled. "So you are the one. How do you say it? In charge?" He addressed Steve Sheffield.

Neither SEAL acknowledged the observation.

The rebel leader frowned. "It does not matter if you answer or not. The order of command is obvious. What is your name?"

Sheffield hesitated for only a moment. "Steve."

"Steve? Steve who? What is your full name?"

"Just Steve."

The rebel leader chuckled. "Just Steve? It is an odd name, no? But you Americanos have such odd names anyway. They do not tell a story. A true name tells who and what you are; for instance my name means: He who will lead his people to freedom." He put his hands flat on the table. "Before we can begin our talk, I must again ask you to give up your weapons. I believe you were asked to do this when you first trespassed upon our doorstep. Apparently we were not specific enough. Give up all of your weapons."

Steve reached for his field knife and pulled it downward out of its sheath. Ross did the same. Steve held the knife upwards, and smiled very slowly. "If you want these weapons..."

The rebel leader raised his hand and his voice! "Stop right there. You can forget the heroics. A desperate attempt at resistance. Give up your weapons now, or we will simply take them."

Neither Ross nor Steve made any move to comply. The lights went out again. The trap door opened from above. Ross dropped to one knee deftly reaching for the pistol in his boot. There was the sound of expelled breath through a long tube, a sort of spitting sound, and then another immediately following the first. Ross felt a sting to the side of his neck. He thought he was standing up, raising his weapon to fire. And he did manage to almost stand erect before toppling over.

Steve took the dart square in the front of his neck, just below and to the right of his Adam's apple. It stung him and he slapped it away, immediately his mouth

went dry, the room began to turn. Or was it he who was turning? He staggered about trying to maintain his balance, feeling a numbing, tingling sensation coursing through his system. A not unpleasant feeling, rather like having far too much to drink. He bumped into the wall and fell over backwards, striking the back of his head on the stone floor. Knocking himself unconscious.

When he regained consciousness, he felt hands all over his body, searching his pockets, running along his pants leg, extracting everything carried on his person. And though his mind willed him to resist, his muscles would not respond to the commands of his brain.

The paralysis of the narcotic, delivered via darts expelled from handmade blow guns, began to wear off fairly quickly. What remained was a sort of relaxed stupor. The brain could function, cognitive of what was taking place, yet physical reaction seemed impossible. Now he understood the condition in which they'd found the students.

The glare of the lights, again turned on, was unbearable even though his eyes had plenty of time to adjust. He sat dumbly on the floor squinting at the rebel leader seated behind the small table.

"There now, that's much better," the rebel leader said. "My people call me Pokomchi. We are the Pokomam." He raised his palm outward, and shook his head. "No, not those who do the bidding of Ladinós, the foreign devils who use the name in blasphemy of our cause. We are the direct descendants of the last great tribe of Mayans to rule this land. And we answer to no one.

"I will ask you no more foolish questions, because I know who you are and why you have come; using these silly children who preceded you as an alibi."

Steve shook his head, and Pokomchi thought he was protesting when in fact he was simply trying to clear it a little.

"No, no, please don't protest. Of course you used these children, that's how all you foreign mercenaries operate. You use innocent people, to get closer to your target."

Sylvia, Clifford, and Julie listened to the rebel leader's words. It seemed Pokomchi was telling the truth, but then drugs had that effect. As if everything was clarified, even when what was said was logically wrong, or at least flawed. The drug was interesting, Sylvia thought, it came and went as if it had a sort of half life, with repeated flash backs. Strong when initially administered, less effective over time. She suspected the maize porridge they'd been given that morning had been laced...with what?

"I will tell you something else. You came in search of a compatriot, a man your government placed here three years ago. You may rest assured he has gone to a better place."

Steve Sheffield struggled to force his metabolism to speed up, to breakdown the molecules that made up the potion they'd been administered. He'd studied the poisons and sedatives used by Indians in the area, and was fairly certain he knew what he'd been given. A combination of tree frog poison and peyote. A little too much of the former and their hearts would have stopped, but it was most likely the cause of the paralysis.

"You are special operations personnel, no? Your equipment tells me this. Not Rangers. Green Beret perhaps? It doesn't matter, you will not escape." He laughed derisively.

"There are others," Ross said matter of factly. "You will soon be overrun."

"I think not." Pokomchi asserted with confidence. "We have sent a patrol to your aircraft. To make certain the one you left behind is also brought to me. We have been watching him work on your airplane, but he is lazy and chooses to sleep. A foolish man, who will soon join our little party."

"You seem well equipped, and well informed." Steve said, a complimentary tone to his voice, appealing to the rebel leader's vanity. "You must be a wise and wealthy man to choose the best, rather than accept what the Soviets are willing to provide."

Pokomchi scowled. "I have already told you we do not answer to anyone, nor do we accept assistance from outsiders who would usurp our heritage. We are the Pokomam and we are self sufficient." He looked at his soldiers and grinned magnanimously. They nodded their heads in unison, and said something together in an unintelligible language. Clearly they had no idea of what Pokomchi was talking about.

"You are wondering how I am able to do so much here in this backward little country? I will tell you. I don't mind your knowing, since none of you will leave here alive anyway."

"I was privileged, not by my family's wealth, but by the largess of your country. A small, little known, program run by your Peace Corps, under President John F. Kennedy, chose certain young people from Guatemala and other Central American countries to be given an education at the best American universities. Affirmative action I think you call it. In the hope that one day we would become leaders of our respective countries, and be favorably inclined towards the United States."

Pokomchi arose from his chair and began to pace back and forth in front of the cell. "As a matter of fact, I'm not unfavorably inclined towards America. We just have different agendas."

He stopped and looked at Steve Sheffield. "The most important thing I learned, while studying in America, is that you have a huge population of people who seem to feel life's unbearable unless it is softened by the effect of narcotic."

Pokomchi laughed derisively again. His men followed suit, without any knowledge of what was so hilarious.

"Isn't that precious. All these hippies and anti-war protesters, cowards really, unable to face the terrible life they have in America? Stupid." Pokomchi shook his head. "But who am I to criticize. They are my market. My customers. You see I am a very good businessman, and as matter of fact, I will admit it, a good chemist too. And so I provide your students with a very special mixture." He smiled broadly. "You must admit, even in your present circumstance, it's not bad. Not bad at all."

He walked over to the bars of the cell, and leaned on them. Steve considered the possibility that he could cross the space, less than five feet, and rip the larynx from Pokomchi's throat before he could leap away. He tensed his muscles, prepared to leap, but found they were not tense at all, but relaxed, weak, only in his mind did he do anything at all.

"You see? You are thinking: I can take this little guy, right now. But then it's just too much effort." Pokomchi pushed away from the cell. "Your students, my market, have provided me with all of this," he gestured around him. "I have converted this humble temple into my own base of operations." He grinned, then looked very serious.

"No, no, the labs are not here. They operate in a nearby city under perfectly acceptable cover. We ship legally, and then we convert the end product. It's so simple. And you know what I like best of all. My customers will grow up to have little customers of their own, who will use even more of my product because that is the way of life. We must out do our elders." He shook his head. "I regret your CIA could not have minded its own business. I really have no quarrel with your country. And I will one day take my rightful place as the ruler of Guatemala."

He signaled to his men to remove the table. Then started to leave, but stopped and looked back at Steve and Ross. "We will talk again. After I have had a chance to speak to your pilot. I have found from past experience that pilots seldom have any real loyalty to their employers. They just want to fly." He flapped his arms like a bird and did a little dance turn. "I'm sure he'll be most

conversational, once we explain the alternatives. And who knows, maybe I can use another pilot too."

He motioned in mid air again, the lights went out. Pokomchi and his men left.

Steve looked over at Ross, who shook his slowly. "Fuckin' loony tunes."

Chapter 16

Jim Richards glanced at his watch, fifteen forty-five. He looked up at the stepped pyramid, silhouette black against the blue sky. A few scattered cumulus clouds here and there. The forest was returning to normal. Birds were beginning to call to each other, danger was past. Crickets and tree frogs chirped.

How long before someone would come to check on the three he'd killed, or were they alone on a routine patrol? The answer came all too soon. The sound of an approaching vehicle on the dirt road somewhere beyond the meadow. Soon an open Land Rover emerged from the trees.

It pulled to a stop, no more than thirty yards past the tree line. Six armed men leaped from the vehicle, then immediately began maneuvering towards the aircraft. They wore camouflage jackets and blue jeans, like the first three. But no bandannas over their faces.

So the first ones were sent to capture him. They didn't want him to see their faces. Why? In case he was not at the aircraft but watching from the trees and somehow evaded them. They could then hunt him down, perhaps pick him up on the road like good Samaritans, as he attempted to make his way into town for help.

What brought the present group? The sound of gunfire?

They were moving cautiously across the meadow. Five prone, covering one maneuvering forward. They moved leap frog fashion from one karst mound to the next, twenty-five paces apart. A seventh man waited in the driver's seat of the old Land Rover. Richards squinted down the open sight of his weapon, noted a whip antenna on the back of the vehicle.

Why had the driver pulled out from undercover of the trees? Richards looked to his left, followed an imaginary line to the top of the pyramid. Line of sight, ultra-high frequency communication? The curve of the hill would have blocked the transmission unless the vehicle moved far enough out from under the trees to assure clear transmission.

As Jim Richards gazed up at the pyramid, he saw a minute flash of light. So there was a watcher up there. Binoculars? Telescope perhaps?

Richards returned his gaze to the field. The first of the approaching men was now about one hundred yards out. Fight or flight, still the decision to be made.

He assessed the situation. First three. Now six. Why not more? Because there were not that many in the pyramid? Or were others patrolling through the woods sweeping towards him in a flanking maneuver? If that were the case, the six in the field would delay their approach, wait for greater fire power to arrive. But they came relentlessly, if warily, forward.

If he escaped where would he go? As soon as the bodies were discovered, word would be relayed to the pyramid. Instantly all forces within would join the hunt. Others might be contacted as well.

He must engage them, try to wound some. A wounded man was more of a problem than a dead one, because he had to be cared for, at least two men assigned to extract. That would slow them down a little. Also, he must delay their call for help.

He looked across the field at the driver in the vehicle. It was a long shot for an open sight. He'd not had a chance to test fire the weapon, zero in the sight at any distance.

The six men were now in rhythm. Curiously, as they moved forward all but one placed the barrel of his weapon on the left side of the limestone mounds. Apparently, they were focusing on the aircraft and that portion of the woods close to it.

Richards shifted right, remaining back in the shadows until he lined up three of the men in a direct line of sight. He took aim at the driver, barely visible behind the reflection of the afternoon sun off the windshield. Richards thumbed the select fire to full automatic.

Jim Richards had never been in this kind of a situation before. He'd gone through some interesting training. He knew operational tactics. He was terribly tenacious. And he was a thinker, planning three steps ahead whenever possible.

He waited patiently holding his weapon on target. He wanted the first of the approaching men only fifty yards out when he opened fire. Jim Richards felt a little shaky, fear or adrenaline he didn't know which. He didn't like killing, or hurting anyone. But there were no other choices, not if he wanted to stay alive and have any hope of joining up with Ross and Steve.

What had become of them? Already dead? Or the students they had spoken of? Dead too? That possibility drove away any thought of remorse from Richards' mind. This was simply a job. The men bore weapons. When they found their

comrades dead, there would be no thought of mercy for him. Only torture and death in the slowest way possible. At least this way he'd either prevail, or die quickly.

He took a deep breath, then began letting it out slowly as he squeezed down on the trigger, trying for a six round burst. It came as a surprise, when it came. The roar of automatic fire. Just a squeeze, then release. The assault rifle wanted to rise, but Jim Richards had expected that, using the underside of a branch for his initial burst.

Six rounds slammed into the windshield of the Land Rover. He saw the driver throw up his hands, then fall to one side. He also thought he saw a spray of blood.

As expected, the three men in his direct line of sight threw themselves prone and kept their heads down. At fifty yards they would have heard the gun fire as needle sharp packets of sound. Even though the rounds were over their heads and past their position, the natural reaction was to duck fearing they were the target.

Five of the men in the field could not immediately return fire to his position because they all had their weapons to the left of the karst mounds. He dropped his aim down to the one man who was in position to fire. No time for finesse here either. He squeezed off another six round burst, watched the karst mound disintegrate, followed by the head of the man firing at him.

Jim Richards dropped to the ground, and rolled left. Rounds from two of the remaining five men impacted in and around his former position. Ripping through the branches of the tree, and impacting the ground around its trunk. He raised up to one knee and emptied the rest of the magazine, spraying from left to right, just to keep their heads down. Keep his enemy off balance.

He then scurried away, and stopped behind another tree. Dropped the empty magazine out of his weapon, slipped in another, released the firing bolt. It slammed home with a metallic clack, having finished in the open position, a signal the magazine was empty. He thumbed the select fire mechanism to semi-automatic.

Return fire had ceased, he waited, then crept forward to the top of a slight rise where he could see the field again. One of the five men rose to begin a flanking maneuver. Richards took him with three quick rounds, one missed, two found a home, one in each leg. The man went down screaming. Jim Richards rolled away as fire poured in, very disorganized. High into the trees. Dust and debris sprinkled down. The noise covering his race to the next fire position.

The injured man cried for help. Richards peered around a tree. He could just see the butt of one man, the rest of his body hidden by grass and limestone. Three

rounds went out, one found a home. It blew away half the left cheek of the man's butt. More cries of agony. Richards rolled left again. One man returned fire.

He scurried forward to the edge of the forest. Now he was looking back towards the aircraft. Two of the remaining three men were visible, but he'd lost track of the third.

He waited. Must find the third. Movement from the corner of his eye. The man was right below him in slight depression, using its leading edge for cover. Crawling towards the forest, unaware Jim Richards had closed to the edge of the trees. Richards thumbed the select fire to automatic. Shoved the rifle forward while pulling the trigger. A spray of blood. Scramble right. Incoming to his last position.

Back to nearly his first position. One man behind a mound firing into the forest to his left. Must be covering the other. One in a rapid crawl towards the woods. Exposed momentarily. Just time for a quick shot. Another burst seven rounds out. Damn, forgot to go back to semi-auto. Severed his foot. Oh Jesus, this is out of control.

His back against a tree. Sweat running down his forehead. He didn't want it to be this way. Why wouldn't they just leave him alone?

The last rebel had stopped firing. Jim Richards peered around the tree. The man was trying to reload his weapon. Hands shaking, sweat glistening in the late afternoon sunlight. He dropped the fresh magazine onto the ground. The man was completely exposed, but didn't realize it. Fear had narrowed his perceptions.

Jim Richards thumbed the select fire to semi-auto, one quick pop. Through the left shoulder. A scream. The man spun left. Groveled on the ground. Then rolled, gripping his shoulder. His weapon lying where it fell. He got up, started running for the Land Rover. Tripped, fell. A groan escaped his lips.

Richards blinked sweat away. Can't let him reach the vehicle. God let me shoot straight. I don't want to kill him if I don't have to. He squeezed off another round. It found its mark in the back of the man's left leg. He went down in a cloud of dust. Then rolled about screaming in agony until he passed out.

Near silence. No birds. No crickets. Only the moans and curses of wounded men. The wind sighing in the trees. Jim Richards held his breath for a moment or two, then took several slow deep ones.

###

"Here are the latest images, taken at sixteen hundred." Tim Dodd laid them on the table. The SEALs, and Matt Harding each looked at the photos.

"They're definitely using the pyramid as a base of operations," Bob Spencer said. "Some sort of fire fight took place, which resulted in several bodies." He shuffled through the photos. "Looks like they're using the northwest side of the hill for storage of vehicles." He thought for a moment. "My guess is there's a connecting tunnel, or causeway beneath the jungle canopy into the pyramid." He shuffled a couple more of the photos. "They've got wounded men in the field, and this two truck convoy is heading out to render assistance."

Vince pointed to the rear of the pyramid. "If we come in from this side, we may be able to secure the vehicles, and take out any ground communications emanating from inside."

Dave Prescott looked over at the Sea Stallion commander. "How long you figure it'll take to fly there from here?"

Commander William Curtis thought for a moment. "If the winds don't change, about forty minutes."

Spencer looked over at Tim Dodd. "We're going in. Please make a note, it was my call."

Dodd nodded, "We've got a U-2 on its way. It'll down-link real time reports to the Sea Stallion. That's the best we can do. I can't get authorization for air cover. Guatemala is a sovereign country. However, I think you'll find everything you need in the helicopter, your stores were personally ordered by Commander Laughlin."

###

They'd started exercising as soon as Pokomchi and his guards left. Focusing on thoughts of absolute mayhem to get their adrenaline flowing, force the narcotic to metabolize faster. Ross recovered first. His size required a larger dose, something not really possible to control with a mouth blown dart.

Steve reached the point of being able to function almost as quickly as Ross, but still felt the side effects of the narcotic.

They took a five minute breather, motioning to Sylvia and the students to say nothing. Pointing to their ears and then at the ceiling trying to convey that microphones might be monitoring their conversations. They could not tell if they were getting through, the students seemed stupefied from repeated exposure to the narcotic.

Nearly everything Pokomchi had said, in pretending to have guessed their mission, could have been picked up from the conversation they'd had with Sylvia during the first half hour of captivity. But the business about a CIA field agent was something else. Perhaps Pokomchi had been fishing for confirmation?

Ross began examining the bars and door to their cell, looking for a weakness. He looked over at Steve and shook his head. They were made of good steel, and could not be bent or broken easily. Too bad their diamond impregnated garrotes had been taken.

A half pound padlock locked the cell door, it would take a good size bolt cutter to get through. Picking it was a possibility, but Ross found nothing with which to attempt the job in his pockets, or anyone else's.

They sat down next to the students, and waited. Although it was quiet in their cell, they could hear occasional sounds drifting to them from other areas of the pyramid, or possibly from outside. At one point, Steve thought he heard small arms fire, one or more assault rifles on automatic.

It didn't last long, most fire fights don't. He wondered if Jim Richards had resisted, been killed. He looked over at Ross, who pursed his lips tightly together and shook his head.

Not long after the gunfire ceased they heard the sound of two large trucks, the noise of motors echoed around inside the pyramid. It reminded Steve of listening to someone trying to communicate over a couple of tin cans with string stretched between.

Their watches had been taken, along with the rest of their gear, it was difficult to keep track of time. Though a half hour seemed to have passed after they'd heard the trucks. Suddenly the lights came on. Again, they sat blinking until their eyes adjusted.

Pokomchi was again outside their cell, this time he had only two armed guards with him. He did not look happy.

"Well, it seems your pilot was not as cooperative as I'd expected. Which is too bad, I could have used both he, and the aircraft." He shrugged and sighed as if it were all beyond his control, a matter of fate, pre-ordained perhaps.

"I want you to know, Miss Sylvia, that we've found the sign we were waiting for," he clapped his hands. An unarmed guard, wearing traditional Mayan dress, came forward carrying a tiny jaguar cub. Spotted like a leopard, it would become

black as sable when it matured. For now, the animal was as cute and cuddly as a kitten, not more than three weeks old.

"This is Acté," Pokomchi said. "He has come to us most auspiciously, for tonight is the night of the jaguar. Many of our people will gather for the ceremony, and each of you will play a most important part." Pokomchi chuckled, and scratched the baby jaguar behind its ear. It tried to bite him, and he just managed to pull his finger away in time. "Oh, you are a fighter already." He cooed in a baby like voice. "Very good."

He looked at the prisoners. "Fear not. You'll be well cared for, bathed and dressed in our finest ceremonial attire. You'll feel no pain, this I can assure you."

Sylvia started to cry then choked back the tears. Anger welled up inside her. "I know the legends of this forest. You've forgotten, the jaguar makes it's own choice. I don't believe it's you who'll be chosen. I see your death coming."

Pokomchi laughed. "Perhaps, but not before I see yours." He turned and left the room.

Through out the encounter Steve and Ross continued to appear stupefied. Julie and Cliff were, in fact, still under the influence of the narcotic, as they'd eaten their full share of the maize brought to them that morning. Sylvia seemed to drift back and forth. Steve put his arm around her shoulder and hugged her to him. If they could feign complete compliance, they might have a chance to do something to change their fate.

####

Bob Spencer was about to climb aboard the Sea Stallion, when Matt Harding stopped him. "I'd like to come along."

Spencer turned to look at Matt. He smiled and put his hand on Harding's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Matt. I can't authorize that. You saw what nearly happened to Richards back at the camp, but I appreciate your sincerity." Then he sighed. "I'll be honest with you. We came here to do a job, because that's what we do. Figured a lot of strings were being pulled, 'cause you're John Harding's son. But you've comported yourself well."

Matt looked away for a moment. Then said: "Jim Richards and I go back a long ways. He came in for me. How can I not do the same for him?"

Spencer nodded his head in an understanding way. "Look, we don't know if Jim, or any of them, are alive. If that turns out to be the case, and something goes wrong and we lose you too, what would be the point of their sacrifice?"

Matt looked glum, then nodded his head. He turned, and started to walk towards the Lear waiting to take him home.

"Hey, Matt." Spencer called after him. "Don't think we're lettin' you off easy. Pay backs are due. And I won't forget where to find you, when we need a favor."

Matt grinned. "Anytime, Bob. Anytime."

###

It was nearly dark when Jim Richards reached the base of the pyramid. He'd scrambled through the stand of trees where the fire fight had occurred until he was at the narrowest point of the meadow that intervened between himself and the jungle canopy covering the hill on which the pyramid stood. He'd confirmed there was a narrow lane not observable from the top, then quickly crossed the meadow and disappeared into the canopy. As he began his careful climb up hill, he heard voices calling out commands, the rattle of equipment, and the motors of at least two trucks.

For awhile, halfway up the slope, he watched the men maneuvering below. They'd sent a flanking patrol further down the road, then made their way through the stand of trees on the far side of the meadow. Relaying their lack of success to the watcher at the top of the pyramid. Richards could hear the crackle of a field radios, though the words were unintelligible.

After assuring the stand of trees was clear, the rebels returned to the pyramid with their dead and wounded. They did not patrol the canopy around the pyramid, nor seem interested searching beyond the immediate area. Jim Richards could not understand this lack of concern.

By the time he reached the top of the hill on the west side of the pyramid, twilight had fallen. His plan was to climb the stepped courses of the temple and enter through the top, after neutralizing the watcher. There was no point in going in by the front entrance. He did not know for certain if Steve and Ross had been captured, they might have been killed out right, but his intuition told him one, or both, were there.

As he waited for the sun to fully set, the second two ton truck sent to the field returned. He watched as a steel door at the entrance to a tunnel slid upward into a pocket seam in the concrete facie of the tunnel. Ten men jumped down from the rear of the truck, eight scrambled inside, and the truck slowly followed.

The two who'd remained behind on guard ducked into the tunnel as soon as the truck cleared the entrance. There was barely enough width for the truck to pass. And Richards wondered if it was necessary for vehicles inside to back out again, or if there was a large enough space within to turn around?

Most likely, Richards thought, the front entrance was open for the occasional visitor, captured perhaps the way a spider catches a fly by simply allowing it to come into her web. While the back door was used by those who occupied the structure. He'd probably find armories, a mess and sleeping quarters on the lowest level. Perhaps prisoners too? Yet he could not simply charge the rear entrance, nor sneak in for that matter, not with a solid steel door barring his path.

###

"Rock Candy one. This is Eyes. Over." The radio crackled in Commander Curtis' ears. He looked back and signaled Bob Spencer to switch his headset to channel two.

"Go ahead Eyes, we've got you five by five." Curtis said.

"Roger that, I'm getting some very strange infrared readings. It looks like a small army is converging on your target, inbound from all quadrants. They appear to be clustered in small groups coming on at a fast walking pace carrying torches. Not in patrol sequence.

"All manner of animals are moving away from their approach, gathering into a relatively small space about your target."

"We copy, Eyes." Curtis said. "Can you give us an ETA for the walkers."

"Hold one we're computing now. Make ETA for first arrivals less than forty-five. Also we're picking up activity around the base of the target, looks like a cordon of some sort is being set up."

"How many surrounding?" Curtis asked.

"Reading fifteen at base of target. Whoa. That blew our optics all to hell."

Curtis frowned. "What's happening Eyes?"

"They just lit up the entire top of the target, it looks like a rock concert down there. I can make it out clearly on normal visual. You should be able to pick it up yourself."

Spencer scurried forward into the red glow of the cockpit. He hunkered down between the pilot and co-pilot's seat, and stared forward into the pitch black night. They'd just crossed the Belize border into Guatemala. Their target straight ahead about thirty miles. Sure enough, the sky was aglow. A shaft of brilliant, white light speared upward out of the surrounding jungle darkness.

###

The top of the pyramid was larger than it appeared from the ground. A level area covered by a stone roof. The granite slab supported by several columns carved from similar stone. Under the roof, a rectangular block of polished limestone three feet wide, six feet in length, and forty-two inches high. Julie was chained to the altar. She'd been dressed in a sheer white gown, appliquéd with stylized, multi-colored animals. Next to the stone block was a slightly higher, square pedestal on which was chained the jaguar cub.

Steve Sheffield had never felt more impotent and useless in his life. All their SEAL training and combat experience was valueless at this particular moment, as had been the case the entire time they'd been in captivity.

In training they'd been warned escape, once captured, was rare. SEALs were not supermen, just extraordinarily well trained soldiers. Their reputation for success was based on more than simply skill and tenacity. It was based on good planning, and excellent back-up. The inherent problem with most black operations, too often there was no back-up.

He and Ross had worked out a scenario of escape when the guards came for them. But it was a lost cause, Pokomchi didn't waste time trying to determine if the first dose of narcotic was still in effect. His guards produced air guns similar to the kind the SEALs had used during their insertion to extract Matt Harding.

Steve and Ross had pulled the darts from where they'd stuck in their bodies, and thrown them through the steel bars with all the malice they could muster. Followed by much bellowing, cursing, and rattling of the cell door. After about thirty seconds they collapsed in a heap on the floor.

The narcotic Pokomchi produced was an amazing substance, no wonder it was so highly coveted by druggies back home. It had the effect of clarifying the mind, while totally anesthetizing the body. Under other circumstances, the experience would have been quite pleasant. Steve wondered if the narcotic was addictive? Dumb question, anything was addictive to addictive personalities.

He shook his head to clear it, but realized his mind was drifting off onto philosophical considerations that had nothing to do with their plight. He had to stay

focused, perhaps an opportunity to escape, or at least kill their tormentor, would yet present itself.

As Pokomchi promised, they were taken from their cell and bathed. Then a warm aromatic oil was massaged into their muscles. Pokomchi personally massaged Sylvia, he seemed to enjoy every minute of the time he spent.

Next they were clothed in the traditional dress of those who were about to be sacrificed. He and Ross were shackled, just in case the drug wore off enough for them to resist. They were brought to the top of the pyramid, then chained to columns. All except Julie, that is.

Steve Sheffield looked out beyond the jungle canopy surrounding the pyramid, he was facing south, towards the road where they'd landed. He saw people walking towards the temple, carrying torches, but they were still a couple of miles away. When they finally arrived, he imagined the ghastly ceremony would begin. He looked over at Ross. Even in his stupor, Ross never gave up trying to free himself. He worked vigorously at the anchors driven into the stone column that held his chains. Steve did the same, though he knew it was futile. Just then flood lights came on, once again forcing them to close their dazzled eyes.

###

Jim Richards remained prone, three tiers from the top. The course he was on lay in shadow. The flood lights mounted in the trees surrounding the pyramid illuminated only its apex, and the top two courses. In fact, most of the light seemed to shine straight upward, a beacon to the Mayan gods perhaps.

At first he'd made good progress, but then two more watchers joined the first when he was still twelve courses from the top, and they patrolled about the threshold of the ceremonial chamber. Jim Richards could only move during the brief moment when one guard passed around to the eastern side and the other had not yet gained the western. Although they seemed not to look down, rather were intent on gazing out beyond the sea of forest that surrounded the temple, he could not chance they might notice movement if he attempted to climb higher when he was within the periphery of their vision.

He considered simply shooting them. And wished more than once that Ross had left his silenced weapon with him. But firing the AR70 would only bring the rest of the garrison out.

He'd drawn the Bowie from its sheath, intending to take the last three steps at a run. Tripping one watcher, then killing the second when he came to see why his compatriot had fallen with a clatter down the steps. An accidental trip and fall

would come to mind first, as the narrow last step was precarious in daylight, let alone in the last gloaming of twilight.

What he would do with the third watcher would depend upon how quietly he could handle the second, a last resort was to shoot him once and hope a single shot would not attract too much attention. A poor plan, but the best he could come up with under the circumstances, and given the choices of weapons at hand.

Just when he was about to make his move, five more men appeared, dressed in bizarre outfits. Three carried obsidian tipped spears. And they brought prisoners with them.

As soon as this second group arrived, the armed guards, who were not dressed in ceremonial garb, vacated the top of the pyramid. Richards presumed they descended a stairway, or ladder, using a trap door in the floor on the top most tier of the temple.

At first he was elated by the sight of Steve, Ross and the students. But then he saw how they were dressed, and remembered there were supposed to be four students.

Well at least now a full-on assault made sense, he could easily take the crudely armed guards by surprise. Then cut off entry to the top by blocking the door. Once free they could all scramble back down the pyramid's steps and disappear into the canopy. He glanced below and groaned silently in dismay, a cordon was being thrown up about the base of the pyramid. Then the flood lights came on.

####

"Its your call," Commander Curtis said, shouting to overcome the noise of wind blowing into the open side door, and the sound of the rotor whirling overhead. "We can come in low over the canopy then pop up at the last moment. They'll never hear us 'till we open up with the mini-guns."

Spencer gave a thumbs up. "Fire on my command only. We don't know what we're flying into. If it is the ritual of the jaguar that Vinnie's been talking about, they'll have sacrificial victims on top of the pyramid."

####

Jim Richards slowly, carefully raised his head to peer over the stone step above the course on which he lay. He was still in shadow, everything above his position was bathed in brilliant light. The spots were powerful enough to illuminate the entire pyramid, but for some odd reason were directed towards the apex. A

lot of the light was wasted, sent upward into the sky. Individual shafts criss crossing above the apex.

As Richards watched, another man emerged from inside. He was short of stature, but powerfully built. He reminded Richards of a gymnast. The man appeared to be the leader, or perhaps a priest in some bizarre religion. He wore a white gown, similar to the one worn by the girl chained to the altar, but his was long and flowing covering his ankles. His feet shod in leather sandals.

He carried a pottery bowl ceremoniously in both hands, the bone handle of some sort of implement leaned against the inside rim. He set the bowl down on top of the altar, next to the torso of the girl who was secured with manacles that held her wrists and ankles.

She did not struggle, but her breathing was rapid. Her eyes wide with fear. The priest, gently, as a lover might, parted the ceremonial dress she wore revealing a long lithe body. Small, perfectly shaped breasts. Nipples hard with fear, or excitement.

Music arose from somewhere within the pyramid, probably recorded, thought Richards. There was the pulsing sound of drums and other percussion instruments with a haunting almost classical melody played by something that sounded like an electronic synthesizer. Jim Richards glanced below, hundreds of people were beginning to gather about the pyramid. A low chant began in harmony with the music. It was strangely hypnotic, and seductive.

The music softened and the priest began to speak a prayer, or perhaps it was an incantation, in the Mayan tongue. His voice directed upward toward the stone ceiling which, Richards now noted in the brilliance of the electric spotlights, was slightly concave. The result, an amplification of the words spoken, directing the sound downward about the pyramid.

The priest began at the girl's feet, where the jaguar was chained. He bowed low to the young animal, showing him the contents of the bowl. The cub swatted at the handle of the implement inside, and hissed in anger at the priest.

The priest then turned, and faced the girl. He said a few words, then stepped to her left side, facing east, his back to Richards. And repeated the ritual, using different words. Next he moved above her head, facing north. He took longer at this position. Finally he moved to her right side. He spoke more words. Then set the bowl down.

All the while the music and the chant continued. All in harmony to the ritual above.

The priest raised his hands above his head, and looked up. He spoke to the starry sky, as if he were asking permission to proceed. When he lowered his hands, the music stopped. The chants stopped. And there was complete silence.

Perhaps not complete, Jim Richards heard something off in the distance, a motorized sound perhaps, it seemed to echo from the stone step he hunkered on. It tickled an old memory, but before he could not recall its implication.

The priest withdrew the implement that had thus far been hidden by the edges of the pottery bowl. In his hands he held an obsidian knife, perhaps ten inches long. He raised it above his head, its tip pointed downward, then lowered his demonic gaze until it focused only on the rapidly rising and falling diaphragm of the young women.

Jim Richards did not stop to consider the consequences of his actions. He did not plan three steps ahead. He did not even take particularly careful aim. He simply reacted instinctually. A five round burst of automatic fire, left the AR-70 assault rifle, three rounds hit in a tight group centered about the priest's solar plexus, and two rounds drifted upward striking his upper chest. The impact lifted the man completely off his feet, and drove him backward past the column where a young man was chained. He disappeared in a scream of agony over the far side of the pyramid.

Jim Richards was up in an instant, racing across the landing towards the altar, for a moment its occupants frozen in shock. Another burst dropped one of the spear carriers, he grunted once grabbing for his intestines then rolled off the south side tumbling down the first six steps.

The guard nearest Richards had taken cover behind one of the columns. As Jim Richards reached the altar, the guard thrust his spear forward, a bayonet lunge. The obsidian tip easily sliced through the rip stop nylon of Richards' load bearing vest but not through the thirty round fully loaded magazine it encountered just beyond.

Richards pivoted left, slapping the spear aside. He could not fire for fear the rounds at this range would pass completely through his attacker and kill the woman chained to the column directly behind.

Swinging the stock of his rifle like a baseball bat he slammed his attacker on the side of his face and felt the jaw bone shatter on impact. Richards rushed forward and shoved with all his strength. The guard flew off the upper tier, then disappeared in cry followed by a dull thud somewhere beyond the focal point of the spot lights.

He heard Ross call out a warning, Jim Richards spun right, the last spear wielding guard thrust his weapon forward. Richards blocked it with his rifle. The guard instantly parried, tearing the weapon from Richards' hands. It bounced off the side of the altar, then clattered onto the stone floor. The guard thrust again. Richards's side stepped, then turned to his left grasping the spear three feet back of the point. The guard yanked as hard as he could trying to free his spear from Richards' grasp.

But Jim Richards did not release the weapon, instead he used the momentary rigidity of the spear as a lever, leaped into the air, and kicked the guard square in his chest with all the force he could muster.

They both fell to the floor. Richards kicked again catching the guard on that point of the elbow known as the funny bone. He doubted the guard found it funny, because the impact caused him to relinquish his grip on the spear. Hence he could not resist Richards' take-away with only the use of his one remaining hand.

The guard and Richards both scrambled to their feet. Richards up first, the spear in striking position. The guard thrust his hands forward in a pitiful defense, as if the mere gesture was enough to fend off the attack. Jim Richards skewered him, then used the spear as a ram, driving the screaming guard backwards off the east side of the pyramid.

As Richards let go of the spear, one of the unarmed attendants scrambled around the altar diving for Richards' rifle. Jim Richards spun to his right, his hand dove for the old forty-five auto loader but snagged on the handle of the Bowie that had partially ejected from its sheath during the struggle for the spear. There was no time to untangle. As the guard seized the AR70, Richards threw the Bowie knife.

Jim Richards was no circus performer, and seldom practiced knife throwing. The knife struck the guard, butt end first, square on the top of his head, knocking a nasty gash in his skull, and momentarily rendering him stupefied. He dropped the rifle, then tried to regain it. Too late. He took the toe of Richards' hiking boot squarely under his chin. The blow lifted the guard to his knees, his eyes went dull, and blood bubbled out of his mouth. Jim Richards bent down and grabbed the man first by the collar of his ceremonial attire, and then by his scrotum. He lifted the attendant, then heaved him out beyond lights. The body made a dull thud eight steps below, just as the last attendant slammed into him. They rolled and kicked at each other, then both scrambled for the assault weapon. The guard winning the race, fatigue was beating Jim Richards.

Suddenly the Bowie was uncovered. As the guard fitted his hand to the pistol grip of the assault rifle, Jim Richards drove the blade of the oversize knife into the side of the guard's throat, then ripped outward. The guard went limp, falling

across the weapon as blood flowed in arterial squirts, his adrenaline primed heart hammering its final beats.

Richards leapt to his feet, yanking the assault weapon from under the dying guard, its pistol grip wet, and slippery with blood. But there was no time to consider the gore. He spun three hundred and sixty degrees. No targets, no threats. He charged the trap door, pointed the weapon down the shaft and fired a quick burst, then slammed the door shut.

Then he looked up, and over at Steve, grinning sardonically with the lust of victory. But his smile of battle glory collapsed as reality set in, and it suddenly dawned on Jim Richards: He had no key to unlock their shackles.

Chapter 17

Time is an interesting phenomenon. A given amount of time can seem long or short, depending upon the events crowded within it. The struggle to control the altar could not have lasted more than two minutes, probably less. Yet it seemed forever.

Now the second or two he stared at Steve Sheffield's locked chains, was an eternity. In that time he realized there was nothing more he could do, they were all doomed.

He rushed over to Ross, then pulled at the anchor slightly loosened by the big man's efforts. It would not come free. And even if it had, they would never free the others. Richards turned and scanned all about the top of the pyramid. A silly exercise, but maybe the keys to the shackles had been dropped.

Most likely one of the guards, he'd so violently ejected from the uppermost level of the temple, had the keys on their person. His eyes fell on the girl manacled to the altar. He looked in her eyes and saw hope, the kind of desperate hope one sees on the face of a drowning man when he's just beyond reach. Just before he goes down for the last time.

In movies, the hero severs the chain securing the shackle with a well placed gun shot. This, of course, is impossible unless wounding or killing the person you're trying to free is one of the consequences you're willing to accept.

An angry wasp buzzed by Richards' ear. Another slammed into one of the columns above Sylvia's head. Richards looked to his left into the darkness. Flashes of light appeared, like flash bulbs at a rock concert. Reports of gunfire came to his ears. More rounds were ricocheting about the upper tier of the pyramid.

"You assholes!" Richards cried out in frustration. He stepped to the edge of the pyramid, and held down the trigger the AR70, sweeping left and right. He heard a couple of screams, the flashes in that direction ceased for the moment. He dropped the empty magazine and reached for another.

"Richards, use the trap door," Steve cried. "Get your butt out of here. There's nothing more you can do."

Jim Richards popped another magazine into the assault rifle's receiver, then swept the east side of the pyramid, soldiers had climbed higher there.

Rounds were impacting the stone ceiling, shattering, and raining bits of lead and stone on everyone. A few would hit the side of the altar, or careen off a stone column. Sooner or later someone would be hit. Jim Richards dropped another empty magazine, extracted a fresh one and popped it in place. For some odd reason a picture of the Alamo came to mind. This must have been what it was like then, he thought, no chance of escape. But damn it, make 'em pay for every step closer the enemy dared to take.

A round glanced off the top of his shoulder harness, searing a crevice in the strap of the load bearing vest. Jim Richards swept the north side of the pyramid. Dropped the magazine and reached for another. Just then he remembered the sound he'd heard earlier, maybe five minutes earlier, or was it five years.

###

The Sea Stallion suddenly popped up over the canopy, like a huge, black dragonfly. Bob Spencer still hunkered between the pilot's seats, looking forward through the windshield. The scene he viewed as they roared towards the target was so bizarre it took a good five seconds for his mind to accept what he saw. The upper part of the pyramid was lit in a brilliant blue, white light. Four people, dressed in ceremonial Mayan costumes, were chained to vertical columns.

A naked girl was lying prone on the stone altar. And a crazy man was running all around the perimeter of the pyramid, firing an automatic weapon at several armed men attempting to assault the top in a completely unorganized manner.

And on the ground below, surrounding the pyramid, was a throng of peasants jumping up and down, waving torches and clubs, apparently cheering the bizarre drama on as if it were a local soccer game.

Mid-way down the stepped side of the stone pyramid lay three bodies in various odd and broken positions, these were also dressed in some sort of ceremonial garb.

Hanging below the belly of the Sea Stallion were two electronically activated mini-gatling guns capable of firing six thousand rounds per minute. Two minutes of uninterrupted fire power for the load they carried tonight. At the open side door, Frank Prescott sighted down the barrel of a belt fed M-60 machine gun. Seven-hundred and fifty rounds per minute of continuous fire, if it didn't overheat and jam. But Frank wouldn't let that happen, he knew the weapon well.

The Sea Stallion roared closer.

"I'll be damned," Spencer said. "It's Ocean Man, and he is one crazy SOB. Commander, sweep around from the south. Let's see if we can clear the decks on one pass. Then hover in from the west side, so we can keep that M-60 talking to the assholes below."

Commander Curtis nodded once. And Spencer turned to brief his teammates waiting in the back, oblivious to the mayhem they were approaching.

###

Jim Richards popped the last of his magazines into the AR70, a round from below slammed into the assault rifle. He lost his footing, fell backwards onto the floor. His weapon clattered off into the darkness coming to rest three tiers down.

Suddenly, a single searchlight illuminated the men clambering up the stepped sides. Richards looked to his right, supporting his upper body with his elbows. The jet black Sea Stallion swept into the glow of the flood lights, mini-guns blazing.

Wherever the pilot looked the guns pointed, and he looked at each and every Pokomam rebel. The helicopter hovered, then side slipped, working its way around the entire pyramid.

But Jim Richards only saw what happened to those directly below his position. One of those men had fired the round that would have ended his life had it not struck his assault weapon.

Below, bodies wheeled, shivered in a spasmodic dance, then screamed and died. Richards rolled left, and scrambled to his feet. He rushed to the girl chained to the altar, and tried to pry the manacles open with the Bowie knife.

The helicopter settled into a hover on the east side of the structure. SEALs fast roped to the fourth tier, then scrambled to the top. No additional fire came from below.

The trap door popped open, Jim Richards sensed movement in his peripheral vision, he looked right. A rifle barrel emerged first, then the head and neck. Jim Richards side armed the Bowie. This time it was not the handle that struck first. There was a fleeting vision of a one eyed unicorn, then the threat clattered away into the darkness.

A SEAL dressed entirely in black, slid to a stop at the trap door, pulled the pin on a hand grenade and threw it hard down the hole. Then slammed the trap door shut. KARUMP! The lid flopped up about six inches then dropped back down.

Dave Wilcox took up a fire position standing on top of the stone trap door, it would not open again unexpectedly.

Vince Morris quickly cut Steve's chains with a bolt cutter. Steve took the tool. As Vince crossed to the far side to look for any climbers that might have escaped the mini-gun. Steve cut Ross's chains, then Sylvia's and Clifford's. He and Ross got them down to the fourth tier and into rope lifts. One at a time each was hauled up.

Meanwhile, Bob Spencer worked to free Julie. Drilling out each shackle lock with a diamond tipped hand drill. It took 30 seconds per shackle. When the first shackle broke free she started saying thank you, over and over again. Interrupted by sobs and tears.

The Sea Stallion made another sweep around the pyramid. There were no more climbers. And the people who'd come to watch had scattered into the forest as soon as the mini-gun opened up.

The last shackle came lose, Bob Spencer swept the girl into his arms. "Vince! Let's go."

They scrambled down to the fourth step. Vince clipped Spencer into the rope, he was hauled up in a mutual embrace with Julie.

Jim Richards grabbed the bolt cutters, now lying on the floor. As he slipped the cutter under its wire rope collar, the Jaguar cub swatted at him. Then turned, and grasped Richards' hand with his teeth, halting the pressure of his bite before blood was drawn. Their eyes met, two predators, a moment of primal understanding. Jim Richards cut the collar, the cub leaped from the pedestal and scampered down the east side of the pyramid away from the whirling noise of the hovering helicopter.

A short argument ensued between Jim Richards and Vince in regard to who would be hauled up next, but Vince wrapped the rope around Richards' chest, clipped it into itself, kicked Richards in the butt, and signaled for a lift.

Richards hung from the rope, looking down as Vince got smaller below him. The trap door came open, he cried a warning. It was blown away in the wind of the rotors.

A burst of fire from Dave Wilcox who'd left the door, but not his vigilance, for a position on the far side of the altar. The door dropped and did not reopen.

Now Vince was up. And finally Dave.

####

The pyramid receded as they flew east towards Belize. They found a jump suit for Julie, a couple of fatigue coats for Clifford and Sylvia. The three students huddled together against the bulk head, sipping coffee poured from a thermos.

The SEALs sat together asking and answering questions amongst themselves. Ribbing Steve and Ross about the loin cloths they were wearing, and promising to show the entire base the photos they'd supposedly taken of the whole affair as they made their initial approach.

Jim Richards sat alone, numb with fatigue. Violent images came and went at random through his mind, as it tried to catalog the things he'd seen and done while trying to stay alive. There would be nightmares, that was a given. He'd had them before, he understood their origin. They would eventually fade. One day, they might even go away entirely.

He looked across at Sylvia, Julie, and Clifford, and wondered how long their nightmares would last. And whether, or not, their lives would ever be the same.

They saw him staring at them, and fear came into their eyes. He must be a sight, he thought, covered with the blood of people he'd killed. He could smell it on himself. He tried to silently convey that he wasn't a mad man. That sometimes you just had to do things that normal people did not condone.

Finally, Sylvia was able to acknowledge him with her eyes. She was older, she knew circumstances seldom turned out the way one expects. And those who are the most dangerous, may actually be the most reliable. With this acknowledgment in mind, Jim Richards drifted off to sleep, lulled by the incessant whine and vibration of a deadly dragonfly that now carried them to safety.

Chapter 18

The building where Tom Lovell lived was also his place of business. It was a small, two story, adobe and wood affair. Retail space below, an apartment above. Located in the mercantile section of Puerto Barrios.

It was ten in the evening when Lovell pulled his old Land Rover around to the back of the building. The street was quiet, all the other shops closed. Only a small restaurant down the street was open, and Mario's Taverna as well. Lovell was tired, it had been a long day decoding messages from his Control, over at the safe house on the other side of town. He shut the engine off, then climbed wearily out of the driver's seat. He crossed the short space between the vehicle and the rear entrance to his shop. Then fumbled for his keys, taking a moment or two to select the right one, and fit it into the lock. He was not as cautious as he'd normally be, not as sharp, such is the nature of fatigue. He unlocked the door, then stepped into the back of the darkened shop. He did not turn on the light, nor did he allow the door to fully open before stepping inside.

The leaded sap caught him just below his left ear, he saw stars, and for a brief moment, had the odd thought that the old cartoons had got it right. Then his knees buckled and he collapsed, unaware of burly arms that arrested his fall, then picked him up as if he weighed no more than a small child.

When Lovell awoke, he was seated in a straight back wooden chair. His forearms tied to the chair's armrests, each ankle to one of its front legs. A light shown from above, casting a circle ten feet in diameter, beyond, which total darkness, prevailed. He felt nauseous, and took several deep breaths to keep from vomiting. He was frightened. The possibility of capture, interrogation, and torture was always a risk any field operative faced. Anxiety served a valid purpose, it assured an agent would pay attention to detail lest his worst fears come to pass. But he'd become too comfortable, to complacent of late.

He took another breath, and tried to assess his surroundings, get some idea of where he was, who his captors might be. His first hint came from a melancholy buoy ringing off in the distance, and the fetid stench of salt water mixed with rotting fish. If he listened carefully, he could just make out the sound of water lapping against pilings somewhere below his present location.

Okay, he thought, I'm in a warehouse over water, probably on the second floor. He tried to twist his wrists and forearms, testing for give in the ropes, a chance to work free, escape. There was none.

He sat for what seemed an interminable time. Anxiety gnawing at him. Who were his captors? And why had they taken him? He'd not been working on anything particularly sensitive. In fact, except for the two special operations men he'd assisted three weeks before, there hadn't been any change in his routine at all. There was nothing, he knew of, that was so sensitive he would not disclose it to avoid torture or death. That was why the cut out system was set up in the first place. No one withstood torture for long. It was only a matter of not giving up the information too quickly, lest his interrogator fail to believe his sincerity, and torture him anyway.

Time dragged on. Lovell began to think about life outside his agency work. His import-export business, his girlfriend Marlena who gave him so much pleasure and asked so little in return. He didn't want to lose the things he'd worked hard for, they suddenly seemed so sweet.

Time took its toll. As his anxiety calmed, the fatigue he'd felt before his capture began to manifest itself again. He started to nod off.

"Well, well Mr. Lovell you are very relaxed I must say."

The voice startled him, his heart rate went up, he tried to grasp the moment. Must have nodded off, he thought to himself. How long had he slept? A minute, an hour? Tom Lovell squinted, straining to see beyond the circle of light. He worked his wrist, trying to free his watch, get some idea of the time, and measure the length of his captivity. Maybe he'd only imagined the voice. A dream perhaps.

The minutes wore on. He felt the need to urinate, it was mildly uncomfortable at the moment but eventually it would become intolerable. If he were not allowed to use the bathroom, sooner or later he'd wet his pants. That would be embarrassing, and a sign of weakness. But perhaps it was the least of his worries. Time crawled by, the monotonous rhythm of the water far below seemed closer as the auditory chemicals in his brain adjusted to the quiet warehouse. Eventually he nodded off again.

"I would be less inclined to sleep if I were you, Mr. Lovell."

He started awake again, his heart racing. He shook his head to clear it. Then said, "Who are you? What is it you want from me?"

"In due time." The voice grew louder, as a man stepped into the circle of light.

Tom Lovell squinted up at the man, his face still in darkness, the rest of his body illuminated from the chest down.

Someone set a chair down, and the man sat in it facing him. His face had a swarthy, dark complexion. Pocked marked by smallpox, perhaps suffered when he was a small boy.

"I'm a consultant who has been retained by the Guatemalan government, to assist them in acquiring some very important information. My investigation, Mr. Lovell, tells me you are the person who can tell me what I need to know."

Lovell frowned, he could not place the accent. Cuban? No. Panamanian perhaps, or Colombian?

"And if I tell you what you want, then what will you do with me?"

The man smiled a cynical smile. "Oh we just want you to carry a message for us to your handlers. After which, I imagine they will have little to do with you. You are not really an important asset you know?"

"Well, at least we can agree on one thing." Lovell said in an off hand manner. "Would it be possible to untie me, and let me use your rest room?"

The man shook his head. "No."

He raised his left hand, casually as if responding to a bid price at an auction. Immediately, a low table was set next to him.

Lovell stared at the table, then back at the man who confronted him. It was then he noticed the man's eyes held all the warmth and humanity of a hooded cobra. Lovell recognized only one of the items on the table, a surgeon's scalpel.

"Oh you're probably wondering about these," the man gestured towards the items. "Well, we have a scalpel." He held it up before Lovell's eyes. "And we have a small bottle of hydrofluoric acid, and...oh yes, a bottle soda water..."

"Oh God." Lovell began to struggle violently, trying to free himself, trying to rock the chair over, anything to escape. But burly hands clamped onto the back of the chair and held it rock steady.

The man chuckled, a kind of thin psychotic snicker. "I was about to say that hydrofluoric acid is the only acid not neutralized by water, rather enhanced. But don't worry, the soda water is not to pour on you." He grinned, maniacally. "It's for me to drink. "There is more than enough fluid in your body to enhance the acid. All we need to do is make a little cut with the scalpel and..."

"Oh Jesus, this is insane. Please don't." Lovell pleaded. "Look. I'll tell you anything you want to know. You don't..."

The man held up his hands, palms forward. "Oh I know that." He shook his head slowly back and forth, the way one might when pointing out an obvious error to a child. "There's no doubt in my mind you'll tell me everything I want to know. In fact, before we're through, you'll wish you had more to tell me." He paused for a moment. then said: "My dear boy, it's not only what we want you to tell us, it's what we want to tell the Central Intelligence Agency. And you will be, how do you say it, a not so silent messenger. Come to think of it, you may never stop screaming."

Tom Lovell felt warm liquid running down his leg, as the man with the pockmarked face leaned towards him, a scalpel in one hand, and an eye dropper in the other.

###

Jim Richards slept soundly for eight solid hours. And would have slept even longer had he not been awakened by children laughing in the swimming pool, six stories below his hotel room. He rolled over onto his side, groggily slipped from under the bed sheet, and then padded into the bathroom for a steaming hot shower.

It was nearly eleven in the morning by the time he ventured out onto the balcony. He wore a pair of boxer swim trunks, and a T-shirt that bore the slogan: I dove the Blue Hole below the eighteenth fathom.

The day was warm and humid. Out beyond the hotel pool, a thousand yards of white sand glimmered in brilliant sunshine. Beyond the beach lay the calm blue waters of the Caribbean sea. Jim Richards took a sip of rich, dark coffee delivered by room service. Then thought about the past few weeks.

It had been a more dangerous mission than anticipated, but they always were. Still, the objective had been achieved. The after action reports had taken a day to complete. Then, with hugs and handshakes, everyone had gone their separate ways. Steve and Sylvia were off together to Grand Cayman. Clifford and Julie home to be with their families. The rest of the SEALs to their own favorite R&R locales. And Richards had headed back up to Cancun to keep the promise he'd made to Shannon when he'd passed through on his way to Sosela. And now, for the past three weeks they'd been inseparable, except for her work duties.

He was just finishing his breakfast when the telephone rang. Jim Richards had an excellent sense of intuition, which he kept honed in little ways. One of those was guessing who was on the other end of the line before he picked it up. A picture of Arnold Batiste came into his mind as he stepped over to the telephone.

"How's the R&R going."

Richards smiled. "Just fine, thank you."

"Are you alone?"

Richards sighed. "Unfortunately, yes. Shannon's off to Caracas on business for her boss. By the way, I thought you were going to shut U.S. Investments down?"

"Well, you know sometimes it's best to let things run their course. Are you up for a little business? At least until your new lady friend gets back? We need to tie up loose ends with your old instructor friend."

Richards groaned inwardly. "What exactly do you mean, tie up lose ends?"

"Oh just lure him back here to the states, we'll take it from there."

Richards grimaced. "I have a sneaking suspicion my old friend is not going to be real happy to see me."

"Probably not, since he thinks your enjoying your new job teaching rebels how to fly. Seems he's got one more unit to deliver. We've had the paint shop under surveillance ever since your visit there. But due to the usual screw ups, by the time we got the FAA's security team on the spot, he'd already left. He has no idea of your action at the airfield."

Richards pinched the ridge of his nose. "Flight plan?"

"Cancun."

"Today?"

"Should be arriving in about an hour. See what you can accomplish with regard to a return. Maybe manuscript a tale of a narrow escape with Matt Harding in one of the Skymasters. You know, all sweetness and innocence about the rogues turning out not to be training for a medical mercy mission."

"Oh yeah, that should do the trick." Richards said sarcastically.

Batiste chuckled. "Well, that and a little sedation perhaps."

###

The Cancun airport terminal was in process of improvement, in consideration of the increased tourism expected with the building of new resorts, and the promotion of Mayan historical sites as a nearby adjunct to a vacation in the warm Caribbean sun. Jim Richards used the partially constructed terminal addition as a place of concealment, while he waited for George Krystonopolis to arrive in another stolen Skymaster.

At two-fifteen, a solid gray, Cessna 336 touched down at the north end of the runway. As usual George put it on the numbers, and had no problem taking the mid-field taxi way over to transient parking directly in front of the construction site.

Jim Richards lounged casually on a stack of concrete blocks, surrounded by various construction materials that were covered with a white canvass tarpaulin. Dressed in a loose white cotton shirt, faded blue jeans, and a bleached woven straw hat, he basically blended right into the material. In fact, if he didn't move, the chances of George or anyone else noticing him was highly unlikely. Certainly not any of the workers, they were all off-site taking siesta.

George Krystonopolis climbed out of the Skymaster. He immediately tied the aircraft down. Then secured the controls, and locked the aircraft.

Jim Richards frowned. Why wasn't he simply refueling for the next leg of his flight? It was unlike George to bother with tying down an aircraft, let alone securing it if he planned to leave the same afternoon. If it was breezy, he might chain down the wings, but that was it. Richards watched as Krystonopolis supervised refueling, then walked towards the single terminal building carrying an overnight case in one hand, his knee board, which contained his air charts, in the other.

As soon as George entered the terminal, Jim Richards dropped off the stack of block. Then made his way through the construction site to a point where the new addition abutted the main terminal just beyond the Customs counter. He concealed himself in the shadows behind an opaque plastic tarp that hung down from the ceiling, partitioning off the construction area. He removed his sun glasses, then peeped through a small tear in the curtain.

Krystonopolis was just stepping up to the counter, answering the standard questions about his reason for visiting Cancun? "Vacation," Richards overheard him saying to the Federale. The Mexican official was thorough as he went through George's bag, then told him to go over to the Port of Entry office to fill out the necessary documents, and pay his landing fee.

As Krystonopolis moved off towards POE, Richards skirted around to the front of the building. He found a spot behind an umbrellared burrito vendor and

waited. Twenty minutes later Krystonopolis emerged from the terminal, and immediately stepped into a taxi.

Jim Richards had to scramble to reach the Moped he'd rented from the hotel concession, then pedal like crazy to get started. Even so he lost sight of the taxi for three or four minutes, picking it up again as it entered downtown Cancun. Using traffic to his advantage, he closed to within three car lengths, then verified George was still on board.

As it turned out he could have saved himself the effort, Krystonopolis checked into the same hotel where Richards was staying.

It cost twenty bucks, but the Bell Captain accommodated Richards with George's room number. The map under glass at the registration counter showed the room to be within view of Richards' balcony.

He jogged up to his room, the stairway was faster, and undoubtedly more reliable, than the elevators. Slithering on his belly onto the balcony, he peered through a pair of binoculars at George's room diagonally across the pool, and one floor lower than his own. George was animatedly talking on the telephone, waving his free hand about and pacing back and forth. Then he switched the receiver to his other ear, and looked at his watch. Jim Richards thought he could read his lips forming the words six, or maybe seven o'clock. Krystonopolis returned the phone to its cradle, then walked out onto his balcony.

He looked down at the pool, staring openly at several bikini clad women lying on lounge chairs. Then turned his gaze towards the Caribbean. He then began scanning the balconies. Richards slithered backwards, as George's gaze passed over his balcony. When he returned, George was not in sight. But judging from the clothes flying through the air, and landing on the bed and floor, he was either planning to take a shower, or go for a swim. Five minutes later George emerged at ground level wearing a pair of goofy long shorts, Jams the surfers at Newport Beach called them, and a towel draped around his neck. He headed straight for the pool.

Jim Richards thought for a moment, he slipped back into the hotel room, then grabbed the day pack he'd picked up from the British SAS headquarters in Belize City, having left his overnight bag in the Skymaster they'd force landed in Guatemala. He chuckled to himself, as he checked the contents of the pack from which he'd taken the binoculars earlier, remembering how the Sea Stallion had rocketed the abandoned Skymaster. A sort of parting shot as it were, following their rescue. No sense leaving any salvageable equipment for the Pokomam to use.

He slipped one of the straps over his left shoulder and walked down stairs, then found a chair in the shade. He watched George attempting to impress a girl obviously far too young for him. Krystonopolis soon lost interest, and went for a swim, then returned to his room. While George was swimming, Richards ordered lunch.

###

The hotel had several exits, however, only three would make any sense for George to use. Of the three, one led directly to the beach. A possibility, but Richards did not feel whoever George was scheduled to meet would pick him up in a boat. That left the main entrance, where cars and taxis arrived, and a side entrance - the most direct exit to the street leading downtown.

Jim Richards placed himself across from the hotel in a spot where he would be able to observe if George left by either the front or side. At six-thirty, Krystonopolis emerged from the main exit and got into a taxi. Richards waited a suitable period of time before following.

###

He shut off the Moped engine, and coasted down the dirt road. Stopped, then pushed the little motor bike off the road through a break in the foliage. He heard a car door slam, then George's voice thanking the driver.

It was almost dark, the brush too thick to penetrate for any distance. So he left the Moped, and returned to the road. He moved forward slowly, silently, keeping to the inside of the curve. He'd proceeded no more than fifty yards when the hair on the back of his neck stood up. There was danger near. He went into a crouch, listening, scanning ahead, behind and to both sides but heard and saw nothing to support his concern. He crept forward until he was almost around the bend in the road.

Just ahead, perhaps thirty-five yards, was a small cabin, used, he supposed, for fishing. Perhaps rented by the day, or simply occupied at whim by anyone who happened by and found it empty. There were no curtains on the windows visible from his position. A soft glow flickered from within, candle light, or perhaps an oil lantern. Not far from the front entrance was a guard, idly smoking a cigarette. Some sort of small automatic weapon hung by a strap from his shoulder. He finished the cigarette, flicked it to the ground, and then stepped on it almost as if it were an after thought. He took a few steps to the left, stopped and looked around, then a few to the right. This was not the source of danger Richards sensed.

The guard appeared to be paying poor attention, a guise perhaps to bring the unwary in, as a Morning dove will feign an injured wing to lead a predator away

from the nest it is protecting. Jim Richards faded back around the curve, then crossed the road. He inched forward again, and watched the guard outside the cabin for several minutes until he was sure there was no back-up concealed in the surrounding trees. Yet the urgency of danger was still strong.

Looking to his right, he saw an animal trail that wound away through the brush. Perhaps he'd find a clearing and make his way around to the beach side, then approach from that direction.

###

George Krystonopolis stepped through the doorway. He'd been directed to enter by the man standing guard outside. The room was rectangular, with a dirty wooden floor, badly in need of a good refinish. At one end was a counter and a sink, a kind of miniature cistern stood adjacent to the sink. When filled it provided water for washing. Adjacent to the sink was a long counter with galvanized metal nailed to its upper surface. A few feet from the sink was a small table, capable of seating four people comfortably. Two men were seated at the table, illuminated by a hurricane lamp. Its wick nearly exhausted, so the flame did not burn steadily.

George looked to his left, a door led to another room. A bedroom perhaps. The cabin smelled of fish, the odor had soaked into the dry porous floor, which continued to give off the rank smell though it was unlikely anyone had used the cabin for fishing recently.

As George walked towards the men seated at the table, he recognized one whose face had been obscured by the lamp when he'd first stepped through the doorway. "Good evening Roland," George said, a casual smile masking his unease. "Nice place you got here. Pay much for it?"

Roland Pollock did not return George's smile. "It has its good points. Privacy for one."

George looked at the other man seated at the table. He was solidly built, military bearing. Slavic heritage. High cheek bones, black hair combed straight back. A shadow of beard, so heavy it would always look as if he needed a shave. Coal black eyes regarded George with disdain. Well the feeling was mutual, thought George as he pulled one of the chairs away from the table and sat down.

The man took a drag on a poorly rolled cigarette. He held it between his thumb and forefinger, palm upward. An eastern European trait, though the tobacco was definitely Cuban. George was an astute person by nature, and by years of careful observation.

"This is Colonel Anatoly Skorokhodov," Pollock said. "He has some questions about the aircraft you've delivered, and the pilots."

George frowned. "My contract was with you, Roland. And I've fulfilled it. In fact, if I recall correctly you still owe me for the last delivery."

Pollock was about to respond when Anatoly held up his right hand, a gesture of silence. "You delivered eight aircraft? Nine were contracted for..."

George looked Skorokhodov directly in the eye. "That's right, and I've brought the ninth with me today. You are welcome to take delivery if you wish. It's at the airport, fueled and ready to fly. Can you fly it?"

Skorokhodov did not respond to George's taunt, not did he blink. "Did you make each of those deliveries yourself?"

George looked from one man to the other, then back at the Russian. "No as a matter of fact, two of the deliveries were made by flight instructors hired at the request of El Commandante, Reyes."

"And where did you find these instructors?"

George frowned. "What's this third degree all about, I've delivered the aircraft as we agreed."

Anatoly Skorokhodov crushed out his cigarette. "This is not third degree Mr. Krystonopolis, but it can be made so if you prefer. Please answer my question."

George swallowed, his throat felt dry. Something had gone wrong. "One flight instructor I've known for quite sometime, we used to work together. The other, I checked out carefully, everything looked okay."

One corner of the Russian's mouth turned downward derisively. "Tell me their names."

George sighed. "The first was a guy named Chris Hartford, use to fly for Pacific Airlines before they went bankrupt. The other, Jim Richards, a guy I know well, like I said."

The Russians eyebrows went up for a moment. "Where might I find Mr. Richards?"

George's eyebrows went up also, an unconscious response. "As far as I know he's at the Sosela camp."

Anatoly shook his head. "Nyet. Both instructors are gone, and all the aircraft destroyed."

George was genuinely shocked, his face showed it. "How can that be?"

"Precisely," Anatoly said. Then he slid an eight by ten color photo across the table to George, who took one look and nearly gagged.

"Christ what the...? Who is this man, or should I say was?"

Anatoly grinned. "Was. A CIA resident agent in Guatemala, who assisted a team of U.S. Navy SEALs to acquire transportation to Sosela. He did not know where we could find Mr. Richards either? Let me ask you again..."

George shook his head. "You can ask me as many times as you'd like, Colonel. I don't know. To my knowledge, he flew the Skymaster he procured down to Sosela and remained there.

"But that's neither here nor there, whoever did this," George tapped the photograph. "Is one sick puppy. And you don't look to me like someone capable of this kind of torture. I don't believe you ordered it. Because if you had, I would not be sitting here having this discussion with you. Whoever did this, did it as much for their own amusement as for any information they wished to acquire. That kind of asshole wouldn't bother having a conversation."

The Russian bowed his head slightly, acknowledging the back handed show of respect. "You are astute Mr. Krystonopolis. It's too bad you were not so astute when it came to Mr. Richards."

"I don't follow your meaning, Colonel."

"Jim Richards is a covert operative for your country's intelligence community..."

George burst out laughing. "No offense, sir, but that's not possible. I've known Jim Richards for a little over two years. He's not the type, he hates authority almost as much as I do..."

Anatoly held up his hand again. "I can assure you he's what I say he is, and the fact that you seem to have no hint of that is perhaps a compliment to his skill. But he's been at this game for quite some time. And this is the second time our paths have crossed, to my dissatisfaction." He turned and looked towards Roland Pollock, who by this point in time was beginning to sweat.

"Perhaps you should explain to your business partner what this situation is all about."

####

Jim Richards eased the small rucksack off his shoulders, and placed it on the ground in front of him. He'd found a clearing within the foliage that had a view to the cabin. There was another watcher not visible from his previous position, who paced occasionally at the rear of the structure.

Richards sat on the ground and carefully opened the pack, then began removing what appeared to be several common items any traveler might carry. First he extracted a small metal flashlight about four inches in length, perhaps twice the diameter of a twenty-five caliber gun barrel. Next he removed a can of shaving cream and a square hair brush with a pewter back.

He pried the back off the hair brush, revealing a hollow compartment that contained a skeleton pistol grip, inside of which was a .25 cal. magazine loaded with seven rounds. A half twist of the shave cream can and the bottom came off revealing a receiver and trigger mechanism, which he quickly married to the grip. Finally the front quarter of the flashlight was disassembled leaving behind a fully silence barrel for the small pistol. Richards quickly threaded it into place.

He then found, inside the rucksack, a double edged, razor sharp Gerber boot knife with a five inch blade. This he strapped to the inside of his left forearm. The gun was snugged into a waistband holster sewn into the back of his blue jeans. Next he pulled out two metal tubes that served as side stiffeners for the rucksack. The tubes screwed together to become a blow gun.

From the rucksack he removed a small sewing kit, it's hollow needles slipped into a three inch shaft with a plunger at one end that exactly fit the internal diameter of the blow gun. He then removed a small glass vile from his snake bite kit. He unscrewed the top, then very carefully dipped each of his four darts into the thick solution within the vial; a formula that contained DMSO and a small amount of Cobra venom. Not necessarily enough to kill, but enough to quickly disable an opponent, rendering the person unconscious, or in such distress as to be unable resist.

The darts were then slipped into a flat leather sheath that resembled a cartridge holder, except the ends of the leather loops were not open. This he strapped to outside of his left forearm.

While Richards was preparing his weapons, he continued to watch the guards whose pattern of activity had not varied. As he watched, he noted they did not communicate with each to verify the other's presence.

By the time he was ready to move, the evening had turned from deep twilight to complete darkness. Yet to Jim Richards' excellent night vision, coupled with the glow of light from within the cabin, and stars reflecting off the sea, there was more than enough illumination by which to see.

He began a very slow, silent circle around the perimeter that soon brought him to the edge of the foliage at the beach. He was about to move from cover, when a ripple out on the water caught his attention. He could not be certain but he thought he saw something rise to water's surface for just a moment. If he were in California, he'd swear it was a harbor seal, but there were no seals in Yucatan.

Jim Richards waited, using his peripheral vision to watch for further movement. He turned his attention back to the guard at the rear of the cabin, noting the time it took him to walk the length of the structure before he began his return. Like many sentries, he'd become bored with his task, and fallen into a routine that hardly varied.

Richards was about to move forward, when he again noted movement in his peripheral vision. There appeared to be three distinct wakes, separated by approximately thirty feet, very close to shore. He watched. Slowly three shadows emerged in the shallows, and slithered onto the beach. At first, he thought they were some sort of reptile, an alligator perhaps but that thought was quickly rejected.

They were clearly men, and very stealthy. He noted one of the shadows advance to within ten yards of the rear guard's farthest patrol point. While the other two moved to mid-beach using the trunk of an intervening fallen tree as cover.

The front, and rear, cabin guards were not coordinating their watch at all. Consequently, half the time both were walking in the same direction at the same time. One of the two shadows behind the log took just such an opportunity to move, first to the side of the cabin.

As the rear guard reached the farthest point in his patrol, Jim Richards heard the sound of compressed air. The guard stopped suddenly, then seemed to stand up on his toes. His legs collapsed, he dropped to his knees then pitched forward.

A few seconds later the front guard came to the near corner of the building. He stopped, then turned away facing up the driveway. He reached into his breast pocket for a cigarette. The shadow at the corner of the building moved suddenly, his hands seemed to describe a crossing movement behind the guard's back.

The guard was just withdrawing his pack of cigarettes when he too seemed to stand on his tip toes, and then his back arched. He dropped the pack of cigarettes to the ground, both hands shot the base of his throat as if his collar were suddenly too tight. Behind him the shadow seemed to be doing a little ballet, a sort of half pirouette that lasted less than five seconds. The guard went limp, his arms falling to his sides.

The shadow did not move, it stood frozen for at least another minute then slowly lowered the guard's body to the ground. He then turned to his left and crouched, scanning the surrounding area. For a moment he stared in Richards' direction, but there was no way he could see him as long as Richards did not move. Then the shadow gave a low call, like an owl.

Chapter 19

Jim Richards remained frozen in a crouched position. Unlike the previous guards, the lethal shadows did not waste time walking back and forth adjacent to the cabin. They stayed in their positions and viewed opposing sight lines. Richards' legs began to ache. Then, as five minutes stretched into fifteen, he felt his right hamstring beginning to cramp. He willed it to relax, the last thing he needed was a sudden Charley horse. Still it kept twitching, threatening to seize up. Yet he could not move, to do so would bring unwanted attention, and possibly death soon thereafter. Just when he was sure he could take no more without cramping, he heard the shadow at the front of the cabin call out again, mimicking an owl. This time it was answered by the shadow at the rear corner.

As if they were in direct communication, the two shadows moved in unison: One to the front door, the second to the rear. As fluid as India ink, they assaulted both doors. As the rear shadow entered the cabin, the one behind the log rose and sprinted to the rear door, stopping just outside.

The interior light spilled outward through the open doors, Jim Richards saw that all three men were armed with stubby automatic weapons. In profile, they appeared to be UZI style micro-submachine guns.

As soon as the third shadow turned his back to him, Jim Richards threw himself prone grabbing his right hamstring, squeezing then rapidly massaging the muscle to keep it from cramping. He could hear commotion inside the cabin, a chair falling, commands shouted in a foreign language. Russian perhaps, at least the words sounded Russian to Richards' ears.

At first no shots were fired, even a silenced weapon made some noise, and in the quiet of night he would have heard the reports, muffled though they might have been. Of course, there would have been muzzle flashes as well.

One of the three shadows came out to the rear porch. He aimed a flashlight towards the water, then blinked its red light three times. In the distance, Jim Richards heard the sound of an outboard motor. The sound of its exhaust traveled easily across the calm bay, growing in volume as the boat approached.

Suddenly a commotion erupted inside the cabin, something large was overturned. The light inside seemed to dance, as if someone were shinning it in all the nooks and crannies of the room. Then the sound of breaking glass. The light momentarily went out, only to be replaced by a sudden surge as flames leapt up.

The commotion inside continued for a second or two, commands in Russian, curses in English.

Muffled reports of shots fired, came from within, and several holes appeared in the end wall of the cabin. A man cried out, then screamed, it sounded as if he were rolling about on the floor inside.

When the fight began, the man at the rear of the building turned and rushed inside. Now he came out, dragging a struggling form whose clothes were on fire. He bumped him down the stairs and into the sand. Then rolled him over and over quickly, putting out the flames.

As the flames went out, he struck the man behind his ear with the butt of his weapon, the man lay still. He then proceeded to strap the man's hands together, perhaps with plastic lock ties. Jim Richards could see smoke still rising from the man's clothing. While this event was occurring at the rear of the cabin, two men rushed out the front. They turned left, broke into a wild run heading directly for Richards' position.

The men who'd earlier appeared as only shadows, leaped from opposite doorways and stood outside the cabin illuminated by the flames within. They were dressed from head to toe in black, their heads and faces covered with hoods, holes cut into the front for their eyes, nose and mouth. They raised their weapons, and commenced to fire intersecting fields at the men desperately trying to escape. One of the men began to pull ahead of the other, he crossed in front using the slower man's greater girth as cover. Jim Richards recognized George's lanky form as he desperately sprinted for the undergrowth.

The early rounds fell short, kicking up geysers of sand behind the fleeing men. But the men at the cabin were professionals, and soon found at least one of their targets. As George crossed in front of the other man, the two streams of fire converged, peppering the larger man from behind. Richards could hear the slap of individual rounds, like a piece of steak being slapped onto a counter top. The man screamed in agony, and threw his arms upward the way a world class runner might as he crossed the finish line. His back arched, his gut thrust forward, as rounds exploded outward from his upper torso. His legs buckled, he fell tumbling like a rag doll.

George dove forward, landing just short of the underbrush. He lay still, Richards couldn't tell if he'd been hit, struck his head on a rock, or was simply playing possum. Either way it had the effect of causing his executioners to cease fire.

The men leaped from the cabin's porches and sprinted towards their fallen victims. The larger victim was still struggling, moaning in pain, trying to crawl on his belly towards the undergrowth.

Jim Richards quickly fitted a dart into his blow gun. As the killers approached they sent a burst of fire into the crawling man, a round split his skull, and Richards heard the sickening crunch of bone fragmenting. The killer on the left, swung the muzzle of his weapon towards George Krystonopolis. At that moment, Richards propelled a poison dart towards the killer on the left.

The combined speed of the running man, and the flying dart conspired to drive the needle cleanly through the killer's hood impacting the right side of his neck. He yelped, and slapped at the dart driving it further into his neck, breaking the protruding shaft off, and knocking it to the ground. This motion caused his aim to falter, and though his intent to fire was not thwarted, the rounds missed George.

The second killer knelt next to the man they'd shredded earlier. Checking his pulse, assuring he was dead. He was about to turn his attention to George, when he noted from the corner of his eye, his team mate staggering around, groaning through gritted teeth. He'd torn off his hood off, and was doing what appeared to be a very funky version of the Frûg, a dance popular back home. Saliva foamed at his mouth. He began shouting deliriously in a foreign language. Then his legs buckled, and he collapsed to the ground where he continued his spasmodic horizontal dance.

As the second killer leaped to his feet, and rushed to fallen man's side, Jim Richards fitted another dart into his blow gun. He was surprised by the killer's reaction, as he'd taken care to choose a non-lethal dose, but each person reacts differently especially when agitated.

Just then a Boston Whaler roared up, and slid to a stop in the sand. The man who appeared to be the assault team's leader, the one who'd dragged the burning victim from the cabin called to the killers. The second killer answered, and received a terse reply. Without hesitation he lifted his fallen comrade over his shoulder, and sprinted towards the boat. Paying no further attention to George, or the other victim.

By now the cabin was fully engulfed in flames, lighting the night as if it were day. Jim Richards back crawled farther into the underbrush, to assure a flicker of flame would not reveal his position. He could see the faces of the two men who'd jumped from the boat, one running to assist the killer carrying his team mate. The other to assist with the prisoner. They pushed the boat back into the water, then scrambled over the gunwales.

George began to move, first one leg, then an arm. Richards caught the movement in his peripheral vision, and hissed at him to freeze and stay frozen.

The outboard engine started, the boat spun around and screamed off into the night.

The cabin had collapsed upon itself, the fire was beginning to die. Miraculously, it had not set the woods afire, at least not as yet. If the wind came up before the embers quenched, there might be a conflagration in the tinder dry underbrush, and subsequently the trees.

Jim Richards scurried forward, as George began to rise to his knees. He knocked him back down, then slapped a choker hold onto his neck. He stage whispered into George's ear, "I told you to stay still, asshole." George attempted to squirm away, but Richards closed the choke, in two seconds George passed out.

He sat there perfectly still for a five full minutes. Every time George started to move, Jim Richards closed the hold just enough to keep George's brain from fully awakening. Finally, when he was sure neither the boat, or any of its occupants had returned, he dragged George back into the undergrowth, and over to the clearing where his pack was located.

Gradually Krystonopolis regained consciousness, he shook his head and massaged his scalp, bitching about the pins and needles he was feeling all over his head.

"Quit grouching, dip shit," Richards said. "You're lucky to be alive."

George squinted over at Jim Richards, just barely able to make out his features in the gloaming of the fading embers that reflected into the tiny clearing. "Richards? What the...? What are you doin' here?"

"Looks like saving your sorry ass for the second time this month. And by the way, where's the sixty grand you owe me?"

###

They sat in Jim Richards' hotel room, drinking Dos Equis delivered by room service. It had taken a couple of hours to walk back. At least George walked. Richards peddled along on the Moped, threatening to stick George with a envenomed dart if he tried anything stupid.

"So tell me one more time, George. Where's my sixty large?"

"Apparently gone."

"Gone? Look pal we agreed: I deliver the aircraft, you pay the bucks."

George laughed, and shook his head. "Our deal didn't include your inviting the United States Navy Special Warfare Group to party with my airplanes. In fact, I don't seem to recall anything in our conversation about your working for Uncle Sugar! So don't give me any crap about owing you sixty thousand dollars. Matter of fact, if it weren't for you and your meddling, we wouldn't be in the mess we're in now."

Now it was Richards turn to laugh. "What the hell did you think you were doing? Stealing aircraft to sell to a bunch of armed insurgents funded by the Soviets."

George rolled his eyes skyward. "Okay fine. The bottom line is: We've both got prices on our heads. Me because of you, and you because of you. And it ain't gonna matter where we hide. Sooner, or later Moonface is gonna find us."

Richards frowned. "Moonface? Who the hell's Moonface?"

"He's the reason Skorokhodov called the meeting tonight. His real name's Generalísimo Manuel Montresoreno. He's the head of Guatemala's Internal Security." George took a pull at his beer, then continued. "That Mayan pyramid, you and the frogs stumbled into is big money, his money."

"Skorokhodov needed funds to run his operation. He hates the United States... And you, by the way."

Richards frowned. "Me?"

George nodded his head, smiling. "Apparently you've been a thorn in his side for a long time. Seems you managed to bust up another of his operations some time back."

Jim Richards made no comment, just raised an eyebrow.

"Anyway, Skorokhodov's method of generating cash was to use a network of intelligence operatives inside the United States to deal dope to university students. Typical wheel and spoke operation, with a cut out at the hub. He made a deal with Montresoreno to front the dope."

"So what? Skorokhodov's history." Richards said.

"Maybe. But Skorokhodov's not the one we've got to worry about; compared to Montresoreno, he's a pussy cat."

Richards shrugged. "So... fuck him if he can't take a joke."

George finished off his beer. "Easy for you to say, you didn't see the photo."

"What photo?" Richards asked.

"The one Skorokhodov brought to the meeting as a little wake up call. Seems Moonface picked up one of your CIA buddies, and rearranged his appearance with a little hydrofluoric acid."

Richards winced. "Who's the guy?"

"Who knows... he wasn't recognizable in the photo. Point is, Moonface has got Pollock's secretary, Shannon. And she's his next subject d'art."

Richards' face blanched momentarily, then went red with anger.

"I thought that might get your attention." George said.

Richards wagged a finger from side to side. "That doesn't make any sense George. Montresoreno didn't pay for the aircraft, it's Skorokhodov whose bucks out. So if anyone's unhappy about the loss it's the Ruskie. And like I said earlier, it appears he's history."

George smiled cynically. "You're right about that, and if the only thing you and your merry little band of marauders had destroyed were the aircraft, I suppose we could both walk away happy people." George shook his head derisively. "Of course you assholes had to make a little detour at Xutilha, and kill Montresoreno's brother."

"Oh."

George smiled. "Oh shit, is what you mean."

Jim Richards got up, and walked over to the sliders, then out onto the balcony. He stood there for several minutes thinking about the situation. He didn't need to see the photo George had referred to, in order to feature the results. And there was no doubt in his mind that Moonface would do Shannon the same way, if he hadn't already. He turned and walked back into the hotel room.

"So what's the deal Anatoly offered, before your little tete a tete was broken up?"

"Exchange you for Shannon, with a guarantee I'm off the hook."

Jim Richards squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. "You believe that?"

George smiled. "Of course not. The only way either one of us walks, is if someone does Moonface first. Which isn't exactly my line of work. On the other hand, it may be yours."

Richards ignored the allusion. "How did Skorokhodov, and Moonface, learn of my involvement?"

"One of the first questions Skorokhodov asked me, was if I'd delivered all the aircraft personally. Later, he showed me a picture of you and I together. Apparently someone photographed us on the veranda of the Blue Hole Bar and Grill.

"The after action reports from his people in the field, who arrived at Sosela just as you and the gang were flying off into the wild blue yonder, completed his understanding of your role in the affair. Later, I suppose in conversation with Moonface, they put two and two together with regard to Xuthila."

Jim Richards said nothing, his face impassive. He stared coldly at Krystonopolis. Intuition told him George was leaving something out. Something crucial. He waited. George opened another beer. Took a pull at it. Belched. Fidgeted a little, then shrugged and looked as if he'd made some sort of decision. "I'll tell you what. I'm gonna come clean on this one. And then I expect you to do the same. 'Cause what I have in mind is gonna require terminal resolve, you understand what I mean?"

Richards nodded slowly, "Oh yes."

"We've got forty-eight hours, then Moonface goes to work on Shannon."

George paused a moment looking at Richards, then sighed. "About eight, nine months ago I got busted for conspiracy to traffic in stolen goods.

"When Advantage Flight furloughed us, they owned me a bunch of money. Consultant fees for developing an instrument approach to Tracy Airport, so they could use it to train those Japan Airlines pilots they thought they'd secured a contract on. I'm sure you recall that little fiasco."

Richards nodded. "Cost me my job too."

George nodded. "Anyway, since they didn't get the contract, they figured they didn't need to pay me for the approach.. Wrong. So I swung with one of their one seventy-two's, and flew up to Canada. Unfortunately, I wasn't quite as clever as I

thought. The Mounties nailed me as soon as I touched down. I was extradited back to San Francisco.

"Long story short. I'm sittin' in this holding cell, when a dapper little guy drops by to see me. We go into an interview room, he pulls out a transistor radio and sets it between stations, producing static, you know, in case of bugs. Then proceeds to tell me he's with the Intelligence Community. Now there's an oxymoron if I ever heard one. Says they got a little proposition for me: All I gotta do is take a few Skymasters down to Guatemala, and everything's gonna be forgiven."

Richards raised his eyebrows. "That's interesting."

"Right," George winked and nodded his head. "Everything was hunky dory, 'til you and the Mayhem Brothers show up. One more delivery, and I was home free."

George took another pull at his beer. "All the aircraft were wired for tracking. Once they were in place, the transmitters would be activated via U-2 fly over. From that point forward, anywhere they went the intelligence community would know."

Jim Richards shook his head derisively. He wondered if John Harding and Arnold Batiste were even aware of George's true involvement. Wouldn't be the first time one hand didn't know what the other was doing. "Bullshit," was all he said out loud.

George laughed. "I didn't say it was a good idea, or my idea. But who am I to argue? I'm outta the slammer. All I gotta do is what I love best, fly a few airplanes down to Guatemala."

Richards nodded. "Okay fine. But I don't see where you're lately deceased pal, Roland Pollock fits in?"

Krystonopolis grinned. "Pollock was the conduit for funneling Skorokhodov's earnings out of the United States, the axle in the wheel and spoke plan I mentioned earlier. With offices in San Francisco, New York, Geneva, and Cancun it was easy for him to launder money flowing in from drug sales, keeping ten points for himself, of course. Except it appears he got a little greedy."

"Moonface figured it out. When he got the chance, he grabbed Shannon for security. Then he contacted Skorokhodov to set up a meeting with Roland Pollock, that's when he learned about your involvement in baby brother's death. Now money ain't enough, he wants you as well."

"He'd better get in line, he's not the first to want me out of their misery."

George smiled. "So Skorokhodov was straight, you are CIA."

Jim Richards kept a poker face. "I didn't say that, but I will say this much: I am paid very well to solve certain kinds of problems, and I have no compunctions about how I accomplish the task. And I kid you not, George, you best be tellin' the truth."

George raised his hands palms outward. "I owe you my life twice. Well once for sure. I'm still wondering about that O ring. But once at least. So I ain't screwing around here."

Richards nodded. "We're even on the O ring, I told you that before. But you're right about last night. You were dead meat." Richards thought for a moment. "We've got to go after Montresoreno. Preferably on neutral ground, away from his network."

George nodded. "Exactly. But this is not, I repeat, not, a two man operation."

Richards seemed to ignore the comment. "When's the deadline?"

George looked down at his watch. "The clock started running at six this evening, we've got forty hours left."

"How are you supposed to contact him?"

"According to Anatoly, someone will contact me at six tomorrow morning for an answer."

"Stall for time. Tell them you've got a line on me." Jim Richards was pacing as he spoke, he stopped and looked at George. "Who do you suppose those guys were, the ones who sacked Anatoly last night?"

George shrugged. "Russians, no doubt. I speak a little, you know? Seems they got wind he was operating on his own."

Jim Richards nodded. "Figures. My guess is this whole operation, the aircraft, my involvement, your involvement, was a set up to nail Anatoly Skorokhodov." He thought for a moment. "What did you do with the money you were paid for delivering the eight aircraft?"

George was hesitant to answer, and drank some more beer to stall for time. Then shrugged again. "Skorokhodov authorized Roland Pollock to credit me each time an aircraft was delivered. Pollock was supposed act as trustee, not allow me

to withdraw anything except expenses until all nine were delivered. But like I said, he got greedy. I suspect he commingled my money with his own, then stashed it all in a bank on Grand Cayman."

###

Elmo Jefferson was jolted awake by the secure line in the office adjacent to his bedroom. It had a muted, distinctive ring. His wife slept on undisturbed, too many years of early morning calls made her immune to its disturbance. Jefferson rolled out of bed, and padded into his office, closing the sound proof door behind him. He picked up the receiver. It was Arnold Batiste at the other end.

"Richard Holt was right, that little side trip Jim Richards took to Xutilha has set off a chain reaction."

Jefferson listened patiently while Batiste filled him in on his most recent conversation with Jim Richards. Jefferson sighed. "Okay, let's cut our losses. There's no telling how much Tom Lovell gave up before he died. Have Richards pull out. We'll get him into witness protection, 'til we can deal with Montresoreno."

Jefferson listened patiently to Batiste, then said: "Anyone we send against that son of a bitch will get chewed up. She's probably a goner anyway."

Jefferson again listened to Batiste, he paced back and forth the length of the telephone cord. Then shook his head. "He's got more balls than brains. But then we always knew that didn't we?" He squeezed his eyes shut nodding his head as he listened. "Alright. But strictly on a volunteer basis. And keep it deniable."

###

Jim Richards packed his gear, then slipped over the railing of the balcony outside his hotel room. He needed sleep, and couldn't risk the luxury of remaining in his room. Three floors down, and two over, there was a vacant room he'd noted earlier from the lack of activity inside. When he reached the balcony of the room, he settled down onto a lounge chair and allowed himself to drift into a relaxed sleep.

He awoke at five-thirty, lifted the slider, popped open the lock, and entered the room. He used its facilities, showered, and then returned to his own room. Nothing had been disturbed. So far at least, it appeared George had not given him up to the opposition.

####

The house was located high in the hills outside Puerto Barrios. It was a two story Spanish style structure with a terra cotta tile roof and thick white washed adobe walls. The high arched windows of the second floor bedrooms could be swung open like French doors. Outside each window, a tiny balcony. A twelve foot security wall surrounded the house, also white washed, topped with razor wire. Aluminum scaffolding stood just inside, to create a parapet for guards. There was only one gate, ten feet high with two oak doors hung on wrought iron hinges. Armed guards were posted at the gate, at each corner of the wall, and strategically throughout the residence.

Shannon Albright thought the bedroom was nicely appointed, and under different circumstances it would have been a pleasant place to visit. There was a bureau on one side of the room, a tall mirror attached. A four poster, queen size bed, with drop down mosquito netting, took up most of the floor space. There was a club chair, a floor lamp, and a side table.

She sat on the bed, her legs drawn up to her chest. Her chin on her knees. She gazed out through the window. Beyond the wall were tall trees. And over the tops of the trees, she could just see the smoke stacks and cargo masts of great ships that moved slowly on Amatique bay.

Manual Montresoreno sauntered along the landing that overlooked the entry hall. He nodded to the guard posted outside the bedroom, then fitted a key into the lock, turned the door knob, and entered the room.

Shannon's gaze left the view beyond the window, and shifted to Montresoreno as he closed the door behind him. A shiver of fear went up her spine, though she knew not why. Except for her velvet imprisonment, he'd given no indication he intended to harm her.

Perhaps it was the small, dark eyes in the round pock marked face that were so unnerving. But no, she corrected herself, it was the reptilian gaze of those eyes that so frightened.

Once again she admonished herself silently, for her own stupidity when his men approached her as she deplaned in Caracas. They were so business like, even knew personal things about Mr. Pollock. They led her to believe they were his colleagues, and she was to join them for a meeting. It was not the first time Roland had diverted her to handle a courier assignment. And always the trips had been interesting, with the best of accommodations.

She watched intently as Manual Montresoreno crossed the room towards her. He smiled, showing a row of teeth, exceedingly white in contrast to his dark

complexion. But his eyes remained completely cold. He sat on the edge of the bed. She involuntarily scooted her bare feet away from him, and gripped her knees so tightly to her chest that soon she felt the fine muscles in her forearms begin to quiver.

"Do not be afraid, you will soon be free again. Your friends have agreed to meet my conditions.

"Tomorrow we must travel by small airplane. I want you to dress for such a trip, bring a bathing suit if you'd like, and an over night bag. We will be going to an island off the coast of Belize. And if all goes well, as I expect it will, you will be able to continue your own journey following our meeting."

Shannon lifted her chin from her knees and relaxed her grip a little. "And the rest of my things?"

"You need only tell me where you would like them sent, and they will arrive as quickly as can be arranged. If the aircraft were not so small, I would have you bring everything with you. Unfortunately, the landing strip we will be using will only take a twin. "You are not afraid to fly are you?"

Shannon shook her head slowly. "No."

No she was not afraid of flying, but she was afraid of this man. He lied to her just now. She sensed it. And it took all her will power to hold back the tears. To not lose her composure, and scream in primal fear.

He placed his hand on her right knee, then stroked it upward toward her thigh. She felt revulsion, a desire to slap the repulsive thing away like an insect suddenly seen. Instead she smiled coyly and rolled to her left, deftly pulling away from him. Then slipped off the bed, and stood on the other side.

He stood up and walked around the end of the bed, stopping a few feet from her. He smiled. She detected a hint of sadistic intrigue in his smile. "You are afraid of me perhaps?" He asked.

She gave no answer.

His smile broadened, which made it no less sinister. "Don't be, I will not harm you. You are very special to me. I wish there were more time for us to get to know each other. But alas there will not be."

A wave of relief passed through her body, she nearly wet her pants. "When do you want me ready?"

"Eight tomorrow morning." He turned towards the doorway, and placed his hand upon the door knob. Then turned back towards her. "By the way do you know a Mr. Jim Richards."

She hesitated, tried to show no recognition as Jim Richards face flashed before her mind's eye. If only he would come for her. But even as the thought crossed her mind, she realized perhaps that was exactly what Montresoreno was hoping. "I believe we met once, but I can't say that I know him well. Why?"

Montresoreno shrugged. "Just curious. It seems Mr. Richards is quite willing to trade places with you.

Chapter 20

The landing strip was nothing more than a clearing with a hard packed surface. George Krystonopolis stood beside the Skymaster, waiting for the arrival of Manuel Montresoreno.

A twin engine, Piper Apache entered the airport pattern. It circled to the left and lined up on final approach. The pilot made a poor landing, but managed to get the aircraft stopped before reaching the end of the runway. The Apache made a one-eighty and taxied back, parking on the opposite side of the runway directly across from the Skymaster.

Four people emerged from the cabin. The only person George recognized was Shannon Albright. They carefully climbed down from the wing to the ground, then walked slowly across the runway. George almost wished another aircraft would turn final so he could watch their faces as they tried decide whether or not to pick up the pace, or continue to saunter dangerously across the dirt strip. Typical machismo assholes, no respect for aviation etiquette, or anything else.

As the foursome approached, two of the men stepped forward, producing pistols from under their coats. George immediately raised his hands above his head and waited as the two bodyguards walked rapidly up to him.

One went directly to the Skymaster and looked inside, the second thrust the barrel of his forty-five autoloader under George's chin, as he began to frisk him. Satisfied he was not carrying a concealed weapon, the bodyguard stepped to one side his pistol leveled.

As Manuel Montresoreno and Shannon continued to approach, the second bodyguard completed his cursory examination of the Skymaster's interior, then stepped over to where George was standing and leveled his own weapon. George looked at each bodyguard in turn, then slowly lowered his hands until they hung loosely at his side. When Montresoreno and the girl stood directly in front of him, George bowed slightly.

"Generalismo Montresoreno, my name is George Krystonopolis. How do you do." He addressed him in a pleasant, diplomatic voice with just the right tone of respect.

Montresoreno glanced over at the aircraft, then back at George. "Where is Jim Richards?"

George looked Montresoreno directly in the eyes. "He is on Grand Cayman."

"The agreement was, you would bring him here, and then we would discuss an exchange. I do not like being disappointed." Montresoreno said, with just a hint of malice in his voice.

George glanced at Shannon, who looked quite terrified though she maintained her composure. Then looked at Montresoreno. "May we step aside, and speak alone. I've learned information I could not convey on the telephone."

"My people have my complete trust." Montresoreno responded.

Krystonopolis looked directly at Shannon, then back to Montresoreno. "Of course, I would expect no less from a man of your integrity and authority, but not everyone here is in your employ. Or have I misunderstood the situation?"

Montresoreno looked at Shannon, who avoided his eyes. He looked back at George, nodded once then swung his head away from the Skymaster. They walked several paces before stopping. Montresoreno looked expectantly at George, who returned his gaze unhesitatingly.

"Roland Pollock owes each of us a great deal of money." George began. "That money is secured in a bank on Grand Cayman. He's been skimming twenty percent of the profits. Of course, he claimed everything was lost when Jim Richards raided Xutilha.

Last night I followed him to a meeting with Colonel Skorokhodov. The meeting was broken up by KGB agents, who'd come for the Colonel."

Montresoreno's eyes narrowed, he was not entirely convinced of George's story. "How did you escape? And where is Pollock now?"

"I did not escape. I merely had the meeting under surveillance, however, what I observed was an attempt by Pollock to escape. He was gunned down. Skorokhodov was then sacked, and carried off."

Montresoreno's eyes eyebrows went up momentarily.

"As I said, Pollock owed us both a pile of dough. One million to me, five million to you. Am I right?"

Montresoreno nodded. "The one million to you, was for all the aircraft you were supposed to deliver."

George turned his palms upward and shrugged. "The aircraft were delivered. I'm not responsible for Skorokhodov's inability to protect them."

The corners of Montresoreno's unpleasant slash of a mouth turned downward, making him look even more repulsive. "Perhaps, but it was you who sent Jim Richards to the Pokomam's camp."

George looked down at the ground. Then looked up and nodded his head. "Alright. Five-hundred thousand, to pay for my mistake. Five point five million to you."

Montresoreno nodded. "And how do we secure this money?"

George looked over at Shannon, then turned his eyes back to Montresoreno. "Only she, and Pollock are authorized to access the account." He paused for a moment to let the information sink in. "Here's the deal. We fly to Grand Cayman. There Shannon will access the money, transferring your share anywhere you like, cash if you prefer.

"I've convinced Jim Richards you're only interested in the money. He has no idea you want his life as well. He insists I owe him sixty grand for the aircraft he procured. He has no idea I know of his participation in the destruction of the aircraft. So you see, I have every reason to want him as dead as you, especially since I'm now out a cool half-mil because of his meddling. Once you've secured your money, and Mr. Richards, we go our separate ways. No hard feelings. Agreed?"

Montresoreno thought for a moment. "I could kill you right now, and force Shannon to give me all of the money. She would not be hard to persuade, in fact I find the thought rather pleasant"

George looked pained, as if he'd never considered the possibility. "Sir, I respect you. You are ruthless, and strong willed. But please, respect me also. The account requires two signatures in the presence of a bank officer, Roland Pollock's and Shannon's. I am, how shall I describe it, a very good artiste."

Montresoreno smiled, showing his white teeth. "And the girl, what is to become of her?"

George's face went poker. "She's a guppy in the fish bowl of life, while you and I are barracuda. When the transaction's complete, which by the way you are welcome to witness, Shannon and I will remain behind. I'll pay her expenses from my share, then send her home."

Montresoreno frowned. "And why do you care what happens to her?"

The photograph of Tom Lovell flashed before his mind, but George kept his face stolid. "Think about it a moment, sir, we are inside a bank, on a sovereign nation's soil, a nation allied with the United States of America. All she has to do is squeak once, and the gig is up. I'll assure her cooperation, and future silence. Which will be best for both of us."

Montresoreno made no comment, he looked over at Shannon thinking of the thrill he felt when he cast his gaze upon her while she was in his home. He could almost taste the thought of manipulating her flesh to his desire."

"Besides," George added. "You will be busy with Mr. Richards, I'm sure."

Montresoreno's train of thought was broken, his mind shifted from carnal pleasure to sadistic revenge. But even as this new thought took hold, another came to mind. He said: "You're right, of course. However, after our transaction you and Shannon will remain in my company until I've secured Jim Richards. After that is accomplished, you will both be free to go." And then he smiled magnanimously.

###

Jim Richards stepped from the sand of Seven Mile beach onto the polished concrete floor of Maynard's. He chose a table on the perimeter, his back to a group of palm trees. Maynard's was one of those island watering holes purposely built to be easily blown down by the next hurricane, and just as easily resurrected. It consisted of a small wooden building at one end of a concrete pad. There was a bar, and a small kitchen for preparing copious quantities Jerk Chicken skewered on slivers of bamboo.

A conical thatch roof, supported by tall round stilts, protected Maynard's patrons from the nightly showers, and the lesser down pours during hurricane season. There were flop down canvas sides for protection from wind blown rain, though most of the time the entire place was open to the sea air and tropical breezes.

It was six in the evening, Maynard's began to fill with those who wished to say good-bye to the day, and hello to the night. The sun hung just above the horizon. Sunset was one of Jim Richards' favorite times. He always took a moment to reflect, although this evening his reflections were clouded with concern for the outcome of the scheme he and George Krystonopolis had cooked up to rescue Shannon.

An olive skinned beauty in a tight fitting sarong, split to her thigh, stopped at his table to take his order. He gazed at her swaying hips and taut, round buttocks

as she left to order his Planter's Punch. When she returned he thanked her with a smile, and a generous tip.

He took a sip, then turned to watch the last golden rays of the sun disappear in a green flash. Just then, Steve Sheffield slipped into an empty chair on Richards' left.

"Hey what are you drinkin', Ocean Man? Tourist swill?"

Richards grinned as he looked over at Steve. "Oh I just love these little umbrellas with all the fruit stuck on them." He said in a lilting voice.

Sheffield nodded. "Reminds me of what you find on the beach after a good blow." He laughed.

Richards shook his head, smiling. "You're not a well man."

Just then the waitress came up, took Sheffield's order, a chilled Stoli with a twist of lime.

Jim Richards clinked his glass to Sheffield's. "Thank you for agreeing to help, Steve, but I want you to know right from the get go this is gonna be FUBAR infinito."

Steve grinned. "Perfect."

Richards sighed. "Sorry about interrupting your play time."

Steve nodded, "Your timing sucks. So what's the plan for tomorrow?"

"Montresoreno's supposed to arrive in his private jet, about oh seven-hundred. George and Shannon retrieve the money from Pollock's account. I meet them at the bank, we go back to the airport. Moonface gets me and the money, George and Shannon are set free."

Sheffield shook his head. "That's ridiculous, no way that ugly little bastard gonna set foot on this island, nor does he intend let any of you go. His henchmen will hijack you all. Even if he releases Shannon, where does that leave you? Much as I hate lookin' at your ugly face, it's a damn sight better than the new look ol' Moonface intends to give you. That is, if those photos Arnold Batiste received on Tom Lovell, from the butt sniffers back at Langley, are any indication."

Jim Richards took a pull at his drink, and thought for a moment. "I agree it's a long shot. On the other hand, Montresoreno's a greedy son of a bitch, the money may just lure him in for the taking."

Sheffield thought for a moment, then finished his drink in one swallow. "I've a bad feeling about this, Jim. Been brain stormin' scenarios since Arnold Batiste first got hold of me, I keep comin' up with you on the wrong end of the stick."

Jim Richards nodded his head thoughtfully. "I know, but I can't leave Shannon to the mercy of Moonface, not even if my life's in the trade."

Sheffield looked at Jim Richards for a long moment. "You know my friend, Shannon chose to align herself with Roland Pollack. You had nothing to do with that. And I'm sure she had, at least, an inkling he was not on the level. You're steppin' on someone else's karma here, son."

Jim Richards took a long pull at his drink. Then said: "I hear you, but I can't walk away from this one, and still live with myself."

Steve Sheffield let out a long sigh. "Okay. I'll run some contingency plans with Mac & Vinnie when they arrive." He looked at his watch. "They should be touching down by MILTRAN just about one hour from now. Frank and Dave will insert at Puerto Barrios late tomorrow." Spencer's divin' Palau, too far away to get back in time." Sheffield smiled suddenly, lightening up the moment. "Boy is he gonna be pissed, missin' all the fun."

###

The blue over white North American business jet touched down at Owen Roberts airport at seven in the morning, right on schedule. Jim Richards and Steve Sheffield sat in a rental car parked amongst several vehicles near the transient aircraft parking area. They watched the executive jet roll along one of the taxi ways eventually turning into the business aircraft tie-down lane where it was directed to a slot by one of the airport's line boys.

As the engines spooled down, the seam around the door on the port side of the aircraft widened. Slowly the door opened from the top, falling gradually outward until it became a set of built-in stairs leading to the ground.

A swarthy Hispanic male in a white, open neck shirt worn loose over his trousers, was the first to descend the steps. He pivoted when he reached the ground, positioning himself at the foot of the stairs to offer a hand to those who followed. A second man emerged from the aircraft, dressed similarly to the first. Then George bent his lanky frame to clear the door. No one else emerged from the cabin.

Jim Richards scanned the interior with a small pair of binoculars, looking into each round window. There were no other passengers on board. He looked over

at Steve. "Look's like you were right, he didn't go for it. Guess I get to play goat. He's still holding Shannon for insurance."

Steve frowned. "I thought she needed to counter-sign the withdrawal?"

Richards shook his head. "Not really. We thought the ruse might work. Most likely Montresoreno confirmed everything George told him, and found out a counter-signature wasn't required." Richards sighed.

Sheffield looked over at the business jet. "Guess we go to plan B."

###

Jim Richards met George Krystonopolis. He was flanked by the two swarthy Hispanics observed earlier departing the jet.

"Good morning, George," Richards said in a friendly tone of voice. "Seems there's been a change of plan. Where's Shannon?"

George looked at his two escorts, then back at Richards. "General Montresoreno has respectfully requested I transfer his share of the funds to his account in Caracas."

"Really," Richards smiled disarmingly. "So why don't we just take care of these two monkeys, and keep all the money for ourselves." His smile never wavered, in fact, it grew even wider as he watched the two men accompanying George grow obviously tense. "Just kidding guys, relax."

One of the men stepped forward, and grabbed Jim Richards around his biceps in a powerful grip. "The only monkey in this group is you, Gringo, and just like the little Howlers we catch in the jungle at home, we've caught you with your hand in the cookie jar. You should have gone back to the United States while you had the chance."

Richards looked down at the man's hand, and shrugged out of his grip. "You touch me again, I'll kill you right here, and right now."

George intervened. "Hey, hey gentlemen. Please, please. We have business to conduct. All of this nonsense can be resolved later."

"Where's Shannon?" Richards asked angrily. He pushed George in the chest. "You piece of shit. You were supposed to bring her with you. That was the deal? Where is she?!"

At that moment several events occurred simultaneously, and later the few witnesses nearby who'd turned in the direction of the commotion were not sure exactly what had occurred.

By pushing George in the chest, Richards forced him to step backwards. The man who'd grabbed Richards' arm earlier, stepped forward to grab him again, thus placing himself between Richards and his partner. At that moment a car stopped at the curb, the right front and right rear doors flew open.

The second bodyguard, turned towards the car while reaching for a weapon he carried at the small of his back. But the lunge, by the first bodyguard, at Jim Richards bumped his partner's hand; so he was unable to grasp his weapon.

Just as the first bodyguard touched his arm, Jim Richards retrieved a ball-point pen clipped to the pocket of his shirt. He depressed the pen's plunger. Two inches of surgical steel flashed out. Without hesitation, Richards drove his hand downward, his fist balled about the body of the pen. The needle struck deep into the carotid artery of the first bodyguard's neck. The sudden arrest of the downward force activated an internal syringe, injecting two CCs of pure cobra venom doped in a solution of DMSO solvent.

The bodyguard's reaction was nearly instantaneous, his mouth came open with surprise, his eyes seem to bug in his head as the lids rose open as far as they were capable, much wider then one might have imagined.

With his left hand Jim Richards shoved the first bodyguard backward into the second, propelling them both towards the old dilapidated vehicle at the curb.

The second bodyguard, bumped by his envenomed partner, stumbled forward, head down, one hand behind his back still trying to reach his weapon, the other thrust to one side in an effort to maintain his balance. Ross McIntyer met him as he emerged from the vehicle, a set of brass knuckles on his right hand.

McIntyer brought his fist upward in a vicious arc contacting the man's jaw just below the right mandible joint, lifting him six inches off the ground. The blow was accompanied by the sound of crunching bone, shattering teeth, and the slap of splitting flesh.

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The second bodyguard began to collapse, and though it was probably unnecessary to inject him, Richards did so anyway with a second pen pulled from his breast pocket.

George was completely shocked, frozen in place. It had all happened so fast, so unexpectedly. Suddenly, he truly understood what gaining the element of surprise meant.

The first bodyguard had still not fallen to the ground, he seemed to be standing stiffly in place, shivering as if he were terribly cold, while foaming at the mouth. Ross McIntyer had already dumped the second bodyguard onto the floor behind the front seat.

Vince Morris spun the first bodyguard around, and shoved him onto the prone body of the second, like a sack of potatoes stacked for delivery.

George was pushed into the front seat, where he was sandwiched between Richards on his left and McIntyer at the wheel. And then they were off with Vince Morris in back, his feet resting on the two dying men.

Less than fifteen seconds had elapsed.

###

"Oh Jesus, oh Jesus." George kept repeating, while trying to catch his breath. "What the hell's going on? Who are these guys. Are you all crazy?" He stared wide eyed at Richards.

"Calm down George, this isn't the time to hyperventilate. Pull yourself together. And start thinking. How long does it take to fly a Sabreliner from Grand Cayman to Guatemala? Does it have enough fuel for a return trip? What are the port of entry requirements? Can you fly that thing? 'Cause if you can't we really are in a heap of shit."

George turned and stared at Jim Richards. His head bobbing up and down in rhythm to the useless shocks on the old heap Vince had conjured up from somewhere on the island. George seemed to be trying to respond to Richards' questions, at least his mouth kept opening and closing.

They drove no more than six blocks, then parked the sedan in a public parking lot, under the shade of several palm trees. The four men climbed out and casually walked away. They crossed a street, then turned right at the next intersection. Up ahead was the Colonial Hotel, out front several taxis.

They split into two groups, Ross and Vince pulled ahead while George and Jim Richards hung back. They maintained their separation and entered the hotel at a side entrance, then emerged through the front entrance. Each pair hailed a taxi to the airport.

Once there, they entered the main terminal separately, emerged again at the south end, and walked towards the business jets.

###

The Sabreliner skimmed the water like a dragonfly on steroids. George had quickly learned the flying characteristics, etching the critical speed numbers in his mind as Jim Richards read procedures from a flight manual. Krystonopolis had never flown a Sabreliner, but he'd had a couple of hundred hours in Lears, and quickly transferred the experience.

When Jim Richards had headed into town for his rendezvous with George, Steve Sheffield had slipped into the ramp crew's ready room, then found a uniform shirt that fit him. He then approached the Sabreliner pilot, who was busy making certain the aircraft was ready to fly at a moment's notice.

The fuel truck had just pulled away. Sheffield asked if he could clean ashtrays, or the Biffy. Normally the pilot's duty, he was pleased to show Sheffield into the plane. It was then Sheffield hit him with a sap just behind the ear. He'd kept him alive in case George, or Jim Richards, couldn't figure out how to fly the Sabreliner. Or got themselves into some sort of jam enroute.

Fifty miles off Grand Cayman, Krystonopolis winged over and lost altitude, falling towards the cobalt blue Caribbean like a cast iron safe with it's door open. At fifty feet he pulled out, came wings level no more than ten feet off the surface. George was in seventh heaven, screaming across calm water straight for Punta Gorda, Belize.

Steve Sheffield patched the communications radio into the SAS group they'd coordinated with on the Xutilha extraction. Once again British Special Air Service came through, arranging hangar space, making certain the tower understood their flight was off record. In fact, it was an SAS controller who vectored them in for the final five mile approach.

At Punta Gorda Sheffield made contact with Frank Prescott and Dave Wilcox, gathering intelligence for the next stage of their mission.

###

Dusk had settled, night was coming on, as they disembarked from the ferry at Puerto Barrios. Each man carried a small knapsack over his shoulder. Each sack contained a lethal store of weapons: One fully silenced UZI sub-machine gun, several poison darts, a small two piece blow gun, and a pistol grip crossbow with poison tipped bolts. In the waist bands of their pants, at the small of their backs, they carried forty-five caliber autoloaders.

They shuffled along the narrow gangway mixed individually with commuters heading back to Guatemala after a day at Punta Gorda, Belize. At the foot of the ramp, they eased away from the crowd waiting to clear customs, then made their way, concealed by the shadow of a building, to a padlocked gate.

Earlier, Dave Wilcox had cut the existing padlock off with a pair of bolt cutters, replacing the lock with one of his own. Now as Steve and the others approached, he unlocked the gate and let them out, relocking it behind them.

###

Manuel Montresoreno swirled an ounce of cognac around the bottom of a leaded crystal snifter. He stared across his office at the face of a grandfather clock that ticked softly against the far wall. What had become of his aircraft? It had landed on Grand Cayman, then departed. The flight plan called for a direct route to Guatemala. Yet it had not arrived, nor was the money transferred.

He'd ordered the Guatemalan Air Command to run a trace, find out where his jet had gone. But so far nothing. The last contact with ATC indicated they were on course, until they suddenly disappeared from radar.

Montresoreno polished off the cognac in one swallow. He set the empty glass down on a burgundy leather pad that covered his highly polished mahogany desk. He shrugged. It would turn up, not possible to hide an jet aircraft for long. The thing was useless on the ground. Sooner, or later, it had to be flown.

Most likely Krystonopolis had conspired with Richards to steal the plane, something he should have expected. After all, aircraft theft was their line of work. They probably figured to sell it, make as much, maybe more, than the deal George had struck for Pollock's money. Montresoreno shook his head, irritated with himself. He should have played along, let Krystonopolis think he was getting his full million. Fucking asshole.

He sighed. Sooner or later he'd turn up, as would Richards. There was all the time in the world to deal with them both. In the meantime, there was the girl upstairs.

###

Wilcox pulled the car he'd boosted earlier, off the narrow road. He backed up into a clearing amongst a stand of giant ferns, facing the vehicle in the direction of their intended escape. They melted into the dense undergrowth, then made their way east.

Earlier in the day, Frank and Dave, dressed as Guatemalan forest surveyors, discovered an approach to Montresoreno's villa not covered by the watchers on the walls. Dave Wilcox signaled the direction they were to travel holding up two fingers to indicate the spacing between each man, two body lengths or approximately twelve feet. Richards had no idea what the signal meant, but immediately noted the spacing.

They skirted a running stream, then climbed a steep hill, in places duck walking through the undergrowth. Wilcox led them north just inside the tree line, which had been cut back thirty feet from the walls of the villa.

Fifteen minutes later they were grouped about Frank Prescott's observation post, a tree of wide girth. At its base were several black canvas duffel bags, each with additional lethal stores and a few tubes of the amino acid mix.

Prescott lay prone along one of the branches watching the activity within the compound through a starlight scope mounted on his Weatherby sniper rifle. He used a climbing rope to lower himself to the ground when Wilcox and the rest of the team arrived.

Each man ate several lines of aminos while they conversed in whispers about the mission.

"What have we got?" Sheffield asked, after Prescott dropped amongst them.

"Twelve guards outside. Six on the walls. Six patrol the grounds. Six inside. All armed. Outside CAR 15s, and side arms. Inside, sidearms only."

"The girl?" Richards asked.

"Second floor, third window from the end."

"And Moonface?" Wilcox asked.

"Until about ten minutes ago, he was in his office making telephone calls and pacing. Then he poured himself a drink, drank it down, and left the office. It may be coincidental but the light came on in that third bedroom shortly after he left. Unfortunately, the angle I've got from up there," he motioned with his thumb to the branches above his head, "precludes a visual into the room.

###

At first she'd tried to work her wrists or feet free. But the knots had been tied in such a way the more she struggled the tighter they became, cutting off circulation. She found if she relaxed and stretched, giving slack to the ropes, she

could loosen them a little. Not enough to escape but enough to restore circulation. She was tied spread eagle upon the bed, the ropes running from her wrists and ankles to each of the four bedposts.

She wore the white summer dress she'd worn to breakfast that morning when there was still hope she might be set free. Earlier that day, she'd been given permission to go outside within the compound for awhile, and spent some time in a gazebo over by the pond. A simple gesture, but so welcome after nearly a week of confinement. Late in the afternoon she decided to take a nap, and when she awoke she found her door was again locked.

The evening came, and she began to lose faith. At last someone came to her, two of the General's flunkies and they quickly bound her, groping her even as they carried out their orders.

###

"How many wall guards can you take out with that silenced rifle of yours?" Sheffield asked.

Frank Prescott thought for a moment. "Maybe three, before the others notice."

"That leaves three more, one for each of us." Wilcox interjected.

Richards shook his head. "By then the ones within the compound will be alerted."

Ross nodded his agreement. "Before we can storm the place, they'll call for help. There's no way we can complete the mission, and extract before reinforcements arrive. Even if we pull it off, we'll be heading down the only road out. Bound to run into stiff resistance."

Sheffield thought for a moment. "We can take out their communications. Telephone first, then roof antennas. Maybe electrical power for a few minutes until the generators kick in. But we need another element. Something softer, completely unexpected.

###

The overhead light dazzled her eyes, she squinted, unable to see who had entered the room. She heard the door click shut, a key turned the lock from inside. Gradually, she opened her eyes as they adjusted to the light. She saw Manuel Montresoreno standing at the door staring at her the way one might consider a piece of beef resting in a butcher's display case.

He looked about the room. Then crossed to the night stand, and turned on the lamp. He stepped back to the door, turned off the over head light. Then paused staring at her again, tapping the tip of his index finger against his lips. And then he smiled.

"Yes, yes. That's perfect. The quality of light is important."

Shannon made no sound. She watched his movements the way a bird watches an approaching snake. It occurred to her that he moved like a dancer, a bit effeminate she thought.

He sat for awhile in the arm chair, appraising her, watching the rise and fall of her breasts beneath the white dress. Her rate of breathing had already gone up. He liked that, and to think he'd not even begun foreplay.

"You are very beautiful." He said. "And you're thinking, I am not so beautiful. No?"

Shannon's eyes were wide, her fear slowly building. She could think of no reply that would be believed, or not perceived as a taunt.

He leaned over and undid the laces of his shoes, but did not remove them. Then stood up and removed his tie. "It is best not to answer. I am not here for answers, but for pleasure."

He moved towards her, it seemed he almost glided across the intervening space. At the foot of the bed, he lifted her right ankle and loosened the rope a little then gently massaged her ankle where the rope had constricted it. His touch was surprisingly soft and sensuous.

She could not prevent the intake of breath when he slid his hand along the calf of her leg, lingering for just a moment at the inside of her knee.

He crossed to the other side of the bed and did the same to her right leg, and in spite of herself she found she was becoming wet, an anatomical reaction she did not understand or relish under the circumstances.

He walked around to the right side of the bed, then sat upon it, stroking the inside of her thigh until his hand brushed against the white cotton panties she wore beneath her dress.

"Don't." She said.

He smiled, and she noted with sudden clarity, his perfectly even white teeth were all artificial. The color grossly different from that of his lower teeth, which

were a sickening yellow. He leaned closer, pressing his hand against her, feeling the wetness penetrate the thin cloth.

"Don't... don't?" He shook his head slowly from side to side. "But I must. Because tonight I am going to take you places you've never been before. Where pleasure and pain are mingled into one endless tangle of lust. Life and death have no dividing boundary.

As he spoke he placed his thumb just above the crease he felt in her rapidly moistening panties and began to massage gently in a circular motion.

She gritted her teeth, fighting the desire growing in her in spite of her conscious disgust. Without altering the pressure, he unbound her right hand and placed it on his engorged member. She tried to pull away, but he wouldn't let her.

Waves of exquisite tension began to cascade from her loins upward towards her throat, even as her disgust began to turn upon itself. And then the thought occurred to her that if she took an active part perhaps she could bring him to climax quickly, before he ever intended. And this would satisfy him and he'd leave her alone.

An involuntary moan escaped her lips, as she began to actively participate in what she thought would be his pleasure. His member was not large, at least it did not feel large to her hand, but he was fully aroused, very hard.

He groaned deeply, his lips drawn back in a feral grin. She thought he would come soon.

Suddenly, his right hand was clamped across her mouth. His thumb and forefinger pinched her nostrils closed. Immediately she tried to pull his arm away, but it was impossible. She struggled writhing this way and that, trying to get air.

She felt his thumb again. The waves of tension building faster, she tried to stop them but could not. She wanted to scream with pleasure but could not. From the edge of her vision, a gray cloud seemed to be closing. As she was losing consciousness she began to climax continuously. Her hips thrusting upward against his hand. And then everything was black. And the only thing she felt, was wave after wave of exquisite pleasure, accompanied by the sound of her heart pounding in her ears as if it would explode, trying in vain to pump oxygen to her dying brain.

Someone was pounding on the door. He tried to ignore it.

"General, General!"

He stared down at her, another few seconds, she would be dead. And he was so close to climax himself. And then this idiot!

He pulled his hand from her mouth, and from under her dress. She gasped for air, then let out a shuddering moan.

He stood up from the bed, straightened his uniform and walked stiffly to the door. Opening it abruptly.

"I told you, I was not be interrupted." He scowled at the young soldier before him.

"My apologies, Sir. But a man is at the front gate."

Montresoreno's eyes grew wide with anger, his voice edged with sarcasm. "A man is at the front gate? You interrupted me because a man is at the front gate!"

The soldier nodded, "Yes, Sir... Mr. Jim Richards. He said you were expecting him."

Chapter 21

Montresoreno stood frozen in place, dumbfounded. His mind trying to grasp the significance of the situation. Jim Richards? Why the hell would he come here? And then a vision of the carnage he'd seen at Xutilha came to mind. Richards would not have come alone.

"Do not open the gates, kill him where he stands!" Montresoreno commanded.

The soldier seemed perplexed. "Sir, the guards were in the process of arresting him, even as I ran to bring you the news."

Montresoreno threw up his hands. "Fools! It is a ruse."

###

Jim Richards stood outside the entrance to Montresoreno's compound. He called to the guard on the wall, speaking politely in perfect Spanish. "Senior. My name is Jim Richards. I've been ordered by General Montresoreno to appear before him tonight."

Two enormous twelve-hundred watt flood lights suddenly came on, illuminating the ground where Richards stood. He shaded his eyes, and squinted into the blinding light.

All four guards on the front wall gazed down at Jim Richards. At the south end of the front wall, the guard turned his back to the woods as he leaned against the parapet.

No one heard the sizzle of the crossbow bolt, as it traversed the thirty feet of space between the wall and woods. Its poisoned, surgical steel tip entered the guard's neck dead center, just below the cranium. His head jerked up as if something extraordinary had caught his attention. His body stiffened, he died nearly instantly. But he did not fall over, rather he simply sagged a bit, his elbows resting on top of the wall, where it met in the southwest corner. To a casual observer it appeared as if he were gazing at the starry sky above.

The guard nearest the gate called to Richards. "We have no orders to expect visitors tonight. You must leave now, or we will arrest you."

Jim Richards reached into his shirt pocket, careful not to disturb the two ball point pens clipped there. He extracted a folded piece of paper, opened it in the brilliant light and held it up towards the guard. "My papers. The orders are explicit. Open the gates and arrest me if you will, but don't send me away. I'm sure neither of us will want to face the General in the morning, if we disobey these orders."

The guard on the wall turned and motioned to three guards on the ground just inside the gates. "Let him in, and arrest him. Mario, go up and ask the General what we are to do with this Jim Richards."

One of the guards on the ground swung open the right hand gate. Light spilled in through the open gate, illuminating the guards just inside the entrance, casting a brilliant white pathway towards the villa. Jim Richards moved forward slowly, shading his eyes from the light. Timing his approach to allow the guard, sent to speak with Montresoreno, time to enter the villa. He carried the paper close to his chest, holding it over his breast pocket with his left hand.

The two remaining guards moved towards him, and towards each other, soon all three would meet in a tightly formed circle. One of the guards held his hand forward, a gesture indicating he wished for Jim Richards to hand him the orders.

As Jim Richards crossed the threshold, several events took place simultaneously: Frank Prescott could not use the starlight scope mounted on his sniper's rifle while the lights were on, so he sighted over the top of the barrel, targeting the wall guard standing at the north end of the front wall.

As the guard turned to watch the activity just inside the front gate. Prescott squeezed off a seven millimeter round from his silenced weapon. The round slammed into the guard's chest knocking him backward. A grunt of pain escaped his lips, followed by a thud as his body slammed against the thick adobe wall. He bounced forward, then toppled off the parapet headfirst onto the hard dirt below. The fall broke his neck.

When the guard grunted, all of the other guards inside, and on the walls of the compound, turned their eyes towards the sound. At that moment, Steve Sheffield, Ross McIntyer, Vince Morris, and Dave Wilcox charged forward out of the darkness beyond the perimeter of the flood lights. For an instant they were illuminated in brilliant light, an apparition of impending doom coming relentlessly forward. Each was dressed from head to toe in black. Their faces greased in deathly green camouflage, vertical zig zag lines of black grease paint marring the continuity of their features. Their heads oddly misshapen, a collateral benefit of the floppy, boonie hats they wore.

Each man carried an UZI submachine gun, raised to the shoulder fire position. At their left shoulders, secured inverted to one of their load bearing straps, a combat knife. Across their chests in canvas holsters, also inverted, their Model 1911 autoloaders. Hanging on a short line at their sides, pistol style crossbows, each armed with an explosive bolt. With two spares clipped to the frame. Hanging along the second strap of their rucksacks, three anti-personnel hand grenades.

Secured in belt pouches, and stuffed into pockets all over their battle clothing were hundreds of rounds of ammunition loaded into magazines for their weapons. The weight of the stores alone would daunt the average person, but these men carried it all with ease, knowing it would soon grow all too light.

One of the guards caught their approach out of the corner of his eye, but had no time to identify all there was to see. To him they were but shadowy figures, festooned with bits of fern and grass. Not human. A terror to behold. He opened his mouth to cry a warning.

Steve Sheffield put three rounds from his Uzi into the man's chest. Vince Morris took another guard, who'd turned to look into the courtyard, stitching a three round burst up his back. Ross McIntyer blew out the right hand flood light, Dave Wilcox the left.

Frank Prescott, sheared the telephone connection at the building with one round from his sniper rifle. Then popped the electrical power insulators on a power pole just beyond the wall, killing all the lights inside, and outside the compound.

Jim Richards withdrew one of two ball point pens from his breast pocket just as the lights went out. He thrust it towards the first guard whose hand was held open to accept the bogus orders. The guard yelped in pain as the two inch needle inserted into his hand, driving horizontally towards his wrist.

Jim Richards then slapped the second guard's weapon aside as it started to come up, and shoved him towards the first, neutralizing the spasmodic arc of his weapon as well. In a flash of speed, nearly invisible to the naked eye, he retrieved the second pen, deployed its needle, then thrust it deep into the right eye socket of the second guard, burying the shaft nearly to its pocket clip.

The guard opened his mouth in anguish, a scream died in his throat as the Cobra venom instantly seized the motor functions of his brain. Jim Richards then stripped the CAR-15 from the second guard's hands and rushed towards the villa. Behind, and all about him chaos ruled.

The two guards he'd struck with venom, stood erect like vibrating statues until a final shock of uncontrolled electrical body energy slammed them both to the ground. Like pick-up sticks they fell away from each other, landing on their backs arms thrust upward, hands contorted into talons, as their final death spasms rattled to a close.

With the lights out, Frank Prescott took full advantage of the starlight scope's capability, shifting from one target to the next in rapid succession.

The guards inside the compound were momentarily frozen in total disbelief, seven seconds had elapsed. All the guards on the wall were down. Of the six on the ground, two died at Richards' hands, and one had been sent into the building. Prescott nailed two more with his rifle.

One remained, he crouched at the east corner of the villa. His vision not yet fully adjusted to the sudden lack of light. He'd seen a shadowy figure running towards the front door, but that vision was peripheral and he was too slow to bring the target into his sights. Now he was torn between the security of remaining concealed, and doing his duty.

As his eyes adjusted, he saw four black figures rushing through the gate. One stopped and raised his arm, a small crossbow extended from his right hand. The guard arose from his place of concealment, then raised his CAR-15 to his shoulder, it would be a perfect shot. But as his finger began to squeeze down on the trigger, he felt a sudden jolt as if he'd been struck by something very large, and rather hard.

His weapon flew out of his hands, an event that amazed him. He seemed to be falling backwards. There was no pain. Just some sort of misunderstanding. His chest felt congested, as if he'd suddenly acquired a terrible cold, or eaten something hard that had gotten stuck in his windpipe. He coughed, and gasped for air but couldn't seem get enough.

It was as if he were drowning. As he nearly had when he was a small boy. He remembered looking up through deep water at his mother, her hand reaching down towards him, distorted by the rippling surface. He reached for her... "Mama."...blackness.

Frank Prescott shifted his aim searching for another target, his heart beating too fast. That was close, Vince had almost bought it because he'd overlooked that section of the courtyard. He scanned each corner of the building again, then swept his scope in wider arcs.

Vince Morris squeezed the trigger mechanism on the crossbow, the bolt sailed upward, wobbling slightly as it arced toward the cluster of communications

antennas on the roof. He didn't wait to see the results of his shot, no point. There was nothing more he could do, no time to reload a crossbow. If he missed, another SEAL, McIntyer, or perhaps, Wilcox would take the next shot.

The bolt completed the apogee of its arc and fell towards the antenna array. Its tip shaped like a plumb bob, three concentric stabilizer rings machined into its base. On impact, a plunger contacted a primer cap that in turn set off four and half ounces of plastique explosive. Not a large explosion, but enough to destroy the antenna array.

###

"Fools! It's a ruse." His voice shocked her to reality. She felt disgusted with herself, drained at first, now suddenly stimulated to escape. She reached up with her right hand pulling at the knotted rope binding her left wrist. Just as the lights went out she managed to untie it.

Montresoreno turned towards her, she could sense him straining to see her in the darkness as she struggled with the rope about her right ankle. It was not easy to reach, even though she was quite limber. Her eyes began to adjust to the darkness, the white rope seemed to glow.

She exhaled, grunting involuntarily. It was almost untied. No! His hand was across hers, bending her fingers away from the nearly unfastened knot. She fought him, refused to let go.

His hand left hers. In the darkness she did not see its movement but felt the push of air just before the impact of the back of his hand across her mouth, knocking her back to a prone position.

"Put a! I'll kill you now. And fuck you later." Montresoreno swore.

He scrambled onto the bed, straddling her body, reaching for her throat. She scratched at his eyes, drawing blood below the left one.

He slapped her hand away, then punched her, intending to smash her nose. But in the dark he missed entirely, delivering only a glancing blow to her right temple.

Suddenly her right ankle came free. The release of tension acted as a catapult to the lever of her leg. Her knee shot upward with at least seventy-five pounds of force, directly into Montresoreno's groin. She felt his cajones give way to her knee as a high pitched scream escaped his lips.

The force of her blow, and his instinctual reaction to escape the sudden pain, drove his upper body completely over her head. He impacted the wall above the low headboard, slamming a hole into the plaster the size of his cranium. Then bounced backward, rebounded off the edge of the mattress, and clattered ass over tea kettle onto the floor, smashing the side table into several pieces on his way down.

Instantly, Shannon leaped from the bed running for the door. Suddenly, something seized her left ankle, throwing her to floor. Stunned she rolled onto her back, moaning. A biting pain at her ankle. She'd forgotten to untie the last rope.

Montresoreno groaned as he pulled his legs into a fetal position. The pain came in waves, yet his anger was so intense, his adrenaline so high, he soon ignored its intensity. Staring across the floor under the bed, he saw her straining to untie the last rope. He was incensed, he wanted to tear her head from her body.

Instinctively, he reached to his side for a phantom pistol. Foolish. He rolled to his knees, a shot of pain sliced into his stomach. He gritted his teeth. If he could not stand, then he'd crawl to where she lay and throttle the life out of her. The bitch! He crawled forward, rounding the end of the bed.

Her fingers worked feverishly at the last rope. Her shoulder hurt, something had happened to it when she fell. It felt weak. Oh God help me, she thought.

He continued towards her, his eyes maniacal. A feral grin frozen on his face.

He was closing in on her. She could smell his putrid breath, as he grunted and gasped with every inch he moved forward. She felt his hand on her injured shoulder, his fingers digging into her flesh. She screamed.

All at once the rope was free. She slapped and punched at the inside of his forearm, then spun on her rump and kicked out with both feet. Her right heel made contact, full on the bridge of his nose, and she heard, as well as felt, a gratifying crunch of cartilage.

He bellowed like an elephant, raising both hands to his injured face.

She scrambled to get to her feet, but when she tried to use her left arm to help herself rise, it seemed to collapse. She groaned in pain. Staggered to her feet. Ran for her life towards the door.

At that moment the ceiling came down, a concussive blast of cold air and debris knocked her to the floor. She slid out onto the landing, driven by the momentum of

her rush for the doorway, and slammed into the wood railing, then lost consciousness.

###

Jim Richards reached front door of the villa, it was made of solid oak and reminded him of another door he'd tried to break down once upon a time. He tested the door knob, it turned. As the door unlatched he kicked it open, then spun to his left his back against the solid exterior wall. Three rounds from a nine millimeter pistol flashed from within, out the open door; had he attempted to enter he would have been hit.

He heard the sizzle of a crossbow bolt go through the doorway, there was a bright flash and an explosion within. Window glass blew outward to his right and left.

Steve, Ross, Vince and Dave gained the veranda breaking left and right, two hand grenades pinged as their spoons came off in mid-air. Inside the flash and roar of their ignition was deafening. Screams came from within as well.

Then the SEALs began firing through the shattered windows, their suppressed weapons strangely muffled. Fire belched from bulbous tips. There was a machine like clatter of extraction bolts. Expended brass rattled onto the wooden floor of the veranda. Exhausted bullet magazines dropped, the scrape and click of fresh ones inserted.

They stormed in, guns blazing. Richards through the front door. Vince and Dave through the right hand window. Steve and Ross the left. Inside the SEALs scurried through the wings of the house leap frogging around each other clearing each room. Weapons blazing as targets appeared.

Jim Richards moved forward, the smell of cordite assailed his nostrils. On floor of the large entry way, below the upstairs balcony, three bodies. One still writhing in pain.

He ran for the stairs, weapon up, muzzle forward. A young man came around the right hand corner of the balcony, a pistol in his hand, a look of surprise on his face. Jim Richards squeezed the trigger on the purloined CAR-15, six rounds roared out into the man's mid section. Blood sprayed back in a fine mist, as he went down screaming in terror and agony. He curled into a ball whimpering, puking blood.

Richards topped the stairs, then put a round through man's head to end his agony. He turned left, a shape was on the floor outside the room earlier identified

as the bedroom where Shannon was held. It looked like a bundle of laundry tossed against the banister. He approached cautiously.

A few of the interior lights came on again, perhaps activated by a generator started up in some other part of the house where sporadic fighting continued.

Montresoreno stepped through the bedroom doorway. He did not see Richards, intent as he was on killing Shannon. He was covered from head to toe in a fine white powder, residue of the blast that knocked out the antennas and blew down the plaster ceiling. His face a ghastly mask of coagulated blood dappled with plaster. In his right hand he held a large, lock blade knife.

Jim Richards held down the trigger of his weapon expecting a fuselage of .223 rounds to shred Montresoreno's body, nothing happened. The damn thing had jammed.

He charged forward screaming at the top of his lungs, hoping to distract Montresoreno from his single minded intent.

The General looked towards Jim Richards, then pivoted grasping the muzzle of Richards' weapon, using his momentum to fend him off.

Jim Richards slammed into the wood molding of the doorway to the bedroom, the wind knocked from his lungs. He spun left and tumbled to the floor. The useless rifle banging down, skittering away, under the bed.

Montresoreno dove at him thrusting the knife towards his throat, but Richards just managed to roll away. He scrambled to his feet, then back peddled as Montresoreno slashed his knife in a vicious horizontal arc ripping through the front of Jim Richards' shirt, and snicking the skin beneath.

And then both men froze, sizing each other up, breathing heavily. Montresoreno held his knife low, ready to advance. His eyes confident with lust for an easy kill.

Jim Richards thought about the boot knife strapped to the inside of his left leg, under his pants. He could not reach it now, there would not be time. A useless place to carry a weapon, but it was not meant for situations like this, he'd only put it there to have something besides the poison pens when he walked through the gate.

Montresoreno said nothing, his breathing now under control. He advanced suddenly, his left arm sweeping upward in a classic shield parry, his right arcing from his hip directly for Richards' mid-section.

Jim Richards dove horizontally to the right, bending at the waist to sweep Montresoreno's feet. But Moonface also leaped into the air, avoiding the tripping maneuver.

Jim Richards hit the floor and rolled, scrambled to his feet, and spun around just in time to parry Montresoreno's thrust at his back. He followed the parry with a solid blow with his right fist to Montresoreno's rib cage, feeling with satisfaction a rib give way.

Montresoreno grunted in pain, and threw a backhanded slash at Richards' throat, but Richards ducked under it, seizing the arm at the elbow and driving Montresoreno back towards the bed.

And then the fight deteriorated into punching, gouging, kneeing and grunting. They fell to the floor. Jim Richards clawed and kned his way up Montresoreno's body, all the while keeping the knife arm extended above his opponent's head.

In every life and death struggle, a moment occurs when the final outcome can fall to either man, and only luck determines who the victor will be. Jim Richards was losing strength in his left arm, soon Montresoreno would force it downward. Then the strength of his primary arm would be at its peak and it would only be a matter of driving his knife downward into Richards' body.

But amongst the rubble on the floor was a shattered piece of the night stand. Perhaps a foot in length, wedge shaped like a tent stake.

Jim Richards right hand inadvertently fell upon this shaft of wood, as he struggled to gain advantage over his opponent. He brushed Montresoreno's left arm aside, as he raised the stake above his head, then drove it downward into his opponent's upturned throat. The tip of the stake entered the front of the Montresoreno's neck, it crushed through the surrounding cartilage, punctured the wind pipe, then exited out the back, left of the third cervical vertebrae.

Jim Richards twisted the stake one full turn as he scrambled to his knees directly above his enemy's head. He tore out the stake, raised it again, this time aiming for the center of Montresoreno's chest. But there was no need for a coup d' grace.

Jim Richards staggered to his feet, then stumbled backwards as he watched in morbid fascination the final ebbing of Montresoreno's life. The man gagged repeatedly, as if such a feeble effort would clear his throat, allow him to breathe again. Suddenly, his body stiffened, eyes bulging in unseeing disbelief. Slowly his lungs deflated, as the last liters of putrid breath gurgled from his torn esophagus.

####

Jim Richards heard a soft moan and turned, Shannon began to stir. He knelt at her side. Her eyes opened and she looked up at him. She tried to smile, but tears came to her eyes. "I prayed you'd come."

Just then movement on the stairs caught Richards' eye, his hand went automatically for the knife he could not reach earlier. But then he saw it was Vince, followed by Dave Wilcox. They gained the landing and quickly checked the room to the right, empty. They came to Richards side, Dave helped him get Shannon to her feet.

Vince Morris stared into the bedroom. He saw Montresoreno prone on the floor, blood pooled about his neck and head. The ropes dangling from the bed. The gaping hole in the ceiling, stars beyond. "Hell of a remodel," was all he said.

###

They waited for Shannon to change into jeans and a T-shirt. Then throw a few things into an overnight bag.

They found Steve Sheffield in Montresoreno's office, rifling through his desk, throwing papers into a large, black duffel bag. Ross was on the other side of the room, thumping on wood paneling.

"What's our time?" Steve asked no one in particular as he continued to search through the papers.

"We're zero plus nine minutes." Vince replied.

Richards shook his head, it seemed like a eternity since he'd walked through the gate. Their operational time had called for a twelve minute window. Assuming a call for help went out when they started, twelve minutes was all they could afford before exfiltration back to their vehicle.

"I've got a safe." Ross called out.

"All right clear the room." Steve ordered.

They all went out into the entry way, while Ross set a shaped charge, popped a five second fuse, then joined them. There was a frump followed by a metallic clang as the safe blew open.

Ross and Steve, ducked back into the office, smoke billowed out the doorway. In the safe they found a journal, and about eight hundred thousand dollars in clean one hundreds. It all went into the duffel bag.

###

They crossed the courtyard, Shannon noted the carnage of their rescue. It shocked her to think all these men had died because of her. Because they'd participated in her kidnap. She did not know about Tom Lovell.

They passed through the gate, then turned right and headed down the road at a fast pace. Frank Prescott joined them as they jogged past the west end of the front wall. It took less than two minutes to reach the car. Everyone piled in, squeezed together.

Shannon sat in Richards' lap, her legs stretched out across Frank Prescott and Vince Morris. The men smelled of sweat and gun powder. It seemed aphrodisiac, and she thought she understood the reason boys played the game of war. Then she thought of Montresoreno's sadistic sex play, and again felt disgusted with herself. She put her head on Richards' shoulder and whispered in his ear. "Thank you." He stroked her soft hair and held her close, feeling the wetness of tears against his neck.

Ross drove carefully down the hill, the road winding its way to highway 9. Just before they reached the highway they turned east on a feeder road. Proceeding no more than a mile, they turned right onto a dirt road, and drove a short way along until they came to a cliff over looking a quarry filled with muddy water.

There they climbed out. Shannon watched with curiosity as the men, shadows really in the darkness, quickly removed their battle clothing. Then stuffed the garments into black laundry bags. Next they helped each other remove all traces of camouflage paint. Then used towellettes to rub themselves all over, before pulling on civilian clothes.

Jim Richards brought some towellettes to Shannon, she cleaned her hands, face and neck. Throwing the used towels into a bag Richards held open.

"I'm surprised at the fastidiousness." She said. "It's not what I would have expected."

Jim Richards smiled. "Well if we were exfiltrating by chopper, none of this would be necessary. But we have to drive through populated areas, and may be stopped. The smell of cordite, and our appearance would be a dead give away. No pun intended." He threw the knapsack into the trunk of the car. All the other lethal stores except easily concealable personal weapons, and the one large duffel bag followed it. When they were finished, they tossed the laundry bags into the trunk, slammed the lid, and then pushed the car over the cliff into the flooded quarry.

They moved off, single file down the dirt road. Just before they reached the feeder road, Dave Wilcox led them to the right, down a dirt lane barely wide enough for one car to pass. Less than hundred feet down this road, they came to another old car parked facing outward.

###

In downtown Puerto Barrios, near the harbor district they abandoned the second car splitting into teams of two and three on foot. Steve Sheffield accompanied Jim Richards' and Shannon. "We can't leave the country tonight," Steve said. "But tomorrow we'll have some options."

###

The Sabreliner gleamed under bright sodium lights, inside the hangar. George Krystonopolis walked around its fuselage, carefully checking the paint job they'd just given it. He glanced at his watch, midnight. They'd worked non-stop for ten hours. If the mission had gone well, Jim Richards and the SEALs would be calling in soon.

High on a rolling scaffold, an artist carefully painted new registration numbers onto the vertical stabilizer. He was the same man who'd worked for George in the New Mexico dessert, preparing Skymasters for their flights to Guatemala.

"Hey, George." The man called down to him. "You want some sort of name or logo on this thing?"

George thought for a moment. "Yeah, let's call it ExecuJet One. You know, like it's a charter deal."

The man nodded once and grinned, "How 'bout a great big numeral one, kinda stylized, little shading so the words float in front."

George laughed and shook his head good naturedly. "Anything you want Paco, just don't use any candy apple red. Oh and if it's not too much to ask, could you finish it by morning."

Paco gave him the one finger salute, his left arm stretched high in the air, his right already going to work on the lettering.

###

Jim Richards, Shannon Albright, and Steve Sheffield sat at a small, round table inside the confines of a wrought iron fence that bordered the patio of an outdoor

cafe. They ate a local dish of rice, beans, and over cooked shredded beef, with corn tortillas on the side. They were famished, and said little during the meal. When they did speak to each other, or the waiter, they were careful to use only Spanish.

Several times during their meal police patrols on foot, and in vehicles passed by the restaurant. If they were noticed at all, their clothing, at least, helped them blend in with the locals. Jim Richards and Steve Sheffield sat low in their chairs, to obscure their size and height, keeping their faces down towards their plates of food. They'd chosen a table in the corner where the fence met the building. The shrubbery outside the fence, and the large potted plants placed through out the patio, also concealed their presence, at least they didn't stand-out like gringo tourists.

As they lingered over coffee, as locals would do, Dave Wilcox sauntered by accompanied by Frank Prescott. Almost imperceptibly he nodded to Sheffield, then crossed the street disappearing into the shadows of the non-illuminated areas beyond the lights of retail establishments.

After a few more minutes passed, Steve Sheffield paid the bill in local currency. They left the cafe, walking in the same direction as Dave and Frank had earlier. Once away from the lights, they too crossed the street. Then continued on for another block, or so, until they came to an alley leading off to the left. Ducking down the narrow lane, Steve counted two doors on the left, two on the right. The second on the right was the one he was looking for, he knocked twice, and Vince Morris opened it.

They stepped into a narrow hallway that led to a living room, with a small kitchen. There was a bedroom as well, with a bathroom attached. The living room was sparsely furnished. An easy chair, occupied at moment by Dave Wilcox. A small table with four chairs. Around the edge of the room, bare single bed mattresses. Jim Richards noted as he passed the bedroom door, there were more mattresses in that room as well. All told the safe house could accommodate eight people in relative comfort.

The living room was lit by a couple of hurricane lanterns, one on the table, another standing on the kitchen counter. Two others, in the bed room and bathroom. Frank Prescott stood at one of the windows that over looked the street. Blackout shades were pulled down. There were two eye holes cut into each, with a piece of black cloth taped over the holes, which could be moved aside for viewing.

The building was built on a slight hill. The front, two stories. The rear only one. In the front, at street level, did a dress maker currently occupy a small mercantile space.

Jim Richards looked around the room, everyone was there except Ross, who could be accounted for by the shower heard running in the bathroom. "Nice little place you got here, Vinnie. Reminds me of the Haight back home." Richards said. "How'd you manage a safe house on such short notice?"

Steve Sheffield had stepped over to the window, and was staring out through the peep holes, he turned towards Richards letting the cloth fall back over the holes. "This was an observation post set up to cover Tom Lovell's back. Unfortunately, with the budgetary cutback last year, staffing was eliminated." Steve replied, in answer to Richards' question. "Too bad, might have saved his butt. Fortunately, someone had the good sense to buy the place when such purchases were less scrutinized by the bean counters. The gal downstairs keeps it relatively clean, in exchange for free rent on her shop and no embarrassing questions."

Dave Wilcox came over to Shannon, who was standing next to Richards, a little overwhelmed by the company she'd fallen in with.

"How's the shoulder?" Dave asked.

She frowned a little. "It aches quite a lot."

Dave nodded. "Let me take a look at it." He examined her shoulder, fingers gently probing the joint, then testing her range of motion." She winced more than once.

"You have a mild separation of the acromioclavicular joint, typical football injury. You ever play pro?"

She laughed, "No."

Dave smiled, "Well nothing to worry about. Hurts like hell, but should heal up fine in a week or so. We'll get it X-rayed when we get back to friendly territory, just to be on the safe side, but I doubt very much if anything's broken. I've got some analgesics in the my kit, nothing too strong in case we have move out of in a hurry, but they'll take the edge off the pain. Just don't do any push-ups for a day or two."

Shannon smiled. "Thank you."

"Speaking of leaving. What's the extraction plan?" Richards asked.

"We're here for the night," Prescott answered. "Crash on the mattresses 'til about oh five-hundred. We split the watches, two on the roof covering the street

and the alley. There's two exits, the door you came through and roof access through the ceiling in the bedroom. From there we can make it roof to roof until we get to the end of the block, then down the fire escape to the street. Or Geronimo off the backside into a vacant lot.

"I just spoke with your buddy, George. Used an open line over at the hotel a couple of blocks away. Double chit chat and all that good spy stuff. Basically, he flies into the airport tomorrow. He's repainted the Sabreliner green over white, new numbers, the whole shebang. Flight plan calls for an oh eight-hundred inbound.

"We make our way to the airport early. Borrow a fuel truck, and go out to the aircraft. Then get on board."

"Just like that?" Richards' voice skeptical.

Prescott grinned. "Well...the only easy day...

Richards nodded, "Yeah I know, ...was yesterday."

Chapter 22

The night passed without incident, except for one odd event. An old car pulled up in front of the building next to Tom Lovell's place. One man out, one man in. Apparently someone was watching his former residence. Or were they watching the safe house? Jim Richards scurried on all fours, over to the other side of the roof, and reported what he'd seen to Steve Sheffield.

"Interesting. Too bad there isn't time to drop in, maybe squeeze some information out of the bastard. But then, perhaps we've done enough damage for one visit."

Richards nodded, his head barely visible in the darkness. "Yeah, I'd say we've definitely worn out our welcome." He looked at his watch, zero four forty-five.

"Looks like its time to wake the others."

Steve nodded, "Okay. Keep the street under surveillance. When everyone's ready I'll give you the nod.

####

George Krystonopolis reviewed his flight plan, and rechecked the weather forecast for the region. He heard the door open to the pilot's ready room, a small office in the northwest corner of the hangar. He didn't look up from the navigational chart on which he was making notations.

"I hear you're looking for a co-pilot."

Krystonopolis swiveled around in his chair. Matt Harding stood grinning just inside the door.

"Someone with a little experience in a Sabreliner." Matt crossed the room his hand extended, "Well I've got about as little as anyone."

George shook his head. "Not exactly what I had in mind. How many hours you got in type."

Matt stepped over to the chart, glanced down at the routing. "Oh about twenty-five, plus another five in a simulator before catching a MilTrans down here."

George shook his head. "No offense, Matt, but with all the scrambled eggs flying these things for the Air Force, how come the blind have to lead the blind?"

Harding looked sideways at Krystonopolis. "Probable deniability, your not exactly Mr. Clean you know. Just for the record, whose side are you on anyway?"

Krystonopolis grinned sardonically. "My own mostly...and for the time being, Jim Richards'. At least until we're even on the butt saving scoreboard."

Matt nodded his head once. "Look, you flew the bird from Cayman quite nicely. I'm sure you can get it to Guatemala. I'm just along to help with the toggle switches."

George sighed. "Good enough. But my exit route's back to Yucatan. After that, where I go is my business."

Matt shrugged. "Not a problem, far as I'm concerned."

####

"Nothing on the local news this morning," Vince said. They were lying in tall grass on the summit of a hill, half mile southeast of the Puerto Barrios airport. Steve Sheffield raised a pair of binoculars to his eyes, careful to cup his hands around the lenses, shading them from the morning sun. He wanted to reduce the possibility a flash of reflected sunlight might reveal their position.

"Security's definitely been increased." He scanned the airport and surrounding approaches. "Check point's set up on the entry road. Four vehicles patrolling outside the perimeter fence. Three on the inside. And a two man foot patrol weaving in and around the structures, vehicles, and aircraft out on the tarmac." He closed his hands over the lenses and lowered the binoculars. They back crawled from the crest of the hill to rejoin the others waiting below.

"The Guatemalans are not going to make this easy for us, no walk in the sun." Sheffield said as they hunkered into a circle. "The entry road's watched. Perimeter patrols and inside security." He glanced at his watch. "Seven-fifteen, too late to warn our inbound flight.

"Ross, what options do we have?"

Ross McIntyer spread a set of engineering maps of the Puerto Barrios airport on the ground, as the rest of the group closed the circle around it.

"Nice charts," Richards commented.

Ross grinned. "Army Corps of Engineers helped build the place. I picked up a set of these on our first visit, thought they might come in handy." He pointed to a series of elevation lines. "This is where we are right now." He traced the curve of an elevation line with his forefinger. "Around this way is a small creek. Right here a drainage culvert carries rain water off the tarmac.

"About here is where fuel trucks are normally parked." He looked over at Sheffield. "Sentries at the trucks?"

Sheffield shook his head.

"Good. Our best shot is through the culvert. Then one by one up the drain pipe. This particular pipe is nearly three feet across, it takes all the runoff from transient parking. Once topside we get ourselves into one of the fuel trucks, it'll be a tight squeeze like stuffing phone booths in college. We drive out to the aircraft. Then hope and pray George makes it all the way to liftoff, before someone wonders why the truck is still sitting out on the flight line."

Jim Richards shook his head. "Ground control won't let us taxi anywhere with a truck out there. If George violates their orders, the boys in the jeeps are gonna block the runway." Richards looked at Sheffield. "Let's take another look."

They crawled back to the crest of the hill. Richards cupped his hands over the ends of the binocular tubes, then carefully scanned the area where they'd be operating. He stopped his search when he came across the Skymaster flown down by Krystonopolis earlier, when Montresoreno had insisted he spend the night as his guest. It was sitting by itself, near a hangar that stood alone at the east end of the field. He handed the glasses to Sheffield, nodding in the direction of the Skymaster. "Recognize that?"

Sheffield lowered the binoculars, then smiled.

###

"Puerto Barrios tower, this is ExecuJet One turning final."

"Ah, Roger...EssenJets uno. You are okay for coming to land."

George released the push to talk button, and glanced over at Matt Harding, then bust out laughing. Tears running down his face, "Oh Jesus, we're in trouble now."

Harding chuckled. "Maybe we better switch to Spanish."

George shook his head. "Better they think we can't speak the lingo. Might save us problems later, when all we want to hear is: Cleared for take-off."

####

Sheffield raised his right arm, bent at the elbow, hand balled in a fist. Everyone stopped. Single file, six feet between each, except for Shannon who stayed within arms reach of Jim Richards.

They were strung out around the inside curve of a creek. Their shoes and socks soaked, pant legs already wet and muddy. Sheffield carefully crept around the bend, one slow step at a time. Just ahead the open culvert yawned back at him, the perimeter road running over the top. He waited for three minutes, no vehicles passed.

He looked back at the group, and held up one finger. Then pointed at his watch, and again held up one finger, bent. All of which meant: Proceed one person at a time, one half-minute between. He didn't expect Shannon to have a clue, nor to comply in any case.

He turned and moved forward keeping low, quickly covering ground, splashing as little as possible until he was safely inside the culvert. As expected Richards and Shannon came together, Ross was last inside.

They moved forward through the damp tunnel, in a tight group. It smelled of rotting organic material, mixed with petroleum lubricants and kerosene. Soon their shoes and clothes were soaked and splashed with the smelly substances.

Ross held the entrance until he heard three evenly spaced taps echo down the concrete culvert. By the time he reached the drain pipe, Vince was nearly half way up, using a chimney climb technique.

One question left unanswered was whether or not the grate would be bolted down. They were designed to be installed with four inch bolts. But the bolts were usually not placed because they inhibited debris clearing when torrential down pours clogged the grate. Fooling around with rusted tie down bolts was a poor use of time, when the tarmac was turning into a lake.

Vince reached the top of the ten foot climb, he pushed against the underside of the grate, meeting resistance. He gradually increased the pressure, nothing. His muscles began to shake, fatigue in the awkward position was setting in fast. He knew if he didn't break it free soon he'd have to drop back down, then try again after a brief rest.

He gave a sharp rap with the fleshy part of his fist on the underside of the grate, it gave little. Another sharp rap and it popped up, bruising his fingers when it fell back down. He'd grabbed the lip for a better hold, as well as to muffle the metallic clang of the grate as it rebounded. Tears came to his eyes momentarily, as he gritted his teeth against the sharp, brief onset of pain.

He raised the grating, then carefully set it aside. His feet slipping, muscles giving way. Gripping the lip of the drain hole he let his legs dangle, allowing his back to stretch out for a moment. Then with more will power than strength, pulled himself up and through the drain hole, rolling onto the warm asphalt. He quickly replaced the grate, then rolled under a fuel truck parked nearly five feet away. There he regained his strength, while watching for patrols.

He looked all about him. Beyond the fuel truck was the side of a building, a maintenance hangar they'd identified earlier. On the other side of the drain, another fuel truck. Between both, just enough space to park a third truck.

The missing truck had been there when they scanned the area earlier in the morning, now it was either fueling an aircraft or possibly refueling itself at the fuel farm across the field. From his ground level perspective he could not tell.

This was going to be dicey, especially if it returned while the others were in the process of ascending. He wondered if he should wait for it. He glanced at his watch, 08:05. If everything was on schedule, George was already on the ground, possibly parked. The flight plan called for a half hour stop plus fifteen minutes for taxi to take off if the field were busy. They didn't want to be on the ground exposed any longer than necessary. Ideally, Vince thought, up the shaft, into the truck, out to the plane and good-bye, without a lot of dilly dally.

A foot patrol, walked by behind the fuel line. Vince tried to think small. He was an oil spot on the ground. The guards jabbered away in Spanish. Typical grunts. Talkin' instead of lookin'. Good thing too, if they all thought like SEALs his ass was grass.

A cigarette butt sailed through the air bounced once on the tarmac then fell through grating. Vince shook his head, idiots. Then he suppressed a chuckle, as he thought of Ross staring up the pipe with his mouth half open.

He felt the ground vibrate before he heard the sound of an engine. The missing fuel truck rolled up, pulling straight into the parking spot. The driver leapt from the cab even as the sound of a hastily applied parking brake echoed off the asphalt.

What the hell, thought Vince, maybe he had a case of the runs. No time to back the goddamn truck into the slot even with the others. He waited another

minute for the area to calm down. Then Vince rolled to his right and slipped under the newly arrived fuel truck. He removed the grating, fished a length of cord weighted with a Swiss Army knife from his pocket, fed it down the hole.

'Bout time, thought Ross, as he caught hold of the folded knife swinging from the end of the cord. What the hell is he doin' up there? Takin' a siesta? He tied the cord to the knotted end of a climbing rope and tugged.

Vince pulled the cord back up, thus acquiring the climbing rope, which he quickly tied to the underside of the fuel truck that had just arrived. The SEALs easily clamored up the rope, rolling onto the tarmac under the truck.

Jim Richards tied the end of the rope under Shannon's arms, giving her a quick kiss on the neck and whispering encouragement. "We're almost there. This is going to hurt your shoulder a little but grin and bear it." She nodded, smiling gamely. He showed her how to fend off the sides of the shaft with her feet. Then raised his hand, the SEALs quickly hauled her up. Then dropped the rope back down for Richards.

####

Matt Harding stood outside, while three Guatemalan soldiers armed with sub-machine guns carefully searched the aircraft. It was small inside, seating for six, with a little cargo space. One of the guards stuck his head in the tiny biffy. Outside, they opened the cargo hold then quickly closed it again, as it was empty.

"Nobody inside, no cargo. What's the purpose of your flight?" Asked one of the soldiers, who appeared to be their leader, possibly a corporal, if the stripes on his shirt corresponded to U.S. military rank.

Matt answered in perfect Spanish. "Oh you know, those crazy U.S. corporations. Send us all the way down here to deliver some papers." He hefted his hand like he was holding a suitcase handle. They'd seen George walk over to the terminal carrying a leather briefcase.

They all laughed and shook their heads.

"Are you picking anyone up?" The corporal asked.

Harding shook his head. "No, sir. We're leaving as soon as the pilot comes back."

The corporal nodded, looked the aircraft over one more time from where he stood, then motioned to his men to move off.

Harding continued to scan the area, wondering how Jim Richards and the SEALs intended to get themselves on board. He glanced at his watch, almost eight-thirty. Time was running out.

###

Jim Richards sat in the driver's seat, Vince scrunched sideways behind the seat where the tools were normally stored. Dave Wilcox in the middle. Steve riding shotgun. Their feet rested on Shannon and Frank like crushed spoons on the floor of the cab, Frank's face an inch from Richards' foot resting on the gas pedal.

There was no place for Ross inside the cab, but he found a place of relative concealment outside between the rear of the cab and the fuel bearing tank itself.

"Come on, Matt." Richards mumbled to himself. "Let's get the show on the road." He waited impatiently, watching Matt Harding, in the side mounted mirror, as he joked with the guards.

Then the guards moved off. Richards started the engine. He waited awhile longer, allowing the guards time to move well away from the aircraft. He shifted the truck into first and slowly pulled out of the parking slot, circling around the truck on his left then heading out onto the ramp towards the Sabreliner.

###

George stepped out of the terminal, then strolled with a casual gait out to the aircraft. He came up to Matt Harding.

"Not looking too good," George said.

Matt nodded.

George looked at his watch. "Eight-thirty, we'd better start engines. I still think they'll materialize out of the grass at the end of the runway just before we take off."

Matt sighed, they'd been discussing options while taxiing in, and having realized from the increased security the hunt was up. "I hope your right. But I don't see how they can clear all that open space undetected in broad daylight."

George nodded in agreement. "Regardless, they're definitely not in the terminal. We can't hang around looking suspicious."

He climbed inside, then turned towards the cockpit. Matt climbed in behind, started to pull the doorstep up. From the corner of his eye he caught movement, the fuel truck was heading directly towards them.

"Here comes that fuel truck again. What's the deal?" Harding asked. "Mandatory fuel purchase?"

"Dumb fucks. I told the stupid bastards we didn't need any fuel. Probably somebody else drivin', nobody gave 'em the word. Just tell 'em muchas gracias and pull up the stairs."

George kicked over the APU as the fuel truck pulled to a stop just behind the port wing. As it rolled up Matt Harding recognized Jim Richards behind the wheel and gave him a broad smile. He called back to George, "Looks like they're in the fuel truck."

George shook his head, grinning. "Tell 'em to get their butts on board, pronto."

###

Everyone piled out, except Jim Richards. Shannon was the first on board. Vince, Frank, and Dave were right behind her. Matt clamored into the co-pilot's seat, rapidly running the check list and setting switches for George as the starboard engine spooled over.

Steve stopped just inside the door and looked back. Ross stood on the ground holding the edge of the fuel truck's passenger door, looking in at Richards. He glanced over his shoulder at Steve, a silent thought passed between them. Steve looked down for a moment, then back. He nodded once then pulled the door up and closed.

###

Ross McIntyer swung up into the passenger's seat.

Richards stared over at him, "What are you doin'? Get on the plane, Ross."

Ross looked past Richards towards the three guards they'd seen earlier talking to Matt Harding. They'd been leaning casually against the wall of the terminal, now one of them seemed curious about why the fuel truck had returned, and yet not fueled the corporate jet.

"Back the truck up, Ocean Man, before your pals over there start asking questions."

Jim Richards didn't argue, he shifted into reverse and backed away from the Sabreliner. As soon as he was clear, the aircraft began to move, turning towards the main taxi way.

####

When the door closed, Shannon raised her head and looked around the cabin, she'd been trying to get the safety belt adjusted to her waist. Steve approached her, making his way down the tight aisle. "Where's Jim." Her voice edged with panic.

Steve knelt at her side, he took her hand in his. "Someone had to move the truck, or else they would not have let us leave."

"Tears weld up in her eyes. "How will he get away. They'll kill him if he's caught."

Steve patted her hand. "Don't worry, Shannon. He's a clever guy, and Ross is with him."

She bent her head, tears rolling down her cheeks. "Not fair, it's not fair."

####

"You should be on that aircraft, Ross. This is a one man job, either it works or it doesn't. What's the point of risking two lives?"

"Haven't you learned nothin' over the past few weeks? It's all about team work, the minimum possible number in a team is two, not one."

Richards nodded. "I'm a spook Ross, not a SEAL."

"Yeah that's what I thought too, 'til I saw you towin' that skiff up Point Lobos road. Ain't no spook crazy enough to impersonate a goddamn Clydesdale, got to be SEAL blood in there somewhere."

Jim Richards looked to his left, the Sabreliner was almost to the approach end of the runway. So far so good. They passed the fuel truck parking area and headed straight for the Skymaster. "All we got to do is hot wire this little baby and we're out of here. No runways, no clearance. Just hit the throttles and go." Richards said optimistically.

Ross nodded, "Assuming it's got a full load of fuel."

Richards turned his head to look over at Ross. He knew he had oh shit written all over his face. "Hadh'n't considered that, there's a good chance Moonface wouldn't have let George top off the tanks after he landed."

Ross nodded. "Exactly. So while you're gettin' the wiring rigged for a no key start, I guess I best be filling the tanks."

They pulled up to the Skymaster. Ross hauled the fuel hose over to the port side tank, removed the filler cap, and started pumping Avgas into the aircraft. Meanwhile Jim Richards stripped and twisted wires under the dash.

###

Julio Verapaz slouched in an over stuffed chair inside the fueler's ready room. Across the room, at a small wooden table, Francisco Dary flipped through a three month old copy of Playboy magazine purloined from an aircraft fueled two months ago. Just then Rafael Jocopilas, their boss stepped through the open door. He was an overweight trucker in his late forties, who'd grown tired of driving the hazardous roads of Guatemala, and elected to drive a fuel truck at the airport instead. His brother in law, an agent for Guatemalan Customs helped him get the job. Rafael ran a tight ship, or tried to, as tight as he could with the two idiots whose work he was forced to oversee.

"Hey, Julio, where's your truck?" Rafael had come around from the back of the building and noted there was no truck in Julio's slot. He looked over towards the flight line where the Sabreliner had been parked, and then across the field to the fuel depot. No truck there either.

Julio stared at Rafael, non-plused. Then snapped back a sarcastic answer. "Gee, I don't know Raf, maybe I left it at home in my drive way."

Rafael's dark eyes, turned sinister with anger. "Hey, don't go gettin' smart with me. We got three fuel trucks, only two are out there. And neither one of those is assigned to you. I thought you went over to fuel that gringo jet."

Julio rolled his head back and forth on the sofa. "Didn't want no fuel."

"So where's your truck?"

Julio sat up a little straighter in his chair. "It's outside Raf, right between the other two. Okay, so I didn't back it up all nice and pretty. If that's what you're talkin' about."

"I ain't talkin' riddles here, Julio. It ain't out there."

Julio got up sullenly from the chair, then went outside. Rafael right behind him.

He stood dumb founded staring at the empty spot. Then started looking around the airfield, he soon spotted the truck over by the Skymaster parked near a hangar that was off limits to everyone except the ugly little General.

"What the hell's it doing over there?"

Rafael followed his gaze. Then they both stared at each other for a moment. Rafael said, "Oh shit." Then turned and ran towards the fuel office. As fat as he was, running wasn't exactly an accurate description, more of a high speed waddle. He picked up the telephone, dialed airport security.

###

"Puerto Barrios tower this is ExecuJet One, ready for take off." George released the push to talk button then waited for his clearance.

"EssenJet uno . You cannot go. The airfield is now closaid. You must go to gate, por favor."

George Krystonopolis and Matt Harding looked at each other.

George said: "Fuck 'em if they can't take a joke." And then he fire walled the throttles.

###

Ross finished topping off the starboard tank. So far so good. In the distance he heard the Sabreliner spooling up for its take off run. He looked towards the tower, two government jeeps were roaring in their direction. A third was weaving between aircraft and baggage carts trying to reach the runway before the Sabreliner could reach lift off speed.

He called to Richards as he hopped off the wing strut. "We've got company comin', get this thing started."

Ross leaped into the driver's seat of the fuel truck, then roared off heading directly towards the two jeeps. He'd purposely left the fuel pump off its hook, and it bounced along behind the speeding truck fuel still pumping out its nozzle.

Jim Richards pulled out from under the dash, he touched a hot wire to the lead he'd stripped. The front engine turned over, the prop whirled around in slow revolutions several times before it started. Next he cranked over the rear engine, it caught a little faster than the front.

Ross got the truck up to thirty miles an hour, jammed the throttle to the floor board with a wrench he'd found earlier under the seat, then leaped from the careening vehicle. He hit ground and rolled, as he came up, he drew a forty-five caliber autoloader from a holster strapped under his shirt.

Five rounds blasted out in rapid succession, aimed at the ground around the bucking hose nozzle, a spark ignited the fuel, sending it burning in two directions. One towards the back of the speeding truck, the other towards the Skymaster.

Richards added power, the aircraft pulled forward. He depressed the left rudder operating the steerable nose gear, pivoting the aircraft to his left. Then began a high speed taxi towards Ross.

One of the jeeps was obscured by the bulk of the speeding fuel truck, its course beginning to wander as it sped along with no one at the steering wheel.

Ross began running full speed towards the Skymaster, but the burning trail of fuel was faster, raising a wall of flame between them.

One of jeeps broke to the left, to avoid the on coming truck. The other broke right. In the back of the left hand jeep a soldier cleared the bolt on a belt fed machine gun mounted on a swivel tripod. He swung the barrel towards Ross, and squeezed the trigger. The rounds fell far short and to the right of the running man. It was nearly impossible to lead a moving target from a moving vehicle.

All at once the driverless truck hit a pot hole in the tarmac jinking the steering wheel left, the effect was devastating. The top heavy fuel truck tilted to the right, toppling. Then it began to tumble in the direction of its original course. It managed one complete roll before volatile vapors in the half full storage tanks ignited.

The force of the explosion blew the rounded back wall of the fuel tank completely out. It was propelled through the air at nearly twelve hundred feet per second pivoting from vertical to horizontal within the first twenty feet of its short flight. It scythed through the machine gunner targeting Ross, cutting his body in half at the waist.

Immediately behind the flying rear wall of the fuel tank came five hundred gallons of ignited aviation fuel, instantly incinerating the jeep, its driver and passenger. They didn't even have time to scream.

The front half of the tanker skidded forward on its side at fifty miles per hour, propelled by the exploding fuel out the back end. The bumper of the fuel truck smashed into the left rear quadrant of the second jeep, sending it bouncing and

tumbling end over end across the tarmac. All three occupants died, as they were thrown a kimpo from the careening jeep.

The concussion wave from the exploding fuel truck knocked Ross to the ground, he rolled three times before leaping back to his feet.

Inside the Skymaster, the concussion felt like a sledgehammer slamming into the front of the aircraft, sending it momentarily airborne.

###

The Sabreliner gradually gained momentum, off to the left George saw a military jeep weaving between baggage carts, and parked aircraft, heading in their direction. The aircraft's throttles were full forward, there was nothing more he could do.

Matt Harding called out the numbers. "Fifty knots, Sixty knots..."

They needed at least a hundred and ten to get the Sabreliner airborne. George focused on keeping the jet longitudinally straight with the edge of the runway. He glanced towards at the jeep. It was clear of all obstructions, the angle was good. Only a matter of fate, whether the Sabreliner would lift off before the jeep pulled into an impossible to miss fire zone.

George watched with almost detached fascination as the jeep's machine gunner cleared the bolt on his weapon then raised the barrel toward the jet.

Suddenly farther off, a huge fireball flared. All the men in the jeep looked towards it, unintentionally the driver altered his course. In that instant, the critical angle necessary to stop the jet was lost.

"One hundred and ten." Matt said in a calm even voice.

George Krystonopolis eased back on the yoke, going airborne at maximum angle of climb into a clear blue sky.

###

Jim Richards fought to keep the Skymaster under control, he tapped the brakes and kicked in the left rudder as soon as the aircraft was back on the ground. A wall of fire was burning fifty feet in front of him, another just to his left. He turned into the flames to his left, the propeller's down wash beating a path through the fire. And then he was through to the other side.

Ross had lost sight of the Skymaster during his tumble, now he looked ahead and to his left. Nothing, had it been blown away too? Suddenly the Skymaster was abeam his position, the starboard door flopping open and closed in the slip stream, as Jim Richards tried to open it, and the slipstream banged it shut again.

Ross jinked left, then leapt into the passenger seat without missing a stride.

"Hoooo ha!" He yelled. "Let's get this thing outta here!"

Jim Richards laughed at his exuberance, a release of tension as he firewalled both throttles. In moments they were past the flames, careening down the tarmac, a low fence that marked the boundary of the field directly ahead. No time to head for the runway. Already other jeeps and vehicles were taking up the chase. He dropped ten degrees of flaps, and forced the yoke forward holding the aircraft on the ground to build as much airspeed as possible before lifting off. If a gust of following wind suddenly came up just as they lifted off, the Skymaster might not even clear the fence let alone the stand of trees a hundred yards beyond.

They roared towards the chain link fence. A tiny sign with the manufacturer's name began to grow in size until it looked to be about six inches high, and eight inches long. When Jim Richards could clearly read the word Cyclone, he hauled back on the yoke.

All he could see was sky, as the Cessna leapt into the air, clearing the fence by inches. His speed dropped from one hundred to seventy knots almost instantly. He then lowered the nose slightly to best angle of climb.

Now the trees were rushing towards them, tall pines. His hands gripped the wheel so tightly, he could feel his finger nails digging into his palms. As they closed on the stand of trees he could see they were not really a solid wall, as it seemed from a greater distance. Some were closer, some taller. He lifted the left wing over the top of the first few trees. Gained an increment of altitude. Lifted the right wing over the next set. Gained a bit more altitude. Then the front propeller sheered through the silky soft growth at the very top of the next set.

And then they were clear, climbing out over the blue green water of Bahia de Amatique. Guatemala rapidly falling away behind, Belize and safe haven directly ahead.

Jim Richards let out an audible sigh.

Ross turned his head and stared at Richards, a mixture of awe and respect etched on his face. "Ocean Man, I think I just wet my pants."

Chapter 23

The road to the late Generalismo Montresoreno's villa was closed to unauthorized traffic. One mile from its entrance, a check point was manned by an officer and two soldiers armed with automatic weapons. A black Mercedes-Benz limousine pulled up to the check point, the rear passenger window electronically lowered. Identification shown, the limousine allowed to proceed.

The Mercedes passed through a second check point at the gate, then followed the curving driveway around to the front entrance. The rear doors opened, three men slid out from its interior.

Antonio Carlos Guterrez looked around, taking in the extensive damage done to the villa. The carcasses of Montresoreno and his body guards had been removed, but the dark rust colored stains of blood remained. And too, the heavy presence of death that sometimes lingers indefinitely in places of horrific carnage.

Guterrez wandered through the house, followed discreetly and silently by his small entourage of trusted lieutenants. Montresoreno had been one of his most successful protégés. At least that was how he thought of his best distributors, when he sipped cognac on the terrace of his own villa in Medellin, Columbia.

Gradually he made his way through the house and into Montresoreno's office. He noted desk drawers pulled open, some barely hanging on their tracks. The safe bulging like an overweight midget. Its door blown across the room, imbedded two-thirds its length into the opposite wall. Empty of anything valuable.

It was not the loss of money that Guterrez was concerned about, Montresoreno had far more in numbered bank accounts scattered through out the Caribbean, Switzerland and even the United States. Some of which Guterrez had already begun to access, and relocate. Though all the moneys now within the U.S. were a write off.

He shook his head disgustedly. "You see," he said. Speaking to his two lieutenants. "Let this be a lesson to you, and to any others who are foolish enough to think they can let their egos over-ride good business sense. You cannot torture and kill American agents, no matter how much you hate them. The United States of America has unlimited resources, and very skilled people to carry out their bidding. If we cannot turn an agent to our favor with reasonable money, then we must not let our anger lead us to foolishness. A simple mugging, or car accident would have sufficed."

He turned to one of his lieutenants. "Jorge, I want you to find out

who was responsible for this retaliation. And I don't want to hear simply the name CIA. I want to know specifically who orchestrated this attack."

"So that we can retaliate?" Jorge asked.

"No, you idiot." Guterrez said with annoyance. "So we can make certain we do not inadvertently piss him off again. Whoever planned this attack, care's nothing about the power of money. He is loyal to friends, and to ideals. And the people he chooses to do his bidding are like himself, incorruptible."

###

Jim Richards looked at his reflection in the bathroom mirror, his beard had been growing for over two weeks. He thought about shaving it, but decided to let it go a while longer. So he carefully shaved the outline he wanted to maintain.

Shannon was still asleep, her golden hair spread across the pillow. Richards pulled on a t-shirt, followed by a pair of clean blue jeans, and then padded into the living room of the suite he'd taken at the La Playa Hotel.

The telephone rang. He picked up the receiver before it rang again, and awakened Shannon. She needed sleep to put the fear and tension behind her.

"Glad you made it through in one piece." It was Arnold Batiste.

"Yeah, well the day is young." Richards said sarcastically. "The last time you called, it nearly killed me." He heard Arnold chuckling at the other end of the line.

"Krystonopolis still around?"

Jim Richards carried the phone over to the sliders, out on to the balcony. He looked down towards the pool, thinking he might see George out in the sun trying to impress some young thing. "Far as I know. He doesn't much tell me what his plans are, you know?"

"I suppose not." Batiste said. "Listen, been having a little conversation with our colleagues upstairs. They're kind of thinking George might be a little too squirrely to cut lose."

Jim Richards' mouth turned downward cynically. "Figure he's done his part. So its time to pinch the flame, do they?"

"No, no nothing like that." Batiste's voice soothing. "Just want to make sure he doesn't go off on his own completely unattended."

Richards sat down wearily on the edge of the chase lounge. "What's the offer?"

"Matt wants to start a little proprietary charter company. Figures the Sabreliner would be a good first aircraft, since its already bought and paid for so to speak. His dad likes the idea, keep him out of trouble and all that. Anyway, we figure George would make an okay pilot, if he's interested."

"And if he isn't?"

"Well we're hoping you, and Matt can persuade him. If not, just make sure he comes back with you. We'll deal with it, once he's within our jurisdiction."

Richards changed phone hands, moving the receiver to his other ear. He'd been gripping it a little too tightly. "Seems like a good deal to me, I'll see what I can do."

"Good. How's everything else going. You coming home soon?"

Richards looked out over the pool area, past the recreation shack, and on out to the Caribbean. "Yeah, another week or so, I guess. But don't plan on booking me anytime soon. It's going to take awhile to get this adventure out of my system."

"Understood. Let me know whenever you're ready. We'll pull something together for you, there's always a little action out there that needs to be attended to."

Richards made no comment, the silence fell hard on the line.

"Anyway take care of yourself, Jim. Give me a call-back on George, soon as you get his decision."

Jim Richards hung up the receiver, but continued to stare at the ocean. He hadn't been sleeping well, in spite of Shannon's best efforts to blissfully exhaust him. The dreams kept recurring: The dismembered bodies. The cries of pain so loud in his mind he'd wake up sweating. He'd killed before, had more than one close call. But nothing like this mission. He got wearily to his feet and padded back to the bedroom, intending to lie down next to Shannon, sleep awhile longer. But as he slipped under the crisp white sheet it soon became apparent she had other ideas.

####

The cafe was located across the street from the airport. It was one of those adobe style places, common all over Mexico, that seem to have been around forever. Though this one had probably been built within the past two years. Most of the structures out by the airport were new.

There was a small bar at one end, not the kind that beckoned to be lingered at, but rather a counter to step up to, for an order subsequently carried to one of the tables. Adjacent to the lounge was a medium sized restaurant. The place catered mostly to travelers waiting for flights. Central and South American air travel was notorious for delays and overbooking.

The high arched windows were open to the evening air. If glass had ever been contemplated, it was never installed. At closing, the owners slipped plywood panels into brackets, then secured them with padlocks.

Jim Richards and George Krystonopolis sat at a table near one of the open windows. Across the street they could see the Sabreliner parked out on the tarmac, the Skymaster standing next to it.

"So you're not interested in Matt's offer?" Richards said, a statement more than a question.

George shook his head. "Trouble with charter flying, you go when they want you to, stay 'til they want to depart. They say frog, you jump. Not my cup of tea at all. Besides, Matt's gonna have The Company bean counters breathing down his neck three hundred and sixty five days a year. No thanks."

Richards nodded, then took a pull at his beer. "You coming back to the states? Plenty of room in that Skymaster we're supposed to return. Get you off the hook, and all that."

George smiled shaking his head. "Why is it I don't think I'll ever be off the hook?"

Jim Richards shrugged. "Sure you will. All that once in, never out stuff's just an urban myth."

"You sure?" George responded.

Jim Richards looked at Krystonopolis for a long moment, then dug down into his pocket and extracted a small round key. He set it on the table and slid it across to George. "There's a safety deposit box at Banco de Brazil on Grand Cayman. I keep a whole new identity in it."

George frowned.

Jim Richards continued. "And I don't want to see that Skymaster out there come morning." He held George's eyes with his own for another long moment, then stood up, and extended his hand. "Be careful my friend, its a dangerous world."

George looked down at the key, then nodded, understanding. "Now I owe you another one."

Jim Richards shook his head, a half smile etched on his lips. "Now we're even." He stepped away from the table, and disappeared into the twilight.

###

Matt Harding finished filling out the flight plan, then turned towards the Sabreliner out on the tarmac. Jim Richards had just completed his walk around, making certain the business jet was ready to fly. Shannon was already on board. The SEAL's had all gone their separate ways, soon after returning to Cancun. Matt Harding walked up to the airplane, then did a quick once around himself before joining Jim Richards at the entry door.

"So George flew the coop, eh?"

Richards nodded. "'Fraid so."

Matt shook his head. "Oh well, he'll turn up again one of these days. There are only a finite number of airports in the world, and he's sure to be found at one of them."

Richards smiled. "If anyone bothers to look."

###

They parted company at San Francisco International Airport. Each promised to see the other again soon. He'd fly east, or she'd fly west, but neither really believed it would happen.

Once again settled with her family in Denver, the violence she'd seen, and the knowledge that he too was part of that terrifying world would gradually build a wall between them.

She'd meet a man whose past and present were unexceptional. A man who'd need not lie about what he did for a living, or where he went. And she would not

have to wonder why he chose the life he led, for it would all make perfect sense as it should.

For one brief moment her adventurous spirit had cast her amongst modern day pirates, amoral adventurers who cloaked their deeds in a thin veneer of legitimacy. A veneer that might be stripped away at any moment by political change. And for a brief moment she'd also met real heroes, larger than any created on the movie screen. And they too were frightening in their own way. Like samurai, hired to help, then shunned when the deed was done.

Jim Richards kissed her full, beautiful lips. And looked for the last time into her clear blue eyes, the enthusiastic naiveté he'd seen in them when first they met, gone forever.

And then she turned, and walked down the boarding ramp, and out of his life.

###

July 1974

Elmo Jefferson climbed awkwardly out of the black sedan assigned by the agency for his conveyance. The United States Marine at the east door to the White House saluted him sharply. Elmo acknowledged the salute with a nod of his head.

Inside the door, he passed through a metal detector, then displayed the contents of his thin brief case to the Secret Service agent within. He was allowed to pass into the office area on the main floor. As always, he noted how narrow the hallways seemed, a dramatic contrast to the enormity of decisions made within the confines of these walls.

Another Secret Service agent, whom he recognized and who recognized him, greeted Elmo as he passed through another door into the main rotunda. Together they climbed stairs to the second floor where he was shown into a private office.

As he stepped across the threshold, Dr. Richard Holt swiveled around in his desk chair to face him. He was animatedly engaged in a telephone conversation, nevertheless, Elmo discerned, mixed amongst a variety of gestures, a signal for him to take one of the leather chairs that stood directly in front of the desk. Jefferson eased himself down into the chair, as Holt wrapped up his conversation. He hung up the telephone, then pressed the send calls button so they'd not be disturbed.

"Thank you for coming over a little early," Holt said. "I wanted to discuss a couple of issues with you before going into the President's briefing."

Elmo raised his eyebrows, and cocked his head slightly.

"Skorokhodov has been, shall we say rehabilitated. Though he is definitely on a short leash. He's been shifted to Afghanistan, primarily to liaison between Russian and Cuban advisers.

Elmo nodded. "But that's not what you wanted to talk to me about, is it?"

Dr. Holt's steel blue eyes sparkled. "No." He thought for a moment. "President Nixon will resign soon. The senate investigation into CIA activity will likely lead to serious curtailment of the agency's covert operations."

Elmo closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I've been warning the Director of exactly that scenario."

Dr. Holt nodded. "I know you have, and the damn fool isn't listening." He sighed. "We need a new type of proprietary, a sort of internal housekeeping entity. To assure we neutralize any embarrassing issues before they're discovered by prying liberals."

Elmo sighed. "Then we will soon be no different than our Russian friends. And equally as vulnerable to disinformation."

"Maybe, but better that, then complete curtailment of our ability by those who are sure to fill the vacuum following the President's resignation. Do some research, let's put our heads together on structure and personnel."

Elmo nodded, then glanced at his watch.

Dr. Holt stared across his desk vacantly for a moment, and Elmo knew his ever searching mind had shifted to another subject, or perhaps it was another nuance of his latest idea.

"By the way, whatever became of that field operative we used on the Guatemalan case...Jim Richards?" Dr. Holt asked.

Elmo smiled. "Retired."

Dr. Holt's eyebrows shot up. "Retired?"

"Yeah. I believe he's married now."

"Married? Jim Richards?"

Elmo laughed. "You see? I've been telling you all along, those profiles you're always running aren't necessarily accurate, people do change."

Dr. Holt grinned. "What's he doing for a living?"

"A little of this, a little of that. He has a DBA, Robert Bushman, Management Consultant. Commercial investigations, that sort of thing."

Holt nodded as if he were not at all surprised. "In other words, on hiatus."

Elmo shrugged. "An extended one, if that's what you want to call it."

Holt smiled mischievously. "Put him on your list of possible operatives for the proprietary."

Elmo shook his head. "He'll refuse the offer."

Dr. Holt held up his hand, palm outward. "Trust me on this, it's only a matter of time."

####

May 1976

The yellow taxi pulled up in front of an especially well maintained Victorian. An old man, eased himself out of the back seat. He used a cane to hobble across the sidewalk to the steps that led up to the front door of the mansion. High above, wisps of fog shredded in the breeze as the mid-day sun tried to break through. One slow laborious step at a time the old man climbed the stairs. Resting now and then, before going a few more steps.

Across the street on the second floor, Mikail and Sergai took bets on whether the old fart would make it to the top. Or coronary out, topple backwards to slide, at last, to the bottom.

And then when it became clear, that in spite of his advanced age and near complete infirmity, he would nevertheless make it to the stair's summit, they joked about the sad state of American intelligence forced to rely upon the musings of someone so advanced in age.

The old man rapped upon the solid oak door, with the handle of his cane. The door opened. Immediately, Sergai zoomed in with his four hundred power lens mounted on a silicone stabilized tripod. But as usual he was not quick enough, the interior pitch black as if the door opened on to a black hole, as well it might have.

And then the old man was inside, his step suddenly fluid as he crossed the threshold, or was that just imagined?

###

The door closed behind him. Arnold Batiste drew the curtains aside, and Jim Richards stepped into a softly lit hall. Batiste shook his head. "Such drama, why didn't you just use the back entrance. Through the house behind?"

Richards chuckled. "I suppose you think the front of that building is more secure than this one, don't be foolish. Even the idiot taxi driver who brought me here is on their payroll."

Batiste nodded and grinned, "Better the devil you know."

Richards shook his head. "Better the bastards don't recognize you." He stepped farther into the hallway.

"I'm glad you accepted our invitation, Jim. It's been a long time."

Jim Richards looked at Arnold Batiste for a long moment. "Truth is, I'm bored stiff."

THE END