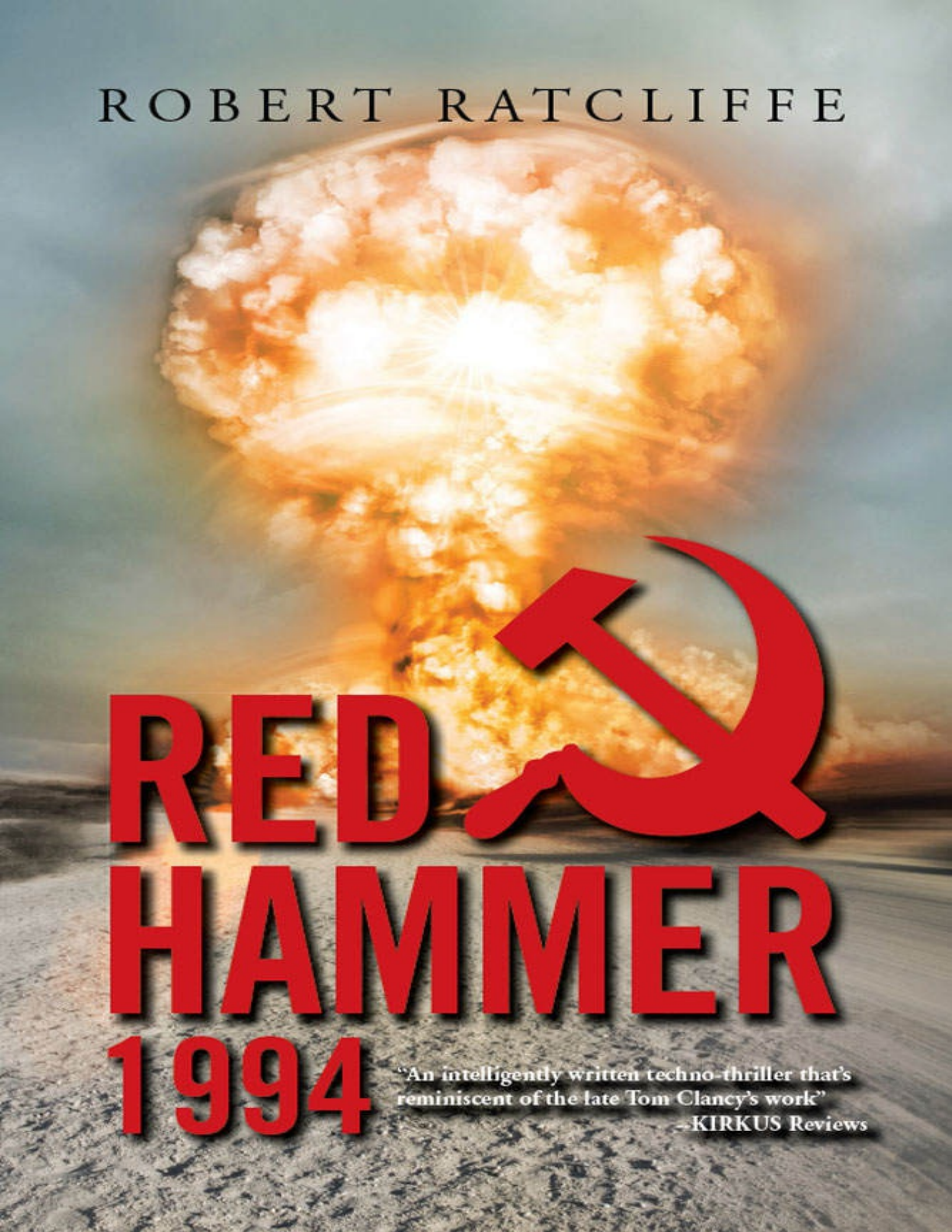
ROBERT RATCLIFFE



RED HAMMER 1994

"An intelligently written techno-thriller that's reminiscent of the late Tom Clancy's work"
--KIRKUS Reviews

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ROBERT RATCLIFFE

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ISBN: 1481998072
ISBN 13: 9781481998079
Library of Congress Control Number: 2013901187
CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform
North Charleston, South Carolina

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CHAPTER 1

Marlina Tatralova collapsed, overcome by anguish. Tears streaked her reddened, wind-chapped cheeks. She stared blankly at the graffiti-covered, red brick walls surrounding the Uralmash Zavod factory in Yekaterinburg, Russia. It was true, just like the gossips had said at the butcher shop, the one that hadn't had any meat for six months. Marlina saw through frightened eyes that the factory gates were locked for good. A dozen or so surly looking men roamed the cluttered grounds, apparently to keep potential looters at bay—as if there was anything worth taking.

Marlina cowered like a beaten child, an empty plastic shopping bag at her side. She rocked on her haunches, each breath labored, surrendering to the dark forces that had crushed her unmercifully. What did the politicians want? Blood? The fools in Moscow did nothing but strut like peacocks and bicker and then make bold promises that were no better than lies. She couldn't begin to fathom the intellectual downpour that tormented her meager existence. Free markets, participatory democracy, hard currencies, private ownership, these words were nothing but gibberish to the common Russian. Outside of Moscow proper, the people lived like animals.

The ominous slate canopy that smothered the rugged Urals seemed particularly threatening this fall day. As usual, the climactic monotony was intensified by the cold drizzle that seeped into the drab, poorly constructed

apartments and filled the interiors with the pungent odor of mildew and wet wool clothes. The black mood suited this dismal industrial city that brooded like a condemned soul. Everyday life in Yekaterinburg had ground to a halt.

Founded by Stalin in 1933, the onetime showpiece factory town had bolstered the old Soviet Union's power and prestige during the difficult, formative years. Throughout the Great Patriotic War, Uralmash Zavod had churned out sturdy T-34 tanks by the hundreds to beat back the vicious German invaders and lead the Red Army to victory. Production hummed unabated for decades, both with military hardware and heavy construction equipment, and promised cradle-to-grave security for the thousands of tough workers who braved the frontier city with its substandard housing and brutal weather.

But past glory had vanished into confusion, panic, and recrimination. It hadn't been American bombs or tanks, as the propagandists had direfully predicted for so many years during the cold war. Instead, mysterious and insipid free-market forces and muddled economic reforms had done the deed. They had sapped the life from Uralmash Zavod, like an infectious disease that rotted the innards while leaving a crumbling shell to serve as a testimonial to their collective failure.

Production had fallen precipitously to less than a third of its 1980s peak, when the 39,000 workers churned out modern T-72 and T-80 main battle tanks and massive oil-drilling rigs that rivaled the best produced in the West. After lingering for a few years on life support, the final deathblow for the diseased patient had been the complete and rapid deregulation of energy prices—a capricious and callous edict that had been like a dagger to the heart. The bureaucrats in Moscow had convinced themselves that it had to be done. Soaring fuel-oil prices had beaten them into the ground, as easily as a steam-driven pile driver pounding steel girders.

Sister cities throughout Russia's industrial heartland had suffered the same irreversible fate. The supposedly sympathetic Western press called it a necessary and quite natural initiation, a much-needed slap in the face, and a tough dose of medicine for those who would enter the competitive world economy on the threshold of the twenty-first century. The Russian people called it betrayal. Like shell-shocked war victims, they drowned their sorrows in copious servings of alcohol and prayed for someone, anyone, to rescue the struggling nation from the twin evils of runaway inflation and looming starvation. Dreams of democracy quickly vanished when competing with

empty stomachs and the fear of starvation.

The Western political dynamic was impossible for the average Russian to fathom. For decades, their world had been a rigid one of necessary order and accepted struggle. But if one had performed his or her obligation to the state, they would be cared for—albeit at a standard of living that would make those in the West groan. But in the early nineties, they had been cruelly seduced by the Westerners' constant covetousness for material possessions, a fatal diversion from the path of socialist purity, that had lead them straight to economic hell.

Marlina glanced up through salty tears at the high-bay factories and shops. What was left of the old plant? Machinery so antiquated that Uralmash couldn't compete with the rest of the world, even if her workers labored for free. The arthritic plant required hundreds of millions of dollars of scarce capital to even contemplate the task of rebuilding. And who would lend such vast sums? Not the West. They were greedily pouring money into the Eastern European nations, those despicable ingrates. For decades their socialist brothers had sucked up Soviet largesse in the form of nearly free fuel and blanket military protection, and now they thumbed their noses at their erstwhile friends. The capstone of humiliation had been when Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic had begged their way into NATO.

Marlina shivered uncontrollably with raw fear. Unemployment was a sentence of near death, a perpetual, grinding poverty with absolutely no escape. No so-called safety net existed in Russia; the state was bankrupt, the ruble—worthless. She tugged at her worn and faded wool sweater. The first signs of winter loomed on the horizon; a stiff breeze carried the telltale frigid air from Siberia. The cold wind bit her cheeks and made her shudder. It would be a long winter; the worst in memory they predicted. As usual, it was the common people who would pay the price for the bureaucrats' arrogance and incompetence.

Marlina sniffed and wiped her nose and stood, adjusting her damp scarf and rumpled skirt. Drying tears stained her cheeks. She staggered in the direction of her miserable apartment, wishing beyond hope that someone could bring back the old days. Who would save them, save Russia? Marlina shook her bowed head sadly and shuffled along in a very Russian mixture of stoic acceptance and steadfast perseverance in the face of insurmountable odds.

The gloating, stiff-necked man with short-cropped gray hair preened.

He sat pompously in his anointed chair in the section reserved for members of the Liberal Democratic Party. Actually, there was nothing in the least democratic about this gang of thugs. Once a hodgepodge of ultranationalists, neo-fascists, revanchist Stalinists, and a sprinkling of monarchists, the Liberal Democrats had deftly closed ranks and were now just hitting their stride. They had gained long-sought legitimacy through their recent smashing victory. No need to any longer kowtow to coalition partners. Nikolai Laptev had seen to that.

Over time, the more faint-hearted LDP members, those deputies lacking the stomach for a knock-down, drag-out fight, had been pushed aside to make way for the fire-breathers. The crowning glory in the early years had been the pact with the Communists and the agrarians. While those simpletons dreamed of the old collective days and Potemkin villages, the Liberal Democrats had used their votes to thwart reform and paralyze the government. Disaster led to disaster, until the government had collapsed. A sham presidential and parliamentary election had thrust Nikolai Laptev and his cohorts from the role of noisy and troublesome opposition to the seat of unchallenged power. Russia's Choice and the other so-called reformers were in tatters—discredited, chastened, and on the run.

The rebuilt Russian Parliament building, or White House, never looked better than this late October eve. A horde of workers had put the finishing touches on the pale marble masterpiece and scrubbed and polished for this special gathering. The rich, historical monument was a fitting backdrop for the occasion. The scene of death and destruction at Yeltsin's direct order earlier in the month, its resurrection signaled the final triumph of the State Duma over the disgraced president.

The former army paratroop officer suppressed the building anxiety that made him subconsciously squirm. Patience, he coaxed himself. He shifted his train of thought and focused on his earlier speech to the Duma, while he was still its speaker. He had been magnificent, his booming voice rising and falling in spirited intensity like thunder in a violent summer storm. He had his strong arms raised in defiance, his balled fist daring anyone to deny him his destiny. His pale blue eyes breathed fire, smoldering. Russia would rise from the ashes.

Laptev's invective had issued forth like a poisonous snake spitting venom. Betrayal of the common people. Slaves to the West. And what to show for the years of agony? Ruthless capitalists grown obscenely rich,

prostitutes on every corner, petty criminals ran amok, and a thriving, homegrown Mafia. That and millions upon millions of hungry displaced factory workers and a vicious depression that clung like a leech. Russia was an international joke, humiliated and prostrate, groveling before Jewish bankers and despicable American and German capitalists. Castrated by hastily negotiated strategic-arms agreements, her military might lay in ruins. Russia was impotent and needed to reclaim her rightful place in the world. Laptev had left no emotional stone unturned.

His blistering attack upon the remnants of the reformers had inspired sustained applause and rampant foot stomping, fueled by a deadly mixture of half-truths and blatant lies. The outcome of yesterday's vote had been preordained, as sure as the misery gripping the Russian people. The final tally hadn't been announced, but the consensus had the current Russian president unceremoniously thrown out on his rump, along with his cabal of baby-faced economic advisors and worthless political sycophants. Real men would once again rule Russia.

Long dismissed as a reprehensible madman, Laptev had masterfully manipulated the bone-weary populace. While others had fed them bland economic theory and esoteric political nonsense, Laptev spoke to their abandonment and personal humiliation. He proudly bore the common man's burden of pain and frustration squarely on his shoulders. His maudlin brew of self-pity and deep-felt resentment struck a chord with the unemployed, the homeless, the deserted, and, most of all, the dejected and angry officer corps. Laptev and his cronies had swept both the capitol region and the countryside like a tidal wave.

The new speaker of the Duma, the lower house of the restructured Parliament, assumed his post. He signaled for quiet. An unaccustomed hush swept the floor. He gripped the microphone and triumphantly announced the latest vote tallies. He flung his arm to the right and dramatically presented the next president of the Russian Republic. Over half the audience jumped to their feet, cheering wildly. The dejected minority clapped limply or sulked in despair. Their worst nightmare had come true.

CHAPTER 2

Nikolai Laptev held court inside the stonewalled Defense Ministry, surrounded by his inner circle of trusted generals and marshals. Laptev found comfort with this obedient lot. They fed his ravenous ego with their incessant groveling. The clever demagogue had proven skilled at fueling their innermost fears and arousing petty jealousies. He had deftly played to their hurt and humiliation and had them in his hip pocket. Most of the Russian brass could remember the old superpower days, when the Red Army had struck terror into the hearts of free-world leaders, and now smarted at their current societal status, one rung above the detested Moscow police. Laptev had cast a spell and had snared even the best and the brightest. Despite their misgivings, they fervently believed only their tough-talking president could restore Russia's greatness.

The room was cramped, but the furnishings were magnificent. Lavish ceiling-to-floor velvet drapes were gathered and pulled back from the leaded-glass windows, while ornate crystal lighting fixtures hung gracefully from the freshly painted plaster ceiling. The meeting table was polished mahogany and round, with Laptev at the head in a captain's chair. Nearly twenty Russians completed the assembly, an emergency meeting of the Military Planning Group. Every gathering was an emergency these days.

Laptev's mood was combative and nasty. Outside the Defense Ministry,

a brutal January storm lashed at the ancient Kremlin walls, with marble-sized ice balls violently banging on the thick windows and sounding like kettle drums at the Moscow symphony. The creaky Russian state, in desperate straits at Laptev's ascendancy, was comatose at this, the height of the worst winter on record. The atrocious weather was a harbinger of impending doom for the punch-drunk Russians. The state survived on nothing more than constant doses of Laptev's rhetoric, and like the habitual use of drugs, the desired effect was beginning to fade, requiring even more outrageous pronouncements to soothe the patient's pain.

A blend of self-deprecation and betrayal stoked the hatred brewing in Laptev's heart. The reformists had so thoroughly destroyed the country's weakened and fragile infrastructure that an attempt to turn back the clock was failing miserably. The civil glue that held man's more primitive instincts in check was cracking. The prognosis made even the most hardened and cynical Kremlin bureaucrat tremble—civil war across the length and breadth of Russia. Once unleashed, the fighting would be uncontrolled and catastrophic, like Yugoslavia magnified one hundred times.

The Russian defense minister banged the door open and entered the smoke-filled room, waving a message over his head, incensed. An adroit old communist that had long ago sold his soul to the Liberal Democrats, the anointed head of the military was of medium height, completely bald, grossly overweight, and sour looking. His reddened face was puffy like he had just awakened from a difficult nap and his ample jowls jiggled as he shuffled toward his chair to the right of Laptev. He wore a drab brown suit that fit like a tent. Despite his shabby appearance and dull eyes, he was a clever survivor who had served many masters and had proved himself invaluable in military matters.

Laptev publicly applauded the old-party faithful who had flocked to his banner. Privately, he ridiculed them. To their credit, they worshipped a strong leader, despised democracy in any form, and rarely had an independent bone in their body. Orders were obeyed without question. Even many of the early Liberal Democrats exhibited a tendency to question Laptev's more outrageous commands. Today the defense minister was the indignant patriot as he plopped into his chair.

"The latest dispatch from Ossetia," he blurted out to no one in particular. "Traitors! They will be shot!" A buzz rose, and heads nodded in unison. A nondescript secessionist group in the so-called Northern Ossetian

Republic had stormed an armory and made off with a cache of weapons including handheld surface-to-air missiles, leaving over twenty Russian troops dead. Such crimes were coming much too regularly. Laptev rightly suspected that some of the generals in this very room were encouraging such treasonous behavior, skimming a share of the spoils. A rash of executions had temporarily squelched such treason, but the lure of hard currency tucked safely in a foreign bank account provided a powerful inducement.

Laptev leaned forward slowly, shifting his weight to his thick forearms, resting on the table. His fat fingers were interlaced in a death grip. “Marshal Kiselev,” said the Russian president to a now-hushed room. “Perhaps you could explain how a ragtag mob of Muslim fanatics can snatch weapons in broad daylight right from under our very noses?”

Kiselev, the first deputy minister of defense and chief of the general staff, winced. He cleared his throat and cast a disparaging glance at the nearest army general, the one in charge of the Transcaucasus region. “Our forces are spread thin, too thin, President, and there are literally thousands of such armories throughout the nation, but the lapse of security is inexcusable.” The sentence had been pronounced—another “early retirement” from the ranks. The guilty officer accepted his fate dispassionately. The general staff had become a revolving door of late, and no one, even Kiselev, expected to last the winter.

Laptev chopped the air with his beefy hand. “These criminals must be taught a lesson.” He turned to his personal secretary, standing to his rear, a serious-looking mid-level bureaucrat, and the fifth in the last three months. “I want food and fuel deliveries to Ossetia cut by fifty percent immediately. I will show those ungrateful bastards.” He turned again to Kiselev, with a smug look folded into his face. “I want the missing weapons found and the culprits caught and executed. Understood?” Laptev had no patience for secessionists, or anyone that disagreed with him, for that matter.

No less than twenty-two separate entities within Russia’s borders were demanding varying degrees of sovereignty. The Caucasus Mountains just happened to be the latest flare-up. Besides chafing under the heavy yoke of their Slavic masters, the Muslim Ossetians were warring with neighboring Chechen-Ingush, also a Muslim hotbed of rebellion. If ethnic Russians weren’t caught in the crossfire, Laptev would gladly let the backward, filthy peasants slaughter each other. The northern and Siberian province breakaway threats presented a more severe headache. The Finno-Ugric speaking

Republic of Karelia lay astride the militarily important Kola Peninsula, and the Republic of Yakutia-Sakha encompassed half of Siberia, including rich mineral deposits. It was like stamping out forest fires and chasing the band of arsonists at the same time.

The marshal nodded to his master. “I understand perfectly, President,” was the reply. “It will be done.” Producing the stolen weapons would be child’s play, Kiselev thought. Any surplus army gear would do. But the rebels? More difficult. In the end, the internal security forces would conjure up the proper number of stiff bodies to satisfy the president. Innocent or guilty, it didn’t really matter. As to the supply cuts dictated? The people in Ossetia were already starving—and freezing. Muslims and other non-Slavs were at the bottom of the food chain in Laptev’s Russia.

“Well,” demanded Laptev, “what else? I have a meeting with the International Monetary Fund in twenty minutes.” Laptev’s lackey nodded like an obedient dog while his master rolled his bloodshot eyes in disgust at the lack of initiative shown by his military men. “Must I do everything?” he thought as he grimaced. He couldn’t imagine how he had taken orders from such men when serving in the army. They were all fools.

On the financial front, Russia was delinquent and had ignored all protests to control her hemorrhaging money supply and mothball half-a-dozen Chernobyl-style nuclear power plants that were ticking time bombs. No bother. Laptev would play the injured party and blame it on greedy foreign businessmen who held a knife to his throat. In truth, foreign capital and international investors were running scared, expecting to lose everything. Laptev was confident the IMF dolts would continue to throw good money after bad. The mere hint of civil unrest sent shivers up their spines and opened their fat wallets. In the end, he would rob them blind. They wouldn’t see a dime.

The defense minister cleared his throat. “It’s Ukraine again. Their army attacked an outpost three kilometers inside our border. Over one hundred dead and fifteen armored vehicles destroyed. They claim Russian troops provoked the action.”

Laptev seethed, his chapped lips curled with disgust. Within days of taking residence at the Kremlin, Laptev had put a hammerlock on Russia’s former Soviet cousins and nearest neighbors, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. Their belligerent rhetoric had melted like spring snow before his not-so-subtle threats. The ingrates had crumbled when he had brandished a

few armored divisions in “winter maneuvers.” The big three continued to be economic slaves to Russia and military pygmies. But lately, they had sensed weakness in the Russian state and had tested the waters.

The Russian president drummed the tabletop with his right hand. His brow knitted in deep thought. “What is the readiness of the Third Shock Army?”

Kiselev sighed. He was ready for another beating. “All the divisions are below fifty percent strength. Only a third of the tanks are operable. Ammunition is nonexistent. We would have to cannibalize forces the entire length of Russia to fit them out properly, and that would take a year.”

Surprisingly, Laptev took the summary in stride. It had been a rhetorical question. “So,” he began, pinning each dress uniform to its chair in turn. “My military commanders are unable to muster a handful of divisions to defend the Motherland. Two million men, over eighty divisions still under arms, and I can’t scatter a nest of troublemakers on our western border.” Laptev knew only too well that Russia’s conventional military forces were in shambles. But it warmed his heart to sink a knife into the bastards’ hearts.

“I suppose I shall have to handle this myself.” His comment met only silence. Laptev had taken personal command of the Russian Spetsnaz Special Forces. Thirty thousand strong, they were his ace in the hole. Spetsnaz still trained to the hilt and had served him well, appreciative of the president’s largesse with the finest in housing, supplies, and generous foreign travel. Their toughness, dedication, and superb language skills made them invaluable. At least a quarter of the traveling Russian technologists were his Spetsnaz soldiers. The high-tech treasure they brought home was staggering. And, they provided a valuable counterbalance to the leak-ridden and hopelessly corrupt foreign intelligence service, SVR. Half of their old KGB agents were now on the payrolls of the West, and the SVRs overseas foreign national networks were in shambles.

For this latest insult, Laptev would simply parachute in a few dozen Spetsnaz near Kiev, dispatch a handful of top-tier politicians and blow two or three key bridges. The troublemakers would get the message. He might even have his men speak German and wear GSG-9, the German antiterrorist unit, gear. That would be an interesting twist. Maybe even throw in a Pole or two. He liked that. Yes, a masterstroke. He was pleased with himself.

Laptev’s anger melted into momentary apathy. “Marshal Kiselev, we should hope our good friends the Chinese don’t decide to pay us a visit, eh?”

He smirked. “They’d be in Moscow in a week.” He broke into a deep belly laugh. The generals fumed.

Laptev pressed his palms against the tabletop and began to rise, but eased himself back to his seat to everyone’s discomfort. “I want the SS-25 production line operating round the clock, immediately. I will stand no further delay.”

Every dark day that passed authenticated Laptev’s resolution to rebuild Russia’s nuclear arsenal. The still-formidable nuclear forces were their only salvation. Even his addle-brained predecessor had come to the conclusion, albeit too late, that those nuclear weapons were the keystone of Russian power.

The defense minister played devil’s advocate, a dangerous proposition. “That would be in direct violation of the START treaty language,” he intoned.

Laptev’s pudgy face turned to stone. His eyes burned with black fire. Laptev was an inch from renouncing the treaty completely. He knew in his cold heart that the Russians had been coerced into signing, duped by false promises of dollars and technology that never materialized. The hopelessly flawed treaty would leave the Russians prostrate before the Americans by the year 2003, if not sooner. Time was slipping through their fingers.

“I spit on a treaty signed by imbeciles and traitors to the Motherland.” He suddenly flashed on Gorbachev and Yeltsin. How he hated those men. They personally destroyed Russia and now made a fat living on the Western lecture circuit, charming ex-cold warriors and liberal politicians who revered them as gods.

The defense minister cringed. “A technical point, President. I agree with your position completely.” Heads nodded approvingly as the defense minister slumped in his chair, wishing that he could disappear. Beads of sweat blossomed on his forehead, and his cheeks flushed as he furiously searched his mental cabinet of clichés and politically neutral truisms for an escape route. He came up empty and sighed, waiting for the expected lance from the left.

Laptev let him twist in the wind. At times like this he understood Stalin, his methods and his moods, his use of fear to mold men’s wills. “I need no tutorial on the treaty language, thank you. I will be the final judge on what does or does not violate the treaty.” His defense minister was beginning to sound like the American secretary of state. He made a mental note.

Laptev raised his bushy eyebrows in question. The defense minister signaled closure. Chair legs screeched across the floor as no one lingered in the president’s presence.

Laptev rose and faced his aide. “Time to play the charming whore,” he groused. The bankers were waiting.

CHAPTER 3

Lieutenant General Robert Thomas, aide to the secretary of defense, was pissed. He clenched his jaw, and the deep scar on his right cheek reddened menacingly. The old injury to his left hip ached, and his rumbling stomach only compounded his discomfort. He wiped the sharp features of his tanned face and then arched his spine, which brought a flush of relief to his tight lower back. “Idiots,” he mumbled. “What the hell is going on?” The comic opera being performed before him smacked of classical NASA procrastination and incompetence.

Thomas leaned his lanky six-foot frame against the stainless-steel rail, gripping it like he wished he could break it in two. He had doffed his uniform blouse hours ago, and his blue shirt was stained with sweat under the armpits and down his spine. Gazing out from the raised platform, the scene before him was pure bedlam. NASA technicians in white short-sleeved shirts and too-short ties glanced over their shoulders, each wondering if they would be next to feel the heat.

The central status board announced yet another hold. “Damn it!” Thomas snapped. He stormed off, shaking his head, muttering under his breath. He pulled up and studied the tabular data displayed on a large plasma screen prominently positioned on the front wall. His sour expression was proof that the numbers essentially said that everything had gone to shit.

Thomas spied the launch director and worked up the energy for yet another run. A tight circle of senior NASA officials huddled in muffled discussion. The engineers turned managers crowded closer and braced themselves. Thomas really didn't have the stomach to beat them up anymore, but Secretary Alexander had given him his marching orders—kick ass and get the shuttle off the ground by sundown.

The countdown for the shuttle *Discovery* had been stopped on five separate occasions since first light. As the fading Florida sun coasted toward the horizon, the launch window was slamming shut. The odds now favored that the super-secret mission would be scrubbed. NASA was pushing for a reschedule to early morning, but Space Command was fighting them tooth and nail. Then there was the threatening warm front moving rapidly north from the eastern Caribbean, driven by powerful gale-force winds. Stringy clouds streaked with black were already drifting over Launch Complex 39, casting long shadows over the two imposing support towers and the massive shuttle resting quietly on pad 39A. The only signs of life were wisps of condensed gases vented from the liquid-hydrogen and liquid-oxygen fuel tanks. To further muck up the works, upper atmospheric winds had increased by over five knots in the last two hours, yet another abort criteria according to the NASA liturgy.

"What's the holdup?" Thomas barked as he stepped into their private conversation. "If there's a problem, it had better be a showstopper, not some third-order backup system for flushing the toilet."

The mission director, a tall, walking skeleton, turned purple with rage. He was at the end of his rope.

"General Thomas, we're working on the flight computer software problem as fast as we can," he pleaded, both flustered and mad. "Get off our backs," he added, his voice rising in intensity. His comrades raised their eyebrows in unison at their leader's unexpected boldness. They correctly predicted disaster and stepped aside, giving the general elbow room, more than happy to throw their hapless companion to the wolves. Thomas planted himself six inches from the mission director's hawk like nose, staring hard and scowling.

The director became unnerved, backpedaling with Thomas in pursuit. He held his hands up chest high in a gesture of surrender. His voice ratcheted up in pitch.

"The software has been reloaded, and the validation algorithms are

being run as we speak. We can't go any faster," he offered apologetically. "We have to follow procedures, or I can't recommend a launch."

Thomas was unimpressed and moved in for the kill. "If *Discovery* doesn't go in the next forty-five minutes, I'm going to have your ass. And stop that 'we' crap. The decision is yours and yours alone." A furious Thomas stomped off. The thin NASA man started to almost dance. "What the hell are they putting up there, anyway? Why hasn't anyone said anything? I've never seen a mission like this!" he said to his friends. The mission director sulked off, disgusted with anyone in a uniform.

Thomas glanced at the clock and shook his head. They couldn't make it, not now. Time was rapidly slipping through their hands. An adjacent wall-mounted video monitor showed *Discovery* stuck on the launch pad, with a small digital clock in the lower corner frozen at *T* minus twelve minutes.

This particular shuttle mission had aroused unbelievable curiosity and attention both at Kennedy and in the press. Security had been the tightest in recent years. A week-old canned press release mentioned a "scientific mission," but most observers were savvy enough to sense it was an important military payload. Speculation ranged from a new communications or reconnaissance bird to a prototype wide-area surveillance radar satellite developed by DARPA, the DOD research and development folks.

At a computer console, one of the launch operators queried the shuttle-health monitoring system and then flashed a relieved smile. "The flight software checks out OK," he reported proudly, straightening in his chair.

The mission director was a changed man. His face returned to its normal pasty tone. He exuded a muffled sigh to signal his release from bondage. "Resume the countdown at *T* minus twelve minutes."

From that moment, events went without a hitch. The launch of *Discovery* was picture perfect. At *T* minus zero, the shuttle's three main engines roared to life. Powered by liquid oxygen and liquid hydrogen stored in the huge orange cylindrical external tank attached to the belly of the shuttle, they were throttled to full power prior to liftoff. Despite producing over one million pounds of thrust, *Discovery* squatted, clamped to the pad, giving the flight engineers precious seconds to monitor the engines for proper performance. The shuttle's hydraulic system gimbaled the huge engines in a rote pattern and then quickly returned them to their nominal position. It took less than three seconds.

With all systems go, the giant, solid rocket motors strapped to the

liquid-propellant storage tank ignited, and explosive hold-down bolts detonated. The monsters, producing over five million pounds of thrust by burning solid propellants, shook the ground and rattled the windows as they pushed the shuttle rapidly skyward in a blaze of orange and yellow fire and billowing black smoke. Ever since the *Challenger* accident so many years ago, the launch team still crossed their fingers and gritted their teeth until the solid rocket boosters were completely spent and safely separated from the shuttle.

Rising through thickening clouds in the fading light, *Discovery* commenced the customary lazy roll on its back and then executed a graceful turn to the north. This signaled to the initiated that *Discovery* and her payload would be put in a highly inclined orbit relative to the equator. The most common trajectory from the Cape, one without the dogleg to the north, put a shuttle in an orbit perfect for launching military and commercial communication satellites into geosynchronous orbit over the earth's equator at an altitude of 22,300 miles.

The less frequent northerly maneuver signaled a payload destined for low earth orbit, like the electro-optical and radar reconnaissance satellites used by the air force and the CIA to scour the earth's surface for intelligence data. The final inclination would depend on the magnitude of the turn, and in this case, most observers agreed it was near the maximum permitted, allowing the widest coverage of Russian and Chinese territory by the super-secret payload.

One of the army of white-shirted operators leaned back in his chair like a proud father in the delivery room, grinning from ear to ear.

"Everything looks good, solid rocket-motor burn terminated at *T* plus one hundred and fifty-four seconds, normal separation, orbiter velocity is right on the money, main engines continuing to burn—looks like we're going to have a nominal orbital insertion."

"Well, General, satisfied?" asked the mission director, a look of disgust imprinted on his face.

Thomas, his arms defiantly folded across his chest, ignored the comment. "We're not there yet; the main engines still have to burn for another five minutes." The mission director scowled.

At approximately *T* plus eight minutes, the main engines shut down, propelling *Discovery* to a picture-perfect entrance into low earth orbit. The sausage-shaped external tank was blown free by explosive bolts and drifted

toward earth and a fiery rendezvous within the atmosphere.

"That's it," grunted Thomas, a slight smile breaking through his gruff shell for the first time. "Thank you, gentlemen." He scooped up his things and headed for the exit. Thomas had a plane to catch.

CHAPTER 4

The sleek air force C-21A Learjet touched down at Peterson Air Force Base east of Colorado Springs shortly after ten at night. Its silver fuselage glistened under powerful halogen lamps that lit the runway. In the distance, a dark blue sedan with air force markings idled patiently. Painted on a nearby hangar door was a ten-foot diameter emblem depicting the US Space Command logo. The pilot swung the executive jet from the taxiway, braking to a stop and shutting down the twin turbofan engines. Fifty feet away, a lone air force colonel in a wool overcoat and leather gloves stood rigidly, bathed in the glow from white flood lamps. While the ground crew hurriedly chalked the landing gear, the small cabin door swung open, and Thomas disembarked, raising his overcoat collar against the late-evening cold. The colonel came to life and saluted smartly as Thomas walked toward the waiting sedan.

"Good evening, sir," he said to Thomas. "Welcome to Peterson. General Morgan is waiting at Space Command headquarters." The frigid April air helped shake Thomas out of his flight-induced lethargy. He politely returned the greeting.

"I understand it went well," the colonel said to Thomas as he slipped through the rear door. He looked askance at the Space Command staffer. The long flight from Florida had triggered a much needed reevaluation. Reservations had crept into Thomas's thoughts.

The sedan pulled away from the hanger and proceeded across the base to the three-story, cinder block and glass building that served as headquarters for the US Space Command and its air force component, the AF Space Command. The driver turned into the wide, circular drive and halted next to the curb. He quickly jumped out, opening Thomas's door.

The colonel slid from the front seat, standing and adjusting his combination cover. "Please follow me, sir," he said to Thomas.

Inside the sliding glass doors, a drowsy air policeman leaned on the visitor-control countertop. He snapped to attention after spotting the galaxy of stars rapidly bearing down on his exposed flank. He dispensed with the customary ID check and promptly handed Thomas a visitor no-escort-required badge. Thomas hung the plastic pouch from his pocket as he started off after the colonel.

"General Morgan has been here since 0500," the colonel said over his shoulder.

Air Force General Anthony Morgan had been commander in chief, US Space Command (USCINCSPACE) for over two years. As such, he was responsible for all US military space activities, including the launch and operation of all military satellites. Dual hatted as commander in chief, North American Aerospace Defense Command, his men and women manned NORAD's Cheyenne Mountain complex, nerve center of the nation's extensive early warning and space-tracking networks. Pundits tagged him as the next chairman of the Joint Chiefs--space was a hot area these days. Thomas couldn't argue the point. Morgan was politically connected and had punched all the right tickets.

The colonel escorted Thomas to an out-of-the-way conference room where Morgan was seated alone with a mug of coffee in hand, reading a stack of message traffic. He was a big man, who had lost his hair but not his contagious smile. Too many years of desk duty had added a slight paunch to his once-athletic frame. He stood as they entered, smiling broadly.

"Bob, good to see you," he greeted, extending his beefy hand. He towered over his average-sized guest. "It's been quite a while."

"Good to see you, General," Thomas replied, receiving a firm shake.

"How was your trip?" Morgan added.

"Fine, sir." Thomas unbuttoned his blue overcoat and tossed it on the polished oak conference table. "We had a smooth flight."

"Well, tell me, how'd it go?" asked Morgan, his tone more serious.

Thomas scowled. “We barely made it. Dealing with NASA is a real pain in the ass. We came within a whisker of scrubbing the mission. And the weather for tomorrow is rotten; a storm’s moving in. We could’ve blown the whole laser test.”

Morgan nodded in agreement. The air force detested depending on the on-again, off-again shuttle team. The habitual delays were getting more frequent and played havoc with critical launch schedules. If it were up to Morgan, he’d scrap the entire fleet of flying dinosaurs and put them out to pasture in NASA’s stable of fancy visitor centers with the rest of the early space-years relics.

“How about the reporters?” Morgan asked. “They were pestering me all week. I got the feeling they were damn close, especially that one from the Washington bureau of *Aviation Week*, a nosy bastard, I forget his name.”

“Don’t think so, sir,” replied Thomas, leaning against a side table. “Just the usual stuff, guessing the payload and the orbital parameters. The consensus seemed to be an operational test of a new radar satellite.”

“Good,” said Morgan. “Want coffee?”

“No, thanks,” said Thomas, holding up his hand. He planned to get some sleep.

The big man walked over to a Formica countertop separating the conference room from a small galley. He grabbed a dingy Pyrex pot and topped off his mug. The strong aroma quickly filled the room, sending a pleasurable jolt through Thomas. Morgan grew serious.

“I talked to the people at Vandenberg; everything’s on track. They’ve beefed up security without raising undue suspicion, or so they tell me. All the telemetry stations are ready.” Morgan drew long and hard on his mug, wincing as the brew passed muster.

“We’re going to have quite an audience tomorrow for the show. CINCs or their deputies, senior service reps, and top civilians from the labs.”

“It should be impressive,” said Thomas, not sounding convinced.

“We have high hopes on this one.” Morgan flushed. “Could be the breakthrough we’ve all been praying for.” CINCSPACE cocked his head. “Something bothering you, Bob?”

Thomas hesitated. This wasn’t really the time, but it had to be said. He leaned against a swivel chair braced against the table. “I had time to think on the plane,” he said. “Timing could be off on this. The Russians have been irritable as hell lately. Laptev outdid himself yesterday. Called for the

dismemberment of Ukraine. The Poles are scared; the Germans are scared; everyone's scared. If the Russians detect the test, we could have hell to pay."

Morgan's brow knitted. "Are you suggesting we call off the test? After all we've accomplished?" Morgan stepped closer. "Laptev's a blowhard, a one-man show."

Thomas raised his palms in surrender. "No, sir, of course we can't call it off. But the secretary has similar concerns, especially about the Russians' surveillance capabilities." Most military men had written off the hapless Russians and their crumbling space-surveillance assets, but not Thomas.

Morgan began to pace. "The Russians have a huge gap in coverage with one of their large space-surveillance radars down for maintenance. The rest of their system is marginal. Based on our computer models, we're confident the test will be undetected. Besides, the Russians have absolutely no inkling of the breakthrough we've achieved. The total payload for *Discovery* is less than fifty thousand pounds, far less than any current estimates for an operational space-based laser system. It will be impossible for the Russians to put all the pieces together."

The answer sounded too well-rehearsed, but Thomas held his tongue.

"Seriously, Bob, we've thought this through very carefully. We've had extensive surveillance of Vandenberg for weeks. The CIA has been closely monitoring Russian intelligence-gathering activities, especially the status of their other surveillance assets. They don't have much left, Bob. We don't anticipate problems. You can assure Secretary Alexander of that. I already have." The last comment signaled that Morgan had heard enough dissension. Thomas let it go. It was late.

Thomas's silence was the response Morgan desired. The conversation was over. "I know you want to hit the rack. I appreciate you stopping by." Morgan's hand shot out again.

"Good night, General Morgan."

Morgan smiled his response. "A car will pick you up at the door at 0730 for the ride to Falcon."

The colonel gestured at the door with his right arm. "Follow me please, General Thomas."

The morning broke bright and clear, and the magnificent snow-capped Rockies were framed in the distance by Thomas's frost-covered BOQ window. Thomas had thoroughly enjoyed the extra two hours picked up by traveling west. He used it to casually shower and shave and even took time to

read the morning paper, which was delivered to his door.

The day's action was at the Consolidated Space Operations Center (CSOC) residing at Falcon Air Force Base northeast of Peterson, set in the open plains of Colorado. First conceived in the early 1980s, it was now the hub for all military activities in space, pulsing with constant activity. Falcon also served as the site for the National Test Bed, a super-secret computer simulation center. It was the most powerful concentration of computing power in the free world outside the NSA at Fort Meade in Maryland.

The pleasant ride to the CSOC took less than twenty minutes through flat, open country. The morning was bitter cold for April, and the remnants of an unseasonable snowstorm clung to patches of ground bordering the highway.

"Crazy weather," commented the same colonel from the night before, "the first part of April was beautiful with temperatures in the low seventies, and the next thing you know, we get a blizzard. The locals tell me this can happen as late as May. I'm new here."

Thomas smiled. "I know," he said. "I was stationed here six years ago. Loved it."

He leaned back in the sedan's seat, admiring the breathtaking scenery. It had a soothing effect, bringing back pleasant memories of his last operational tour before being thrust back into the insanity of the beltway.

Bob Thomas had cut his teeth as a highly decorated air force fighter pilot. Commissioned through Officer Training School in Texas, he had fortunately or unfortunately, depending on one's view, caught the tail end of the Vietnam War flying over two hundred sorties in an F-4 out of Korat, Thailand. He never lost an aircraft over enemy territory, but had been shot up twice by heavy ground fire. On the second such occasion, he barely made it back to base, smoke pouring from his starboard engine, hunks of his elevators shot away. Slamming hard on the runway, he had skidded off and decapitated a grove of palm trees. He walked away without a scratch, much to the amazement of the frantic crash crew rushing to his rescue. His later career followed the fast track, all the way to early selection for lieutenant colonel and the coveted prize of a commanding officer's slot of an F-15 Eagle squadron in Germany. He could do no wrong, a "head and shoulders" officer with an impeccable reputation.

But a freak accident cut short his dream command and almost his charmed life. One hot summer afternoon, an engine flameout during takeoff

in a newly reworked F-15 sent him plunging into the dense tree line adjacent to the base perimeter. He luckily punched out just seconds before the fully fueled jet exploded into an orange fireball that roiled the forest. Far too close to the earth, his main chute never fully deployed. He was sent twisting and flailing into a tall pine. His broken and gashed body was rushed to the base hospital, where the expert medical staff saved his life, but not his career. A smashed pelvis left him with a distinctive limp, and a tree branch cleanly sliced his cheek open like raw meat. He lay in the hospital for weeks, depressed and despondent, nursing himself back to health, but destined never to fly his beloved fighters again. A replacement for squadron commanding officer was named before he ever left the hospital.

Transferred to DC, Thomas had begun what was for him a series of dreary, unpleasant staff assignments, some air force, some Joint. He continued to excel based on hard work and a stellar reputation for getting the dirty jobs done, but he fought the system at every turn and made his life miserable. His running mates had won the right to command air wings, while he languished behind a desk, beset by mind-numbing drudgery. It was tough to stomach. He wasn't sure what kept him going through those rocky years, although most certainly his wife played the central role. His beautiful, strong, caring wife, who gently encouraged and cajoled, was always sensitive to the hurt left by the cold, official termination from flight status and the scars that still haunted his body. When he felt too sorry for himself, she would give it to him with both barrels.

Making brigadier general had been a watershed. His peers called it a miracle. That prized milestone signaled a continued career in uniform and wiped away any residual self-pity and doubt. He was a military man to the core, and he knew it.

His current duty assignment had been serendipitous. A close friend, now in the government, had introduced him to the current secretary of defense years earlier when the friend and Secretary Alexander were both still in private industry. Thomas was on his way to Colorado Springs for a tour as a watch commander in the Missile Warning Center at Cheyenne Mountain. He fell into an unplanned lunch with the two in Alexandria. They had enjoyed a lively discussion about the course of events in Russia, with Alexander optimistic and Thomas pessimistic. Alexander was noticeably impressed with Thomas's lack of rigid dogmatism, which crippled so many bureaucrats, military and civilian alike. Later, as a two star on the Air Staff,

he was unexpectedly tapped out of the blue as Alexander's senior military advisor. The secretary hadn't forgotten the tough-looking general with the scarred face who spoke his mind.

With the new job came a third star. He rose in seniority over forty or fifty general officers in the air force, not the best way to make friends among the senior-officer corp. Friends told him it was a guaranteed stepping stone to four stars and a major air force or unified command. The old luck had returned in spades.

Thomas found the job exhilarating. He felt renewed after years in the bureaucratic trenches, fighting narrowly focused air force budget battles. He was a big-picture man. The world he and Secretary Alexander now faced was startlingly different from the unparalleled drama, breathtaking euphoria, and plain giddiness that gripped the planet early in the decade. Ice-cold reality had hammered home with a vengeance. The epochal upheavals in the world's supposedly rigid power structure left everyone breathless and cultivated a breeding ground for international mischief.

In retrospect, that wonderful period in American history had been an aberration. It started with the brilliant Desert Storm victory romp through Kuwait and Iraq. The Soviet Union had been relegated to a bit player, a helpless onlooker, struggling to stay in one piece. The United States had emerged as the undisputed master of the universe. After years of procrastination, the START I treaty was successfully negotiated and later amended by START II for even deeper reductions. The treaties promised massive cuts in the superpower nuclear arsenals, the first ever. Conventional forces were dissolving on both sides of the quickly forgotten Iron Curtain. Fledgling democratically elected governments in Eastern Europe struggled for life, but the atmosphere was electric. Anything seemed possible. Even the bankrupt and beaten Soviets—now Russians—appeared on the tortuous road to real economic reform and the beginnings of some sort of democracy. The once frightening prospect for a major East/West confrontation was proscribed from acceptable Washington cocktail party chitchat, and the threat of a nuclear showdown ranked up there with the probability of a comet striking the earth. Even the anti-nuclear movement gave up the ghost, convinced that mankind was on the golden road to reason and universal nuclear disarmament. The cold war was clearly over; the ranting of a few surviving anticommunist curmudgeons in the Capitol was no matter. Their days were numbered.

Then the clumsy Soviet coup attempt by Stalinist dreamers momentarily turned the world on its head. At first it seemed as if the clock had been instantly rolled back ten years. Faceless Soviet hard-liners made ridiculous pronouncements that presaged an instant return to the Cold War. Battered Marxist/Leninist holdout regimes around the world cheered, but just as quickly the hapless conspirators were behind bars. The party was disgraced, and the military ran for cover, wearing their apparent indifference to the plotters as a sign of fidelity. The abortive coup unleashed decades of pent-up resentment and hatred, accelerating the Soviet state dismemberment to breakneck speed.

The triumphant reformers turned to dismantling the Kremlin-centered power structure overnight. The stated goal was a loose confederation of sovereign states with all the trappings, but the result was a ridiculous hodgepodge of squabbling ethic groups that could never get their collective act together. The experiment was doomed from the start, despite the forced shows of mutual support by all the key players and bold pronouncements giving birth to the new Commonwealth.

Over time, the miraculous transformation had collapsed, despite the heroic efforts of the popularly elected Russian president. The sick, socialist economy, originally in a tailspin, crashed and burned and never recovered. That’s when Nikolai Laptev came on the scene. The disgraced reformers had been discredited by empty shelves and a bone-weary population that craved stability at any price. With Laptev, they got it.

Like following a bad script, the State Department launched repeated fresh diplomatic initiatives to calm the turbulent seas. The military fell back on the tried and true—aggressively pushing exotic weapons systems and exploiting the United States’ technological edge to the hilt. In reality, no one had the foggiest notion how to approach this mysterious, ultranationalist beast led by Nikolai Laptev.

Laptev rode a wave of recrimination, hate, and nationalist fervor. His Liberal Democratic Party controlled the State Duma, and Laptev controlled the coveted presidency, much to the horror of the West. At first, they had tried to ignore the man, as they had when he blustered and raved as leader of the opposition in the Duma, passing off his more egregious and outrageous ranting as political food for local consumption. But eventually the clearer heads realized they would have to deal with the man. Doing so had proven nearly impossible. The vitriolic native of Saint Petersburg held sway over a

disillusioned and desperate Russian people. The irony was not lost on Thomas—a democratically elected neo-fascist armed with thousands of nuclear weapons. Time would tell what Nikolai Laptev had in mind. Until then, the West, led by the United States, stumbled, loath to fully engage the despicable Russian president, but terrified of the alternative. The constant, gut-wrenching tension didn't make for sound foreign policy.

Thomas rubbed the back of his neck. He thought again of Project Shooting Star. When it came to operational security, he was a born cynic. He'd seen more than one plan screwed up by overconfidence and both hardware and lives lost. Not to mention careers. Lingering doubts played on Thomas's mind. He prayed they had played this one right.

CHAPTER 5

Mission Control was at full throttle when Thomas arrived a few minutes after nine. If Morgan and his boys pulled this off, it would rank as one of the most remarkable technological achievements of the century.

The first hurdle was positioning *Discovery* precisely in space. The mission director, an air force lieutenant colonel, was hunched over a console near the center of the room, looking over a young female captain's shoulder. He was responsible for the whole show, and it had already been a long day. The bright computer graphics depicted the orbital track of the shuttle, shown in magenta, against a beautifully animated earth imprisoned within a black latitudinal and longitudinal grid.

Thomas walked over. The director had been forewarned that the secretary's aide would be present on the floor.

"Good morning, General Thomas. Looks good so far. Take a peek here, sir," he said, tapping the screen. "They should be in position in about fifty minutes."

The boyish-looking colonel tapped a spot on the CRT where the distinct orbital trace crossed the Pacific Ocean a few hundred miles west of the North American continent. Thomas studied the screen but wondered if he had looked that young as a light colonel.

Over the Pacific Ocean, 170 nautical miles above the earth, the space

shuttle *Discovery* prepared for her final approach for the last orbital burn. Absolute precision was the watchword.

Like bleachers filling before a basketball game, VIPs began to gather in a glass-enclosed spectator gallery above the CSOC Mission Control. From their comfortable chairs the brass had a perfect view of oversized high-definition video screens, which covered the entire front wall thirty yards away. The off-white panels were driven by customized graphics processors assisted by the CSOC's stable of powerful computers. Live video was also pumped in for everyone's enjoyment. The system was state of the art, providing a dazzling showcase for computer technologies just beginning to filter into the DoD world. The CSOC had been fortunate to piggyback on the National Test Bed's proclivity to procure only the finest hardware for their extensive war-gaming simulations.

The left screen exhibited a computer-generated timeline with supporting tabular data detailing key events and milestones. As the countdown progressed, the symbols shifted in color, furnishing a comprehensive roadmap for the uninitiated.

The dominant middle screen hosted an impressive, three-dimensional computer mock-up of the entire experiment's geometry. A bright blue globe, complete with soft white caps on each pole, slowly turned in space, blotted with the fami-liar pattern of earth's light brown land masses. Even the la-test weather data was overlaid, painting a third of the earth in broad brushstrokes of white and gray that made the image look exactly like a photograph from space. The orbits of the shuttle and other supporting spacecraft encircled the globe with brightly colored rings. Relevant text doggedly trailed each moving object, providing the latest position and performance data. Thomas marveled at the processing engine required to unleash such a magnificent presentation in real time.

The less sensational right screen was split into two windows, the top for real-time video from a camera mounted in *Discovery*'s cargo bay, and the other signal from Vandenberg, from a camera positioned to catch the ICBM launches.

At *T* minus twenty minutes, the activity level rose to a fever pitch. Important last-minute checks had to be successfully wrapped up before committing the ICBMs. Coordination between the two sites, the CSOC and Vandenberg, had to be exact. A delayed ICBM launch, even for a few short minutes, would throw *Discovery* completely out of position, dooming any

hope for a successful experiment. The shuttle would have to return to earth empty-handed.

"*Discovery*, this is Mission Control; commence laser power test at *T* minus fifteen minutes."

"Mission Control, this is *Discovery*, all checks completed satisfactorily. Laser power level within acceptable limits. All critical temperatures within normal bands."

"*Discovery*, Mission Control, stand by."

Before committing the precious Vandenberg ICBMs, the laser would be fired at half power, out into dark, cold space at an azimuth safe from nosy intruders. Only then could they be sure.

"*Discovery*. Fire."

The camera aboard *Discovery* captured the test shot magnificently. The one-megawatt chemical laser generated a brilliant, reddish-orange, pencil-thin beam that shot from *Discovery*'s cargo bay and into space, lasing for two full seconds. The man-made energy would travel forever through space, someday signaling these earthlings' monumental triumph to some distant corner of the universe.

"Looks good, Mission Control, power level right on the button, recharging was perfect. Took about five-and-one-half seconds to regain full power."

"Vandenberg, this is Mission Control; the test shot was a success. Start the final countdown. *Discovery*, Mission Control, we're proceeding."

The digital clock relentlessly crossed *T* minus three minutes. The mission director leaned back in his chair, his thin frame coiled like a spring; it was up to Vandenberg. There was nothing left to do.

The disembodied voice of the launch director at Vandenberg could be heard over the speakers. When the voice froze at *T* minus zero, the remote video camera captured the first ICBM as it leapt from its expertly camouflaged silo, ejected by a violent eruption of super-heated steam from a subterranean gas generator. The magnificent missile hung momentarily 150 feet above the ground before the first-stage rocket motor ignited in a billowing cloud of flame and smoke. The surplus Peacekeeper missile roared skyward, lazily rolling and heading out smartly over the Pacific Ocean. In tandem, the ballistic-missile trajectory was plotted on the center screen, originating from a small dot on the surface of the earth near Point Conception off the California coast.

For success, the battle manager first required a launch detection. This critical signal would flow from an early warning satellite floating high above the equator in geostationary orbit. Sensitive infrared sensors would then lock on and track the red-hot booster, developing the needed firing solution to accurately aim the laser. All this would happen in less than two hundred seconds, while the target missile was still in the boost phase. At least that was the plan.

"We have launch detection," shouted a voice over the intercom. The left-hand screen lit up with a cascade of data signaling initial detection of the first Peacekeeper missile. Within seconds, the second missile was ejected from its silo and headed downrange in hot pursuit of the first. The two missiles were separated by only thirty seconds; the third was scheduled to trail the first pair by fifty—the extra twenty seconds providing a much-welcomed cushion.

All three missiles had been launched and the first two detected when the brilliant, electronic battle manager established a firm track on the first booster. It was seventy-five seconds into flight, fifteen seconds after the booster had shed its cumbersome first stage.

The tiny silicon brain continued to track the accelerating booster, waiting for just the right time to shoot. They needed the hot rocket as close as possible. Seconds into the tracking sequence, the laser slewed a few degrees to the right and locked on the supposed enemy target. In an instant, the chemical laser beam burst forth toward the limb of the earth, this time at full power, reaching out to deposit its lethal dose on the first ICBM. The beam found its mark and locked on the booster for over two seconds. Silence followed over the voice circuits. Floating upside down in orbit, the shuttle crews had picked up the brilliant flash. Awestruck, they groped for the right words.

Transmitted telemetry to earth indicated a kill, but the screen displaying close-up video from *Discovery* provided the unquestionable confirmation. First came the blinding laser flash, quickly followed by a bright whitish-yellow explosion as the booster disintegrated. Debris floated off in an irregular circular pattern as the blast gases dissipated. The lack of an audible explosion didn't detract from the euphoria.

A deafening roar filled the room, but subsided quickly, tempered by the sober realization that the most challenging portion of the test was still to come. Could the laser's power supply recharge in time? That was the

Achilles's heel.

Booster number two was deep into its trajectory, tracked by super-cooled infrared (IR) and UV sensors. Disengaged by its computer boss, the laser trained toward the rapidly rising hostile target while the prototype power-generating system struggled to regenerate. The second ICBM continued to accelerate toward the drifting shuttles, powered by its third-stage rocket motor. The laser finally locked on, but at a point much farther along the predicted trajectory than the first. There would be no time for a second shot.

The laser beam leapt from *Discovery*, arcing slightly as it reached toward the slowing spinning earth. This time there was no explosion, and a chorus of groans rose from the rows of consoles. The mission director quickly interceded to interrupt the nominal test sequence. "Break off and go for the third bird," he ordered. *Discovery* would translate to the battle manager. The additional twenty seconds for the third booster had proved to be a godsend. Mentally counting the seconds, Thomas noticed that the power supply had not fully recharged after the wasted second shot. He and everyone else gripped their chairs and prayed it would have enough juice.

For the third and final time, the laser burned forth. This time it was a perfect shot. The reduced power level had required the beam to lase for close to three seconds, but it clearly packed enough punch. The propellant in the booster exploded violently, sending off a shower of fragments like holiday fireworks.

The entire room burst into applause, cheering wildly. The instant celebration intensified when the grinning mission director announced that the second ICBM had been knocked off course by a grazing blow and had failed to deploy its dummy reentry vehicles. As good as a hard kill, Thomas surmised. He stood in admiration as everyone slapped backs, a few of the overexcited civilians embracing in a well-earned moment of euphoria.

"Mission Control, this is *Discovery*, two for three, not bad."

"*Discovery*, this is Mission Control, make that three for three. The second booster was knocked off course and malfunctioned. Good job! Let's get you guys home."

Discovery returned to earth, touching down at a backup strip at the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico. She touched down at dusk, making it difficult to pick out her unique silhouette against the opaque blending of the darkening sky and the rugged spine of mountains to the west.

The mission director passed the word when *Discovery* was safe.

"General Morgan, *Discovery* has landed safely," the mission director shouted, looking up, almost too weak to smile. His ordeal was over. "They reported the airspace was clear, and surveillance sweeps of the area showed no signs of intruders. We pulled it off, sir."

Morgan, in the gallery, beamed from ear to ear. A gaggle of flag officers waited eagerly to shake his hand. Thomas stayed put on the floor and replayed the day's momentous events. It was unmistakably the most remarkable demonstration of antiballistic-missile technology he could ever have imagined. Up until now, talk about destroying ballistic missiles in the boost phase had been just that—talk. Now there was a compact, prototype system which clearly showed the potential to significantly alter the strategic balance. Government scientists who witnessed the drama were already talking about how much better a future system could be in only two or three years—four times the power, faster recharge time, a more accurate pointing-and-tracking system, and probably one-half the weight.

The Russians? That one still bothered him. He had his doubts about strategic defenses and their effect on the nuclear equation. He hoped that wisdom wasn't being pushed aside by euphoria run amuck.

High above the earth, coasting in an abnormal circular orbit of fifteen hundred nautical miles, a small Russian ferret satellite sprang to life, its burst communications transceiver spurting a compressed signal as it traversed Asia. Its passive IR and UV sensors had earlier detected a peculiar phenomenon over the middle of the Pacific Ocean and had dutifully reported the same.

CHAPTER 6

It was a cool, crisp morning in early May. Small, irregular puddles from the previous night's drizzle steamed and dissolved under a bright blue, cloudless sky; the sun's precious warmth was building in intensity. Moscow was shaking off the bitterest winter in nearly a decade. Skeleton trees struggled to unfurl their spring coats, while the usual rainbow of annuals lay moribund, bruised by recent temperature fluctuations.

Dr. Sergei Antonovich walked briskly across the old Red Square toward the massive stone edifice of the Kremlin Fortress, clutching a large, sealed brown envelope under his arm. He moved hunched over, deep in thought, his thinning gray hair blowing randomly in the light breeze from the east. He was plump and rumpled and looked every inch the research scientist. Approaching the gate beneath Savior Tower, he fumbled for the wrinkled piece of paper which commanded his presence at an emergency session of the Defense Council. Antonovich led the technical team which had been assigned to investigate strange sightings transmitted to earth by a covert reconnaissance satellite only weeks earlier. His stomach churned, a gas pain forcing him to pause and grimace. Surely there must be a mistake, he thought. Why me? Let the others handle this! Antonovich was a busy man who had better things to occupy his valuable time than stroke politicians.

The lone Kremlin guard, stone-faced and immaculate in his heavy gray

overcoat and polished black leather boots, gave the old doctor a cursory glance then waved him through like a cop directing routine traffic. Antonovich's destination was the presidium, one hundred meters down the worn cobblestone way on the right. He pressed forward gripping the package even tighter. His heart raced. He was deeply troubled by his most recent findings, those too new to receive wide dissemination. Both the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) and the military intelligence (GRU) had been criminally remiss in not forecasting this incredible leap in American technology. Those clever Americans were wizards, thought the doctor, shaking his head admiringly. Blame would fall on someone; he was certain of that. Why couldn't Colonel Kulencho have accompanied him? It was his responsibility to deal with the politics of the intelligence community. The doctor groaned in protest.

Antonovich paused before the impressive presidium entrance, taking a last deep, purging breath. A rush of blood surged to his head, clearing his rambling thoughts. The doctor struggled up the steep granite steps and past the twin guards bracketing the entrance. He cautiously stepped inside, stopping and fishing for his identification card lost in his coat pocket. How he hated the insolent guards at Russian government buildings. Some things never changed.

Locating the worn card amidst numerous notes and wadded receipts, Antonovich flashed it at the sour-looking young man stationed just inside the door. The soldier, no more than a teenager in a freshly pressed uniform, motioned for him to step closer, reaching out and flicking his gloved fingers in the doctor's face. He rudely snatched the card and held it high in the air, then finally motioned toward the security desk. He had the look of a man about to kick a disobedient dog for messing on the floor.

A few meters away, lurking in the shadows, a contingent of fellow Kremlin guards congregated near an ornate wooden counter, talking quietly and eyeballing the visibly distressed old man. The contingent leader, a young-looking Interior Ministry officer stepped up. He was handsome, immaculate, and arrogant.

"What is the nature of your business?" he demanded, scanning the doctor suspiciously.

"I'm Dr. Antonovich," he stammered. "I have an appointment with General Surikov."

"Identification please?" The young officer cautiously reexamined the

doctor’s ID. He studied it closely, as if his man had most certainly overlooked something critical. He took his time and smiled at his men. They chuckled in reply.

Antonovich fumed.

“What’s in the package? Open it,” he demanded accusingly.

Antonovich squirmed. “That’s impossible—General Surikov’s orders,” he gasped.

Antonovich was stunned when the impertinent bastard actually hesitated. “Take a seat,” he finally ordered after much thought, waving toward a nearby wooden bench.

The Interior Ministry officer picked up the receiver of a rotary-dial phone. Within seconds, his smug expression turned ashen. His head bobbed repeatedly, and a series of groveling “yes, sirs”, spewed from his lips.

“I will bring him up immediately.” The general had answered the phone, leaving the major mortified. His circled friends refrained from any outward show of pleasure.

He recovered gracefully, the mark of a true bureaucrat. “Come with me, Doctor; General Surikov will see you now.” Antonovich fell in behind the major, following closely through the dimly lit, narrow halls, glancing from side to side. Every time he passed an officer or civilian, Antonovich was greeted with a cold, hard stare that reminded him of so many robots on parade.

They found the general’s office. The major knocked and entered after receiving a grunt from behind the door. The general was a big man, powerfully built, and heavy around the middle. His freshly pressed dress uniform was complemented with rows of brightly colored ribbons, most earned as a much younger officer in the wilds of Afghanistan, capturing freedom fighters and administrating special interrogations. His ruddy complexion and square jaw elicited images of the airborne troops, not the intelligence community.

General Surikov was head of the GRU, the military’s intelligence arm, rising to the top position after his predecessor had been sacked in the recent reorganization, which had swept through the military power structure like a scythe. Antonovich had never met him before but had heard stories—especially about his violent temper.

“That will be all, Major,” Surikov said curtly. Surikov rose with an unexpected grace and extended his large, rough-hewn hand.

“Good morning, Dr. Antonovich, a pleasure to meet you. We must hurry. Unfortunately, I have not had time to thoroughly review your most recent findings. A pointing-and-tracking experiment, correct?”

He said it all so fast that Antonovich didn’t know where to begin and started to panic. “Yes, sir, but there is more. The...”

“I see,” the general replied, cutting the doctor off in mid-sentence. He was already heading out the door, signaling the stammering doctor to follow.

Antonovich shadowed Surikov to an elevator a few meters from his office. The two entered, the doctor after the general. Surikov inserted a blunt key into one of three locks, forcing the elevator to sink at a rapid rate. When the door abruptly opened, they were faced by four security guards in crisp uniforms, all heavily armed. The doctor’s eyes widened.

“Take the doctor to the briefing center, and tell Colonel Menshikov that I will inform the Defense Council he has arrived,” Surikov ordered.

The armed escort saluted then hurried Antonovich into a large, ornate conference room down the hall. The richly paneled walls were complemented by a vaulted stucco ceiling adorned with crystal chandeliers and luxurious, full-length drapes. The round table was beautifully polished hardwood, and the accompanying chairs were covered with brushed velvet. Along one wall was a row of austere wooden chairs, purposely placed for guests. Drawn drapes at one end revealed a large screen for presentations, while a small table with a viewgraph projector stood nearby. The conference table had a pad of paper and a leaded crystal glass strategically placed at each seat, along with bottles of fruit juice and mineral water—typical Russian fare.

“Take a seat,” one of the officers instructed sternly from behind.

The frightening reality began to hit home. Quietly, at the far end of the room, a door opened. The doctor had overlooked this entrance in his cursory search. First through was a Kremlin guards’ officer who signaled the others to prod the doctor to his feet. Next was a group of five high-ranking military officers, marshals and senior generals. The doctor always got badges of rank confused. They individually took station along the wall opposite from Antonovich.

After a few minutes, the Defense Council filed in. They had been in a private session debating the latest military reprisals against rebels in seven provinces. Russian forces were stretched to the breaking point. In the lead was the defense minister, looking unusually sour this fine spring day. Next was the director of the SVR, who was younger, taller, immaculately dressed,

and looking bored. He was handsome with dark skin and black eyes that made him look foreign. He was a former KGB man brought out of retirement. His marching orders were to restore much of the old KGB's internal surveillance skills that had been gutted by the last Russian president and to beef up the overseas SVR apparatus. The spying had never really stopped, as all Russian leaders, regardless of their personal ideology, felt naked without their daily dose of international gossip. It was in their blood.

The Chief of the General Staff, Marshal Kiselev, followed, stepping smartly and appearing much younger than his sixty years. He was fit and wore a dress uniform decked with row upon row of medals, fresh from a formal occasion. A civilian was close on his heels—perhaps the chief of industrial production, newly appointed. There were many new faces in the government lately. Last in line was Nikolai Laptev, looking haggard, his face a pasty white, and large, drooping bags under his eyes. Rumor had him suffering from ills that ran the gamut from daily migraines to prostate cancer. Some dared say that he was becoming unstable, succumbing to the strain, others noted his increased alcohol consumption in public—the curse of nearly every Russian leader since Stalin.

Laptev quickly sized up the room. All stood by their chairs until the Russian president gestured for them to sit. The defense minister was first to speak.

"Dr. Antonovich of the GRU's Special Analysis Group has kindly consented to share his findings with us."

The defense minister paused and nodded toward the doctor with a forced smile. "Thank you for attending on such short notice, Dr. Antonovich. We understand you have performed admirably under a rigorous deadline. General Surikov has sung your praises." He swept his hand toward the waiting projector. "Doctor?"

Antonovich squirmed; the perspiration beaded on his forehead. He slowly rose and walked to the table. His legs were shaking so violently he thought they would collapse. A quick glance convinced him that his audience would offer no sympathy.

The old viewgraph machine had been switched on; the hum of its tiny rattling fan was the only sound in the room. Removing his material from the brown envelope, he paused, cleared his throat, and began, his nervousness riding on his first words.

"In the late 1980s, the GRU placed a series of experimental, stealth

satellites in an unusual orbit. The purpose was twofold. First, to test American space-surveillance capabilities, and second, to analyze certain optical phenomenon which could be associated with optical sensor or weapons tests in space." Antonovich forced himself to slow down. "Of the four satellites launched, only two reached the proper orbit. The others were lost due to a booster malfunction. Indications were that the Americans never detected the remaining two. After a series of tests, the satellites were shut down and put in a semi dormant mode, to be triggered to life by certain wavelengths of light received by onboard sensors." The doctor glanced from side to side. They were actually listening. He breathed a sigh of relief.

Antonovich settled into a smooth cadence, his initial trauma ended. "As you are well aware, on the twelfth of April, one of the satellites detected unusual activity from a point in space over the Pacific Ocean. These emissions occurred over a period of three-and-one-half minutes. Two distinct wavelengths of visible light were identified, along with readings in the infrared spectrum. At first we were puzzled, but upon analysis and comparison, we concluded the light source was a chemical laser."

Antonovich pointed to the chart projected on the screen. "Here you will observe the light intensity as a function of time. Note the short bursts." A small pointer moved across the chart, pausing convincingly at each of four peaks to emphasize his point. The council members sat motionless; only an occasional cough broke the silence. Wiping his forehead with a handkerchief, Dr. Antonovich continued.

"The second phenomenon was more difficult. You can observe two instances here and here. At first we thought these two broad peaks were caused by a malfunction in the detectors—a severe noise spike. But after filtering out the background signals, we concluded they were large, chemical explosions. After much discussion, we concluded that a space-based laser had fired at and destroyed two targets."

"Dr. Antonovich," interrupted the defense minister hurriedly, "are you sure the source of the light emissions was a chemical laser? I have been briefed on our own laser research programs, and the data shows that a chemical laser small enough to be carried by a shuttle does not have nearly the power to destroy any worthwhile target. They are mere toys."

"We have gone over the data many times, Defense Minister," Dr. Antonovich emphasized, "and the conclusion is always the same. It was definitely a chemical laser, a very powerful one."

The director of the SVR nodded his head in agreement. The others exchanged troubled glances. Laptev scowled.

The second chart that was set square on the glass, labeled “Experiment Geometry,” depicted the relative positions of the laser source and the targets. Antonovich hesitated while the Defense Council members scrutinized the chart. He concluded they would never figure it out on their own.

“Once we determined the source of the emissions, we attempted to construct the geometry of the experiment. It appears the spacecraft was in an orbit of approximately forty degrees inclination at an altitude between one hundred and sixty and three hundred kilometers. We were unable to determine the exact source of the destroyed targets, but if missiles, they came from Vandenberg, California. The puzzling thing is their apparent IR signature. I made inquiries at the intelligence analysis section at GRU headquarters and—”

“Thank you very much, Dr. Antonovich,” the defense minister interrupted once more. He turned to the Russian president. “Do you have any questions, President?”

Laptev slowly shook his head, an unsettling, distant look painted on his face. Dr. Antonovich, taken aback, quickly gathered his materials and stood awkwardly, waiting for instructions, like an offending school boy. An officer walked up, put his strong hand on the back of his arm, and coldly said, “Follow me.”

Laptev happily doodled on his pad of paper, obviously pleased with his creation. But then the slight smile at the corners of his mouth vanished as quickly as it had come. The others waited patiently, like they were used to the annoying pace. The president spoke only when he was ready.

“It is time we discuss the doctor’s very enlightening presentation.” Turning to the line of military officers seated against the wall, he said, “You are dismissed, except General Surikov.” The military audience rose and hastily departed.

“General Surikov,” the defense minister said, gesturing with his pudgy hand, “join us at the table.” The fat man flinched, having completely trampled protocol. He belatedly turned to Laptev, who graciously overlooked his grievous error—this time, and sanctioned the invitation with the slightest of nods. The defense minister expeditiously revived the stalled meeting.

“I hope we can get to the heart of the matter as quickly as possible. General Surikov?”

Surikov saw his fate written in the stone faces confronting him. All he could hope to do was make the best of a bad situation.

"Yes," he began plaintively, "the GRU acknowledges the Americans conducted a sophisticated test of ballistic-missile defense technologies." He now leaned forward for emphasis. "But, I wish to emphasize the word technologies, not an operational system. We have anticipated this type of experiment for some time. *Discovery* carried only a small laser used in a pointing-and-tracking exercise—the targets were canned."

The defense minister glared threateningly. "A very smooth explanation, but how do you explain the two explosions shown by the doctor? The two chemical explosions?" He placed particular emphasis on the last two words.

Surikov had expected the question, but from someone else. He smelled a setup. The defense minister was not a technology person. He must have gotten a whiff of the data beforehand.

"The Americans detonated missiles at specific altitudes as part of the sensor test to evaluate kill-assessment algorithms in their battle-manager software. The doctor and his team got carried away in their analysis."

"Is that what you think?" snapped the defense minister. His cheeks of jelly shook with feigned anger. As usual, he was magnificent. Even Laptev looked pleased, grunting a word of encouragement. He folded his hands, resting them on the table. It was a signal for silence. Laptev would deliver the coup de grâce himself.

"General Surikov, would you be so kind as to describe the state of our surveillance systems at this time?"

"As the Defense Council is aware, our space-surveillance system is in the process of a major modernization program. Occasionally, we have had temporary gaps in our coverage. Key American space launches have been missed, but we eventually tag them in orbit."

"Thank you, General," the defense minister said mockingly. "Skip the history lesson, and confine your answer to the issue at hand."

Surikov gulped. "During April, the radar site near Petropavlovsk was in the final stages of a major refurbishment. The maintenance had been timed to correspond to an expected lull in American space activities."

"Well, enough of this," admonished the defense minister. "We've heard the GRU's party line." Laptev nodded approvingly. "Thank you, General Surikov. You may leave."

Surikov was stunned. He swung to his boss, silently pleading for hoped

support. Kisilev stared straight ahead.

“General Surikov, that is all,” the defense minister repeated much lower, now with mock compassion.

“Yes, Defense Minister,” Surikov replied softly as he headed toward the door.

The Russian president sat stewing. He suddenly looked up. Anger crept across his face. He acted like a man who had just been told his wife was cheating on him with his best friend. He straightened in his chair, his face tightening. “Why wasn’t I informed about this,” he roared, turning toward the defense minister. “Two days ago, I met with that imbecilic American Genser. I would have beaten the bastard over the head with this outrageous act. He sat there for over two hours and never mentioned anything about this. We have an understanding. No secret tests of any kind. This is the height of treachery!”

The Russian president seethed. His face twisted and turned beet red. The others sat motionless, alarmed at the prospect of Laptev collapsing on the spot. Finally he regained control, his breathing becoming more relaxed. Lowering his voice, he sounded ominous, threatening. “The Americans will pay for this.” Laptev eased dramatically out of his chair and onto his feet and then walked slowly from the table. Deep in thought, he traversed the room, turned, then retraced his steps, shuffling, lost in deep thought. He stopped and carefully scrutinized the other Defense Council members.

“This is totally unacceptable,” he said with a wave of his hand. “The Americans must never field this system. Never. They could disarm us for good. Our Strategic Rocket Forces would be rendered impotent. The Americans have their stealth aircraft and cruise missiles. We have neither.”

Fatigued from his short trip, the Russian president plopped down and leaned forward, gripping the edge of the table so tightly his knuckles turned white. His voice rose dramatically. The anger was boiling to the surface again. It always came in unpredictable waves.

“The Americans have been lying for decades. While preaching peace with sugarcoated rhetoric, they have pursued their Holy Grail of strategic superiority. It’s always been just below the surface. For years we have bled concession after concession, reducing our armed forces to the point of ridiculousness, while the Americans throw us monetary scraps from the table.” The Defense Council reacted with silence.

Laptev headed for the exit. “This time they have gone too far,” he said

over his shoulder.

CHAPTER 7

The portly Russian defense minister shuffled into his office, followed closely by the trim and much smaller Marshal Kiselev. The two had been verbally thrashed by Laptev at the president's office. The topic had been military options to counter the American laser success.

The defense minister's new quarters were on the top floor of the historic Kremlin Arsenal, recently remodeled to house the entire ministry and general staff. From his vantage point, he gazed across the expansive grounds to the storybook towers and cupolas of the ancient Kremlin and beyond to the stolid Moscow River. The view was remarkably soothing. The sturdy, timeworn structures had stood tall and stately throughout the difficult centuries, a rugged symbol of Russian stability and continuity, a granite island amidst turbulent seas.

"This is madness," he groused. "No one in his right mind would discuss such nonsense. It's asinine to theorize about such highly speculative war plans when other, more pressing business commands our attention." He suddenly weighed anchor and huffed and puffed as he walked circles around his desk, working off nervous energy.

"I totally agree, Defense Minister, but the president is adamant," answered Marshal Kiselev, shutting the heavy oak door. The defense minister pulled up and locked his bloodshot eyes on the marshal. "Hopefully this is

just a charade, more grandstanding."

The defense minister plopped his immense frame onto his large, black leather couch situated in the center of the office. He was exhausted after his indoor jog. Never mind that he was one hundred pounds overweight.

The general staff had worked day and night preparing detailed position papers outlining possible options to counter the American technical coup. The options ran the gamut from shifts in missile deployments to a complete restructuring of the entire ballistic missile force, including the development of fast burn boosters, coatings to deflect or absorb laser energy, and depressed trajectory flight profiles—a two-decade-long process that the Russian state could ill afford.

To his shock and utter amazement, Laptev had broached the topic of direct military action. Direct? What did the ex-army paratrooper mean by direct? Laptev was livid that the general staff had ignored this. When pressed, the defense minister had struggled, summarizing well-worn defense plans, most dating from the Warsaw Pact days.

The defense minister knew that the Russians had always excelled at staff work. To them, military operations were a science with each campaign or operation planned in excruciating detail. They correctly perceived that the outcome of any battle or theater operation could be predicted with surprising accuracy and was based on clear-cut principles and mathematical relationships. But their extensive library was obsolete. One could no longer simply grab a plan off the shelf and dust it off for the master's review.

Laptev had pressed. Did any of the existing war plans contain provisions for a pre-emptive attack, he asked? Certainly, the defense minister had answered. Russian military strategy fundamentally recognized the advantage gained by striking the initial blow. They referred to it as the battle of the first salvo. Then Laptev had gotten specific. What about a nuclear first strike? The defense minister had almost fainted on the spot, fumbling for the ice water in front of him. He had dismissed the question as rhetorical and unanswerable. Laptev politely disagreed.

The defense minister had stumbled around a contrived response. At issue, he had said, was the Russians' solemn pledge never to be the first to use nuclear weapons in any conflict. But, Russian interpretation of what constituted first use was radically different than in the West. If mortally threatened, and if unambiguous indicators signaled enemy hostility, a first strike was considered justified as an act of self-defense. So, yes, the option

existed, he had confessed. It had been a canned answer to a serious question; one that upon reflection brought remorse, but also brought a smile to Laptev's pudgy face.

Then Laptev dropped the hammer. Has the general staff explored the option of a so-called bolt-out-of-the-blue strike? The defense minister had winced. He chafed to label the proposition as irresponsible and dangerous. But the momentum was surging against him, like a wind-whipped tide. In theory, it could be done, he had answered, but the outcome would be highly problematic. Besides, even nuclear strikes called for follow-on forces to secure key objectives. Conventional and nuclear strategy was inexorably intertwined. Yes, he had said firmly for once, only after full mobilization would such an option be viable, and then it wouldn't fit the tight definition of a true surprise attack. For a brief and satisfying moment, he felt the president's attack had been repulsed.

After an uncomfortable silence, Laptev became the teacher. Such an attack, he declared, would throw the Americans' entire command and control into absolute chaos. Even if the surprise were not total, the stunned Americans would refuse to believe their indicators and simply sit on their hands. He cited Pearl Harbor and Hitler's massive offensive against Russia in the Second World War as prima facie evidence. Human nature has not changed one iota, he had offered.

The defense minister had listened in shock. Only once did he interject that the unimaginable risks would far outweigh any marginal benefits. He considered talk of global war with the United States, whether nuclear or conventional, inappropriate and foolhardy. He had wished then and there for the courage to use stronger words, but they had frozen on his lips. The weak response had triggered a final scolding from the Russian president. He lectured the defense minister for underestimating the severity of the current crisis.

Then an incredible transformation transpired. When all had expected Laptev to press, he had leaned back, a wide smile pasted on his thick Slavic face. The gloom had given way to sunny skies and gentle breezes in the blink of an eye. He reached for a bottle of juice and flicked the top off with an opener. The defense minister had been dumfounded; he had felt squeezed by some bizarre time warp that left him panting. The others outside of Laptev's tight inner circle reacted in varying states of incredulity.

Such an attack plan should always be available for appropriate

contingencies, Laptev had said matter-of-factly. It was simply prudent planning. What if the Americans suddenly threatened Mother Russia, blustering and threatening like they are prone to do when things don't go their way? I ask you, what would we do? He turned his mouth upside down and shrugged. No, we must be prepared. Then he had sent them all packing.

Reaching for the ornate silver box resting on the rosewood coffee table in front of him, the defense minister nervously removed an American-made cigarette, repeatedly tapping the end on the polished wood surface. He couldn't stand Russian brands, and American cigarettes were becoming scarce. He was interrupted by a knock at the door. "It must be Marshal Ryzhkov," he remarked, flicking the lighter cupped in his hands.

"Come in," grunted the defense minister, taking a puff on the cigarette dangling from his lip. He glanced up to see two senior officers enter. The first was Marshal Ryzhkov, deputy minister of defense and commander in chief of the Strategic Rocket Forces. He didn't recognize the second officer.

"Good afternoon, Defense Minister," greeted Marshal Ryzhkov. "This is Colonel General Strelkov, my deputy for plans. When I received your urgent message, I felt it would be appropriate for him to accompany me."

The defense minister nodded his approval. "Have seats." He waited until the two were posed opposite him in overstuffed leather chairs.

"Marshal Kiselev and I just returned from a meeting of the Defense Council," he said. "We presented various policy options prepared the last few weeks. Quite frankly, we were disappointed and shocked at how they were received." He was frightened to reveal the entire truth.

Taking a final drag on his cigarette, the defense minister ground it into the ashtray in front of him. "I was convinced we could humiliate the Americans by bringing twenty to thirty reserve divisions to full strength in concert with a demand for total repudiation of the spaced-based laser program. We could even feint a buildup in the Crimea as a precursor to a move into Turkey. A bluff really, but the cost would be minimal, and the Americans couldn't match our partial mobilization. Never mind that our army divisions are nowhere near combat ready."

The defense minister leaned forward and let out a sigh. "The president has specifically directed us to develop additional plans covering a broader range of military options. That is why I called you here."

Ryzhkov looked unconcerned, glancing casually toward Strelkov, sitting stone-faced in his chair. The defense minister took a gulp of air. Here

goes, he thought.

“The president demands the formulation of an attack plan against American command and control centers and their strategic forces. A surprise nuclear attack. For further evaluation, he says.”

Ryzhkov nodded in acknowledgement. Once again, he gave no visible response. The defense minister was convinced the two officers hadn’t heard him; perhaps there was wax in their ears.

“This American laser business is dominating the agenda,” remarked Kiselev. “There is even loose talk of an American first strike once the space-based defense system is fully operational in a few years.”

“That makes no sense,” replied Ryzhkov sharply.

“Fine,” interjected the defense minister loudly. “Tell that to the Defense Council. I tried. I was crucified. So,” he said, raising his voice, “we will give them their plan. They will see the utter ridiculousness and return to their senses. My question to you, Marshal Ryzhkov, is it feasible in just four weeks?”

The marshal didn’t immediately answer. Instead he looked at Strelkov, a confident look crossing his face. Strelkov reached for his leather portfolio and removed a thin document and handed it to Ryzhkov. He gently slid it across the table in front of the defense minister.

“Your request was not totally unexpected,” remarked the marshal. “We have such a plan already.”

“What?” exclaimed the defense minster, turning to Kiselev. “Did you know about this?” His fat face turned three of shades purple. The bureaucrats were one thing, but he would not tolerate insubordination and intrigue from the general staff.

“I’m as surprised as you, Defense Minister,” Kiselev replied, holding up his hands in surrender.

“I should explain,” interjected Ryzhkov quickly. “This is not a war plan, but the result of extensive war gaming in our Plans Department. Colonel General Strelkov has been the action officer on the project. He can describe it much better than I.”

Strelkov leaned forward and positioned the document squarely in front of the defense minister then opened it to the first page. “If you will allow me, Defense Minister, I shall give an overview of the project.” A look of resignation captured the defense minister.

“Another technical brief,” he muttered under his breath. “God help me.

Proceed." It was a less than enthusiastic embrace.

"During the first START negotiations many years ago, the Strategic Rocket Forces' Plans Department supported our team with computer analyses of different negotiating positions, both ours and the Americans. This permitted us to refine our computer models and build a database of hundreds of computer-simulation runs. Rather quickly, an obvious trend developed. With pre-START forces, the outcome of a nuclear exchange was generally independent of who launched first, or the degree of strategic warning or mobilization undertaken by either side. Neither side could achieve decisive results."

"You're losing me, General, get to the point," interrupted the defense minister. The military always talked in circles.

"In other words, before the build down, each side had such an abundance of weapons that little advantage was gained by launching a preemptive strike. A massive retaliation with surviving weapons would severely cripple the attacker. And, each side would still have sufficient weapons held in reserve for negotiation, or for threatening third parties.

"But, the force levels coming out of START I and II created a more dynamic environment. A drastic cut in the number of weapons, the shift in total force structure, and the quality of replacement systems for each leg of the triad combined to create anomalies."

Ryzhkov frowned, sensing the defense minister's frustration. "What the General is saying is that with little or no warning, a decisive engagement is possible. I was surprised myself, Defense Minister."

"So," replied the defense minister, unconvinced, rubbing his chin, "you're stating that deterrence has actually been reduced?"

"Under certain circumstances, Defense Minister. Limited warning, even hours, negates this advantage. But absolutely no warning produces dramatic results. A window of opportunity, if you will."

The defense minister sat attentively, painstakingly weighing the powerful conclusion. "Do you agree with this?" he asked Kiselev.

"Possibly, Defense Minister."

"Possibly?" He was an inch from exploding. This so-called plan reeked of bullshit.

"Our war plans assume hostilities would begin with conventional forces and potentially escalate to the use of nuclear weapons. We have no plans calling for a strictly nuclear attack. To date, discussions of this nature have

been nothing more than an academic exercise, useful only for understanding the interrelationships between different weapons systems."

The defense minister loosened his tie then reached for another cigarette. Lighting it quickly, he tossed his lighter on the table. "Fine," he said testily, easing the pressure, "tell me more."

"Soon after the START I signing, we began serious war gaming. Within two years we had developed three proven scenarios. Satisfied, we pressed our planners to see if the attack strategies we had developed could actually be formulated into an operations plan. We were well aware of the tendency for war gamers to develop unrealistic scenarios which play well on the computer but fail miserably under the harsh light of day. It was an iterative process, forcing us to modify certain assumptions, but the basic framework remained intact. The result was an unofficial war plan, complete to the identification of specific military units, which could be implemented on short notice. Our intention was to float the plan for comment, but it ended up on the back burner."

The defense minister nervously tapped his spent cigarette butt on the couch arm. This plan clearly met the requirement laid on him by the council, but the thoroughness, the years in development, would give it an aura of legitimacy that unnerved him. Besides, he had made a major issue of the ridiculously short timeline and the oppressive security requirements. Now he would return in a few weeks with a detailed plan.

"What specifically is called for?"

Turning to a page halfway through the document, the general pointed to a text table featuring bullets outlining the attack timeline.

"The overriding premise must be total surprise. No compromises. This means no visible preparations, steps toward mobilization, or movements of forces. The fewer people involved in the planning and execution the better. We estimated that the plan could be carried out with one hundred and fifty people, two hundred maximum. This would include handpicked planners, missile-launch crews and officers on ballistic-missile submarines. All must be carefully screened and evaluated. Any leaks could be devastating."

The defense minister's face tightened. "Not permitting even cursory preparations for mobilization could be catastrophic. What if the attack failed? Or the Americans successfully retaliated? Our war-fighting strategy hinges on a carefully planned and implemented mobilization."

"True, Defense Minister, the plan is not without risk. But success rests

on strict operational security. There is no other way.

"The second requirement is to disrupt their intelligence and warning and the chain of command to their nuclear forces. This does not necessary mean a decapitation of the leadership. Destroying key communication nodes paralyzes the decision-making process. Targets would include early warning radars, land-based communications sites, satellite links, communications aircraft, and, of course, the Cheyenne Mountain complex. It is the key command center, feeding data to all the others."

"How about Washington?" inquired the defense minister warily.

"We went back and forth, but finally eliminated targets near the American capitol. Little would be gained. An important facet is to keep the hotline communication channel unobstructed for rapid war termination. It is the command and control links to the American nuclear forces that must be destroyed."

The defense minister shifted on the couch. "A very interesting exercise, General," he commented, "but how could anyone have confidence in this plan? You would be gambling with the fate of the nation, a roll of the dice with millions of lives at stake—hardly the sort of action taken deliberately." He leaned back. "I can't believe I am taking this seriously."

"Quite the contrary," interjected Ryzhkov. "I held the same opinion, but I've since been convinced that if such a plan were ever implemented, it would succeed."

"But the intangibles?" the defense minister scoffed. "World opinion would crucify us. Even our own people, including many in the military, would be repulsed by this action."

"Not necessarily, Defense Minister. In the world's eyes, the Americans would be equally to blame. Many consider them the problem. Besides, with America prostrate, who would challenge us?"

The defense minister had difficulty disguising his skepticism. "Tell me, Marshal Ryzhkov, how does this scenario play out?" Ryzhkov's face contracted in concentration.

"A simultaneous launch of ICBMs and SLBMs would compress the American decision-making timeline to the point of paralysis. Let me explain." Ryzhkov moved closer. He spun an irresistible web. The defense minister unwittingly played his part. How many times in the past had they daydreamed about delivering a knockout nuclear blow to their implacable enemies?

“We assumed that after approximately two to three minutes, the Americans will have picked up our boosters with their DSP early warning satellite system. By five to six minutes, the warning will have been passed to Strategic Command headquarters in Omaha and to Washington. Remember, though, the attack will have come out of nowhere. It will command an uncanny presence of mind to correctly decipher the data. Given the possibility for computer error or sensor malfunction, all which will have to be checked out, the Americans may lose two to three additional minutes.

“By ten to fifteen minutes, they will have attack confirmation. Commanders will be pressing for release authority to retaliate. This is precisely the point when our first SLBMs begin to destroy their early warning and surveillance apparatus, sowing confusion through their ranks. All the command centers will be manned at peacetime levels; government officials will be spread throughout Washington. We have simulated this timeline many times in war games, and we were not physically able to link the proper players before twenty minutes, at the earliest. By then most SLBMs will have detonated on their targets, annihilating the American command and control, and our ICBMs will be bearing down on the northernmost missile bases.”

“You actually acted this out?”

“Yes, Defense Minister. We spread players across the western Russia, linked with simulated WWMCCS command and control circuits. They even followed fabricated schedules, moving from place to place. The best they could accomplish was a hasty conference call in twenty minutes, and that was with all the players well coached. In many ways, the Americans’ technological superiority hinders them. Their sensors provide a surfeit of data. What specific bases or facilities are targeted? When will the weapons arrive? The decision makers drown in detail.”

“But,” interrupted the defense minister, “the Americans have contingency plans. Just as we do.”

“No question. But remember, the American bombers and tankers are no longer on alert. They will be caught on the ground. Even their ICBMs are taken off alert more frequently for maintenance. And no employment of weapons may take place until proper release authority is received from their president.”

“You’re sure of that?”

“Positive. Only in an increased state of readiness could that authority be predelegated to their theater and specified commanders in chiefs. And only

then after extensive consultation."

"I suppose. Continue."

Ryzhkov hunched forward, his eyes riveted on the defense minister. "The American president faces a dilemma. At best, he has ten minutes before the first reentry vehicles arrive at the silo fields in North Dakota. Probably less. Five minutes more for the southernmost fields. Taking into account the necessity to avoid flying their ICBMs through detonating weapons, our simulations predicted an average decision time of six minutes. Six minutes to decide whether to retaliate. Even if the president immediately acceded to his military advisors, he would have to step through authentication to generate and release the appropriate messages to their nuclear forces. We estimate that process at two to three minutes at best, assuming no delays. Then the launch control crews in the silo fields must decode the message, complete checklists, and then launch. Under training conditions, this can be done in two minutes. With the pressure of a surprise attack, the time could easily double. So, you can see, if everything went perfectly, the Americans would launch their ICBM's just as our nuclear warheads detonated overhead, blasting them from the sky. In reality, they would never get close. We are convinced the decision to retaliate would require from fifteen to thirty minutes. By then our strike would be history."

The defense minister shook his head, wincing. "You make it sound so neat. This would not be some damn military exercise; it would be the start of an all-out war with the United States." He threw himself heavily back against the couch, slicing the air with his hand. "The Motherland would be devastated."

"I understand your consternation, Defense Minister, but imagine if you were the American president, suddenly having to deal with a surprise nuclear attack. Could you really contend with that prospect? Don't forget, the Americans could do it to us right now."

"They never would."

"I'm sure they feel the same way," smiled Ryzhkov.

"When we started this," Strelkov weighed in, "we felt like you. No one would ever contemplate such an action. But that is precisely the point. Nations rarely make a deliberate decision to go to war. They stumble through a period of mobilization or belligerent actions geared to provoke an enemy. Why not strike hard and defeat an adversary in a quick, potent attack before he can husband his forces?"

Strelkov stood to stretch and then answered his own question. “Because decisions concerning war are facilitated when tempers are short and cries of revenge are in the air. Adolf Hitler was probably the last modern head of state to coldly and deliberately commit his nation to total war.”

“What would the Americans do after their ICBMs were destroyed?”

“Their options would be to doing nothing, capitulating, or they could strike with surviving SLBMs and bombers, if there were any.”

“I know that,” snapped the defense minister. “But what would they do?”

Ryzhkov drew back, waiting for the defense minister to regain his composure.

“It’s difficult to say. If they committed their SLBMs, they would be going after urban industrial targets and will have expended what reserve force they have left. We will have communicated our intention to meet any retaliation with a devastating counterattack. The United States would have sustained little damage outside key military targets and the silo fields. Would you, as president, commit your nation to mass destruction simply to satisfy a primitive urge for revenge?

“We would emerge from the attack unscathed, the majority of our strategic forces intact, while the Americans would be broken. Yes, the risk would be high, but the reward would be commensurate.

“Surprise attacks always succeed, Defense Minister; history supports the thesis. Without exception, attackers gain the initiative. They fail when they neglect to press their advantage.”

The defense minister slowly rose and walked across his office to the window overlooking the Kremlin grounds. “That will be all,” he ordered, staring out across the distance. The three officers exchanged puzzled glances then quietly rose and left. “Marshal Kiselev,” the defense minister called as he stepped through the door. “I wish to see you first thing tomorrow morning.”

Gazing across the tree-lined cobblestone courtyard, the defense minister struggled to get a grip on the images coursing through his brain. He was beginning to think like his unstable master. It was terrifying.

The somber mood engulfing the Kremlin was ripe with a grim fatalism. Russia was rapidly slipping down a steep slope toward extinction. Laptev’s ruling clique proposed patchwork solutions, but most members secretly accepted the endemic weaknesses which doomed Russia to third-world status in the twenty-first century. Frustration was forged to hatred of the perceived

architect of all Russian troubles—the United States. The Russians were like beggars, cup in hand, prostrate before the world community.

The defense minister turned and stared at the far wall of his office. On it was a diploma from the Moscow Officers' Academy. He reflected on the rigorous doctrine pounded into their heads day after day so many years ago. Those hoary tenants of Marxism/Leninism, which stressed the criticality of the correlation of forces and the inevitability of conflict with the capitalistic West. It was the unquestioned foundation for every decision in the sixties and seventies. The eighties had swept that aside, formulating a dynamic which stressed integration and cooperation with the West. Now they had come full circle.

CHAPTER 8

"Here it is, Mr. Secretary," said Thomas, handing the seated Alexander a manila folder emblazoned with a crimson swath stamped "top secret, code word." It was the latest on a black satellite program that was grossly over budget and behind schedule. Alexander adjusted his reading glasses. Alexander's brow knitted in direct proportion to his distress as he progressed down the page. Thomas shuffled to a nearby chair and plopped down. He had earlier reviewed the bad news, as he did all incoming correspondence, messages, and reports.

"Shit," groaned the veteran secretary of defense, flipping the folder shut. He gave Thomas a tight-lipped frown then a look of resignation, flipping his glasses on his massive oak desk.

"I thought that would be your reaction," Thomas said. "How about I visit my friends at the Air Staff and see if I can work a deal before this gets worse."

Alexander nodded. He rocked back in his high-back swivel chair and gazed out his E-ring window at the lush trees and the peaceful Potomac lazily rolling toward the Chesapeake Bay.

Secretary of Defense Matthew Alexander was a fifty-year-old financial wizard who had made his mark in the dog-eat-dog world of computer chips and electronics. From his corporate suite, he had fought his bitter enemy the

Japanese to a standstill and eventually emerged victorious. A series of deft strategic alliances had actually recovered market share in semiconductors for his shareholders, and he had successfully lobbied Congress to relax antitrust laws and greatly increase government research and development spending. After such stunning success, fingers began to point his way. He was already a CEO, a well-paid one at that, but he wanted a new challenge. Another firm, even larger, would be more of the same, and exercised stock options had made him a very rich man. So he looked to public service to put meaning into his life.

The secretary was a simple man who purchased his suits on sale and lived in a modest two-story home with his wife in Falls Church. He deliberately avoided the Washington social circuit and spent his off time with his one remaining son. The other two children, a boy and a girl, were long gone, with families of their own. His wife thought him handsome with his combed-back, thick silver hair and high cheekbones; others called him distinguished. The universal descriptor was gentleman. Thomas considered him first-rate, a man of honesty and integrity.

Alexander swung left to face Thomas. “Sounds like a plan. See what you can do.” He glanced at his watch. They were running late. It was time for Secretary Alexander’s weekly intelligence brief and staff meeting. This one promised to be interesting. The Russians were frantically searching a wide swath of ocean southeast of the Kurile Islands, and the consensus pegged the lost prize as a missing Delta IV ballistic-missile submarine—one of the Russians’ frontline jobs. And one of the few still operational after years of neglect.

Thomas walked side by side with Alexander to the his personal conference room. They filed in to discover a full room with several new faces. The usual attendees came in various shapes and sizes and were the direct-report under and assistant secretaries, with a sprinkling of military men. The civilian dress ranged from the rumpled college-professor look for the older technical types to the younger men and women in expensive suits. There was little middle ground. When Alexander took his end seat, the chitchat ceased.

“Let’s skip today’s intel summary and get right to the Russian search and rescue (SAR) effort,” said Alexander, counting noses.

An invited guest, an admiral from the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, rose and introduced himself then stepped to a large map of the

Pacific theater, hanging on the wall next to the entrance. He patiently waited for the private discussions to end. Everyone had their own spin on the incident, even before they had all the facts. The admiral's delivery was even and tempered. Funny, Thomas thought, how they all sounded the same when they briefed, including himself. Alexander nodded the go-ahead, and the show began.

"Two days ago, the Russians began sending Pacific Fleet units to this area here," the admiral said, tapping on the map with a pen. "At first we thought one of their bombers had gone down, like that Bear H that caught a wingtip and cartwheeled into the drink two months ago. But the op tempo rose as the week progressed, and we have just received word that they have gotten a submarine rescue vessel underway from Petro." The private whispers started again.

"We're convinced now that one of their boats went down. If we're right, a Delta IV SSBN is resting on the bottom somewhere east of the Kurile chain, chock-full of SS-N-23 ballistic missiles. The water is too deep for an attempted rescue but not too deep for surveillance of the wreckage or a possible recovery of debris. We have unconfirmed reports that the Russians have already contacted the French about purchasing deep-water salvage equipment, including a side-looking, high-frequency sonar. We've offered assistance, but they turned us down cold."

The admiral's last remark brought sustained laughter. "Our response has been twofold. First, we dispatched fleet units to monitor Russian SAR operations. USS *Texas*, a cruiser, was detached from Battle Group Echo. Coming from due east will be USS *Los Angeles*, a 688 class boat, currently on patrol near the Aleutians. Hopefully, *Texas* will draw all the attention and allow *Los Angeles* to slip into the area undetected. During a recent overhaul, she received a new, experimental coating over her entire hull and a sonar upgrade. She's ideally suited for this operation.

"Secondly, we are intensifying our antisubmarine warfare efforts to make an inventory of Russian SSBNs, SSGNs, and SSNs. If it is the Delta IV, we've got the makings of a real intelligence coup. Since the water is deeper than the Russians can conduct salvage operations in, we estimate they'll attempt to locate the wreckage and destroy it. We should be ready to move in and see what pieces we can pick up."

When the admiral paused, Thomas leaned forward on his elbows and spoke. He had a well-defined role, and Alexander smiled before the words

came out of his aide's mouth.

"Admiral, why are the Russians going to let us waltz in and recover the wreckage?" He was wondering if the navy knew something he didn't.

The admiral took a drink of ice water before delivering his answer. He had expected a question like that from a civilian, not a fellow officer.

"The Russians can't stay there forever, and if they don't find the wreck, they'll leave. They've done the same thing in the past; so have we, for that matter. They'll stay until they're convinced that either no one can find it or that they have reduced the wreckage to rubble. Much of this is face-saving. This is a serious loss for the Russian Navy. Someone is doing considerable explaining at the main Naval Headquarters in Moscow. Second, we've developed covert recovery techniques. We can't expect to go in and raise an entire Russian SSBN in their backyard; they would never stand for that. We'll have to be content with small pieces determined to have the best intelligence value."

"I suppose," said Thomas. "But the Russians might be looking for a chance to mix it up. Are we ready?" Alexander would most certainly pose the same question to the Joint Chiefs later in the day. The admiral's answer didn't really matter.

"I can assure you, we won't be put in that position," responded the admiral, speaking for the navy. "The *Texas* is heavily armed, and I personally know the commanding officer. He's first-rate.

Alexander raised his thick eyebrows at Thomas. The look wasn't lost on the others. "I hope so. Thank you, Admiral. Does anyone have any other questions?"

Thomas flashed on an old incident, remembering the *Glomar Explorer*. He prayed this wouldn't be another CIA escapade. He did hit on something else, though, and raised a finger.

"That particular Delta IV was involved in the new sea-launched ballistic-missile development program," remarked Thomas. "This could have a real impact on the development schedule of the SS-N-27X missile, couldn't it?"

"That's correct," replied the admiral. "They were to conduct a test launch before transiting to their final patrol area. This makes it even more important that we get a look at the wreckage." A long pause followed.

"That it?" said the secretary, after no further questions arose from the crowd, "Let's move on to the problem with the C-17 production." Alexander

leaned to his right and whispered to Thomas, “Keep an eye on this one, Bob.”

The USS *Texas*, a nuclear-powered guided-missile cruiser, steamed leisurely toward the broad entrance of Tokyo Bay at eighteen knots. Her final destination was the harbor adjacent to Yokosuka Naval Base. *Texas* was two months into a seven-month Western Pacific cruise as part of Battle Group Echo, spearheaded by the aircraft carrier USS *Ranger*. The Battle Group was slated to dock in Yokosuka for minor repairs, loading stores and taking a week of well-deserved liberty, then push off for the long transit to the Indian Ocean via the Strait of Malacca and eventually move to operations in the Arabian Sea. Duty in the IO, as the sailors called it, was arduous, monotonous, and exhausting. Long stretches underway were broken only by infrequent, dismal port calls. The best the crew could hope for was a few warm beers at Mombasa, Kenya. The worst would be Karachi, Pakistan.

One rumor had spread like wildfire through the ship’s passageways. A radioman had leaked the word at chow time—a message had been received proposing a week-long visit to the Australian port of Perth after their three-month sentence in the IO. The ship buzzed as wide-eyed sailors happily went about their duties. If true, it would partly compensate for the devastating loss of Subic Bay’s notorious Olongapo City as the crème de la crème of liberty ports. The lovely ladies of Subic had scattered to the four winds once the last Americans trooped home in late 1992. Fleet sailors still wept at the passing of such a venerable institution overtaken by both time and politics.

After weeks at sea, shipboard operations were in autopilot. *Texas* alternated between mundane carrier escort ops and occasionally leading a surface-action group to intercept and investigate Russian combatants nosing around in the Northern Pacific—although these days the pests were fewer. The handful that could still get underway mostly hugged the coasts both in the Sea of Japan and that perennial Russian lake, the Sea of Okhotsk, which also served as the last Pacific bastion for ballistic-missile-carrying submarines.

On *Ranger*, the air wing stepped up the tempo in anticipation of the rigors of life in the Indian Ocean. Flight operations commenced at first light and continued well into the night. It was a grueling schedule that exhausted both flight crews and the young sailors braving the flight deck. So far, to the credit of all, they hadn’t lost a man or a plane.

Lieutenant Commander Brad Chelson, United States Navy, Operations Officer on Texas, was hunched over a radar repeater in the blackened Combat

Information Center, or CIC, located a stone's throw behind the bridge. An occasional red fluorescent backlit the shadowy characters that called this electronic dungeon home. Chelson was slightly over medium height, with thick, sandy blond hair that flopped in a mop on top but was shaved to the scalp above the ears, a tribute to the skill of shipboard barbers. He fought constantly to maintain his college weight, but the sedentary shipboard life coupled with greasy food presented a formidable challenge. His only exercise consisted of daily laps around *Texas*'s steel decks, weather permitting. A look in the reflective glass of the repeater revealed a young-looking face with intelligent eyes.

Chelson had just assumed the watch when the Bridge urgently signaled Main Control over the 21MC squawk box.

"Main Control, Bridge, we're being detached from the Battle Group, stand by for a high-speed run." The CIC sailors stared at each other in mouth-open shock.

"Oh shit!" exclaimed the Lieutenant J.G., on watch with his boss, "My wife is going to meet the ship in Japan."

"You mean was," replied Chelson unsympathetically. "I've told you guys not to make plans. Don't worry," he added thoughtfully, "they'll get word to her. If not, she'll have a once-in-a-lifetime shopping spree without you." The thought of his mate loose with the other wardroom wives in a shopper's paradise caused a sharp pain in the young lieutenant's already thin wallet.

"Where are we going, sir?" asked the senior enlisted man on watch.

"You know as much as I do." Chelson quickly retrieved the secret message board and rummaged through the old traffic. Did I miss something? he thought. What the hell is going on?

The executive officer called an all-officers meeting in the wardroom for 1300. By then the *Texas* had steamed 350 degrees true at a flank bell, a magnificent, frothing rooster tail spewing fifty feet skyward, driven by the ship's twin screws churning the sea. At precisely 1300, the commanding officer strode through the oval-shaped wardroom door.

"Attention on deck," called the executive officer. All the officers quickly stood and braced at attention.

After a mental survey to spot absentees, the CO remarked, "Seats, gentlemen. All right, we've gotten new orders." He stepped to his left, tapping his finger on a chart of the Pacific Ocean, which leaned on an easel.

He pulled out his reading glasses and rested them on his nose. They made him look like a college professor. The officers knew better than to make a smart-ass comment on the old man's appearance.

"Commander-in-Chief, US Pacific Fleet has ordered us to proceed to an op-area southeast of the Kurile Islands. It appears the Russians have lost something important. They've got surface units supported by land-based aircraft covering the area. CINCPACFLT thinks it was a sub. So far it's hard to tell, but there was a Delta IV ballistic-missile submarine patrolling in the Sea of Okhotsk that's turned up missing. On the other hand, it could have been just about anything. In any case, they're worried as hell."

At that moment, the biggest concern for all was the lost liberty. It was a bitter blow to the single men. The more numerous married officers had supposedly learned to control themselves when let loose amid the Far East liberty ports. An after-port check at the doctor's office didn't always support that hypothesis.

"Our orders are to patrol the area and gather whatever intelligence we can. They've got one of their new destroyers up there, so we should be able to get a good look at it. Hopefully, we can pick up communications traffic and get signature data on the various platforms. Might as well make the trip worthwhile.

"We're scheduled to rendezvous with a supply ship farther north for stores," he said, pointing to a location off the mainland, "and we'll pick up linguists. This looks like a straightforward operation, but we're going to have to be on our toes. The patrol area is very close to Russian territorial waters. We can expect them to tell us to clear the area, but we'll hang tough and exercise our rights of navigation in international waters and the right of innocent passage through the territorial sea. That means precise navigation at all times, got that, Navigator? We've got to know exactly where we are."

"Yes, sir," came a voice from the end of the table. The navigator was sharp and confident, and his voice showed it.

The Captain walked to his chair and sat down. He thought for a moment then turned to an officer next to Chelson.

"We'll make a high-speed run the entire transit. That means no engineering casualty drills, Chief Engineer; we can't take the risk of losing one of the plants." Then he looked at them all. "Once on station, we'll shift to port and starboard watches throughout the ship, including one fully manned repair party."

The last comment brought a pained look to the faces surrounding the table. Port and starboard watch standing cursed the life of sailors at sea.

"I'm not sure how long we'll be tasked, but the plan is to have an AFS out of Yokosuka meet us in a few weeks for additional supplies and, hopefully, mail. We'll get more specific guidance later. Any questions?"

Chelson was the first. "Captain, are we the only ship to get tagged?"

"It appears that way," answered the Captain. "There's always the possibility that a sub will join us, but we'll never know, you know how the bubble heads are."

"What's the threat?" inquired the XO. The Captain's brow knitted.

"Two frigates besides the destroyer and two auxiliaries. The destroyer is the only cruise-missile shooter, but they'll have search aircraft combing the area, and we'll be in range of every Backfire in the entire Russian Pacific Fleet. As for subs, that's anybody's guess. I'd expect at least one older Victor III or possibly an Akula. We're going to get a workout, gentleman, make no mistake about it. We're going to be in Ivan's backyard. I want all Bridge personnel to brush up on the rules of the road and on the Russian/US Incident at Sea Agreement. Any other questions?" There was nothing from the group.

Great, thought Chelson, just what I need. Instead of drilling holes in the Arabian Sea, we're going to be up to our ass in Russians. And that meant the usually overworked ops officer would be humping twenty-four hours a day just to keep his head above water.

CHAPTER 9

It was the end of August, and USS *San Francisco* glided effortlessly at four hundred feet, tunneling a stealthy track through the ink-black seawater. At twelve knots, she was impossible to detect. An LA-class fast-attack submarine, *San Francisco* had recently completed a grueling patrol in the North Pacific and the frozen, far reaches of the Bering Sea. The San Diego-based boat had broken new ground utilizing non-acoustical tracking data to bird-dog a couple of Russian attack boats out of Petro. Ivan had never gotten their scent while the *San Francisco* tiptoed in their trails, garnering rich intelligence for fingerprinting the two new-model nuke boats.

Taking a breather in Hawaii for a few days of well-earned relaxation before steaming on to San Diego, *San Francisco* had received a pleasant surprise—an unexpected port call to Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. They were ordered to rendezvous with USS *Cape Cod*, a submarine tender steaming south from San Diego, and tie up outboard of the tender while she anchored in the peaceful, Mexican resort town.

The crew was bouncing off the bulkheads. This would be real liberty for a change. True, they had visited Guam and Sasebo, Japan, but those naval ports hardly ranked as liberty hot spots on the Westpac hit parade. Now they could finally get wild and crazy before returning home to families and loved ones.

Three days out of Pearl and into the homestretch for Mexican waters, the crew really began to loosen up. Mariachi music blared over the boat's entertainment system, and enterprising cooks had thrown together a sampling of Mexi-can cuisine—the messdeck senior chief's enchiladas had proved to be the favorite. Even the boat's skipper was brushing up his long-dormant Spanish.

Commander Raul Sanchez was one of the youngest submarine commanding officers in the US Navy and one of the brightest. He was built like a weight lifter, medium height and stocky, and had a bushy black mustache that grossly violated navy grooming regs. His darting black eyes showed intelligence and cunning, a handy combination for a submarine skipper. A four-year ROTC scholarship had plucked the young Hispanic from East Los Angeles and commissioned him an ensign in the US Navy. The nuclear-power program had immediately claimed him as their own. One of NAVSEA 08's darlings, he had a sterling reputation for thoroughness and toughness, painstakingly built over the years. The crew adored him, convinced that *San Francisco* was the best attack boat in the fleet. And after their backbreaking cruise, they knew they had proven it once again.

San Francisco silently slipped through the black sea, rising periodically to periscope depth for a message dump from one of the fleet's satellites. It was early morning, and Sanchez was standing in the Control Room reviewing in-port watch bills with the executive officer, a senior lieutenant commander with a PhD in physics. All thoughts were on the wonderful Latin liberty just hours ahead.

"Control, Sonar," said the voice on the 21MC squawk box, "we have a contact bearing 025 degrees."

"Johnson," said Sanchez, speaking back into the 21MC communications box, "are you picking up whales again?" Everyone within earshot grinned. The crew was loose and relaxed.

The alert sonarman ignored the barb. His voice was tempered, yet strong. "No, sir, can't tell what it is yet, but it does have twin screws. Maybe a merchant."

Sanchez straightened, and the smile left his face. He was surprised to find merchant traffic this far from the normal east/west shipping lanes. The executive officer shrugged his shoulders and went back to work.

"Get an ID. Let one of the new boys classify it, but I want you looking over his shoulder."

“Good idea, Skipper, I’ll get Brown.”

Twenty minutes later, Sanchez was stretched out in his confined stateroom, no bigger than a small-sized walk-in closet, enjoying a hot cup of coffee when the sound-powered phone next to his bunk growled. “Captain,” he answered routinely, as he had hundreds of times on patrol.

“Skipper, could you come to Control?” It was the XO, and his voice sounded on edge. Sanchez sat up stiffly and secured his cup, then jogged the short distance from his stateroom to Control. For some reason his heart began to pound. Come on, he scolded himself, the patrol’s over, relax. The Control Room was business-like as usual.

“What’s up,” he said loudly, working his way past bodies and equipment to a small table used for plotting contacts. The XO was huddled with the Officer of the Deck, a string-bean lieutenant with black navy-issue glasses and red hair.

“Sonar says they have a sub out there, Skipper,” said the XO glancing up, his blue eyes signaling concern. Beads of perspiration had formed on his forehead. Sanchez hadn’t seen his number-two man this concerned since an Akula sniffed their trail off of Vlad. He studied the marks on the paper taped to the table and rubbed his jaw as he formulated an opinion.

“They’ve got an inexperienced man working the contact,” he reminded.

The XO didn’t look up. He stared at the dots and lines as if he could will them to disappear. “I know, Skipper, but Johnson’s confirmed it. It’s a twin-screw submarine. That can only mean one thing—a Russian boat.”

Sanchez straightened and placed his hands on his hips. “Off the Mexican coast? What the hell would they be doing here? I’ve never heard of a Russian submarine in these waters.” He thought for a minute. “What class?” His initial reaction was to disregard the contact, common sense told him so. But a good captain knows his own limitations and relies on the strengths of his officers and men, and the executive officer was a master of the hunt. He had deferred to the good doctor on more than one occasion. And his sonar team was first-rate.

“Don’t know yet. Johnson’s trying to pin that down.”

“OK,” said Sanchez, “we’re ahead of PIM. Change course, and close this mystery boat. Slow to ten knots, and take her down another hundred feet.”

“Aye, aye, Skipper,” responded the OOD. The Control Room sprang to life as watch standers obeyed the CO’s orders.

“I’ll be in my stateroom,” he announced to all.

Sanchez knew that tracking a surface ship or submarine with passive sonar was difficult under the best of conditions. His crew excelled at passive plotting, but there were so many variables. Sound waves propagated capriciously through seawater, bending and twisting through the ocean depths. They hadn’t had time to determine the local water conditions from the latest bathythermograph drop. All the critical factors, the water temperature profile as a function of depth, the salinity of the seawater, and the existence of a thermal layer, had to be inferred based on years of stealthily shadowing hostile vessels in all corners of the world.

San Francisco’s linear and cylindrical hydrophone arrays could detect the weak sound energy emanating from a contact on a direct path or it could bounce off the ocean bottom, or more likely, travel a sinusoidal path, creating a series of annuli at the surface linked to the noise source. The catch was they would only know the azimuth to the intruder, not the range or depth. Those parameters would have to be painstakingly developed over hours, aided by finely tuned maneuvers, like swinging *San Francisco* to and fro to shift the target’s bearing angle and sound profile. Modern computers helped, but still hadn’t removed the indispensable man from the loop. The alternative was active sonar—blasting the ocean with powerful, low-frequency sound energy, alerting listeners for tens of miles. The winner in the submariner’s world was the one who could detect and strike first, and that required cunning, patience, and skill. Active sonar was like ringing a church bell and was considered a desperate action when all else had failed.

Writing in his private log, Sanchez tried to place himself in the Russian skipper’s mind. What was he doing here? Gaining experience in a potential wartime patrol area? Or just maybe he would head north, approaching San Diego from the south, hoping to catch an unsuspecting aircraft carrier leaving port. Were any scheduled for deployment? He would have Ops check.

Finished, he locked away his journal and stretched out on his bunk, kicking off his shoes and folding his hands behind his head. He was bushed. The fatigue swept over him like a slow, silent wave. *San Francisco* had been on patrol for over six months, with interspersed intense periods of special operations, or in other words, very dangerous missions in places they shouldn’t have been. He had been driving himself hard, never getting more than two or three hours of sleep at one time. It only took a moment for him to drop off.

“What the hell?” Sanchez murmured. He bolted upright to the obnoxious chirping of the sound-powered phone.

“Captain,” he mumbled. He struggled to clear his head. The OODs forward in Control were used to the half-asleep voice. It was a captain’s lot in life to get buzzed after dropping off.

“Sir, it looks like we have a Victor III.” Sanchez sat for a moment, letting the words register. He finally answered, now awake.

“I’ll be right there.” Hanging up the phone, he mentally ticked off the Victor’s characteristics. It was an older Russian attack boat, but still very capable. Victors were being phased out and replaced by the newer Akula class, almost as quiet as the best US boats. Most of the remaining Victors had been upgraded with improved sonars and the new, sea-launched cruise missiles. He smiled slightly, relishing the definite acoustical advantage he held over the Russian skipper driving the older boat. He could track the Russian long before coming in range of the Victor’s mediocre passive sonar.

“So we got ourselves a Victor?” The XO nodded with a smile. Once he knew his prey he was a happy camper. Child’s play, the veteran submariner mused, no surprises here.

Sanchez took a survey of those on watch. “Take a break, XO. We’re going to be at this for a while. Get the Ops Officer to prepare a contact report. When he’s done let me see it.”

“Aye, aye, Skipper,” replied the XO. He bounded off down the passageway.

“We’ll be moving in, so make preparations to quiet the boat,” Sanchez shouted at the retreating figure.

“Understand, Skipper,” shouted back the XO.

Sanchez moved to the plotting table and asked where they held the Victor.

“Right here, Skipper,” replied the young lieutenant, junior grade. “Looks like he’s making about six to ten knots, running a racetrack pattern. We’ve lost him temporarily. Out of the convergence zone. He should pop up in ninety minutes or so.”

“Let me know the minute we regain contact. Officer of the Deck, come to periscope depth in ten minutes; we’ll be sending a contact report.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

Sanchez stepped the short distance to radio. The Ops Officer handed him a hand-scribbled message attached to a clipboard. The section labeled

“commanding officer’s estimate” was blank. Sanchez rested the clipboard atop a four-drawer safe tucked away in a corner of radio. He thought hard for a moment before putting pen to paper. This contact message would generate a lot of interest, no doubt about that. He began to write.

Contact appears to be loitering, possibly conducting surveillance of a wartime operating area. Could be dropping electronic benchmarks for cruise missile firing positions. Maneuvering to investigate. Request relief on station at earliest possible time as low on stores.

He handed the finished message to a radioman, who would process it then send it over the speedy ultrahigh frequency (UHF) satellite uplink.

“Let the OOD know when it’s ready.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.”

The short and simple message was transmitted promptly to Commander, Third Fleet; Commander, Submarine Force, Pacific; and the Fleet Intelligence Center, Pacific, all in Hawaii. The hot news would be sent up through the chain of command to CINCPACFLT, then to CINCPAC, and then flashed from the island to the NORAD Missile Warning Center deep in Cheyenne Mountain, and on to the National Military Command Center in Washington, DC. Cruise-missile-carrying Russian attack submarines now commanded special attention. Their low-flying missiles would be almost impossible to detect if fired at strategic targets in the United States. Sanchez could imagine the pandemonium he had personally caused by dropping a Russian cruise-missile carrier into their laps. No question, his nuts were on the chopping block now.

Sanchez felt a hand on his arm. “Captain, we’ve got the Victor again.”

“Same course and speed?”

“Yes, sir.” Sanchez had been in the engine room. He followed the lieutenant, ducking through a series of watertight hatches over the reactor compartment and climbing a ladder to the Control Room.

The Victor was steaming a leisurely racetrack with long legs of 090 and 270 degree true. *San Francisco* was closing on a course of 010 degrees true, speed ten knots.

“Parallel her course,” ordered Sanchez. “I want a better fix before we move in.”

“Control, Sonar,” called Petty Officer Johnson excitedly. “I’m getting something unusual. I’m picking up noise in the vicinity of the Victor. I can’t ID it; it’s faint, and it’s being masked by the Victor’s prop wash. If we could

get a better angle, maybe I can figure it out. Right now I would have to bet that it's another Russian boat."

"Very well," responded the Officer of the Deck instinctively. Seconds later he was stunned, realizing what he had just heard. He face was frozen in an "I don't believe this is happening" look.

The Ops Officer's jaw dropped. "What the fuck?"

What the hell is going on? Sanchez thought. Are those people in Sonar losing their minds? His brain was running all the permutations. His outward calm was in stark contrast to his inward turmoil. He knew Russian boats often operated in hunter-killer pairs. It was a blatant admission of inferiority to overcome US superiority in quietness and sonar technology. And a tactic that gave American skippers fits. The Russians still had numerical superiority on their side and were also not hesitant to use active sonar to target prey at close range if forced. It was the Americans who worshiped passive detection, even when going head to head.

Sanchez was strategizing out loud. "We'll make a high-speed run to the northwest to force target separation. Officer Of The Deck, take her down to eight hundred feet, increase speed to eighteen knots, come left to new course 330."

"Aye, aye, sir," responded the OOD, crisply repeating the orders to the watch standers, who in turn repeated them back to the OOD. The discovery of a second Russian boat had spooked the Control Room sailors. The normal chatter and joking had ceased.

Thirty minutes later *San Francisco* slowed dramatically, rising to a depth calculated for the best-possible sonar performance. The experienced OOD changed course to put the contacts on the beam. Everyone in the Control Room had their ears glued to the 21MC. The wait was draining. Come on Sonar. Then it came.

"Control, Sonar, second contact's clearer now. Seems to be doing about three or four knots, plus it's deeper. It's definitely not one of the newer attack boats, but maybe an Oscar." Johnson sounded confused. Then there was a loud commotion in the background. Swear words spewed out of the squawk box. It was the sonar chief's gruff voice that won out.

"Damn it, Skipper, it's a Delta. I tracked those bastards for eight months in the Barents. Johnson's full of shit."

Sanchez, the XO, and the Ops Officer were all frozen, looking like three cigar-store wooden Indians. Sanchez popped out of the trance first. He

grabbed the Ops Officer's arm. The XO scrambled over to the plot.

"Get word back to shore immediately," said Sanchez. "We can't wait. If we're wrong, we'll take our lumps. ID it as a probable Delta III or IV."

"Aye, aye, Skipper."

Sanchez leaned heavily against the stainless-steel rail surrounding the island and the thick stumps of the periscopes. The game's just beginning, he thought. Problem is, we don't know the rules on this one. The burning lump in his stomach that had plagued him for the last six months had returned.

CHAPTER 10

Thomas and Alexander sweltered in the August blast furnace that passed as a Washington DC summer. The ancient air conditioning in the Pentagon E-Ring had broken down the day before, and relief hinged on a promise to repair it over the long Labor Day holiday weekend. Both had sweat stripes down their shirts and had long ago shed their ties. The two were digesting reams of fanfold computer printouts spread out on an oval conference table, wrestling with the upcoming fiscal-year budget battle. A slight breeze, captured by cranked-open windows, brought a temporary respite from the midmorning heat.

"Did you get those final F-22 numbers from the air force?" grunted Alexander. His formerly white cuff was stained from repeated passes over his damp forehead.

"Right here, sir. But they still aren't right," Thomas answered. He had rivulets of sweat on his temples that trickled down his cheeks. "General Patrick's adamant about leaving out the additional RDT&E funds for calculating unit flyaway cost. They want a separate line item for the RDT&E overruns. The party line is that Congress stretched out the program and cut the numbers so the air force shouldn't take the heat for the ballooning unit costs. The secretary of the air force agrees."

Alexander frowned. It was a full-faced frown and lately was becoming

permanent. “I’ll talk to the secretary of the air force.” He threw down his pencil, letting it roll across hundreds of millions of dollars. “Let’s take a break. I can only take so much of this.” He squawked at his assistant for two cold cans of soda.

“You still planning to leave this afternoon?”

“Yes, sir. Car’s packed, and as soon as we wrap this up, I’m gone. Five days in the North Carolina Mountains.” A genuine grin was accompanied by a sparkle in his ice-blue eyes.

An aide brought the soft drinks. Alexander accepted the gift and moved to his desk where he sat on a free corner and took a long swig. “Damn, it’s hot.” He took another chug that almost drained the can. “Just you and Sally?”

“Our son’s going to meet us. He’s been working in New York this summer.”

“What year is he now?”

“A senior, and his sister will be in her last year of law school. I don’t know where the time goes. Or the money,” he said grinning. Alexander nodded knowingly.

The two enjoyed a few minutes of light chatter even after the cans had been drained and tossed in the trash. Both finally acknowledged it was time to return to the salt mine.

“Mr. Secretary, I’m sorry to disturb you,” said a voice over the intercom, “but Admiral Fitzgerald is on the phone. He says it’s very urgent.” Admiral Fitzgerald was the chief of naval operations.

“Thank you,” replied Alexander. He wheeled around his desk and grabbed the receiver of his secure red phone. Thomas thought nothing of it and dove back into the figures.

“Good afternoon, Admiral.” The secretary listened intently.

“God damn, are we asleep or what?” Alexander’s face flushed. “Why did I get this from you instead of the NMCC watch officer?” A long pause and then, “I see. What’s the Chairman say? Very well. Keep me updated, Admiral.”

Alexander replaced the handset and looked at his aide. Thomas had wandered toward Alexander’s desk. The secretary looked white as a sheet. “We just picked up two Russian submarines off the Mexican coast. One’s a boomer, probably a Delta.” Alexander collapsed into his chair and crossed his arms on his chest. “What do you think?”

Thomas drew a blank and admitted so. “No idea. Are they sure?”

“Positive.” Alexander set his hand on the other red phone. “This should be interesting,” he said, lifting the receiver and triggering an automatic connection to the Situation Room in the White House.

Within the confines of the beltway, the report triggered near panic. News of the Victor had been bad enough, but now there was the Delta. The navy took the heat, berated for letting the Russian boats slip through their sophisticated antisubmarine-warfare (ASW) net undetected. Commander-in-Chief, Strategic Command lobbied for a dispersal order for his bombers and tankers—something that was unheard of these days. The intelligence community scrambled to rationalize the bizarre Russian behavior.

Shortly after noon, Alexander burst into Thomas’s wood-paneled office. Thomas was tidying up loose ends before departing for his well-earned holiday. Thomas’s head popped up from his stack of papers.

“An emergency National Security Council meeting has been called. You’re attending. Put your vacation plans on hold. Sorry. There’s a helo waiting out on the pad.”

Thomas slumped in his chair, letting out a sigh. “Yes, sir,” he replied to an empty doorway. The request struck him as odd. Aides and second-stringers normally didn’t attend full sessions of the NSC, and he had no idea why he possibly could have been invited, if that was the right word. Standing NSC members, the chosen few at the peak of the power pyramid, appointed designated representatives—assistant secretaries and lower-ranking military officers, grunts in other words—to conduct the mundane day-to-day business of the NSC. They were where the rubber met the road. But for the important matters, the heavyweights guarded the guest list. Thomas was convinced it was to avoid embarrassing themselves in front of their more knowledgeable subordinates.

Thomas dialed home before scooting out the door, and the short conversation with his mate had been as predictable as the day’s crappy weather. Sally had matter-of-factly asked him what the Russians were up to and if she should cancel their reservations. He asked her to hold off—he’d call with an update—I promise, he’d said.

The helo had only taken minutes to deposit Thomas and Alexander directly on the White House lawn. The summer heat had reached its daytime peak, the sun blazing unmercifully in a cloudless sky. They jogged past security and hustled directly to the Situation Room in the West Wing basement. Passing by the offices of the career NSC staffers, they were herded

into a dark, stuffy conference room that served as the NSC's principle battleground. The side walls were paneled with dark-stained oak, while the far wall was adorned with video monitors and communications gear partially hidden by curtains. The heavy, rectangular table was too big for the room, crowding those delegated to the periphery. The entire suite was badly in need of a facelift, belying its critical role in free-world diplomacy. Thomas took a kibitzer seat along the far wall while Alexander assumed his reserved chair. Thomas attracted more than one double take from those around the table. From the gentlemen who knew him, it was probably a "what are you doing here" challenge.

He sat motionless, bolt upright, his eyes locked in front of him. It was like he was seated at attention or poised for combat. Thomas made men like the ones gathered today nervous. Maybe it was the rows of combat decorations on his left breast that recalled heroism during an unpopular war.

The hastily called gathering would be a rump meeting. The national security advisor, Ronald Jenkins, had been detained in Europe at a meeting of the NATO planning group. The vice president was performing a political errand, dedicating a new federal building in St. Louis.

Already seated were Secretary of State Jonathon Genser and Director of Central Intelligence Harold Wilks. Genser, an old Washington hand that had faithfully served both parties, was an odd mix of left and right. Properly connected and possessing heavy political clout, he bounced around the ideological spectrum, much to everyone's frustration. Thomas swore the man threw darts each morning to formulate the policy for the day. But the crafty, old statesman knew Congress like the back of his hand. His chief vice, according to the conservative set, was a slavish adherence to endless negotiations as the ultimate answer to any crises. He viewed the Pentagon with absolute suspicion. Thomas noticed that today the man appeared preoccupied. Genser patted the liver spots on his balding forehead with a monogrammed handkerchief, deep in thought. His gray suit was wrinkled by the weather, and the proper secretary had even loosened his tie.

Wilks, a CIA careerist, had struggled up through the ranks against the tide. He thought little of both the Pentagon and State Department, but occasionally sided with the latter if it served his personal agenda. His claim to fame had been an uncanny prescience in forecasting the swift transformation of the Soviet/ Russian political map years before. He had batted almost a thousand in placing the right faces in the right boxes long before others could

navigate the shifting landscape. Rumor credited him with carefully nurtured top-level contacts within the Russian power structure. Thomas thought it far less glamorous. He was convinced that the Russians had deliberately leaked information to head off panic in the West. And Wilks had served their purpose wonderfully. Unfortunately, his sources had dried up.

Always dressed to a tee, he recalled another age. Maybe it was the distinct European flavor to his manners and speech that he purposely fostered. Even in today's blistering heat, he was freshly pressed in a beautifully tailored Italian suit, complemented by a subtle silk tie that blended superbly with his pale blue shirt. His silver hair and neatly trimmed pencil-thin mustache completed the picture. He fastidiously maintained his weight, kept a country club tan, and was rumored to have had an eye job to remove unsightly bags. He would have been perfectly cast for the OSS under "Wild Bill" Donovon in the war-torn forties, or for Hollywood, for that matter. Director Wilks was a piece of work.

Tardy, but expected, was the blunt, hardworking chairman of the Joint Chiefs, a favorite of Thomas's, even when they were on different sides of an issue. The old soldier would bluster and fume, but he always listened and never took offense. The chairman, a Midwestern country boy, had heroically shouldered the unenviable burden of shrinking the US military during tough times. The highly decorated four-star army general had managed to assuage the services and still present his president with an effective fighting force—no mean feat. Big and burly, he looked like a grizzled construction worker rather than the president's number-one military man. He kept trim by lifting weights and running down the popular bike path skirting the Potomac three days a week, rain or shine.

The others around the table were a mixed bag of NSC staffers. They would listen attentively but keep their mouths shut. The rules were clearly understood. Thomas mused over the agenda. No one had enough time to adequately prepare. Intelligence was sorely lacking. That guaranteed the debate would be a free-for-all. The crux was what were the Russians up to? He doubted anyone knew the answer to that. They waited for the commander in chief.

CHAPTER 11

The president of the United States walked into the room, accompanied by his chief of staff. He resembled most business or government leaders his age. Medium height, not grossly overweight but with a slight paunch over the belt, thinning hair combed straight back, which retrained only a trace of its former color; the man easily looked his sixty-two years. His pale blue eyes lacked the luster that had beamed forth on nomination day at his party's convention.

Well into his first term, he struggled with the Herculean task of national leadership. The president had come from the Senate, but was quickly introduced to the cold, hard realities of limited presidential power. The job was a cruel magnifying glass that accentuated and distorted every flaw and less-than-perfect decision to grand scale, providing a lightning rod for the all-too-common folks in DC that made a living tearing good people down. Nurtured in economics, he excelled in the Byzantine world of fiscal and domestic policy and had made real progress in cracking the fiscal nut that had dogged his predecessors. When it came to foreign policy and military strategy, he was a dilettante and knew it. He typically deferred to his cabinet for the weightier decisions, always seeking consensus. Thomas admired him for his candor and sincerity. Overall, he was a kind and decent man in way over his head.

All rose in unison and stood motionless until the president was seated.

His face was drawn this afternoon and covered with perspiration. He made private conversation with his chief of staff before addressing the group. Thomas thought the president looked terrible. “Please take your seats,” the chief executive said softly.

The president adjusted his tortoiseshell frames and put on a serious face. “I’m sure you all are as concerned as I am about this submarine business. I don’t know what’s gotten into the Russians lately. My last letter to the Russian president has sat unanswered. We seem to have reached an impasse.” He placed particular emphasis on the last words by removing his glasses in a dramatic sweep and scanning the table.

The president returned the glasses to his nose and continued. “I’ve talked to Ron about an hour ago. He’ll query the NATO defense ministers after their meeting. Maybe they know something. Anyway, let’s begin with an intelligence assessment from Director Wilks.”

Wilks smiled graciously. The director had an irritating habit of indirectness. He played true to form by posing a question for his opener. “What do the Russians hope to gain by deploying a Delta submarine so close to our shores?”

“Is this the same Delta supposedly sitting on the bottom of the ocean off the Kuriles?” interrupted Alexander dryly. He wasn’t predisposed to games this hot afternoon. Wilks took it in stride. His plastic smile didn’t crack.

“I suppose one could make that determination,” the director sniffed, “but we have solid evidence that a submarine was lost off the Kuriles; and we now have actual physical evidence to back our claim.”

“Maybe so,” remarked Alexander. “But I’ll bet analysis will show the wreck was some surplus boat, purposely sunk. If the Kurile sinking was a hoax, it could have serious implications. Our good friend Nikolai may be putting us to the test.”

Normally Jenkins, the national security advisor, played traffic cop. In his absence, the president was forced to keep the meeting on track.

“Let’s hold the questions and comments, please,” he suggested.

The director’s smile broke at being second-guessed, and he stared icily at Alexander. “Surveillance of other Russian strategic assets shows nominal deployment patterns. The number of ballistic-missile submarines at sea is five. The Strategic Rocket Forces have concluded a major exercise of both SS-24 rail-mobile and SS-25 road-mobile missiles, with most units returning to garrison. Strategic bomber and interceptor aircraft are riveted at their

airdromes. In summary, gentlemen, Russian military activity is quite normal. And, I would like to add, significantly lower than five or ten years ago. Our Russian friends are a shadow of their former selves," he said.

While the director paused to take a drink of water and let his wisdom sink in, Alexander turned to Thomas. As usual, the director had said nothing relevant.

"Excuse me, Mr. President," said the chairman bursting through the door. He quickly took the empty chair next to Alexander. "I was tied up in the tank with the Joint Chiefs. I felt it would be worthwhile to get their gut feeling on this."

The president smiled and nodded approvingly. He trusted his general, much to the annoyance of Wilks and Genser, who frowned at the late arrival. Wilks coughed and then began again. "As to whether the Russians deceived us, we will have positive confirmation within five days at most."

"Five days," thought Thomas, "that's one hell of a long wait while a Delta chock full of nuclear missiles cruises off the Mexican coast."

Genser raised a finger but was preempted by the president.

"I'd like to hear from the chairman. This is, after all, first and foremost a military matter. General, what do the Chiefs think the Russians are up to?"

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs had a dual role—top military advisor to the president and independently, the representative of the service Chiefs. It was his mission to champion the Chiefs' concerns, tempered by his own judgment, before the NSC.

"Mr. President," he said, folding his big, rough-hewed hands in front of him on the table, "I don't think anyone can say with any certainty what the Russians are trying to prove. Laptev's pushing, but so far the Russian military has been resisting. But I'm afraid I can't be as sanguine as the director. If they wanted, they could catch our bombers and tankers on the ground with a few well-placed cruise missiles. Remember, we no longer have aircraft on alert."

He paused to let all reflect on a long-past decision, unpopular with the military. "Our over-the-horizon backscatter radar would never pick those turkeys out of the sea clutter. We'd never know what hit us. Adding the ballistic missiles on that Russian Delta makes the situation intolerable. We're vulnerable and should take immediate action while we sort out this mess." The general locked his eyes on the president and ignored the others. He knew who mattered.

“A surprise attack?” commented Genser lightly. “Why does the military always dwell on fantasy?” A ridiculing smile curled from the corners of his mouth. The well-trained soldier held back.

“A surprise attack is an extremely unlikely event, I’ll grant you that. But, the bottom line is that we must consider all the alternatives. My job is to be prepared for any contingency, period.” His best hard-ass stare penetrated the fragile secretary of state. Genser was indignant.

“What would you do? Flush our bombers and tankers, and put the entire fleet to sea every time the Russians move submarines close to our shores?” asked Genser impatiently. “Those days are long gone.”

“That’s not what I meant,” snapped the chairman. “We’ve bent over backward these past few months trying to accommodate the Russians. The more we bend, the more Laptev rants and raves. Now they’ve restarted their missile lines, and we haven’t said a word. It’s time to say enough is enough.”

Genser cocked his head. He became composed, tacking with the wind. The secretary of state knew he would lose a shouting match with the general. “My point is that we cannot have a knee-jerk reaction every time the Russians tweak us. Two submarines do not a crisis make. We do the same thing, especially with our submarines. I suggest we protest to the Russians that we know about their submarines and insist they remove them, posthaste. We can get excellent mileage out of this. Actually, we’ve been hoping for just this sort of opportunity to embarrass Nikolai and put him in his place.”

The president held up a hand. “We’re getting ahead of ourselves. What is your recommendation, General?” asked the president. Genser was wounded at the slight. He normally counted on the NSC headman for moral support. This meeting should have been postponed until Jenkins returned from Europe.

The chairman sensed an opening and eased forward on the throttles. “We should move a portion of our bombers and tankers to secondary bases, not too many or too fast. Second, the Chief of Naval Operations has recommended getting USS *Alabama* underway two weeks early from Kings Bay, Georgia. She’s working up for her next patrol, and the accelerated schedule can be accommodated. She can go to sea in two days. These actions will send a strong signal to the Russians that we’re on to them. They’ll pick them up—be sure of that. And I disagree with surfacing this issue publicly. We have nothing to gain. Laptev feeds on this sort of challenge.”

Genser glanced furtively at the less-than-happy Wilks to register his

impatience with the usual Pentagon line. The meeting shaped up as usual, the director and secretary of state siding against the chairman and the secretary of defense.

“You’re overreacting,” said Wilks. “You’re suggesting a change in our force posture equivalent to a Defense Condition increase. Are we ready to increase the DEFCON level, gentleman, over two submarines? The Russians will go ballistic. Their paranoia threshold has been lowered significantly these days.” He raised his silvery-black eyebrows in challenge.

The group sat glumly, no one taking the bait. A change in DEFCON would advertise a heightened alert status for all the world to see and give a propaganda bonanza to the Russian ultranationalists.

“I’m not proposing a DEFCON change,” answered the chairman. “I’m only suggesting that we show resolve, Mr. President.” The president hid any visible response.

“Matt, what are your impressions?” he asked the secretary of defense.

Alexander was pleasantly surprised. Usually at this point he was playing catch-up, but the score was about even.

“I agree with the chairman, Mr. President. We must be pro-active. As I asked earlier, is this Delta the same one the Russians led us to believe had been lost? At this point, we know nothing. We need hard facts and in a hurry. We need to shake all the trees and see what falls out. In the meantime, we should do what the chairman has recommended. I fear we may be drifting toward a confrontation with our Russian friends.”

“Explain,” remarked Genser testily. “I certainly don’t feel we’ve experienced a breakdown in relations. The Russians are going through tremendous upheaval. My last few meetings with the foreign minister have been strained, but we have made definite progress on outstanding issues. I’m optimistic.”

“I second Jonathon,” sputtered Wilks. “All this loose talk is provocative and dangerous. We need time to gather intelligence. Right now, we’re rushing in blind.” Thomas had never seen the director so upset.

“We don’t have the luxury,” countered Alexander firmly. “Gather your intelligence after we secure our forces.”

“What’s the real issue, Matt?” scolded Genser. “It’s the same old nonsense about START and the Russian mobile missiles, isn’t it? Why do you insist on resurrecting that dead horse?”

Genser had caught Alexander off guard. The secretary of defense leaned

back, biding his time while shaping a response. The president appeared puzzled. Alexander cleared his throat, his audience ready to pounce.

"START I and II screwed up by letting the Russians keep their mobile missiles. We knew it at the time but ignored the issue to get a deal. Now it's come back to bite us."

"Reopen the treaty?" interjected Genser, feigning shock. "You're one hundred and eighty degrees out of synch with the policy of this administration."

"I understand that," replied Alexander patiently.

Thomas winced. This was not going well for his boss.

"The Russian mobile missiles are spending less time in garrison and more time deployed. In short, they've been very successful at mobile missile deployment. We have to be very sensitive to Russian deployment patterns that threaten our forces.

"Interesting," admitted the director, "but your vulnerability thesis rests squarely on old cold war thinking." The others exchanged glances, waiting for the president. He sat passively, rubbing his chin. He straightened, having come to a decision.

"Matt, General, I'll accept your recommendations, but I want it done discretely." Genser and Wilks were shocked, expecting an "I'll think about it" answer and time for them to maneuver.

"Yes, sir," answered the chairman, pleased.

"I want to emphasize, Matt, the bomber movements should be limited, understand?"

"Yes, sir."

The president continued. "We'll reconvene late tomorrow afternoon. By then the national security advisor and the vice president will be back in town. In the meantime, Jonathon will visit the Russian ambassador and test the waters. Any questions?"

"Mr. President, I must protest dispersal of the bomber force," interjected Genser. "It will destroy any chance of a useful dialogue."

"I'm convinced it's a prudent move," replied the president.

"Let's hope so," said Genser, shaking his head.

"Anything else? If not, we'll adjourn. I want to be informed immediately of any new information."

The president rose and quickly left the room. Following on his heels were the secretary of state and the director, huddled in conversation.

“Mr. Secretary, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to get the necessary orders to STRATCOM,” said the chairman.

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs left Alexander and Thomas alone. “Bob, I need you at the National Military Command Center. Watch the bomber and tanker dispersal closely. If STRATCOM screws it up, we’re all in deep shit.”

“I understand, sir,” Thomas replied. “I’d come to the same conclusion.”

CHAPTER 12

Thomas strode into the National Military Command Center, sheltered deep beneath the Pentagon. Expertly engineered in the days of propeller-driven aircraft carrying thousand-pound bombs, it was now hopelessly obsolete in the modern era of intercontinental thermonuclear weapons deposited with pinpoint accuracy. The NMCC served as the electronic nerve center that linked the spider web of US military bases encircling the globe. Huge DSCS III satellite dish antennas and high-speed trunk lines funneled streams of digital message traffic and raw intelligence from distant radar sites, listening posts, overseas commanders, and even ships at sea. The all-seeing eyes of the NMCC were the far-flung assets of the North American Aerospace Defense Command's Missile Warning Center and the CIA's secretive photo-reconnaissance satellites, while its ears were the NSA's eavesdropping ELINT satellites, mostly hovering over former Soviet territory. Their sensitivity was legendary, sucking up incredibly minute packets of RF energy, uncovering the slightest indiscretion or hint of hostile intent. This electronic one-two punch had created a cornucopia of data, an around-the-clock surveillance blanket that smothered the earth. Addicted US decision makers were paralyzed without their steady diet of intelligence summaries and real-time imagery fed by this creation.

The NMCC was large, the size of a gymnasium, with row upon row of

state-of-the-art computer terminals. The only light bathing the floor was the soft glow emanating from bright graphics displays, subtly augmented by buzzing red fluorescents that marked one of the hundreds of phones directly linked to someone important. The front section was reserved for the battle watch. The frequent guests were relegated to a glass-enclosed balcony perched high above the floor. Plush chairs and secure phones provided the necessary comforts. This viewing cage shielded visitors from the constant commotion on the floor, which on occasion could rise in pitch to rival the Chicago Mercantile Exchange.

Thomas camped out upstairs. He stared at the “big board” as it was still called. The two errant Russian subs off the Mexican west coast stood out like a sore thumb. The display rammed home how frighteningly close those boats were to US soil. US military installations up and down the Pacific coast were within quick striking range of the Delta’s SS-N-23 ballistic missiles. Flight times would be as short as six to seven minutes. Too short to do anything but cover your head and pray. A glance toward the Atlantic showed a solo Delta III two hundred miles closer to the East Coast than normal. Most of the other Russian boats were near the Barents, close to Russian home waters. Thomas yanked the chair-mounted phone handset to his ear, triggering a flashing red light below. The Battle Watch Commander, an air force brigadier, answered promptly and politely.

“What steps have been taken to implement the NSC directive?” Thomas asked dryly. The officer knew who he was.

“STRATCOM has begun to move aircraft to secondary bases; ten or fifteen have been identified so far, all B-1Bs. The chairman is concerned. Says they’re moving too fast. Overhead reconnaissance sweeps have increased, but the space-borne platforms we have in orbit are getting low on fuel. A replacement photo recon bird is scheduled to go up in three weeks, but JCS is pushing SPACECOM to make it sooner.” Thomas grunted a curt thank you.

Leaning back, he mentally filtered the pieces and players. In terms of numbers of platforms, the Russian deployments were not that unusual, except for the Delta off Mexico. But he’d never witnessed such firepower. Two Typhoons at sea plus the Deltas, Blackjack bombers at an Arctic staging base, and SS-24s and 25s still absent from garrison. Was Laptev indulging in a little saber rattling? The last few years had dulled America’s cold war sense for mischief. Changes in Russian military operations that used to trigger

alarms were now below the threshold of pain. Too many other issues competed for attention. People's receivers had become desensitized by the constant background noise of fiscal and domestic policy.

Thomas frowned, his chin cradled in his right hand. He swiveled and spotted a secure phone. He scooted to the edge of a nearby chair and dialed Alexander's private number. The secretary answered on the first ring.

"Mr. Secretary, I'm recommending we push for an increase in DEFCON. I can't put my finger on it, but the Russians have too many frontline assets deployed." Thomas heard a sigh on the line. He felt his own heart sink.

"No way, Bob. A DEFCON change would be an escalation; remember the meeting? It's a dead issue."

"Yes, sir," replied Thomas, hanging up the phone, frustrated. His pulse quickened. What the hell is going on? He had to find the missing piece.

Thomas crossed the deck in quick strides and took a seat at one of the computer workstations and flicked on the power to bring up the display. After a few seconds to whir, click, and boot, the nineteen-inch color CRT depicted a brilliant three-dimensional globe peppered with iconic symbols for friendly and non-friendly units worldwide.

Thomas could rotate the earth with the computer's three-button mouse, then select a specific location and zoom for detail, all the way down to a relatively minute ten-mile square chunk. Within minutes, Thomas was able to status every major Russian installation.

As he sucked in the detail, Thomas shifted uncomfortably. A handful of key units appeared at full alert, while most conducted business as usual. He was missing something. Laptev's boast to pacify the Ukraine filtered through. Check the airborne divisions, he told himself.

Moving the cursor over the map to central Russia, he searched for a minor city with a name he couldn't pronounce. The local airborne division was gone. They had left two days earlier for a training exercise. He pushed the cursor to the north, tracing a path toward Moscow. To the southeast of the city, he remembered the newest SS-25 garrison. A quick click exploded a table listing the unit's assets. Twenty-five erector launchers, all participating in Operation Vigilant Shield. Thomas's greatest fear was all these mobile SS-25 ICBMs strewn about forests and roads. Russian mobile missiles had been operating away from home base more and more the last two months.

Staring at the screen, impulsively swirling the cursor in slowly

expanding circles, Thomas spotted a new symbol, distinct from the horizontal missile denoting a mobile ICBM unit. This one had the missile icon superimposed on a building. He activated the symbol and was greeted with a screen dump of data. “This site scheduled to become a depot for SS-25 reloads. Operational July time frame.”

A sense of panic gripped Thomas. “You idiot!” he cursed out loud. He racked his brain for other sites. He found the first. No missiles. Likewise for the second, the trucks reported having left two or three weeks before.

“No,” he said, “it can’t be.” He was incredulous. Thomas leapt out of the chair and ran to the bank of phones near the window. He buzzed the battle watch commander once more. The brigadier looked up curiously as he answered the blinking phone.

“Yes, sir, General Thomas?”

“Did you know all the SS-25 storage depots are empty?” he blurted out.

“No, sir.” It didn’t seem to click with the man.

“How about the command trains?”

“The last pictures we have are from two days ago. They were in station. But the weather has been lousy lately.”

Thomas slouched, catching his breath. The panic subsided only slightly. “Let me know if you get anything on the mobiles.”

“Yes, sir.”

Thomas hung up the receiver and massaged his forehead and temples. A premonition overtook him—the image of a Russian military move against US forces somewhere around the globe. He could see it now. Laptev moves into Ukraine in force then proceeds toward Poland for real or for bluff. The effect would be the same—chaos and confusion, the Europeans falling all over themselves to get out of the way. Of course Laptev would have placed his prized nuclear assets in a safe place. The West thought him a buffoon, but the crafty Russian had fooled them all. How about the US nuclear forces?

Thomas buzzed the brigadier. “How do I get NORAD on the line?”

The brigadier sounded incredulous. “What?”

Thomas realized what he had said and paused. He was out of line, way out. “Never mind,” he said with a gush of air, “I had a question about one of the recon satellites.” He hung up, still holding onto the receiver, tapping it in his palm. They’d think I’m crazy, he reflected. Maybe he was becoming hysterical—reading too much into the data. He prayed he was wrong.

CHAPTER 13

Major Buckmeister Grant rolled over in bed, groping for the ringing telephone resting on the adjacent nightstand. He simultaneously plucked a fresh Kleenex with his free hand to wipe his runny nose. “Hello,” he mumbled, half asleep, propping himself on one elbow. “Major Grant.”

“Buck, get back to the base pronto. We’ve got an alert.”

It was the duty officer from the squadron. “Ah, bullshit, give me a break,” Grant groaned, sitting up. He took a swig from the water glass that he had almost tipped reaching for the phone. The water didn’t relieve the sticky taste in his mouth. “I flew last night. Then the debrief took all morning. I got a cold that’s busting my head open.”

“This is a no-shitter, Buck. Code Sierra. I can’t say any more.”

The sudden click left Grant staring incredulously at the handset. Code Sierra? What the hell? He hung up and looked at the clock radio sitting next to the phone. A little after two thirty in the afternoon. At least he had got a few hours’ sleep. He eased his six-foot-three body out of bed and grabbed another Kleenex, throwing the used one on the floor amid a growing heap of pink and blue. Step two was a shuffle across the small bedroom and a stiff tug on the shade over the window. Bright sunlight poured through, bathing his aching body. Buck recoiled like a vampire caught by the rising sun.

“Crap,” he complained, “where did I put the damn aspirin?” The

unsuccessful drug search was quickly abandoned for a better remedy, a strong cup of black coffee.

Grant could have been a recruiting-poster model for the US Air Force. Well built, handsome Nordic features, thick brown hair that lightened in the summer, hazel eyes that were greener than brown, and a wide, white-toothed grin that melted most women and commanding officers alike. His easygoing manner and soft drawl pegged him as a local Texas boy, but he originally hailed from the Midwest.

His small, studio apartment was in shambles. Dirty clothes were strewn the length of the *L*-shaped bedroom, and his open sliding-door closet revealed a tangled pile of messy laundry begging for attention. He had moved to the run-down apartment building when his beautiful, charming wife had abruptly walked out only six short months ago. Their lovely four-bedroom, two-story suburban home was on the market for a steal.

Buck had met his upscale future bride on a blind date his senior year at Penn State. She was a gorgeous business major from Pittsburgh who wanted to go into banking. They immediately fell in love. His six-year commitment to the US Air Force was conveniently overlooked. Frustrating separation, broken by intensely passionate weekends and holidays, solidified the storybook relationship. The culmination was a spectacular summer wedding at her parents' huge Pennsylvania estate. Her prosperous investment-banker father provided an incredible spread, while Buck's flying buddies provided the questionable entertainment.

His perfect mate never really adjusted to the transient military life, nor the role of an officer's wife. A meaningful career was out of the question when traipsing all over the country after her man. One Texas winter morning, after five tumultuous years, she bailed, leaving a neatly typed three-page letter that spelled out Buck's faults and transgressions in nauseating detail. He had got falling-down drunk, but the next morning, with his head resting in the toilet, he concluded that it was for the best. His first love was flying; he had always told her that. In retrospect, he didn't blame her and held no grudge.

Twenty minutes later, Buck burst out the door dressed in a greenish-gray flight suit, polished black boots, and carrying an overnight bag. The Texas summer sky was deep crystal blue, and the gusting breeze felt like a foundry blast furnace against his exposed, tanned skin. He jogged down the stairs to his waiting pickup parked next to the curb, tossing the bag in the bed.

It was an old, beat-up Ford that looked like it hadn't been washed in months, which it hadn't. An ugly gash on the left side commemorated the latest unidentified run-in.

"Must be a hundred today," he grumbled, opening the truck door. He climbed in, engulfed by stifling heat. He danced in place as the blue vinyl seat burned his butt clear through the heavy flight suit. The steering wheel was so hot he had to use a dirty T-shirt from the floor to grip it.

"I've got to get one of those stupid-looking window shades," he groused.

Most in the squadron complained about the hot, humid weather, but usually not Buck. After back-to-back tours in the Dakotas, he swore he never wanted to be cold again. And today's intense heat certainly helped clear his sinuses. He pumped the accelerator, started the engine, and pulled off, leaving a cloud of blackish-gray smoke lingering by the curb.

His apartment complex was less than a mile from Interstate 20, and only five miles from Dyess Air Force Base, home of the Strategic Command's 96th Bomb Wing. Within minutes, he was cruising down the interstate at seventy miles an hour, the wind whipping through the open windows, a slight smile on Buck's handsome face. He felt like shit, but flying was flying.

Buckmeister, as his parents still called him, had let down the family by choosing an air-force career over their preference—following his older brother and father into law. Even as a child, he wanted to fly. Fun-filled hours were spent reading magazines and books, building models, and doing anything pertaining to aviation. Secret flying lessons started at sixteen and continued through high school. On the happy day he had gotten his pilot's license, his mother had burst into tears. His father had been more understanding, certain, as fathers are, that his preoccupation would fade as his thoughts turned to college and girls. Opting for air-force ROTC at Penn State prompted a major rift, one that still haunted holiday get-togethers at the elder Grants'.

Buck's was flying what he now considered the most demanding aircraft in the air-force inventory—the B-1B bomber. His initial preference had been fighters, hopefully F-16s, but somehow he lacked that special ingredient to be a fighter pilot. To the hotshot fighter jocks, it was a combination of coolness and confidence—not hesitating to press the outer edges of the envelope. To Buck, it was a mixture of cockiness and craziness—the word stupidity came to mind. His marks and flying skills would have secured him a seat in the

next fighter class, but instead he selected the more sedate world of bombers, signing his young soul over to the stodgy Strategic Air Command. His nightmare was getting stuck in B-52Hs, those aging monsters that never seemed to die—most of them older than he or anyone else in STRATCOM for that matter. They were now relegated to a standoff attack role, carrying cruise missiles, both the older AGM-86B ALCM and the new AGM-129A Advanced Cruise Missile. But luck was with him, and he drew B-1Bs.

The stealthy, black batwing B-2A, whose production line had been terminated at a scant twenty aircraft, had been billed as the answer to everyone's prayers. But despite its advertised superlative performance, Strategic Command still hadn't figured out how to use it. Many felt the B-2As were too valuable and too few in numbers to risk. That left the ninety B-1Bs to carry the brunt of day-to-day operations.

Pulling up to the main gate at Dyess, Buck fumbled for his ID amid squealing brakes. The air-force gate guards were used to these clever maneuvers during major alerts and calmly waved him through, saluting politely as he passed. He ignored the posted twenty-five-mile-per-hour speed limit and the numerous stop signs between the gate and his squadron. In five minutes, he had parked next to the fence and bounded up the stairs to the squadron operations office on the second floor.

The cramped room overflowed with twice the usual number of officers and airmen; the noise level was deafening. The squadron executive officer was shouting into the phone with his finger in his other ear. He slammed the receiver down and shook his head.

"Stupid bastards," he said out loud, "what do they expect me to do? Pull the fuel out of my ass?" He turned and spotted Buck. "There you are," he yelled across the room, "what took you so long?"

Buck shrugged. "What's up?" he asked. "How come there's a Code Sierra?" The executive officer was trying to do five things at once; his eyes jerked left and right.

"The God-damned Russians are playing tricks with their boomers. Seems we've spotted one off the West Coast. I don't know the details; I've been too busy. CINCSTRAT has been ordered to get some of the bombers dispersed, so your number came up. You'll be one of four from the wing. The colonel wants you to take-off ASAP." The executive officer turned and started to walk away but stopped short.

"See the doc, and get something for that cold. You look terrible. Then

get suited up and out to the hanger. Joe and the rest of your motley crew are waiting. Any questions?"

Questions? Of course not. Who was he to question the gods over in Wing Operations? Grant shook his mussed brown hair and walked out the door and down the stairs, more irritated than concerned. First stop was the flight surgeon's office. The aspirin which he had finally uncovered had helped, but his nose was still running profusely. The friendly doc gave him a vile of small pink pills to take every two hours. He had heard about these particular pills. Their power was legendary, but half the pilots got airsick and the other half drowsy. The kind man added a few stimulants to take as necessary for good measure.

Next was the flight-crew locker room. Buck opened his gray locker and dragged out the mishmash of flight garb—*G*-suit, harness, survival vest, leg straps, and a banged-up helmet with large squadron decals on the sides. The layers and accompanying weight came on quickly. Buck could do it in his sleep. Within minutes, he had the obligatory twenty-five pounds or so wrapped snugly around his body and helmet in hand. He waddled toward the exit next to the maintenance hangars to hitch a ride to the flight line.

Outside, a dark blue utility vehicle waited patiently, the airman tightly gripping the wheel. "Let's go," said Buck.

Half a mile away was the old secluded alert strip. At SAC bases, before STRATCOM was created and when bombers still stood strip alert, a specified number of planes were always on twenty-four-hour alert at special pads. The crews were housed in a nearby cinder-block bunker, ready to dash to their planes at the klaxon. Everyone has seen it over and over again on TV. The routine was practiced until a series of the huge planes could take off single file in a matter of minutes. It was a breathtaking sight, one plane accelerating hard down the runway even before the one ahead had lifted its landing gear off the deck. But those days were long gone.

His plane was off on an ancillary apron, surrounded by air policemen armed to the teeth. The maintenance chief and his crew swarmed over the bomber, making last-minute checks. The always-serious weapons contingent stood in groups, having just finished hoisting the last bomb into the forward weapons bay. They hated rushing—safety procedures went out the window, yet they would still be accountable for any mishap.

Inside the human security shield, standing next to the waiting bomber, was a short, muscular, young captain, a purple scarf around his neck. He had

his hands on his hips, smiling. A crew cut topped a square face with a prominent jaw and boyish grin. Two non-flight-suited gentleman, both captains, stood nearby. They were the bearers of the infamous black case—Buck's Emergency War Order or EWO material.

"Afternoon, Buck," yelled Captain Joe Grabowski as the truck screeched to a halt. "Glad you could make it."

"Screw you, Joe," he replied, jumping to the ground. He grabbed his helmet and strode over, nearly tripping over his own feet. *G*-suits and ejection-seat harnesses don't make for graceful movement.

"At least you got some sleep," Joe responded. "I stayed up thinking I would crash tonight."

The two other officers stood patiently. "Are you ready, Major Grant?" said the first. "Badge, please." Buck complied. They had already checked Joe to make sure he was Joe.

This part always annoyed Buck—signing for the EWO mail. It struck him as ludicrous that he was trusted to takeoff with a bomber full of nuclear weapons yet was required to sign a series of stupid forms to keep the paper pushers happy. He scribbled his name illegibly and looked around.

The second captain stepped forward with a large plastic briefcase sporting a built-in cylinder lock. He double-checked the number on the case and on Grant's badge then initialed the form. He handed the case to Grant, who signaled to Joe. All matters concerning nuclear weapons, physical access, EWO target folders, or authenticators, required rigid adherence to the cardinal rule of two-man control. This included guards, security-response teams, the flight crew, everyone.

Squatting, both Buck and Joe checked the seal on the case's lock then verified the stenciled number on the side of the case once more. "It's all yours, Major," said the captain. "Good luck."

"Sure you don't want to go with us? We've got plenty of room. I know how you guys like to get some flight time once in a while."

The captain smiled and slid into the same utility truck. "No, thanks." He signaled, and the driver pulled off.

Joe followed Buck to the plane. "How's the cold?"

"Terrible, I feel like my head is ready to explode. Any other planes leave yet?"

"Just one. The CO's. Two more are scheduled early tomorrow."

Buck was first up the ladder hanging aft from the nose landing gear and

through the hatch. He worked his way forward toward the cockpit, passing the weapons stations.

"Afternoon, Buck," said First Lieutenant John Jefferson. Jefferson was the defensive electronic-countermeasures officer, in charge of the aircraft's ALQ-161 ECM suite. "What's going on?"

"I'll let you know in a minute. Where's Ledermeyer?"

"Went to take a leak. He'll be right back."

"I hope so; we've got to get moving."

The B-1B carried a crew of four. The fourth was Captain Russel Ledermeyer, the offensive weapons officer. He sat next to Lieutenant Jefferson, directly behind the pilot and copilot. It was a cozy arrangement, but functional.

Buck settled into his ejection seat, setting the plastic case next to him. The cockpit area was Spartan, but well designed. Exotic gear such as a heads-up display in the original Jimmy Carter-cancelled B-1A had been dispensed with to save money in the *B* model.

"How about the emergency gear?"

"It's all here," commented Joe, squeezing by and sitting down. "I did an inventory. This must be serious; what do you think?"

"Let's find out."

Grant lifted the plastic case and set it in his lap. Despite his distaste for regulations, he knew when to cut the bullshit. With Joe's eyes glued on the case, he carefully broke the seal. The next step was the lock. Each of them would enter two numbers, Joe first, neither seeing the other's.

"All set," Joe said, on edge.

Grant quickly positioned the remaining two numbers to release the lock, then flipped the two metal latches and opened the case. Inside, in separately sealed envelopes, were a tasking summary, the EWO mission folder, and the authenticators—the critical item necessary to determine if a properly authenticated release order was received aboard the aircraft. Only then could Permissive Action Link codes be entered to arm the nuclear weapons carried on board. Other pages included up-to-date weather information over target locations and the latest intelligence on the Russian threat.

"Ledermeyer's here," called Jefferson.

"Listen up," ordered Grant. He broke the seal on the larger envelope and opened it. He folded the message back and read the mission tasking, a computer printout summary including a color relief map and a small

aeronautical chart of their ordered flight path. All STRATCOM's mission and logistics planning were now accomplished with centralized computer databases located at STRATCOM headquarters in Omaha. Grant concentrated on the summary, frowning. He picked out the highlights for the crew, running his finger down the page.

"Fly to McChord Air Force Base. Remain on strip alert until further assignment. Possible relocation to a secondary site."

He looked up at Joe. "How far, and when do we get there?"

Grabowski punched the coordinates into the flight computer, and within seconds, the answer was displayed on the small, backlit screen in front of him. "It's one thousand six hundred and eight miles. Assuming an average speed of six hundred and forty miles per hour, it will take a little over two and one-half hours, given normal winds. If we get off the ground by 1525 we'll get there approximately 1555 their time."

"Good," said Grant. "Let's get moving. Maybe we can get some sleep once we're on the ground in Washington."

Buck carefully replaced the folder, latched the case, and stowed it snugly behind his seat. He donned his helmet, the oxygen mask dangling to the side, then buckled himself securely into the ejection seat. He peered out the side cockpit window and signaled to the crew chief who flashed a thumbs-up. The security guards rolled back the perimeter rope while Joe methodically worked down the preflight checklist. Grant fired off equipment status, flicking switches and scanning gauges.

"That's it," Grabowski said, mostly to himself. He forced his helmet onto his head, tightening the strap. "Let's go," he said confidently.

One by one, the huge bomber's turbofan engines sprang to life, the high-pitch whine building to an ear-splitting racket. With all propulsion systems checked, Buck throttled back, gently releasing the brakes to slowly taxi to the edge of the runway. The entire ground crew saluted in unison in an emotionally charged send-off.

The graceful bomber rolled to a stop twenty yards short of the final starboard turn before the runway. "This is *X*-ray Yankee One, request clearance for takeoff," Grant said into the small microphone, which was an integral part of his mask.

A crackle over the radio brought the reply. "Cleared, Yankee One, runway one-three-fiver."

Kicking in the engines, Buck maneuvered the plane to starboard,

pausing momentarily to glance at Grabowski. “All set,” he said, a slight smile on his face.

“You bet, bud.”

“How about you two back there?”

“All set, Buck”

The B-1B eased forward, lining up on the runway centerline. Grant had the variable geometry wings completely unswept to compensate for the full weapon load and the extremely hot day. He throttled the engines to maximum thrust, hurtling the sleek bomber down the runway. Its dull, charcoal paint scheme loomed ominously against the brilliant blue summer sky. Within seconds, they ate up over eight thousand feet of runway, the painted numbers and markers on the concrete a yellow blur. With Buck pulling back on the stick, the aircraft rotated gracefully, the landing gear gently lifting off the deck. Accelerating hard, Buck placed the bomber in a steep climb, slamming the crew back into their seats. It was a wonderful, an intoxicating high, their *G*-suits forcing blood away from their extremities to their trunk.

Grabowski had already programmed the autopilot and was verifying the inputs, punching the small buttons while the plane jerked upward.

“Still looks like 1555 for an ETA, Buck. If we get any headwinds it might slip ten or fifteen minutes. But the reports say the weather’s clear.”

The bomber nosed over and settled out at twenty-six thousand feet, heading on a north-westerly course toward McChord AFB near Tacoma, Washington. Grant switched to the autopilot and settled back, releasing the stick. He retrieved the vile of pills in his pocket and struggled with the plastic top.

“Feeling better?” asked Grabowski.

“Some. These pills really do work. You won’t mind if I start throwing up all over you?”

“Keep it on your own side,” Joe grinned. It was a nervous grin, not like him.

Buck, the perceptive crew commander, sensed his man’s uneasiness. He placed a hand on Grabowski’s knee. “This is going to be a piece of cake. We’ll be home in less than a week, throwing down a few beers at Benny’s.”

Grabowski grinned wider and nodded in the affirmative.

The heavily laden bomber cruised effortlessly at altitude, steadily closing in on McChord. Dark black-gray summer storm clouds loomed ominously on the horizon, signaling turbulence ahead. Grant instinctively

switched to the secure voice circuit to request permission to climb to a more comfortable altitude. A quick positive reply caused him to gently pull back on the stick, and the bomber slipped to thirty-three thousand feet.

CHAPTER 14

Captain Demetri Aetmatov sat glumly in his stiffed-backed aluminum chair in the master launch control center at the sprawling Kartaly missile base. The aging purple Naugahyde covering this monstrosity had badly cracked and split, rescued by a patchwork of silver duct tape. Two hundred feet overhead, the midday temperature had reached a balmy eighty degrees while Aetmatov froze in the clammy, damp concrete tomb, shivering under a knit wool sweater and fur-lined parka. The decrepit LCC electronics hidden in the adjoining cement chamber required an ambient temperature comparable to a meat locker. He furiously rubbed his aching hands but still couldn't stimulate enough feeling to work the small, intricate electrical switches during the interlock-mechanism maintenance procedure. His compatriot, a young lieutenant fresh from the academy, grinned like the fool he was, oblivious to the numbing cold. Aetmatov felt uneasy with this newcomer. His longtime partner, a seasoned warrant officer from Riga, had been replaced for no apparent reason only three weeks earlier. This new imbecile was making his already-difficult life even more miserable. Aetmatov smelled a rat.

The Kartaly base perimeter encircled the six expansive octagon-shaped missile complexes that housed many of the last-surviving SS-18 ICBMs. At one time there had been 308 of the monsters, but now the number had been cut to less than 150. Each grid measured over three miles across; protective

spacing ensured defense against a US attack. No American warhead would be allowed to take out more than one SS-18. Bedded down in super-hardened silos, each cluster of nine missiles carried ninety super-accurate 600-kiloton reentry vehicles, accompanied by a collection of decoys and chaff to foil American sensors and ABM defenses. Despite the remarkable technology encased within the aluminum missile skins, the launch crews labored in deplorable conditions. They were condemned to endless days buried deep beneath the earth within six-foot-thick steel-reinforced walls that dripped with condensation and nurtured a variety of colorful molds. The master LCC, which linked all three wings in a redundant web of landline communications, was somewhat larger, but the extra space was reserved for rack upon rack of lead-acid batteries, which provided critical emergency power.

"The interlocks check out perfectly, Captain."

Aetmatov's only reply was a glare.

"Shall we move to the next procedure?" the young man grinned.

Aetmatov stood and arched his back. "Let's take a break. We have all night to complete the maintenance. I need some hot tea." What he really needed was a few shots of vodka.

Aetmatov stepped through the metal hatchway to the crew's quarters, ducking instinctively from numerous run-ins with the sharp steel rim inches from his head. Two sagging bunks occupied one corner while a small electric burner sat on a nearby counter. The cheap hot plate provided only occasional snacks—hot meals were delivered via a messenger thrice daily. Aetmatov turned on the electricity and set a small pot containing tea atop the coils. He sat down at the small metal table and picked up an old copy of *Russian Military News*, leafing through the worn pages, but his mind was elsewhere.

Unknown to his cellmate, Aetmatov had received a specially coded message ordering a heightened alert status two hours earlier. This unusual event had followed four weeks of frequent, unscheduled drills. The entire chain of command was extremely edgy.

The spitting of boiling tea splattering on the burner broke his train of thought. He retrieved the brew and poured it into a stained mug. Resting, he slipped back into the destructive thought pattern churning inside his skull. What would he do if the real message came through? The message to launch? If it did, he was sure it would be because Mother Russia was under a crippling nuclear attack. The Americans might publicly dismiss talk about a surprise nuclear attack as fantasy, but the Russians were far more practical.

The distinct possibility of a nuclear ambush loomed over all their military planning. It was ingrained in their mind-set, nurtured by the treachery of past enemies who had talked peace while planning war. No nation in modern history had suffered more at the hands of ruthless invaders. Mobile ICBMs, the Moscow ABM system, the extensive underground command and control bunker network, and costly civil defense initiatives were all designed and implemented at huge expense to ensure that the Russian people would prevail in any nuclear exchange with the Americans. That was in the 70s and 80s, but then, what had really changed? Their history forced them to contemplate the unthinkable. Yes, he would do his duty. Aetmatov was sure of that.

On the outskirts of Moscow, an innocuous-looking freight train rested on a spur next to a dilapidated warehouse. Located one hundred meters from the main station, only a flimsy chain-link fence prevented access. Two ordinary-looking guards paraded in front of a small gate, casually swapping stories. The hidden train's unusual configuration escaped notice by all but the professionally trained eye—two powerful locomotives attached to only four worn freight cars. Three heavy umbilical cables exited the last car, looking like black spaghetti on the ground, and were routed into a dimly lit warehouse. The muffled hum of a diesel generator flowed from the building and drifted across the rail yard, carried by the light summer breeze that rustled the leaves in the surrounding forest.

At two minutes after eleven at night, a convoy swept around the corner, led by a two-and-a-half-ton military truck carrying crack Interior Ministry troops in full battle gear. They hastily dismounted and surrounded the fenced compound, weapons at the ready, eyes scanning the tree line. A minute later, through the late-night mist came a lone black limousine bearing the flag of the president of the Russian Republic. It sped through the gate and pulled up next to the train. A senior officer emerged from the shadows and snapped to attention.

First out was the director of the SVR, dressed in a full-length coat. He was followed by Marshal Ryzhkov, commander in chief of the Strategic Rocket Forces. The marshal was in full dress uniform, his rows of medals reflecting the faint moonlight upward to his tight, angular face. After an inordinate amount of time, Nikolai Laptev emerged from the car, aided by an army colonel. He stood for a long moment, taking in the sights, raising his head slightly, and sniffing the pleasant summer air. The trio had been rushed from city's heart via the secret high-speed underground rail line that ran from

the Kremlin to all four quadrants of the compass. It had deposited a handful of key government officials at numerous hardened command bunkers, which populated the line, but had saved this select group of Defense Council members for the final destination. The limo had transported the group the last few miles.

The president strode toward the gray metal platform protruding from the boxcar's recessed wooden door. To reach the car, each man in turn navigated three steep steps. Laptev paused on the last and, gripping the stainless-steel handhold, twisted his body toward his beloved Moscow. Invisible were the city's festive summer lights, but he felt her soothing presence, as so many had down through the centuries. He was merely an instrument to be used as she saw fit. He would most certainly take his rightful place among the heroes who had sacrificed and struggled to thrust Russia on her inexorable journey to greatness. He wanted nothing for himself.

Most confidants assumed this was another in a long series of drills—Laptev knew better. He had been juggling his nuclear forces for the last few months to the point of putting the Americans to sleep. Only a handful of trusted top aides knew the truth. What if they failed him at the last crucial moment? He had planned for that, too. The last Russian president, Nikolai Laptev, lowered his head and ducked inside the door.

Within minutes, the two diesel locomotives roared to life, belching black smoke skyward. The last of the cables was disconnected as the train pulled slowly from the station. The intermediate destination was Gor'kiy, to the southwest. From there the specially configured command train would travel over the stretch of track between Gor'kiy and Kirov, slipping into a heavily forested area thirty kilometers before the city proper to rendezvous with crack Spetsnaz and Air Defense troops.

The Russian president's command train was equipped with the latest in satellite- and terrestrial-communications equipment to maintain tight control of all Russian nuclear forces, even under the worst of conditions. To the north and west, identical trains departed for other dispersal sites, providing well-planned redundancy for Russian command and control. It was ten minutes after three in the afternoon in Washington D C, where the city was melting under the afternoon heat, awaiting the holiday weekend.

CHAPTER 15

"Left standard rudder, ahead one-third, steady on course 195," crisply ordered Sanchez. The young sailors at the controls answered smartly in turn. The tension and silence in Control recalled memories of the last few months. Sanchez stared at the digital depth readout, mentally juggling the myriad of interconnected and mutually dependent parameters that would determine his boat's performance and, ultimately, fate.

San Francisco had slipped between the two intruders, falling in behind the larger Delta at less than eight thousand yards, tucked securely in her baffles. The dangerous Victor trailed *San Francisco* by another ten thousand, at that distance deaf, her old technology sonar unable to weed out the faint, telltale signature of the quiet LA-class boat from the low-frequency reverberations of the Delta's huge propellers. Sanchez hated being sandwiched, but his options were few, and his margin for error was nonexistent. He'd sweat it out just long enough to record signature tapes on the Delta, then slip away, dive deep, and come up six to ten miles behind the Victor, clearly in the tactical driver's seat. Then they could all breathe easily.

Sanchez closed in on the Delta, shooting for no more than four thousand yards astern. A couple of nautical miles sounded huge, but in the pitch black, undersea cat-and-mouse game he was playing, that tiny gap could evaporate in the wink of an eye. Passively generated ranges were estimates, not

absolutes. Surprise could come at any moment given the relative motion.

San Francisco settled on a true heading of 195 degrees, properly trimmed, inching forward on the unsuspecting Delta. It was a game that they had played many times in the past. Sanchez took a stroll around Control to unwind, shaking the tenseness out of his arms. He wanted to measure his crew. They were taking it all in stride. True professionals in every sense of the word, he thought, I couldn't ask for better.

"We made it, Skipper; we're there. It should take another half an hour to close to four thousand," said a lieutenant at the plotting table. The strain partially lifted from Sanchez as he stopped dead in his tracks. He felt a flush of relief, a respite. His boat had regained her natural rhythm. They were in charge, the one forcing events.

"Good," he said, his hands resting comfortably on his hips. "Take it slow and easy." Then, almost as an afterthought, he added, "Take the conn, XO." His number two nodded and barked the announcement to the crew. Sanchez wanted to bone up on his peacetime rules of engagement. He wasn't flirting in Russian waters this day.

At his stateroom door, a panicky sailor ran up behind, out of breath. "Captain, the XO wants you back in Control, sir!"

Shit, he groaned, how had he screwed up? The Victor's sonar was a dog. No way, he thought. Sanchez jogged down the narrow passageway and was back in Control in seconds when he heard the normally unshakable XO hailing sonar on the 21MC.

"Are you sure?" His voice carried his alarm. The taller XO turned as his Captain approached. He spoke in deliberate hushed tones.

"The Delta's increased speed, Skipper. No indication of a turn yet. If she does, we're screwed." Sanchez could have done without the last prediction. He matter-of-factly regained the conn. The XO moved over to supervise the attack plot. The first team was in place.

"We've got to ride the Delta's ass," said Sanchez to the entire room. "If not, the Victor will nail us." He surveyed the crew, busy at work. After a short time, the answers started to flow from the attack team.

"Recommend ten knots, sir." Sanchez nodded and so ordered.

"Aye, aye, sir," said the sailor ringing up the necessary turns on the engine order telegraph.

San Francisco accelerated smoothly, fighting to stay nestled behind the Delta. Sanchez suddenly realized he had lost track of the Victor, a sloppy,

stupid move. He had absolutely no idea where the Russian attack boat was or was heading. Break off, he scolded himself.

"Come right to course 245," ordered Sanchez. "Increase ordered depth to four hundred feet." Then he added in a much lower tone, "We've got to get the Victor out of our baffles." The XO glanced up and nodded approvingly.

As *San Francisco* rose and swung starboard, the rhythmic beating of the Victor's propellers suddenly filled the sensitive hydrophones attached to the hull. Within seconds, the sonar operators had deduced an accurate turn count and sounded the alarm. The ordered course and depth change had made all the difference.

"The Victor's accelerated to probably twelve knots, Skipper, faster than the Delta." Sanchez breathed easier. A break, if you could call it that. They had slipped undetected out of the sandwich.

Sanchez signaled the XO. "Give me a turn time to parallel at eight thousand yards." Then he turned to the 21MC and sonar. "I want an immediate report of any changes in the Victor—speed, depth, anything." Two clicks on the speaker were Sonar's cryptic reply.

Sanchez stepped over and put his hand on the XO's shoulder. His second's pale blue eyes were glued on the two-dimensional plot covered with a maze of colored lines representing the three boats' tracks through the water. Computers could do many things, but manual plotting still persisted despite the best efforts of the shore-based PhDs. And everybody knew that an experienced submariner's brain always won the contest, hands down. Sanchez glanced up at the clock. "Ten seconds to turn, Skipper."

"Come left, resume base course 195." The boat banked gently to port, forcing the crew to grab rails or equipment until she steadied out. An attack submarine flies through water like an airplane flies through the sky. Turns are performed with a balance between the vertical rudder and the co-located horizontal diving or stern planes. The impressive-looking fairwater planes on the sail are for subtle trimming maneuvers. Maintaining the ordered depth is the work of the stern planes.

Sanchez was sitting pretty with both Russians captured in his hydrophone arrays. A beam aspect was always best to detect sudden bearing shifts that signaled a contact's change of course. Sanchez leaned against the polished railing near the tree trunk of the Type 18 periscope, chewing on his options. He sensed this was more than a run-of-the-mill ASW exercise—playing tag with Ivan. What would his opponents do if they detected him?

Normally, despite the belligerent rhetoric, both sides would beat a hasty retreat. But this time he wondered. The Russians were a long way from home. If he blew their cover, they could just possibly panic and send a couple fish his way. Who would be the wiser? Three months previously, a US attack boat had strayed too close to Russian territorial waters and was vigorously prosecuted by Russian surface and airborne ASW forces. Two live torpedoes were dropped by helo, both missed, but it was a sobering encounter for the US submarine force. Had the rules changed? And how would he possibly know until it was too late?

"The Delta's coming up," announced Sonar.

Sanchez frowned. What the hell was the Russian skipper doing now?

The XO's controlled voice broke the silence in Control. "Coming to comm depth I bet." The skipper nodded, but for some reason, he didn't quite believe it. Had he been sucked into a trap by the Russian duo, knowing that the overeager American would fall for their ploy? This was unlike anything Sanchez had faced.

As the Delta rose steadily to a much-shallower depth, *San Francisco* would have to follow or lose her through the acoustically opaque thermal layer. "We're getting hung out to dry," groused Sanchez. Maybe he should slide away, dive deep, drift, let the two Russian boats steam by, and wait for another opportunity. He chaffed at being thrown into a constant reactive mode. This two-boat squeeze was cramping his usually aggressive style.

"Is the Victor coming up?" asked Sanchez. That would be the clincher.

"No, sir," came the answer, "maintaining depth." The answer pleasantly surprised him.

"Diving Officer, fifteen degree up angle on the stern planes. Level out at three hundred and twenty feet." He would leave the Victor behind and follow his prize. Better, he thought. Maybe the Russians weren't acting together after all.

"Aye, aye, Skipper." The young sailor carefully pulled back on the oval control wheel, pitching *San Francisco* gently upward. Sanchez wanted to quickly pop through the thermal layer, calculated to be at three hundred and fifty feet.

"Slow to five knots." Sanchez's eyes narrowed, and his mouth grew taut. "What's the tube load out?" The question caught the ops officer off guard. Standard patrol procedure called for the six torpedo tubes to have at least four Mark 48 torpedoes loaded at all times. Harpoon or Tomahawk

missiles complemented the weapons load out. Maybe one would be empty for maintenance or for holding an acoustic decoy.

"One through four with fish," responded the ops officer nervously. Even the XO gave him an odd look.

"Very well." He sensed the apprehension. "Just a precaution. Any objections?" he asked kiddingly. But he wasn't kidding.

Sanchez turned inward. He was troubled and not sure why. Instincts developed by years of patrolling the Russians' backyard, always in danger, always looking over his shoulder, signaled danger. Get the signature data, and get the hell away, he concluded.

"Delta's leveling out."

Sanchez grunted. The big boomer should have risen to periscope depth for a satellite dump. But instead she had stopped a hundred feet short. Maybe she would trail a VLF wire? The XO gave him a shrug. He was confused too.

"Captain, she's opening doors," said a panicked voice from sonar. The words ignited the control room.

A chorus of curses filled the cramped quarters. "We've been had," snapped Sanchez. He had foolishly underestimated the Victor's commanding officer. The man had him nailed and now was jerking his chain. The tube doors were Ivan's subtle calling card—I've got you, you stupid, American asshole, and I could clean your clock if I chose to. He cursed and kicked himself for booting the ball like a rookie at second base.

Sanchez squeezed the rail surrounding the periscope platform with both hands, mentally calculating his escape. Mortified at being had, his mouth flexed and formed to let loose the necessary orders. He had been humiliated in front of his men, and it hurt.

"Captain, it's the Delta; she's opening her missile-tube doors!" The words from Sonar came slower this time and were a smack across his face. A sudden flash of fear tore at his brain. He fought to maintain calm. A muffled cry filled Control. Stiff, frozen faces marked the crew.

Sonar's unbelievable message left Sanchez momentarily speechless. Two quick steps placed him at the 21MC. He depressed the small pot-metal lever. The words wouldn't come. Sanchez broke through the resistance.

"What the hell are you talking about? You mean the Victor, don't you? The Victor is opening her torpedo-tube doors."

"No, sir," bellowed the chief sonarman. "The fucker is opening missile-tube doors; the second one is moving now. I've heard it before. In the Bering

Sea, during Russian missile tests."

Sanchez straightened and closed his eyes. He couldn't believe this was happening. His heart began to pound. He broke into a sweat. His eyes locked on the XO, everyone else's locked on him. Someone had dealt *San Francisco* a dog-shit hand. Sanchez gritted his teeth. Was Ivan putting him through the ultimate wringer, laughing all the way to Moscow?

"I want a firing solution on the Delta, now," he shouted.

"What the fuck?" replied the ops officer with a look of total disbelief. The man was disoriented. "We can't unload on the Delta, Skipper. The Victor will nail us in the ass; we're totally out of position."

The executive officer stepped over. "Maybe we don't have enough to go on," he offered privately, not necessarily believing what he said but understanding his role. "Remember the rules of engagement."

"Fuck the ROE," said Sanchez. "If this Russian skipper is playing some fucking game, he just crossed the line."

By now everyone in the control room was staring in disbelief, scared and confused. Terrified would be a better word. They were thinking, break off and get us out of here. We don't want to die.

Sanchez turned and glared. The crew tensed as their leader stared them down. "Listen up," he said in a low voice. "This is no bullshit peacetime game. We're going to blow the motherfucker out of the water. Do I make myself clear? If I'm wrong, the Victor will be caught off guard, and we'll nail him too." He didn't elaborate on if he was right.

No one in Control said a word. The ops officer slowly turned to his panel, his face as white as a sheet, and began preparations for torpedo firing. The others resumed their duties, shaken.

"All tubes flooded and ready for firing, Skipper," reported the ops officer, his voice cracking with the strain.

"Open outer doors."

"Opening outer doors." The creaking of the Delta's massive missile-tube doors would mask the slight rumbling as *San Francisco*'s torpedo-tube doors were retracted and locked.

"Doors open."

"Any change in the Victor?"

"No, sir." *San Francisco* might have a chance to break away at flank speed and elude any retaliatory torpedoes, maybe even to get in firing position for a shot. It was a big maybe.

With four missile-tube doors open, the Delta was well into the firing sequence for the first salvo of the SS-N-23 SLBMs resting in her tubes. Each massive door slamming against its stop vindicated Sanchez' order. Even the XO was now resigned, his normally unshakable mask starting to crack. He couldn't believe it was happening—a submariner's fantasy turned nightmare.

"Fire one through four," ordered Sanchez hoarsely. He took a deep breath. "Standby for a flank bell, maximum down angle on the planes. Hard turn to port."

The ops officer hesitated, his finger resting on the plastic button on the attack console. He swallowed hard and then pushed the glowing buttons in sequence. They changed color when depressed. "One away, two away, three away, four away," he reported in cadence.

As each Mark 48 torpedo was ejected from *San Francisco* in a rush of pressurized air, she shuddered. The sailors in Control flinched in response to each impulse transmitted through the hull, as if a lethal jolt of electricity had just surged through their bodies. When number four cleared, the pressure hull was pummeled by the harsh, ringing ping of the Victor's active sonar. It was certain death knocking on their steel door.

Sanchez barked orders, sending *San Francisco* into a radical, steep dive, her single propeller spinning to maximum RPM, the whine reverberating throughout the boat.

"Left five degrees rudder," he ordered. Sailors struggled to maintain their balance amid flying gear.

Suddenly, *San Francisco*'s sonar picked up a spread of enemy torpedoes launched from the Victor. They immediately went active, their miniature sonars easily acquiring the Americans at such short range. But Sonar also picked up the deafening underwater roar as *San Francisco*'s Mark 48 torpedoes tore into the Delta, ripping her hull to shreds, aided by tons of detonating solid-rocket propellant.

Desperately turning and twisting through the ocean depths, *San Francisco* tried to shake the Russian torpedoes that dogged her like hungry sharks drawn to blood. At fifty-five knots, the torpedoes advanced indomitably, rapidly decreasing the range. Sanchez said a silent prayer as he gazed at his magnificent crew. He loved them like family. But he knew there was no escape. In seconds, death's cold hand would reach out and plunge his brave men to an icy end.

CHAPTER 16

A creation of 1950s cold war hysteria, the American/Canadian North American Aerospace Defense Command was buried deep within the bowels of Cheyenne Mountain, west of Colorado Springs. NORAD, as it was called, stood watch over the vast air and space frontiers of the North American land mass. Despite the end of the Cold War, the primary threat axis was still due north—the shortest distance for missiles and bombers from Russia. That rump superpower was still the only sovereign nation on the planet that could annihilate the United States in an afternoon.

Constructed to withstand a determined nuclear onslaught, Cheyenne Mountain's survivability was suspect in the modern age. The intricate design of fifteen huge steel boxes suspended on massive steel springs in a cavern carved from solid granite boggled the mind. Twenty-five-ton blast doors sealed the drive-through entrance, and when those steel monstrosities loudly locked into place, it sent shivers up your spine. Redundant emergency power systems and ample supplies of food and water reinforced the determination to survive any attack. Its longevity was classified, but leaked reports put it at well over one year. Cynics snickered, as if any rational human being could tolerate being locked in a tomb for that duration with the outside world in flames.

Component commands were the Missile Warning Center, keeper of the

early warning satellites floating over the earth and the giant, phased-array radars encircling the continent, and the Space Defense Operations Center. The SPADOC, as it was called, tracked thousands of objects, big and small, orbiting the planet with a system of highly sophisticated radars, optical telescopes, and infrared satellites. Their current focus was on the plague of spaceborne debris. Particles as tiny as a few microns could disable a satellite or pit the Plexiglas on a shuttle. Larger objects, those pushing a few centimeters, were like hundred-mile-per-hour bowling balls in space.

Both the SPADOC and the MWC were at heightened readiness. Sensors, computer systems, and communications gear had been checked and rechecked. Tensions had been higher only twice in the distant past—the Cuban missile crisis and the one day when the Soviets had brazenly launched a handful of ICBMs north from their silos, only to detonate them midflight, shortly after they crossed the pole. They had never said a word, nor had the United States.

At that moment, 22,300 miles above the equator, shortwave, infrared-sensing DSP early warning satellites scanned the earth's surface. They monitored all Russian silo fields and vast ocean areas for the telltale fiery plumes of ballistic missiles. These marvels were America's first line of defense. Their sensitivity for detecting even minute amounts of heat was legend.

During a routine communication check with STRAT-COM's airborne command post, code-named Looking Glass, the DSP over Asia detected a series of hot spots against the cool earth background. The news was instantly bounced off communication satellites and downlinked to satellite control at Falcon AFB on the other side of the globe at Colorado Springs. Forwarded to NORAD, the news triggered an incredibly loud horn, which blared for ten seconds, shattering the tense atmosphere.

Watch standers froze. Astonished faces turned in unison toward the big screen. They searched for the indicator that would jump out, announcing a system-hardware fault or software bug. Instead they were greeted with a rapid succession of small symbols popping on the center screen, marking DSP-provided launch detections in central Russia. It had to be a computer malfunction, they convinced themselves, like the false alarms in the early eighties.

The MWC battle watch commander was struck dumb like his compatriots. The air force general fought to maintain his equilibrium. He

steadied himself while listening to a communication headset clutched in his free hand. Acknowledging the news, his shoulders sagged, and his face paled. He reached for a small handset mounted on a metal bracket by his knees. Swallowing hard, the words finally flowed, albeit in a jerky monotone.

"This is not a test," he announced haltingly over the PA system. "I repeat, this is not a test." The statement echoed throughout the cavernous chamber. He couldn't believe the words himself.

The delayed reaction was palpable, like a car bomb exploding. Groans and gasps rose in chorus. Then a tidal wave of sheer bedlam swept the cavern. Watch standers brushed off the initial shock and sprinted to battle stations, manning consoles and conducting communications checks with STRATCOM's stable of nuclear forces. Action, any action, acted as strong medicine against the tug of personal despair.

Preliminary tracking data blossomed on the three-dimensional polar projection of the earth dominating the center screen. The IBM mainframes, dedicated to cataloguing the attack down to the last reentry vehicle, predicted threatened targets. Targets meant people and places. This was no drill. ICBMs launched from the Russian heartland would take thirty or so minutes to fly their deadly course.

Forty-five seconds after the ripple of ICBM firing, sea-launched ballistic-missiles rose from the ocean off the US East Coast. They arched westward, with a time to target measured in minutes.

"Sir," reported a stammering officer near the battle watch commander, "we have attack confirmation. Eighty-five SS-18s. Twelve SLBMs from Track Alpha Two. Possible cruise missiles have been detected off both coasts and in the Gulf of Mexico. The SS-18s are targeted on Peacekeeper and Minuteman forces. SLBMs are against SAC bases and C3 sites. It will be six or seven minutes before we pick up the first ICBM reentry vehicles on BMEWS." BMEWS was the early warning radar system, the modern version of the old DEW line stretching across Alaska.

The colonel wearing the headset sat motionless. Receiving added bad news, he dutifully passed it along. The first ICBMs would arrive in twenty-five minutes, while the lead SLBMs would strike in less than eight.

The battle watch commander placed his hand on the little-used phone connecting him directly to the National Military Command Center in Washington and to STRATCOM headquarters in Omaha. At higher DEFCONs, he would have accessed the president directly. Today the NMCC

had the conn. A quick glance at the screen highlighted the swarm of hostile missiles bearing down on the continental United States, their colored leaders inching across the globe.

“This can’t be happening,” he gasped inwardly. His jaw tightened as he picked up the red phone. Beginning to speak, he stumbled over the words he had repeatedly rehearsed and committed to memory after countless drills in the mountain.

Thomas sat stewing. Another ten minutes and he would ring Alexander again. Thomas had calmed down yet was obsessed with the thought of a Russian military move somewhere around the globe. But where?

Suddenly a series of short, sharp horn blasts echoed throughout the NMCC. The local klaxon had been triggered by NORAD, the distress signal relayed by secure landline. Startled and incredulous, Thomas sprang to his feet and gazed through the thick floor-to-ceiling glass, a shocked expression painted across his face. A knot formed in his stomach. He zeroed in on the watch commander, down in the pit. The general on watch staggered and then backed down in his chair, stunned. He stared into space for precious moments then grabbed an aide by the collar and whispered into his ear. The man nodded and ran off.

The watch section on the floor collectively held their breath. No movement, no noise. The emotional rollercoaster at NORAD was replayed in detail, but these unfortunates, farther down the intelligence pipeline, didn’t have the entire picture just yet.

To Thomas’s right, a door opened, and the battle watch commander’s aide, an army officer escorted by marines, stepped through. “Please follow me, General Thomas,” he asked. Thomas rose without saying a word. The marines fell in on his flanks.

Thomas navigated the staircase and found himself immersed in the chaos gripping the NMCC. The noise level had increased tenfold.

“You better hear this, sir,” the watch commander shouted, handing Thomas a phone connected to NORAD. After code-word authentication, a distraught voice on the other end struggled through a cryptic attack summary laced with technical jargon. Thomas stood stiffly, listening, but not physically reacting, his mind frozen on his abortive attempt to reach Alexander only forty minutes earlier. Like the others, his brain was in full retreat.

He had sensed trouble but did nothing. No matter that his take had been completely off base. Who could have imagined? Thomas’s failure made him

ill. NORAD asked for orders. It was the president's and STRATCOM's call, Thomas had answered curtly. Follow procedures in place until instructed otherwise. Get General Morgan to the mountain. He wasn't telling them anything they didn't already know.

Thomas began to drop the handset but stopped. "Make sure CINCSTRAT is getting his planes away."

"Already done, sir," was the reply. "They're off, but we can't tell how many will make it." Thomas nodded sadly. The big planes no longer on alert had little chance of escape from a surprise attack. "Let me know when you have radar confirmation." Another "yes, sir" came from the voice on the line. Thomas hung up the phone and looked at the ashen face of the watch commander.

A myriad of possibilities raced through Thomas's mind. Was it an accidental launch by a renegade Russian officer? Computer malfunction? It couldn't be a deliberate attack. Yet only moments before, he had seen the evidence, the repositioning of Russian hardware. What were the targets? NORAD didn't have decent data and wouldn't for at least ten minutes. My God, my family, he thought. How could people function? God help us all.

"Make the call," he said out of nowhere. It was more instinct than anything. The man opposite him shouldn't have needed prompting, but who was he to judge. Thomas was teetering on the knife edge himself. General Patterson hesitated and then unlocked a red plastic encasement, handing one of the handsets to Thomas.

After several rings, an icy White House staffer answered. "Yes?"

The watch commander took a deep breath. The muscles in his neck were as taut as wire. "This is General Patterson at the NMCC. We have a confirmed Russian attack against targets in the continental United States; I must speak to the president immediately." The words sounded bizarre to Thomas. Even from where he stood, with the hard evidence staring him in the face, it seemed preposterous.

The voice at the other end paused then said, "What? There wasn't an exercise scheduled for today; it's not until next week."

"This isn't a goddamn test," shouted the watch officer, "put the president on the line immediately." The veins on his temples bulged. Thomas steadied his subordinate by touching his arm.

"One moment." Within seconds, the president answered. His greeting signaled consternation and confusion.

“Mr. President,” Patterson reported rapidly, “we are under nuclear attack by the Russians. NORAD has confirmed nearly one hundred missiles inbound. We’re tracking down the chairman of the Joint Chiefs and the secretary of defense.”

The president’s voice cracked, like someone had suddenly kneed him in the stomach. “What do you mean we’re under attack? Is this a test?” The man’s anguish could be felt through the wire.

“No, sir. NORAD has not made an error. We’re under nuclear attack.” The president could only mutter, “Oh my God.” Before he could say anything else, the burly chairman of the Joint Chiefs burst through the door like a hurricane hitting shore and snapped his fingers for a handset. His body vibrated with energy, his reddened face boiling. He forced a healthy dose of self-control down his throat before speaking.

“Mr. President,” said the chairman evenly, “the secretary of defense will be here momentarily.”

“The secretary of state is here with me,” stammered the president. “What the hell is going on, General?” It was a plea more than a question. The chairman summarized the terrible numbers. The killer was the nearly one hundred SS-18 class ICBMs. Then he recited the rest of the bad news—first impact for SLBM warheads in seven minutes; Twenty-one for the ICBMs. No time for discussion; we need to act.

The rapid-fire report left the president breathless. He mumbled something to an aide off-line. Thomas wondered if the president truly comprehended what he had just heard—the magnitude of the crisis. His heart broke for the man across the river, standing there with a phone in his hand and wondering what had happened to his world in the last few minutes.

“Mr. President,” said the chairman with conviction, “we must retaliate. We’ve got less than fifteen minutes. CINC-STRAT has to receive authorization to launch our Peacekeeper and Minuteman missiles before the Russians destroy them in their silos. We should execute SIOP Option 2M immediately. I must stress the urgency, Mr. President. We have only minutes.”

The president struggled against the stiff current sweeping him toward Armageddon. “How do I know this isn’t all a terrible mistake?” he blurted. “The Russians would never do this. A surprise attack is out of the question. There must be another explanation. General, you assured me that this kind of mistake would never happen again, that all the software problems had been

fixed.” The president was grasping at straws. He was no different than the rest of them.

“NORAD has verified the attack, sir,” answered the chairman, his frustration beginning to explode to the surface. “Multiple, independent sensors are tracking the missiles. There is no mistake! I repeat, Mr. President, we need a decision!”

“Mr. President,” they heard the secretary of state plead off-line, “we need to talk.” There was a lapse as the line went dead. Thomas and the generals sagged in unison, lowering their handsets and staring blankly at the linoleum floor. The tactical support team of military and civilian advisors formed a semicircle around the trio, awaiting orders to do something, anything.

Thomas raised his head and surveyed the emotional bloodbath sweeping the floor. Thomas knew war, understood war, but this wasn’t his war. War slowly builds in intensity over months, even years, then climaxes in victory or defeat. In Vietnam, he had knowingly killed, calculating violence against enemy troops. His personal war had been a few hundred feet above the jungle canopy, not face-to-face, down in the mud, and he was certain he had left his mark. The trailing napalm fireballs and cluster-bomb fireworks from his Phantom, spread over vast tracks of jungle, surely took their toll. And he had seen enough dead soldiers up close, both American and Vietnamese to last him a lifetime. Two inspections of the war zone, familiarization tours for close-air-support pilots, they were called, had given him a belly full. Yet he had learned to live with the killing and the death, and later found peace of mind. He never had been one of the handwringers who lamented their roles in the fighting.

But on this particular afternoon, time was their enemy. Time mocked them. Time compressed so intensely that all experienced a vertical emotional ramp-up that threatened their sanity. His thoughts returned to Sally, who he loved more than his own life. She was at home, probably worried sick about him, wondering if she should keep dinner. Tears welled in his eyes, but he fought them with all his strength. Like all good soldiers, feelings were to be brutally suppressed in crisis. But how do you watch your world disintegrate before your eyes?

Thomas heard a commotion and turned to see Alexander and his troupe marching through the back entrance. Alexander’s face was flushed; sweat cascaded down his cheeks. Before he even had time to catch his breath,

General Patterson was shouting in one ear while the chairman acted out the president's response in the other. Alexander reacted with predictable overload.

"He's incapable of making a decision," was the part Thomas caught. Alexander nodded in sympathy. The chain of command was cast in concrete. It had to be. Any breach or challenge to authority would be like tossing a hand grenade in a crowded bus station. They could cajole, bluster, and rant, but the president had to make the final decision.

It seemed an eternity before the Commander-in-Chief returned. The poor man sounded on the brink of a nervous breakdown. He panted through his sentences. A touch of anger crept into his voice.

"Jonathon says that I should leave for the airborne command post. He says there is time to consider options, to contact the Russians. I agree. I need more information. I can't be expected to make a decision like you're asking for on so little information." The president paused. His anger ripened as he sensed his words fell hollow on the men in the NMCC. "Jonathon summarized Option 2M. Do you really recommend launching all our ICBMs, General? Haven't the Russians launched only a fraction of theirs?"

The president grew reflective. "We have to stop this. This must be a mistake, an accidental launch by some crazy local commander. We'll contact the Russians on the hotline. We must stop this!"

Thomas was an expert on the various SIOP options and started to mentally recite the objections from Genser. The answers would seem as jargon to civilians. How, for God's sake, do you debate nuclear targeting strategies in thirty seconds to men backed into a corner? He bent and whispered what he considered relevant to Alexander. The secretary nodded.

"Mr. President," interjected Alexander, sensing the hopelessness, "The chairman is right. This was a deliberate attack. Those SS-18s carry nearly one thousand reentry vehicles; with their accuracy, they can destroy the majority of our ICBMs sitting in their silos before we fire a shot. If that happens, we'll have few ICBMs left, while the Russians will have much of their ICBM force intact, in reserve." Alexander broke his delivery infrequently, coughing into his balled hand, his dry throat turning hoarse.

"We'd have to capitulate and seek a brokered peace on Russian terms, or strike with our bombers and submarines. They don't provide the hard target kill capability the ICBMs do. We would strike softer targets, industrial sites and military bases, and invite a similar response from the Russians.

That's what they're counting on; that we'll be unwilling to conduct a retaliatory strike that could lead to a wider exchange. We must retaliate to convince the Russians to negotiate on our terms."

Thomas nodded approvingly at his boss. He had done well. Alexander acknowledged Thomas. The secretary had recited the proper script, but his heart was crushed. This was a different Alexander than Thomas had ever witnessed. A nearly broken man, heroically battling the odds as the strength drained from his body.

"I don't consider launching our entire ICBM force as a proportional response," replied the president angrily.

"Mr. President," interrupted the secretary of state, "We must get you out of Washington immediately and arrange a rendezvous with NEACP. We'll have the bulk of our strategic forces intact, believe me. Launching our ICBMs will only convince the Russians that we are committed to massive retaliation. Ask the chairman what types of targets will be hit with 2M. It's more than ICBM silos."

"Is that true?" asked the president, sounding wounded.

"Yes," answered the chairman directly, "there are other key military targets. But they're necessary to break up the Russian attack and stop a second wave."

"Are any of the targets near Moscow?" barked the secretary of state.

"God damn it!" shouted the chairman, "We're at war. The sons of bitches attacked us; tens of thousands of Americans will be slaughtered. I'll be damned if we should sit by and let the bastards detonate over one thousand nuclear warheads on our soil without lifting a finger. Mr. President, we need a decision!"

"I say we explore every alternative before we commit national suicide, Mr. President. It's our only hope," countered Genser.

"Will other weapons be used, General?" asked the president wearily. The talk of numbers of this and that had cluttered his brain.

"A small number of SLBMs. Any bombers in the air will be recalled and sent to designated recovery locations to await further orders. I must emphasize that we've only ten minutes to decide."

"Very well," responded the president, emotion choking his words. "I wish to confer off-line with Secretary Genser."

"Yes, sir," answered the chairman and Alexander softly in unison.

Those two, plus Thomas, stood wearily, shifting from foot to foot, the

strain permanently implanted on their faces. Collectively they eyed the big board, soaking up the disparate pieces. When the first-ever hostile nuclear weapon detonated on US soil, a small, white symbol mushroomed over Cape Cod AFS, site of the East Coast Pave Paws radar. The computer-generated icon expanded to a circle, the size proportional to the calculated damage radius from the blast.

"Those bastards," shouted the chairman at the air, "those no-good, lousy bastards!" Other white icons peppered the map as Russian SLBM warheads methodically worked their way inland. The watch commander turned to the chairman. His voice cracked as he passed the grim news. NORAD had confirmed nuclear detonations, and that Loring, Plattsburgh, and Griffiss, all STRATCOM bases, had been destroyed. Installations further inland would be hit momentarily. At that moment, Thomas had lost personal friends, murdered by the Russians' treachery.

Thomas felt helpless, more helpless than he had ever felt in his life, watching the nuclear explosions march across the eastern United States, reducing his country's military power to useless rubble. He wrestled with the contradictions. They could capitulate unconditionally and limit American casualties or strike hard to punish Russian aggression. Reward Russian duplicity but spare the world from the horrors of all-out nuclear war, or accept the consequences of retaliation to prevent world domination by a renegade nation? He didn't have the answer. He doubted anyone did, let alone the president of the United States.

"General, Mr. Secretary, the president is back," said the chairman's aide.

The president had surrendered to the dark forces. His stiff words came deliberately. He got to the point.

"I accept your recommendation," he stated haltingly. "I hope to God that by doing this, it will stop here, that the Russians will realize they have to negotiate, and that the casualties can be limited." He sounded like a man who didn't believe his own words.

No one said anything. The sudden release of apprehension triggered a letdown. It was as if someone had suddenly let the air out of an inflated bag. The decision, the one they had vehemently endorsed, left them empty. "I'll ensure your orders are carried out," said Alexander sadly. "You've made the right decision, Mr. President." He actually believed it. They all did.

"I hope so; I truly hope so," the president said weakly. "I won't be

leaving Washington," he continued. "We must end this insanity, no matter how much we detest the Russians. There must be a solution that will preserve our nation and the world." The line went dead once more.

In less than one minute from when the president had authorized release, multiple airborne command posts swiftly transmitted emergency action messages (EAMs) to the American nuclear forces poised for a powerful counterstroke.

CHAPTER 17

Intermittent rain showers had hit the Texas Panhandle and northeastern New Mexico. Approaching the rugged eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains, the graceful bomber broke through towering thunderheads into clear, open skies, dotted with irregular cumulus clouds. Puffy and white at the tops, and splashed with a pallet of grays at the bottoms, they looked like a fleet of rusty tramp steamers resting at anchor in a calm, blue sea.

The trek across the Rockies was spectacular. Only the highest peaks retained splotchy, off-white traces of winter. Alpine lakes dotted the treeless landscape, partially masked by the late-afternoon shadows, creating a camouflage of light purples, grays, and browns.

“Perfect for a low-level run,” mused Grant, glancing out the small window to his left. The B-1B’s subdued paint scheme would melt into the natural mosaic, playing havoc with an interceptor’s hopes for a visual ID.

Grant guided his plane diagonally across northern Utah, crossing the Idaho border on a course that would take them fifty miles north of Boise. Grabowski happily reported that they had picked up a few minutes from favorable winds. At 4:26 Mountain Time, half an hour from McChord, a UHF satellite transceiver in the forward avionics space began to hum, keyed by an air force AFSAT communications package riding piggyback on a navy FLTSATCOM bird high above the equator.

“Holy shit,” Ledermeyer shouted into the intercom. His voice had a sharp edge. “Emergency Action Message.” For a moment, he was frozen. A jab from Jefferson brought him to life.

EAMs, short messages repeated over special, war-reserve communication frequencies, had to be recorded, verified, and authenticated. Ledermeyer would verify that the message was complete and correct, but only Buck and Joe could authenticate. Sophisticated error detection and correction schemes kept bit error rates to a minimum, countering enemy jammers and radio-frequency propagation disruptions from nuclear explosions tearing at the atmosphere.

Joe stared incredulously at Buck, his face shifting from puzzled to confused. “What the hell is going on?” he asked.

Buck calmly reached forward and punched a small red button to acknowledge the cockpit alarm. “Beats me,” he answered. Outwardly he remained composed, but inwardly was a different story.

The plane’s main flight computer had digested the digital input from the crypto device downstream from the UHF transceiver and then spit out the results to a thermal printer next to Ledermeyer’s ejection seat. He studied the brief message, checking the header, then, word by word, verifying the format of the text in the body. Buck removed his bulky flight gloves and retrieved a small plastic box containing a two-inch computer diskette. He inserted it into a drive on the front of the flight computer. The codes stored on the diskette would be displayed on the screen next to those extracted from the message body. If identical, Buck and Joe would make a final comparison to the hardcopy for an exhaustive authentication. Buck waited nervously.

Ledermeyer thrust the printed message forward into Joe’s hand at the same instant the nuclear release codes contained on the little diskette cascaded down the computer display. Joe’s eyes were riveted on the screen, momentarily darting back to the message gripped in his glove. “Shit,” he said excitedly. “Think it could be a mistake?”

Buck pulled a thin folder from the doomsday case. “It’s real,” he said, balancing the red folder in his lap. He ran his finger down a short list of message types, stopping at the one where the message format exactly matched that in the EAM. “We’re to orbit north of the Canadian border. Then wait for the go code—if it comes.”

Joe leaned back in his seat. His world had just exploded. Ledermeyer and Johnson were silent, the normal chatter on the intercom had disappeared

with the stunning realization that they might be going to war. It seemed impossible, unfathomable. Less than twenty-four hours before, they had been on a training mission, clicking through a canned mission scenario, which culminated with a perfect drop of dummy B-61s on an instrumented range. They could do it in their sleep. But now the bombs in the belly weren't dummies, and the bad guys weren't computer-driven emulations. Living, breathing Russians would be trying to kill them.

Buck wrestled with the orders resting in his lap. "A mistake?" he wondered for a moment. "Fat chance," he muttered to himself. To sortie the bomber force and place them in holding patterns meant war. There was no other explanation. The pause was nothing more than a breather for the NCA to weigh the attack options.

Slouched in his seat, Buck stared at the sky and mulled the odds. As the aircraft commander, his crew would look to him to bring them home—to what he couldn't imagine. STRAT-COM felt that 30 to 50 percent of the B-1s would return, or so they said. Buck thought less than 20 percent was a far more realistic number, and that's if they got lucky. The kicker was the assumption that tankers would service the bombers on the homeward leg. Buck had always been fatalistic; it suited his temperament.

Gazing out the Plexiglas windshield, his thoughts turned to family and friends—it hurt. The crystal-clear definition of being a bomber pilot in the United States Air Force whacked him across the face. He shook off the self-pity and returned to the task at hand. It was his job, one that he had committed to and trained for much of his adult life. He reassured himself that he would do it well.

Topping-off fuel tanks was the first order of business. The gas would be provided by a lone KC-135 tanker assigned to the 301st Air Refueling Wing based at Malstrom AFB. The unglamorous tankers were the lifeblood of the strategic bomber force. They were every bit as important as the bombers striking the targets and a high-priority target for the enemy. Their movements would be closely scrutinized to destroy them on the ground or in the air. Raze the fields, and the army starves. It was as old as history.

The mating dance scheduled over Canada between bombers and tankers was a masterpiece of planning, but frail. The slightest disruption would create a bow wave of chaos that would cascade through the force. Once committed, the bombers were particularly vulnerable. Bringing them down short of their objectives, loaded with weapons and fuel, at some civilian airfield or

backwoods recovery site was courting disaster. On foreign soil, the results would be catastrophic. Once topped-off, they had perhaps half an hour to orbit before they would have to either head north to war or south to sanctuary, far from the reach of Russian bombers and ICBMs. Already, support teams were dispersing to sites in northern Mexico where they would wait for crippled aircraft to limp south.

Buck glanced at his watch. 4:40 p.m. Rendezvous would be in twenty-five minutes. His crew monitored instruments and referenced manuals, anything to divert their attention. He felt their pain.

Suddenly, another alarm flashed on the instrument console. Buck tightened. Joe slumped in his seat.

“I want a status report from all stations,” Buck ordered. An infusion of formality marked his tone.

On the bridge of USS *Texas*, the captain stewed in his chair, perched four feet off the green linoleum deck. He leaned back, his shoes resting on the bulkhead under the thick glass bridge windows. His chin was cradled by his thumb and forefinger. It was a fair day, with relatively calm seas for this high latitude, a stiff breeze blowing from the northwest. He had been up before daybreak to keep a close eye on the Russian frigate five nautical miles off the starboard beam. She had been shadowing *Texas* for over ten hours and had worn out her welcome.

Texas had been steaming in circles for the past three weeks. Her captain felt cramped, boxed in by Russian combatants on three sides, and constantly overflown by Bear and Backfire aircraft. They could unload on *Texas* with no warning, and he wouldn’t be able to do anything about it. So far they had behaved. His orders cautioned against pushing too hard, which suited him just fine.

Texas was ideally suited for this tough operation. Nuclear propulsion meant endurance—no need to gas up every few days. She could remain on station for weeks, months—if need be—only needing an occasional drop of groceries. She bristled with Harpoon and Tomahawk anti-ship missiles, complemented by Standard surface-to-air missiles, making her more than a match for the Russian ships nearby.

Enough, the captain thought. “Officer of the Deck,” he called, rising up in his chair, “Get rid of that frigate. All ahead flank.” They had done the same to a destroyer two days earlier, running a Russian skipper into the ground.

“Yes, sir,” responded the OOD. While orders flew, the communications

officer burst through the back door to the Bridge, slamming it hard against the bulkhead.

"Captain," he stammered, out of breath. "Flash message from CINCPACFLT."

The captain looked puzzled, taking the message and holding it in one hand. All eyes were glued on the man in the chair, his face expressionless.

"I'm not sure what they mean, sir."

The captain knew. "Boatswain," shouted the captain, quickly jumping from his chair, "sound general quarters. OOD, cancel that flank bell. Ahead standard."

The boatswain hesitated, his mouth hanging open. A stern look sent him flying to the 1MC with a prompt, "Aye, aye, sir."

The general alarm brought the ship to life. The boatswain's repeated call over the 1MC that it was not a drill ratcheted the sense of urgency. Sailors flew down ladders and sprinted down passageways to their assigned battle stations.

Chelson, working on message traffic in the wardroom, threw his pen on the table and tripped trying to get out of his chair. What the shit? he thought, grabbing his cap and heading out the door.

"What's going on, sir?" yelled a first class machinist's mate headed in the same direction.

"Don't know." Sprinting up two ladders, Chelson burst through the door into the combat information center. Total confusion reigned.

"What's going on?" No immediate answer.

Chelson relieved the CIC watch officer on duty and motioned for the phone talker to bird-dog him around the space. "Tell me when you get manned and ready reports."

"Yes, sir," answered the young sailor excitedly.

The captain stepped out on bridge wing, studying the Russian frigate. So far she had not made a move. Within one minute, sailors and officers with general quarters stations on the bridge had arrived and were donning battle dress. The ship's executive officer, the general quarters officer-of-the-deck, stepped toward the captain, buckling the strap on his helmet.

"What the hell is going on, Skipper?"

"Here, take a look at this," answered the captain, handing the message to the XO.

"My God, execute the CINCPAC OPLAN? Are they serious?"

“No idea, but we’re not going to wait for clarification. I’ll be in CIC. I want to know the minute that frigate makes a change in course or speed or trains a gun mount. So far it looks like Ivan hasn’t got the word. Any questions?”

“No, sir.”

The captain strode through the door into the blackness of CIC, broken only by an occasional red light and the soft glow from radar repeaters and computer consoles. Instant transition from day to night forced him to stand there blinking. His sight would slowly be restored to capture the dim light. Near the large navy tactical data-system console he spied Chelson, the tactical action officer.

“I saw the message, Skipper,” said Chelson grimly. “What are your orders?”

“Where are the destroyer and the cruiser?” Chelson poked at the horizontal repeater. He touched two separate symbols, both diamonds, denoting hostiles, but there was no radar blip under them.

The captain tugged at the stubble on his chin. “Lock on the frigate with both guns and open fire,” said the captain, poking at the flat screen. “When we’ve put the frigate out of action, we’ll steam southeast at flank speed and let loose Harpoons on the two to the northwest. How good is our last position on those two?”

Chelson swallowed hard. The transition to combat had been too rapid. He finally answered his CO’s question. “It’s about half an hour old. They moved out of radar range, but we had a good course and speed on both of them. We could launch the helo for an update?”

“We don’t have time,” responded the captain. “We’ll just spread the shots over a sector based on a DR from their last position and hope we get a couple of hits.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.”

Chelson dutifully passed the orders over his headset.

“Weapons free track 5147,” he ordered crisply. Those down the chain of command at other consoles understood the words but twisted their torsos to visibly spot the TAO. Yes, he was serious.

The young officer at the gun fire control console pressed a square, plastic button and slewed the five-inch gun director to the azimuth of the frigate.

“Locked on target,” he reported in less than ten seconds. The Russian

frigate's electronic warfare suite would instantly detect the fire-control radar's unique emissions. But it would be too late for anything but curses and prayers.

The sharp retort of the twin guns fore and aft jerked the bridge sailors as each projectile blasted from the slender gray barrels in sheets of flame and smoke. The first two rounds were short, benchmark water spouts mushrooming near the frigate. The next salvo was dead on target, erupting violently near the Russian frigate's bridge and aft superstructure. The guns continued to pound away unmercifully.

"CIC, Bridge," the executive officer reported excitedly, "multiple hits on the frigate. No topside activity, nothing."

After more than fifteen hits on the Russian frigate, Chelson ordered cease-fire. By then she was dead in the water with a port list; topside fires roared the length of the hapless ship. Thick, black smoke billowed skyward, marking her grave in the icy waters of the North Pacific.

Texas swung briskly to port, changing course to unmask the Harpoon canisters. When steadied up, Chelson signaled to engage the other two hostiles. With only an estimated position, they would launch each Harpoon down a bearing line, leaving it up to the super-smart missile to figure out where the target lay.

"Ready to fire," reported the officer at the Harpoon control panel.

"Fire," was the order.

The first Harpoon burst out of its canister in a cloud of billowing smoke and flame. The roar was deafening. It was followed by two more. *Texas* changed course, firing another salvo from the quad canister on the opposite side.

"All birds away, Captain," reported Chelson. "Three at the cruiser and two at the destroyer."

"Very well," answered the captain. "Set EMCON. Secure all radar and communications emissions. I'm going back to the bridge."

"Aye, aye, Captain." He stepped quickly through the oval doorway and barked an order at his number two. "Come right to one nine zero."

The order was properly repeated back followed by an "aye, sir."

"XO, come here." The captain was leaning over the navigator's chart, formulating a plan for rendezvousing with the battle group.

"What is it, Skipper?"

"We'll steam southwest for a few hours to see if we can throw Ivan off

our trail. They'll expect us to head due east. Our biggest problem will be stumbling across a Russian submarine. Maintain twenty-six knots and commence zigzagging."

"Aye, aye, Skipper."

"I want a meeting of all department heads in my cabin in fifteen minutes. Get the navigator to relieve you. I'll be down in radio."

"Bridge, Radio, is the captain there?" said a voice over the 21MC. "We have additional flash traffic."

"Radio, Bridge, the captain is on his way."

CHAPTER 18

USS *Michigan*, the second Trident ballistic-missile submarine of the Ohio class, was securely berthed outboard of USS *Georgia* at Delta pier, Naval Submarine Base, Bangor, Washington. As big as a World War II cruiser, her seventeen thousand tons were masked by the graceful lines of her cigar-shaped albacore hull, especially when hidden beneath the blue-green water that lapped against the pier. Like a majestic black iceberg, one had to see a Trident perched naked on supporting wooden blocks in dry dock to truly appreciate her immenseness and her stark beauty.

Both PACFLT boats were in refit following rigorous seventy-five-day patrols in the Northern Pacific. *Michigan* had been recuperating for four hectic weeks. *Georgia* had docked only three days previously, fresh from sea. Her sailors had spilled onto the dock soon after the mooring lines had gone over, replaced by her second crew for the next patrol. And so it went in the Trident fleet. Two crews per boat, over fifty percent of the boats at sea, month after month, year after year.

The eighteen Trident ballistic-missile submarines of the United States Navy proudly carried the torch first lit with the commissioning of USS *George Washington* in the early 60s. The old boats were long since scrapped, but the new Tridents, with their C-4 and D-5 MIRVed nuclear-tipped missiles, kept the faith. Just like thirty years earlier, the navy's stealthy

missile boats secured the peace. Despite the evaporation of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Empire, the top-secret target grid coordinates for the missile warheads still lay in Russia. The C-4s, or Trident 1s, less accurate and carrying a smaller punch, were assigned the urban-industrial target base, while the super-accurate D-5s or Trident 2s threatened nuclear delivery systems and command and control. The Tridents continued to generate more heartburn in the Kremlin than any missile since the ancient Atlas E ICBMs in the early sixties.

Michigan's Blue Crew was commanded by Captain Stephen Jackson. Jackson, lean and trim for his forty-five years and a top Naval Academy graduate, was a veteran of twelve SSBN patrols, mostly in the older Poseidon submarines now decommissioned and resting in the boneyard. This command tour was his first in an SSBN and the culmination of twenty-four arduous years assigned to the boats. It had been backbreaking, yet immensely rewarding. He rankled having to share *Michigan* with the commanding officer of the Gold Crew. Captain Hallowell was a fine naval officer and a close personal friend, but there is a strong emotional bond between a captain and his ship. Reporting on board for turnover was always discomforting. It took weeks before he truly felt she was once again his.

The Friday before Labor Day was hot and clear, with a refreshing, light breeze blowing from the west, rippling the calm Hood Canal. The crew eagerly awaited the long holiday weekend, their last respite before another grueling patrol. Jackson relaxed in the Conning station atop the massive black sail jutting skyward from *Michigan*'s hull. The fairwater planes attached to the sail made him feel like he was soaring in the cockpit of one of those stealth bombers the air force raved about. But he personally commanded more destructive power than they could ever imagine. His twenty-four D-5 missiles carried enough brute power to dismantle a century of civilization in half the world. It was a sobering proposition, but one that all SSBN skippers lived with and learned to accept. Directly behind him, the multipurpose and attack periscopes towered overhead like pine trees, their mottled camouflage paint scheme contrasting with the flat black of the sail.

The scenery surrounding Bangor was breathtaking. Sunlight danced and shimmered off the azure water of the Hood Canal, framed by stands of tall pines as far as the eye could see. It looked like a scene from a glossy travel brochure. Jackson ran his fingers through the remnants of his sandy brown hair. Touches of gray had only recently sprouted around his ears, but he had

lost the majority of his crop on top. Deep lines, fed by years of constant worry and lack of sleep, ran under his intense brown eyes and down to the corners of his mouth. His wife teased him that he was far too serious. But his toughness was born of a crushing accountability that burned out most nuclear navy men long before thirty-five, sending them packing to the civilian world with ulcers and broken marriages. The unforgiving standards of the navy's nuclear-power program stressed the twin tenants of a near-religious attention to detail and adherence to written procedures. Those who failed their masters at Naval Reactors were summarily cashiered. A handful like Jackson thrived, the lure of command at sea outweighing any short-term discomfort. He was a different breed, and he knew it. The obnoxious growl of an old-fashioned-looking sound-powered phone snapped him back to reality. "Captain."

"Sir," reported the chief engineer from down in the bowels of the boat, "we've finished the reactor instrumentation tests. We'll clean things up and then conduct a few casualty drills with the duty section. We should have everything wrapped in two or three hours. Still want to steam the plant over the weekend?"

"Yeah," Jackson replied. "Public Works called after lunch, and they're still having problems with the shore power. I don't want any problems this weekend. The last thing I want is some late-night phone call."

"Aye, aye, sir," the chief engineer answered, "I'll let you know when we're done."

"I may not be here," Jackson said, "I've got a party tonight, so I'll be going ashore early. Tell the command duty officer."

"Yes, sir."

Jackson savored one final sweep of the horizon before descending. Then the phone growled again.

"Captain," he answered once more.

"Sir, this is the comm officer. Could you please come to Radio? I'm not sure I understand this message." Jackson shook his head. Three freshly minted nuke officers had joined the wardroom during the stand down; the comm officer was one. He swore the quality was slipping from when he went through the program over twenty years earlier. Maybe he was getting too set in his ways.

"How come we old-timers always think we were better in our day than the current JOs joining the fleet?" he chuckled to himself.

"What is it?" Jackson finally asked.

“I think you had better see for yourself, sir.”

“Very well, I’ll be right down,” he replied, annoyed the young man had screwed up his afternoon daydreaming.

Jackson slipped through the thick steel hatch at his feet and into the dark, confined trunk leading to *Michigan*’s pressure hull. At the bottom of the ladder, he descended through the main hatch into the upper reaches of the boat. Radio was on the first level just aft of the control room, behind an aluminum cipher-locked door. He was greeted by the comm officer and the chief radioman, both worried. The chief’s look bothered him.

The nervous young comm officer stammered while the captain scanned the short message. “I don’t understand this, Skipper; it’s an emergency dispersal order. Looks like the real thing. But it’s got to be a mistake. This sure isn’t funny right before Labor Day.”

The lines on Jackson’s forehead deepened. He rubbed his chin and raised his eyebrows.

“It’s authentic,” he observed in guarded tones. It took a few seconds for the impact to hit. Shit, he thought, I don’t believe this. Then his heart began to race as he catalogued the implications. Why would CINCPACFLT order an emergency dispersal? And there wasn’t a clue as to a time limit. Immediately, twenty-four hours, or what? He had forgotten the different response codes in the applicable OP-NAV instruction stuffed in some out-of-the-way safe. He would have the duty officer retrieve it.

“Chief, let me use the 21MC.” The veteran sailor stepped aside, skirting the racks of radio gear to give the captain breathing room. Before Jackson could depress the lever, the chief radioman interrupted.

“Skipper,” he said, staring at the clattering teletype, “another message. Probably a cancellation, sir. I’ll bet they realized the screwup. Boy is somebody’s tit going to be in the wringer over this one.”

When the chief ripped the yellow printout from the teletype, his jaw dropped. Beads of sweat in pooled on his brow. Speechless, he passed it to Jackson like a sacred parchment. A quick look for Jackson sufficed.

“Oh, my God,” Jackson muttered under his breath. It was a defense condition (DEFCON) change from five to one, moving them from peacetime to war in one quick stroke. An attack was imminent. He leaned against an equipment rack; his eyes pointed skyward. Something was wrong, terribly wrong, but he had zero information and precious little time to act.

“What the hell?” he reflected silently. His head was spinning. “Get a

grip," he told himself. He sucked in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "How much time do I have?" he thought. He turned and faced the frozen lieutenant.

"Mr. Campbell," he ordered sternly, "run forward and sound general quarters."

"What?" Lieutenant Campbell stammered. His face scrunched in building panic.

"You heard me, get moving." Jackson's scowl sent the officer scurrying on his way. "Chief, find the XO."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"I'll be in Control."

Jackson covered the short distance to Control, bumping sailors flying to GQ stations. The first face he encountered in Control was the chief of the boat, Master Chief Wosinski. The chief's grizzled appearance concealed his playful sense of humor and an uncompromising concern for his young charges. A twenty-nine-year veteran, the master chief had seen just about everything, but stood bewildered like the others, his hands resting impatiently on his hips. A frown spread underneath his ample mustache, and a cigarette hung from his lower lip. The master chief had a bad habit of smoking during GQ drills, but Jackson overlooked it.

"Skipper, what the hell is going on?" he exclaimed, flicking half an inch of gray ash into an adjacent butt kit. The cigarette immediately went back into his mouth for a quick drag. Twenty pairs of eyes were on the master chief, who now served as their mouthpiece.

Jackson leaned forward, wanting some semblance of privacy. "I don't have time to explain. Go aft to the small-arms locker. Post guards at the hatches. No one leaves the boat except any stray yardbirds, understand? We'll secure the hatches in fifteen minutes. Get shore power disconnected and the cables out of the engine room. I'll tell the Engineering watch."

The master chief was dumfounded.

"Master Chief, did you hear me? We don't have time to screw around."

"Yes, sir, but what am I..." Jackson cut him off with a hard stare. The master chief raised his eye brows and wheeled. He had his orders. On the way aft he grabbed two sailors in Control after mumbling, "Follow me."

At two minutes, manned and ready reports poured into Control from throughout the boat. The XO barely beat the deadline, having been topside negotiating a last-minute work order with the shipyard shift supervisor. He strode over out of breath, puzzled, but outwardly calm. A veteran of three

missile boats and thirteen patrols, he had experienced drills at much more inconvenient times, like sitting on the can on a quiet Sunday morning reading the newspaper. Jackson matter-of-factly handed him the pair of messages. His face assumed a pained, ashen look as he read and reread them. The executive officer's normal emotionless demeanor cracked.

"Mother of God," he exclaimed, staring at the DEFCON change. He then asked the popular question of the day. "What the hell is going on?" He looked up incredulously. "Are we under attack?" he asked no one in particular. His mind reeled through a series of scenarios, but hit a dead end and abruptly skidded to a stop.

Jackson shook the man's thick upper arm to break his debilitating trance. When the executive officer looked up, Jackson asked,. "What percentage of the crew do we have aboard?"

It took a few seconds for the question to register. "I'm not exactly sure, Skipper," he stammered. "At least a half, maybe two-thirds. Enough to man the underway stations."

"How about stores?"

"Fully loaded for sea trials," the executive officer answered, the color slowly returning to his face.

Before Jackson could ask another question the master chief showed up with three armed sailors. Jackson noticed how sailors always looked misplaced in flak vests and helmets and carrying rifles and shotguns.

The master chief stood erect, surveying the mood of the crew. He was scared stiff but didn't show it. "Guards are posted, Skipper. What now?"

"I'll tell you in a minute."

Jackson stepped to the center of Control and held down the lever on the 1MC. He paused. He sighed heavily and began.

"This is the captain. Everyone listen up. We don't have much time. We've just received an emergency order to sortie. And to make matters worse, a DEFCON ONE alert. I honestly don't know what's going on. If I did, I'd tell you. But we're going to get the hell out of here, fast." It was cold, unemotional, but what was he supposed to say? He was heading into uncharted waters, blind and rudderless.

Throughout the boat, sailors slumped against bulkheads. Some cried in anguish. Even the salty veterans fought their emotions. Everyone, including the greenest sailor knew, what DEFCON one meant. For a few minutes, no one spoke, the passageways eerily silent. Gloom hung heavily as each man

came to grips with the devastating disclosure in their own way. Each asked the same question. What would happen to them? No one wanted to admit that a nuclear bomb might suddenly be dropped out of the sky square on their heads.

Jackson moved around Control deliberately, weighing his options. They were few. He forced himself to focus on a viable plan, tightly gripping the rail near the periscope platform. Five minutes had gone by. At least he could get the boat far enough away from the pier to submerge in the channel. It was fairly deep even here. Anything would be better than being caught in the open tied up to the pier. Don't forget Engineering!

Leaning over the 21MC, he hailed Maneuvering back aft.

"What the hell is going on, Skipper? I'd like to be able to answer these guys."

Jackson ignored the chief engineer and replied with a blunt order. "I want the boat underway in ten minutes."

"What? That's crazy, Skipper. The plant is at normal operating temperature, but we just started to bring steam into the engine room. And we're still on shore power. It will take an hour; I can't stress the steam piping that way."

"I'm not going to repeat myself, Mister," he shouted into the box, "I want the boat underway in ten minutes. You bring in steam now. Open every God damn steam trap. Do I make myself clear?"

There was a pause before the chief engineer replied grudgingly, "Aye, sir."

The bluster was just as much for the benefit of those in Control. The chief engineer was a fine officer, one of the best. As he straightened, Jackson scanned the cramped quarters filled with a jungle of equipment, control panels, gauges, and piping. His eyes were met with a mixture of shock, disbelief, and anger. He ached knowing what his crew must be feeling. He was proud of how well his men were holding up. If he could just get them out of this alive. If. How the hell was he going to do that?

"Master Chief," Jackson said, lowering his voice, "go aft, and secure the hatches. We'll get the forward hatch."

"Aye, aye, Skipper." The master chief was a pro, and he knew when to play the part. He proceeded aft at a brisk walk, the armed sailors trailing behind.

"XO, take charge, I'm going topside. I'll handle the Conn myself."

“Yes, sir.” He reached out and touched Jackson’s arm as he started up the ladder.

“Skipper, shouldn’t we think about buttoning up and settling on the bottom next to the pier? It may be our only chance.”

“No way. We’re sitting on ground zero. A few feet of water over our heads won’t do any good.”

Jackson hauled himself through the hatch and into sail trunk. He moved up the ladder, hand over hand, until he popped through to the warm sunshine. The striking inactivity pier side floored him. His world below had just disintegrated, yet around the wharf groups of workers puttered near electrical junction boxes and steam connections, and traffic flowed normally by the row of drab buildings facing the waterfront. His brain struggled to reconcile the incongruities.

“On board, *Michigan*,” the *Georgia*’s captain yelled. “What are your plans?” The question had a sharp edge.

Jackson leaned forward over the sail, cupping his hands next to his mouth to overcome the rattle of machinery and pumps discharging water overboard. “Getting underway,” he shouted.

The *Georgia*’s captain replied with a nod. “What can we do to help? I’ve only got a skeleton crew aboard.”

“Help us haul out the shore power cables and cast off. We got to secure the worker’s hatch shacks and the brow. We aren’t going to have a crane.”

The CO of *Georgia* gave a thumbs-up. His boat was helpless, and he knew it.

A new thought entered Jackson’s head. He caught the *Georgia* CO’s attention. “I can take some of your crew. Maybe thirty or so. I can’t take everyone.” The *Georgia*’s CO nodded in the affirmative. “I’ll get my XO over there to work it out.” It would be a two-minute life-or-death drill as they screened for critical missing skills.

Just then the huge, seven-bladed propeller protruding from the water’s surface turned. Jackson quickly growled Maneuvering. The watch officer answered, panting.

“Take it easy; we still have lines over.”

“Yes, sir,” the watch officer replied. “We’ve got steam in, Captain, but God, what a mess! We’ve got water everywhere. It will be a miracle if we haven’t ruined the main steam lines and the turbines.”

“Good work,” he replied, satisfaction in his voice.

The last of the mooring lines went over, draped over *Georgia* like spaghetti. Sailors pulled the shore power cables from the deck of *Michigan*, and others tugged on the steel brow, dragging it across until it teetered precariously on *Georgia*'s back. The makeshift wooden shacks, which covered the six-foot maintenance hatches, were pushed overboard, floating down the port side.

"Get below," Jackson bellowed to the few remaining men on deck.

"Maneuvering, Conn, stand by to answer bells."

Jackson peered down the side, swearing. "Damn, why couldn't we at least have one tug?" He would have to gently swing out from *Georgia*, but not get crossways in the channel and run aground.

Michigan's bronze propeller slapped the water, inching the massive boat forward. Reversing the prop swung the bow gently out from *Georgia*. After four such cycles *Michigan* was fifteen feet from *Georgia*, with a thirty-degree outward angle on her bow. Jackson glanced at his watch. The precious minutes were melting away.

"Ahead one-third," Jackson ordered. The giant propeller turned more rapidly, churning the oily water near the pier. A swirl of light brown mud kicked up from the bottom clung stubbornly to her stern. As *Michigan* slid slowly away, Jackson glanced instinctively at *Georgia*'s sail. There stood her captain, grim faced, braced at attention, saluting. On *Georgia*'s deck and pier side, sailors did likewise. Jackson smartly returned the farewell, choked with emotion, tears welling in his eyes.

Michigan had gotten underway in less than twenty-five minutes, an astonishing feat given she was a nuclear power plant in hot standby. Jackson turned his attention down the channel and for the first time, thought of his family in east Bremerton. His wife was most likely starting to get ready for the dinner party they were scheduled to attend. His kids were outside enjoying the weather, looking forward to the long weekend. He tried to fight the rush of emotion, but couldn't. He wiped away small tears as *Michigan* slipped through the still waters of the Hood Canal, gathering speed. They'll make it, he told himself, they have to. He shook his head in anger. It was useless to dwell on possibilities. They were in God's hands.

"Full speed ahead," he barked into the handset resting in his palm. As *Michigan* accelerated, the seawater poured over the rounded bow and back around the sail. Only the raised missile deck aft was still dry.

It was over ten tortuous miles to the entrance of Puget Sound and

another twenty-five to the relative safety of the Strait of Juan de Fuca. There *Michigan* would have some badly needed maneuvering room. The Hood Canal was over a mile wide and roughly 250 to 350 feet deep along its entire length. Theoretically, *Michigan* could operate submerged in less than 300 feet of water, but they would be bouncing off the bottom, kicking up muck, and possibly ruining the prop. But time was running out. He knew he was pressing his luck.

Ten minutes down the chute, Jackson lined up *Michigan* on the channel centerline and ceased rudder orders. They were well over two miles from Bangor, hopefully safe from all but a direct hit.

"All ahead one-third," he said. "Prepare to submerge."

"What's the depth, Navigator?" Jackson asked on the 21MC.

"About three hundred twenty-five feet, Captain."

Jackson took one last long look before climbing down. He sucked in a deep breath of the cool sea air, closed his eyes, and said a short prayer for his family and his country—an awkward act for him. He wasn't a religious man; not because he was a disbeliever, he just never seemed to have the time. His wife had always assumed that role. But he prayed that God would be watching over the United States of America.

In Control, the air was thick with depression and pain. The men had gone through instant hell. Many had been crying, others still clung to rails, their heads burrowed in their arms. Over thirty-five minutes had passed since the alert, yet no attack. Had both sides pulled back from the brink? If only he had some goddamn information.

"All stop," he ordered, "put her on the bottom, XO."

He was interrupted by the chief radioman, a person certain to have only bad news. "Skipper, could you please come to Radio?"

"What is it?" he snapped.

"EAM," whispered the chief.

Jackson was crestfallen. The air filling his lungs exited with a sudden grunt. No doubt now about a Russian attack. It was all-out war, and they were smack-dab in the middle.

Inside Radio, Jackson was met by the weapons officer and the communications officer, standing side by side, holding the message and an authenticator. They had just played out a well-rehearsed scenario that had always been an exercise—until now. "EAM, Skipper," said the comm officer, handing him the message, his hand shaking as much as his voice. "It's been

authenticated, sir." The young officer was ready to cry.

"We've got to get to our assigned patrol area," Jackson said. "And we need to get word to STRATCOM that we're still alive." He looked up at the weapons officer. "We're gonna have to review the target list once we get clear. I'll bet the coordinates loaded in our birds aren't right. We're not one of the alert boats." Jackson handed the message back to the pair. He wanted to say something, but struggled for the right words. He gave up and left.

Halfway back to Control Jackson was knocked hard against the bulkhead when *Michigan* impacted the bottom, sliding to rest with a tolerable ten-degree starboard list.

Back in the control room, the XO reported they had settled at 275 feet. Jackson stepped to the 1MC, intending to communicate his own personal anguish to the crew and start the slow process of building their spirits and resolve for the difficult mission ahead. Before he could depress the pot-metal level, *Michigan* was hit by a shock wave that knocked him off his feet. Bodies flew in all directions, crashing into equipment. It was big, and it was close.

"Shit," exclaimed the XO, trying to regain his feet. "What the hell was that?" he asked instinctively. Jackson knew what it was, and so did the executive officer. He immediately called to Maneuvering.

"Damage report, Chief Engineer."

"Don't know yet, Skipper," came a confused reply. "Some seawater leaks and one busted steam line outside Maneuvering. We're securing the valves now. A turbine generator tripped off-line, but we got to it before the breaker tripped. We'll have a full damage report in a few minutes."

"Keep me informed."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The brutal concussion from the thermonuclear weapon exploding directly over the submarine base had rocked *Michigan* underwater, even at two miles. The crew's reaction was universal. The emotional devastation and trauma of the last half an hour was replaced by a mix of anger and resolve. Sailors started to converse again. The detonation had wiped away any pretenses of hope and severed the remaining ties to home and family. They were now clearly alone, stuck on the bottom, and the crew was primed for a swift and sure retaliation.

"We're going to be on the bottom for a while, XO, pass the word to relax GQ. In a couple hours, we'll switch to port and starboard, so the crew

can get some rest and chow. I want an all-officer's meeting in the wardroom in twenty minutes. That includes the chief engineer. I'll be in my stateroom." Jackson turned slowly to head aft. He felt drained and overwhelmed. He needed privacy to regroup and plot *Michigan*'s next move.

Halfway to his stateroom, another shock wave hammered *Michigan*'s hull. "Bastards," he cursed, grabbing anything to steady himself. "Fucking bastards." He knew that each explosion pounding the boat intensified the rage and thirst for revenge boiling up in the crew. He swore he would get free and launch his load of missiles if it was the last thing he would ever do.

CHAPTER 19

The bone-weary watch commander, hammered by bad news, strained to decipher a damage assessment over a voice circuit flooded with white noise. Fifteen short minutes had aged the man. He grimaced as the news confirmed what the constellation of sensitive nuclear-detonation sensors floating in space had already reported. The United States was being systematically pummeled by scores of Russian submarine-launched nuclear bombs. The knockout blow, the fast approaching Russian ICBM reentry vehicles, which streaked through space, were only minutes away.

Thomas, Alexander, and the chairman were transfixed on the animated strategic plot, numbed by the scores of miniature red triangles poised to strike. The entire ten-by-fifteen-foot screen was flooded with nothing but hostile symbols. Speed leaders pointed directly at their intended targets. Well into their trajectories, any idiot could predict the aim points. It was like helplessly watching someone slowly strangle the life out of you. Thomas couldn't banish the thought that the Russians had recklessly thrown the nuclear dice and rolled a seven.

"The first Peacekeeper should be fired momentarily," said someone off to the side.

"It's about time," said the chairman excitedly, energized to life. The time remaining to impact for the first Russian ICBM was a tad over three

minutes. The Americans' survivable launch window was about to slam shut. "God, get them off," the army general mumbled. It now boiled down to them or us, with no middle ground.

In scattered launch control centers, buried hundreds of feet beneath the prairie, the doomsday message had been duly received. Disciplined young men and women, most in their early to mid-twenties, methodically worked through checklists stamped into their brains, fighting emotions. Undeterred, they pressed on, despite the subconscious notion that they might have only a handful of minutes to live.

The two-person air force crews turned their brightly colored keys in unison. No power on earth could stop them now. One by one, squadron by squadron, US ICBMs blasted from their silos, rocket motors blazing against a late-afternoon bright blue sky. The well-rehearsed process took less than two minutes; the missiles staggered in time to avoid mutual interference at the business end of their journeys. All escaped the approaching Russian bombs—the stragglers were already dropping first stages when the lead Russian RV detonated in faraway North Dakota. That 600 kiloton nuclear explosion was followed by nearly one thousand others, tearing at the black earth, gouging hideous craters, and spawning blackish-gray clouds of radioactive dust and debris, which billowed toward the heavens, turning a beautiful summer day into a living hell.

"They all got out," sighed the chairman. He collapsed in a nearby straight-backed chair. It had been close. Nuclear detonations blossomed on the screen by the hundreds, peppering the northern perimeter of the country, then spreading south, a plague on the land. But out of the electronic chaos, scores of small blue symbols arched skyward through the mass of red and began their journey northward to answer the Russian onslaught. It was Ivan's turn now. In thirty minutes, Mother Russia would feel the full fury of Strategic Command.

Behind the scenes, the watch commander orchestrated his troops, moving from console to console. A message over his headset interrupted his rounds. "Mr. Secretary, the president has arrived," he announced.

Alexander nodded. "Upstairs," he ordered the others.

The balcony assumed a grim air, the tension palpable. Heavily armed marines guarded the doors, and a handful of senior military officers were clustered by a row of private telephones. Messengers relayed information from the floor to those with the need to know. The secretary and his

entourage were immediately ushered to an inconspicuous conference room accessed from a wood-paneled door. At one end was a circular hardwood table for eight, while an adjoining lounge area had overstuffed chairs and end tables with tasteful lamps. The walls contained the usual assortment of pictures of weapon systems in action and military memorabilia expected in such a meeting place for warriors. A tabletop intercom box connected them directly to the watch commander on the floor.

When the president entered, the trio managed an acknowledgment, which wasn't returned. It wasn't an intentional slight. The president looked haggard, his face flushed, his breathing labored. Perspiration streaked his blotchy skin. He was closely followed by Secretary of State Genser and a few others. Genser's face was imprinted with dread. He wiped his deeply furrowed brow with a handkerchief while further loosening his tie. The president was guided to an upholstered chair at the head of the table. He fought to remain composed, taking rapid, shallow breaths. The others took appropriate seats. Thomas had never witnessed such a collection of pained expressions.

No one volunteered to start. The momentary pause proved soothing, medicinal. All were content to simply reflect on the shared tragedy for a few moments. After what seemed an eternity, Alexander tapped the president's arm and whispered that the American ICBMs had escaped destruction. The news fell flat. The president rolled forward on his forearms. He didn't want to talk military strategy.

"Have we contacted the Russians?" asked the president weakly.

"Not yet," said Alexander. "We've tried every possible frequency, but no luck. We're still trying Mr. President."

The president slowly spoke. "We've got to stop the killing." The chief executive's body shook with emotion; his hands, balled into fists, trembled. A White House doctor leaned forward in his chair, concerned. No one dared move or speak. The president's face tightened.

"Mr. President?" probed his chief of staff, himself in bad shape.

The president gripped the chair arms and regained his equilibrium. His breathing became less labored as he straightened in place.

"I'm fine." He leaned forward, regrouping. "I should have listened to Jonathon," he said out of the blue. He closed his eyes and shook his head. Hard minutes of reflection had triggered a sadness that marked the commander in chief. It was a fatalistic, somber air, a bittersweet moment. The

president scanned the room, as if looking for a friend not there.

"What about Europe?" he asked.

Alexander cast a glance Thomas's way. At the moment, Europe was irrelevant. Alexander answered his president. "The NATO countries are in various stages of alert. They're waiting to see which way the wind blows." He had painted to neat a picture. He didn't say that the American forces still garrisoned in Europe were hostages, at that moment being placed under armed guard by their hosts. Genser changed the subject, still habitually wiping the sweat from his brow.

"What about Russian submarines?" Genser asked pointedly. Alexander sensed the agenda.

"When found, they'll be destroyed," replied Alexander matter-of-factly.

Genser's temper flared. He almost leapt out of his chair. "So that means we're sinking Russian ballistic submarines in home waters," shouted Genser. "You're mad. We'll never stop this." His fist made a futile gesture against the wood table.

"It's militarily sound," replied the chairman sternly, "and I hope we sink every one of the bastards."

"It's hopeless, Mr. President," said Genser angrily. "We've backed the Russians into a corner."

"What?" blasted Alexander. "How can you say that?"

The president buried his face in his hands, defusing the confrontation. He looked up mournfully, running his hand through his thin hair. An eerie calm once again hung heavily.

"We have to contact the Russians," he said, working his body upright and leaning on the table, "to explain our actions."

"Mr. President," interrupted the watch commander over the intercom, "we've made contact with the Russians. President Laptev himself." A glimmer of hope sliced through the gloom. The president sprang to his feet.

The assemblage was herded to a small telecommunications center around the bend. The large number of bodies crammed into the tiny space made the heat oppressive and the air stifling.

Four computer terminals were manned by military personnel specially trained in crisis procedures. They dutifully inputted text as spoken and transmitted the formatted message via radio frequency links to the Kremlin. Both outgoing and incoming messages were displayed on a LCD screen above the terminals, obviating the need to crowd the soldiers. Crushed

against the wall, Thomas held his breath as the first words from the president of the Russian Republic cascaded down the backlit screen.

Nothing had prepared them for the rubbish. The chairman swore. Alexander's head hung in frustration. Genser and the president withheld judgment, hanging onto every word, looking for hidden meaning. Laptev got right to the point.

"This tragedy has been caused by unprovoked American acts, which forced the Russian government to protect our homeland. We had monitored the dispersal of your bombers. We acted in self-defense. And now you have escalated the crisis by launching your entire land-based missile force in an attempt to gain the military advantage. You will not succeed. You may be assured of that. Despite this wanton act, we are willing to consider an immediate cease-fire. All Russian forces will stand down, and US forces must do likewise. The Russian government desires to end this madness before it leads to the total destruction of the planet. The fate of mankind is in your hands."

"We should accept Laptev's offer immediately," said Genser excitedly, even before the others had finished digesting the words. "This is our last chance, our only hope."

"They attacked us," protested the chairman vehemently, "I see no reason to believe their lies now."

The president squinted and rocked forward, hoping he had read the words incorrectly. The man was searching for that one carefully chosen word or tightly constructed phrase that would permit the slightest opening to a meaningful dialogue. Even in his debilitated state all he saw was a stone wall. The negotiator in him, although requiring a dusting off, rejected Genser's plea out of hand. The attack was intentional, he reluctantly concluded.

"We should state that our response was limited," offered Alexander. "We need to ignore the rhetoric and focus on developing a dialogue. This isn't the time for posturing." Alexander blushed. He was acting out a canned role, the faithful advisor, the wise counselor. In his heart, he knew it would most likely fail.

"I agree," answered the president. "I pray I can convince President Laptev. Are you certain their initial attack was as widespread as reported?"

"Yes, Mr. President," said Alexander. "That assessment is correct."

The president leaned over the army-enlisted operator, placing his hands on the young man's shoulders. The words came slowly as he tried to frame a

measured response that was conciliatory but not weak. He mustered all his remaining strength and began.

"This is the president of the United States. Although I strongly disagree with your description of our actions, I am encouraged by your willingness to discuss a cease-fire. I want to emphasize the limited nature of our response. We have launched only those weapons which were threatened with destruction. The majority of our forces have not been committed. Our bombers have been instructed to hold over Canada, and—". The door burst open. The watch commander was sputtering. Additional Soviet ICBMs and SLBMs had risen from Russian forests and the ocean's depths, four or five hundred weapons.

The president hung his head in disbelief, tears welling in his swollen eyes. He gasped, succumbing to overwhelming despair. Beaten would be a charitable description of his condition. He was helped from the cramped room by his chief of staff. The chairman, vindicated, cursed at the Russians for their renewed treachery. The secretary of state bowed his head and futilely fought back tears. Alexander appeared outwardly calm yet pallid. An empty look was painted across his face.

"It's over," said the president, his frail voice cracking, "I've failed."

"There's still time!" said Genser passionately. "We can accept the Russian cease-fire. We've got to break the cycle of strike and counterstrike." The president looked at his trusted advisor like a priest holding confession. His eyes were compassionate and forgiving; the tears were still wet on his cheeks. The startled Genser took a step back.

"I understand now," said the president calmly. "The Russians had this all planned out. I can't imagine anyone that callous. It is nothing more than calculated butchery." His voice had taken on a different tone, soft and reflective. He exuded an inner peace. Thomas was convinced the man had snapped. A glance at Alexander seconded his diagnosis.

"It wouldn't make a difference," he continued, sounding fatherly, looking at Genser. "The Russians would make exorbitant demands. Am I to surrender simply because they struck first? I can't do that, no matter how badly I want to stop this."

"I'm not talking surrender, Mr. President," begged Genser, angered that his words were taken out context. "We've both lost; can't you see?"

"I never thought," remarked the president, almost to himself, "that the concept of a winner and loser would have any meaning in a nuclear war, but I

find myself thinking in those terms. I'm killing millions of human beings thousands of miles away to keep the United States from losing this war. In that process, I'm condemning millions of Americans to a horrible death. I need help, and there doesn't seem to be any place to turn." He turned to the military men.

"Would you say," said the president, for the first time addressing the chairman individually, "that if we accept the Russian proposal, we'll have essentially surrendered?"

"I'm afraid I would, Mr. President." The chairman took little solace in the president's words. "We'll have been hit with nearly fifteen hundred warheads—substantially more than the number we hit them with. We have limited forces in reserve, while they have two hundred ICBMs in those damn forests, plus any submarines they have left. In my estimation, they will clearly be in a superior position."

"Does anyone disagree?" asked the president.

There was a painful pause.

"Mr. President," prompted Alexander, "the bombers are burning up fuel."

"I'm afraid I can't deal with this anymore," the president answered with a wave of his hand. "We're involved in total war. The military should make the decisions. I will approve your orders. All I ask is that we minimize casualties. I don't want Russian cities targeted. I insist."

The president stood, wiping his face up and down with his hands cupped together. By now he was drenched and shivered from the blast of cold air from the ventilation ducts. "I've completely failed," he said sadly, shaking his head. "I'm going to be alone for a moment."

"Mr. President," said Alexander, "there is nothing you could've done to prevent this."

The president didn't look back.

"Mr. President," he called again. "You have to leave for NEACP."

"I'm afraid I can't do that," replied the president, stopping. "There may be something I can do here. You'll leave, though."

"But Mr. President," protested Alexander.

"I'm still the commander in chief. I'm ordering you to go. I won't hear any more about it." He turned and shuffled off toward an unoccupied corner.

"You'd better get moving," said the chairman to Alexander. "I'll stay with the president. The vice chairman and the CINC's will be notified."

At the main entrance, a small cluster of military officers and civilians began to muster. Thomas called to Alexander, putting the last of a stack of documents in a canvas bag.

“Mr. Secretary, the helicopter is here.” Alexander acknowledged him.

The president walked over. He extended his hand. “God bless you and give you the strength to carry out your duties.” By now tears flowed freely down his cheeks; he made no attempt to check his feelings.

“God’s speed,” said the chairman, firmly grasping Alexander’s hand in a two-handed shake. He did the same to Thomas. “Bob,” he said, not letting go for the longest time, “The secretary needs your support more than ever.” Thomas sadly thanked the general. In his mind, he imagined that his personal journey of suffering was just beginning. In a flash of self-pity, he envied the men and women who stayed behind. The party turned and departed.

The displays in the distance now showed an eerie pattern of colored lines and symbols denoting weapon trajectories, targets destroyed, and forces surviving. Somewhere among the mass of data one could predict the outcome. It had been sixty-five minutes since the first Russian missiles had been detected by DSP. The watch commander approached the chairman.

“Sir,” he whispered, “we have confirmed that warheads are targeted at Washington. Time to impact, twenty-two minutes.”

“I understand,” answered the chairman softly, “notify NEACP and the others that we’ll be transferring command authority in fifteen minutes.”

“Yes, sir,” said the officer, moving away quickly.

CHAPTER 20

Thomas led the procession through the dank cinder-block corridor, forcing the pace. His sturdy frame bowed under the weight of the canvas bag slung over his shoulder. It was stuffed with top-secret war plans that even as they evacuated the NMCC were being executed by the theater CINCs.

Thomas pulled one hand free and glanced at his Seiko; it was 7:33 p.m., over an hour since all hell had broken loose. The other evacuees trailed in his footsteps, twelve men in all, bunched together. Thomas' sky-blue shirt was soaked with perspiration, his tie and uniform blouse discarded earlier along with his cover—excess baggage at this point. Uniforms would be waiting.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency or FEMA planners, those men and women who contemplated global nuclear war, worried about such things. Underground food stores, secret fuel-storage sites, emergency communications of every variety, prerecorded videos for every disaster imaginable, were all developed and put on the shelf. Those dedicated souls chased every arcane disaster scenario to all logical and even illogical conclusions. It was their sole purpose in life.

Thomas's face had worsened. Flushed, the cobweb of age lines were accentuated by the harsh, artificial light. The enormity of the last hour had sunk home. Thomas was inundated by a tidal wave of hopelessness. But he pushed on. They all pushed on, the strong and the weak alike.

Thirty yards down the corridor, a squad of Pentagon guards waited. Thomas was struck by the image of the young marines in their crisp khaki and blue semi-dress uniforms, weighted down with camouflage flack vests, web belts, helmets, and tightly gripped M-16s at port arms. Tension was etched on their adolescent faces. “Follow me,” shouted a stern-looking marine major, his hand squeezing his Beretta 9MM pistol. The official party picked up the pace to a clumsy jog. The marines fell in on the flanks, eyes riveted on their major.

The assemblage crowded into a large freight elevator that would whisk them up to the underground parking garage. The door slid shut with a thud. Government civilians and military officers exchanged awkward glances, shuffling to maintain their balance in the crush of people, equipment, and baggage. The elevator accelerated rapidly, sinking stomachs, and stopped just as quickly. The door jerked open, revealing an astonishing picture in the garage.

In the dim light, groups of Pentagon officials congregated, while nearby soldiers held their hands high and shouted, marshaling orders to the stream of men and women who poured into the garage from the offices above. Many had been forced to stay late, despite the long weekend, when the dispersal had been ordered. Groups engaged in animated exchanges. A handful in shock wandered aimlessly. The clamor was deafening. Surrounding them all were heavily armed marines and army troops who stood in clusters, awaiting instructions. They had been dragged out of nearby barracks on zero notice.

The secretary’s VIP troupe was shepherded directly toward the steep ramp leading to the narrow street on the northeast side of the Pentagon. The tumultuous racket stopped as people recognized who had exited the elevator. A brigadier general shouted, “Attenhut!” Nearby military snapped to attention. Alexander graciously acknowledged the show of respect. Thomas experienced a flush of shame that comes with preferential treatment in time of crisis. It was no secret what would most likely happen to these brave men and women.

Trudging up the ramp, the warm garage transitioned to oppressive heat. The hot, humid summer air hung heavily near the entrance, which was bathed in a soft, early evening pastel glow. In the distance, they could hear the reverberation of helicopter blades beating the air. Reaching the crest, the lead marines hunched down, scanning the perimeter, weapons ready. The major signaled a halt then moved forward and disappeared out of sight. The group

instinctively squatted on the angled concrete. Seconds later, the major reappeared. He came directly over to Alexander.

"The helo's ready, sir, but there's only room for six more. The JCS people are already on board." Pained looks spread through the group.

"The others will have to take another helo. The colonel will help them," he added, pointing to an army colonel barking orders nearby.

"All right," Alexander said, wearily. "General Thomas, Secretary Genser, his aide, Colonel Bensen, and the doc." Colonel Bensen carried the top-secret nuclear release codes and authenticators; the doctor was an expert in trauma injuries and radiation sickness.

"Follow the major." Alexander turned and let Thomas pass, touching his arm in a comforting gesture. Thomas began to say something. The words caught in his throat. He remembered the chairman's parting words; he would serve Alexander to the end.

"To the left, gentlemen." The major took off at a jog up the last few yards of the incline. The group struggled to keep up. The sight at the top of the ramp was stunning. A dozen helos, a mix of huge CH-53Cs and army Blackhawks, sat idling on the grass and frontage roads, their turbines whining beneath slowly turning rotors that whipped the foliage on the trees. To the right, an army UH-60 Blackhawk leaped in the air, hanging momentarily then banking sharply and accelerating toward the north.

Across the Potomac, additional helos filled the sky, whisking important senators, congressmen, and federal officials to the safety of command centers or air-raid shelters. Most assumed they were heading directly to Mount Weather, FEMA's highly acclaimed crown jewel in rural Virginia, which had its cover blown in 1991. It was still used for annual crisis-action exercises. But that was it. Mount Weather was a well-maintained museum to the 1950s, when officials in Washington would have been moved to that underground city to fight the war and run the nation for months on end. Anyone there today didn't have a snowball's chance in hell, unless the Russians missed or decided not to waste an RV on a location they knew held no one particularly important.

The real dispersal sites were randomly spread throughout Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania at innocuous government-owned buildings. The effectiveness of this short-notice evacuation was remarkable given the compressed timeline.

Suddenly an air-raid siren energized from the direction of Rosslyn, the

high-pitched whine waxing and waning. Heads jerked skyward. Washington was under attack. The sound made Thomas's skin crawl. A rumbling in the basement signaled panic as the masses understood the meaning. The marine major picked up the pace.

Directly ahead was a flat-black helicopter. The bulky helo with large external fuel tanks was poised for takeoff. An in-flight refueling probe protruded from its nose. It was a MH-53J Pave Low III Special Operations Forces helo, which incorporated state-of-the-art avionics into a basic CH-53 airframe. The kit included terrain following/ avoidance radar, a GPS terminal, secure communications, and a sophisticated ECM suite, providing all-weather and night-flying capability. The bird itself was upgraded with titanium armor, a 20 mm mini-gun, and flares to decoy IR homing missiles. Customized for the National Command Authority, this model had a padded interior to cut down internal noise and an expanded communications suite. Its express purpose in life was to rescue the secretary of defense to fight another day.

The air-raid siren continued to wail, joined by a companion across the Potomac. If any doubt had clouded their minds, it evaporated. They forged ahead. They were greeted by an army colonel in full combat gear, a portable radio in his hand, a determined toughness painted in the weathered lines of his face. He smelled of infantry.

"Colonel Harcourt, Mr. Secretary, 75th Rangers." He shouted to be heard over the racket from the helo's engines. The colonel looked every inch the professional ranger. Lean and determined. "We'd better move, sir. I've been ordered to get this helo airborne in three minutes. Washington is under attack," he said grimly. Alexander grunted a reply. He scrambled aboard, followed by the others.

The helo's cavernous cabin was a dramatic transition. The thick, gray padding covering the interior muffled the engine whine, while an air-conditioning system dropped the temperature by twenty degrees. The cool air felt wonderful on Thomas's face and neck, bringing a feeling of relief. He peered down to the far bulkhead. Seated nearest the forward cabin in a jump seat was Air Force General Roderick Bartholomew, vice chairman of the Joints Chiefs. Bartholomew was the archetype bureaucrat, a master at playing the Pentagon power game. He and Thomas went way back.

Thomas took the jump seat next to Alexander, directly across from Bartholomew. The general's face was fixed with a hostile glare. He was

bracketed by two other general officers, one army and one marine corps. An admiral sat directly aft of the cockpit bulkhead. Genser and his aide were farther aft, clumsily hooking themselves into the intercom system and staring at the seat harnesses in dismay. At the rear of the cabin were others. The doctor had taken station by a medic, the two of them talked softly as they examined radiation detectors. The cabin door slammed shut, and the helo lurched skyward. It hovered twenty or thirty feet off the ground, maneuvered to port, then slowly advanced to the west, accelerating smoothly.

Plans called for them to fly to a rendezvous with a ground mobile command center. The port turn meant they would proceed on a westerly course, fly south of Fairfax, then follow Interstate 66 until they broke to the southwest toward Front Royal and then straight south to Bentonville. If all went well, a rendezvous with a fully functional GMCC would be waiting, protected by elite troops. It would only be a pit stop to get them back in the communications net before moving on. Movement was the key. They couldn't stay in one location for any length of time this early in the war. The final destination would be a secure bunker, either in North Carolina or Georgia.

Despite being strapped in and the noise, Alexander wanted to conduct business. He keyed his microphone for a comm check. One by one the passenger's acknowledged him. The secretary of defense wanted to hit the high points. "Where do we stand on comms?"

Bartholomew leaned forward from across the cabin. "NEACP and Looking Glass are airborne, and we have comms. STRAT-COM's airborne command posts, the airborne launch control centers, and the UHF relay aircraft all escaped. PACCS is in place. So far the satellites have survived. The Russians have detonated high-altitude bursts. HF and LF are holding up. EHF is good; SHF is marginal, UHF SATCOM, worthless." Bartholomew thought for a moment. "If the MILSTAR and DSCS satellites go, we're in trouble. We need the bandwidth to get the targeting updates to the forces. Can't do that over HF or LF."

The general fidgeted, waiting for a signal from Alexander.

"Electro-magnetic pulse effects have been negligible," Bartholomew added as an afterthought. "Only the old gear has been affected."

Alexander was surprised that communications had held. The money spent on strategic C3 in the 80s had paid off. He paused while digesting the general's words. Mentally he created an image of the United States, placing

the players in their respective locations like so many pieces on a board game. “Where’s the Commander-in-Chief Strategic Command?” he asked.

“CINCSTRAT evacuated Offut and is heading to his mobile command center.”

Alexander nodded. They had to rapidly establish communications with all the mobile command centers spread the entire length and breadth of the country. Sooner or later the airplanes would have to come down. Then it would be up to the mobiles to carry on the fight for the duration—however long that was.

Thomas leaned and poked his boss. He had overlooked the most important question. “Where’s the vice president?” he interjected. He said it to Alexander, but they all heard.

“He’s being flown directly to the North Carolina bunker,” came the answer from somewhere in the cabin. The secretary grimaced. “Who the hell made that decision?”

“He did, sir,” answered Bartholomew. “His staff felt it was too risky to bring NEACP down.”

Alexander showed a flash of anger. “Those idiots. All the fixed sites will be hit. STRATCOM HQ in Omaha, the CSOC at Falcon, NORAD, the ANMCC at Fort Ritchie, Mount Weather, they’re all gone. The vice president should be airborne with a battle staff, ready to be sworn in.”

The secretary stewed. “All right,” he said, too fatigued to remain angry. “How about Indications and Warnings?”

Bartholomew signaled the army major general on his left.

“Ground based I and W is getting shot to hell, Mr. Secretary, just like the fixed comm sites. The early warning radars are gone, including the over-the-horizon backscatter radars. That means we can’t detect cruise missiles except with AWACS aircraft. The Defense Support Program satellites are still operational, so we can detect ballistic-missile launches, but we can’t get any worthwhile tracking data. We don’t know where the weapons are headed anymore. The nuclear detonation sensors on the Global Positioning System birds are working, so we’re getting damage reports.”

“What are the casualty numbers?” interrupted Genser. “How bad is it?”

The general was unsettled by the question.

“We don’t have time for that,” said Alexander. He stared hard at the secretary of state to shut him up. “What about the other satellites, General?” he asked, glancing away.

Genser had been treated badly and knew it. He became flushed; the anger exploded as his face tightened. “You’re all insane. We should be talking to the Russians,” he shouted. “Not plotting to bounce the rubble.”

Alexander accepted the outburst calmly. He replied, choosing his words carefully. “This has a long way to go. We’d be wasting our time trying to negotiate a cease-fire until we’ve cut into the Russians’ strategic reserve.”

Genser glared. The general now answered.

“It’s too soon to give you a complete answer, Mr. Secretary. We detected a direct ascent ASAT launched against one of our photo recon birds, but it missed. We’ll have to wait and see if they fire at others when they pass over Russian territory. The co-orbital ASATs they launched will take a few orbits to position themselves before an attack.”

Thomas felt an urge to focus with time critical. “The key,” he interjected, “is whether they try to take out our geosynchronous early warning, comm, and ELINT satellites. And the GPS constellation. Direct ascent ASATs take six to eight hours to reach geo, and with our I and W shot, we may not even know we’re under attack. I recommended defensive maneuvers while we still can.”

Bartholomew didn’t appreciate the tutorial. “I’d save the onboard fuel,” he countered, “until we’re certain. We don’t know they can attack satellites at geo. Maneuvering the satellites could disrupt comms.”

“We can’t assume they’re safe,” Thomas countered.

The vice admiral nodded approvingly. So did the marine to Bartholomew’s left. “General Thomas is right,” said Alexander. “Send the order. And include the recon birds; raise their altitude, even if we lose ’em for a time.” Bartholomew freed himself and moved aft, jerking one of the handsets from its bracket.

Alexander sat massaging his temples, trying to ward off one of his occasional migraines. This was not the time. His thoughts converged to one irrefutable fact. The survival of the United States hung on the momentous air battle shaping up over the Arctic. The war’s outcome would be settled over a desolate frozen wasteland, where magnetic anomalies distorted radar and communications, and atmospherics impaired visual acuity. It was up to the AWACS, the interceptors, and the bombers now.

CHAPTER 21

The lone nuclear bomb that incinerated the Pentagon struck at 7:52 p.m. The 500-kiloton reentry vehicle was hurled effortlessly over seven thousand nautical miles by an SS-25 ICBM. The mobile SS-25, a thorn in the side of American arms-control negotiators for a decade, had proven to be a masterstroke by the old Strategic Rocket Forces. Initially shunned, the old men in Moscow had finally recognized a trump card.

The portable missile was renowned for its accuracy, responsiveness, and survivability. Unlike its big brother, the ten-warhead, rail mobile SS-24, the SS-25 was ideal for ad-hoc targeting against enemy targets. No need to waste excess warheads on worthless piles of rubble. The SS-25 was a sharp surgical knife, perfect for limiting collateral damage, rather than the traditional multi-megaton nuclear bludgeons the Russians had previously favored for decades. These mobile missiles gave the US Strategic Command fits. It was like finding the proverbial needle in a haystack. In this case, the haystack was millions of square miles of rugged Russian territory.

The five-foot-tall reentry vehicle started its journey perched atop an SS-25, protected from the harsh elements and the hazards of flight by a filament-wound fiberglass nosecone. Its booster had been jettisoned from its canister, solid rocket motors propelling the sleek three-stage missile skyward. Accelerating hard by the second, it became a brilliant fireball trailing a

slender tail of flame, illuminating the still night sky over Izhevsk. The missile discarded spent booster casings and rocket motors as each successive stage consumed its solid rocket fuel, shedding excess weight and rapidly gaining speed and altitude. At final burnout, well above the atmosphere, with the nosecone now discarded, the remaining hardware reached required suborbital velocity of over 16,000 feet per second. It then entered a ballistic trajectory, relatively free of atmospheric drag. At this point, the post-boost vehicle or bus commanded by the guidance computer gyrated through a series of precise thruster maneuvers to deploy the conical reentry vehicle. Spewed in tandem were heavy and light decoys and pounds of aluminum chaff to confuse detection and tracking radars and infrared sensors. By mid-trajectory, a widely dispersed cloud of objects sped through space in lockstep, inexorably toward the target coordinates. Dropping from the near vacuum of space over North America, the light chaff, debris, and decoys were stripped away, disintegrating in the dense air of the upper atmosphere, leaving the red-hot reentry vehicle or RV to deliver its deadly nuclear cargo.

This particular SS-25 warhead detonated a few feet above the top of the Pentagon Metro station, more than seven hundred feet southeast from its designated ground zero or DGZ, the center of the Pentagon courtyard. Within a millisecond, the enormous release of fusion energy vaporized hundreds of thousands of cubic yards of dirt and rock and consumed the massive superstructure of the Pentagon as if it were swallowed whole. The blinding, incandescent fireball, heated to millions of degrees by the release of deadly *X*-rays, transformed the pinkish glow on the horizon into blazing daylight for tens of miles in all directions. The clear night sky enhanced the devastating thermal radiation effects, extending their lethal range far beyond that of hazy or overcast skies. Far below ground, the manned command center sagged and groaned like a wounded beast under the tremendous overpressure. The transmitted shock wave ruptured the main support walls, crushing and burying hundreds on duty under tons of concrete slabs and debris. Vital communication links worldwide suddenly went dead, signaling the instantaneous evaporation of the NMCC, and with it, the president of the United States.

The split-second pause was broken by a loud cracking noise heard for tens of miles as the vicious blast wave rolled smoothly outward like a stone thrown in a still pond, traveling at the speed of sound. After the initial scorching flush of ultraviolet rays in the first tenth of a second, the nuclear

cloud caught its breath then belched forth the full fury of its thermal energy in the visible and infrared wavelengths in a second horrific thermal pulse lasting several seconds. Combustible material out to almost two miles was instantly incinerated, long before the arrival of the blast wave or the sound of the detonation. The fireball jerked violently upward, sucking up the weapon debris and dirt, rising at hundreds of feet per second. A close observer would swear the earth was vomiting its molten core. Cooling rapidly, it formed an expanding, reddish-brown nuclear cloud of vaporized material and water vapor, later to be dumped as lethal fallout far downwind from the explosion.

The monstrous detonation dug a crater over 180 feet deep and nearly 750 feet across. It was rimmed with a neat, concentric bank of pulverized ejecta that extended the total disfigurement of the earth to a third of a mile in diameter. The surrounding landscape out to three-quarters of a mile from ground zero was mangled, looking like the surface of the moon.

At one point eight seconds, the blast wave, now traveling at over seven hundred miles per hour, had surged to one mile, exerting twenty pounds per square inch of overpressure and packing unbelievable 490 mile per hour winds. Only 60 percent of the thermal energy had been deposited in those brief two seconds, but any exposed, living organism was cremated by over two hundred calories per centimeter squared, bursting into flames like dry wood long before they would be swept away by the rushing winds. To the east, the Twin Bridges Marriot was obliterated, while to the south the invisible tidal wave of death devastated the Crystal City complex, leaving only twisted steel skeletons amid the flames, smoke, dust, and flying debris. Not a living soul was left.

The shock front rushed inexorably onward, unstoppable by any man-made object. At three seconds, it skimmed over the still surface of the Potomac, boiling the waters, collapsing the near ends of the numerous bridges to the east and twisting the rest into unrecognizable forms. Its ferocity roiled the surface of the Tidal Basin, only superficially scarring the smooth, rounded, Jefferson Memorial, while the boxy Lincoln Memorial to the northeast lay decapitated. To the southeast, the busy Washington national airport was literally blown skyward by hurricane winds with parked airliners popping like firecrackers from detonating fuel, shredded into kindling.

The first prominent federal office buildings, the Department of State, the Federal Reserve, the Bureau of Engraving, survived the vicious onslaught. Their massive granite block construction withstood the attack of

eight psi overpressure and 240 mile per hour winds, standing scarred by thermal energy and debris. Their windows had all been blown out, with all interior walls and furnishings torn to pieces and in flames.

At six point five seconds, the deadly destruction extended past two miles. The deluge slackened, unleashing its energy over greater and greater surface areas for each linear increment of travel. Overpressure was a mere five psi, enough to trash residences and light commercial structures and shatter windows and blow unfortunate inhabitants out of tall commercial buildings. Those in the open would become airborne at over thirty feet per second, thrown about like rag dolls, battered and broken. Death would come from impact or by flying debris, if they hadn't been hideously burned by over seventy kilocalories per square centimeter. Surviving structures provided protection from the ravages of thermal effects, which need uninterrupted line-of-sight to kill. This only meant fewer prompt casualties, but more lingering deaths. The benefit of a ground burst with a reduced destructive radius was offset by the hellish fallout which would curse downwind survivors for weeks.

The shock front traversed the Ellipse and visited the White House, leaving a scene reminiscent from storms, which occasionally pounded the East Coast. Trees were ripped out by their roots, charred, denuded of leaves. Debris covered the grounds, now brown and gray in the rapidly fading light. The majestic house was scorched, pitted and marred, with a few windows curiously intact. It stood defiantly amid smoldering ruin. Vehicles were thrown about on the surrounding streets, some protruded bizarrely from adjacent buildings.

By the time the blast wave reached the Capitol at ten seconds, its wrath had mostly been spent. Overpressure had dropped to less than three psi, winds to one hundred miles per hour. At this range only hapless observers caught in the open or near windows were victims, knocked off their feet, struck by flying glass or scraps of wood, or their exposed skin charred and blistered by twenty kilocalories per square centimeter, twice the amount required to precipitate third-degree burns. Those huddled indoors were temporarily safe, unless victims of the fires that quickly spread from ruptured gas mains. Fuel loading precluded a firestorm or conflagration, as long as the fires could eventually be brought under control. Time would tell.

In the air, the dynamic pressure coupled with two to three psi overpressure was sufficient to swat circling aircraft from the skies, like so

many irritating flies. Complete immunity from the death and destruction wouldn't come until at least four to five miles, where both blast effects were negligible, and the thermal effects were tolerable.

At twenty-five seconds the dreadful ordeal had passed. Total blackness engulfed the Capitol, an eerie stillness broken by scattered muffled cries of agony from amid the ruin. The nuclear storm had extinguished the lights through physical damage and electro-magnetic pulse effects to the power grid. Emergency generators struggled to life in cellars of hospitals and key buildings. Fires were obscured by the dust and smoke, which choked those in the open, and hung like a thick blanket over an area of thirty square miles. Life stopped within a four-mile radius of the blast, broken only by an occasional dazed survivor shuffling to seek aid.

The grisly picture was repeated to the north and the south. Central Rosslyn, hit with between five and eight psi, was annihilated, its modern office buildings covered with sheening silver and copper glass sheets no match for the savage shock front. Twisted ruins lay smoldering; the streets were buried under tens of feet of rubble. Portions of Georgetown and Alexandria suffered similar fates. Older, granite block buildings fared best, some miraculously spared, while the newest structures evaporated before the onslaught.

The attack timing had minimized prompt casualties. Many Washingtonians had fled the city for the holiday, while the rest were home enjoying dinner or a few drinks when the air-raid sirens resonated through the city. The warning had puzzled most, eliciting awkward glances toward the sky from pedestrians and those in autos. A test, they concluded, and a very stupid time for one.

The most horrible casualties occurred in the thousands of cars easily swept off the roadways by the encroaching blast wave. Survivors were few. Following closely were deaths caused by collapsing buildings, falling debris, and the later fires.

In less than three minutes, the huge blackish-gray nuclear cloud towered over the city, its immense mushroom silhouette obscured by the dark. Airborne observers could see only a faint glimmer as the illumination from a new moon reflected off the rapidly expanding cloud. The upper reaches of the nuclear cloud continued to ascend to sixty thousand feet, where it would eventually spread laterally, then slowly dissipate, driven by the upper atmospheric winds. By morning, all traces of the holocaust would be gone.

At 7:58 p.m., a second reentry vehicle silently arched toward the ruins of the city. The weapon detonated six hundred feet to the north of the first. Although the same yield, structural damage was more widespread as weakened buildings collapsed, unable to withstand further punishment. Mercifully, the majority of the survivors had sought immediate shelter. A few unfortunates, probably near death, were dispatched by this second blow to snuff out all life in the nation’s Capitol.

CHAPTER 22

"Let's get started," Jackson stated curtly. A submarine wardroom, even on a larger boomer, resembles a mini-storage locker. *Michigan*'s was decorated with a few simple nautical pictures on freshly painted white bulkheads and the mandatory twenty-four-hour wall clock. A two-by-two opening with a stubby stainless-steel ledge provided access to the adjacent galley where mess cooks served four meals per day. The food itself was prepared down in the boat's mess decks. Overhead were ventilation ducts, pipes of various diameters and colors, and the standard navy shipboard fluorescent lights with the red or white option.

Michigan's officers and chiefs were crowded around the small Formica-topped metal table. Others squeezed behind, pancaked against the bulkheads. The boat's navigator, cradling a roll of nautical charts tucked under his arm, forced the aluminum door open against the mass of humanity. He pushed past the straphangers and laid the key chart directly in front of Jackson and the executive officer. The noisy exhaust blower labored to remove the heat buildup from the sweaty bodies. The only other sound was the breathing of emotionally exhausted men. Perspiration stains marked their dark blue overalls, while those with hair had it matted across their foreheads from the buildup of dried sweat and grease. In all, they looked like shit, sapped by a mixture of anxiety, fatigue, and grief. Eyes were glued on their captain.

Jackson knew there weren't any miracles on the horizon. Not from him anyway.

Their CO carefully read the faces one at a time, formulating a subjective assessment of each man's condition. He made a couple of mental notes to discuss later with the doctor. Then his thoughts turned inward, struggling to dig deep and tap whatever energy reserves remained, to do the expected. After all, he was the captain, their captain, the one expected to shoulder the crew's burden with superhuman strength. What a bunch of crap, he groused. The world's in the shitter, and I'm supposed to pull a miracle out of my ass. A glance from the XO told him it was time to get the show on the road. His number two appeared to be holding up heroically.

Jackson reached out and smoothed the curled edges of the nautical chart, folding it over the table's edge. Their future, or the next piece that truly mattered, lay before them on the tabletop. It depicted the navigator's pencil-drawn track all the way from Bangor to the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and on to the Pacific. The transit distance appeared overwhelming for a submarine with a bounty on its head. He pressed his finger lightly against the chart and methodically traced the transcribed route, one that he had memorized from numerous transits. His lips moved in silence as he incremented the miles and did time-distance calculations on the fly. Without prompting, the navigator broke into a recitation. He was young, like all the officers aboard, and scared. His voice showed it as he stumbled over the first few words.

"We're here, Skipper," the young man said, wiping his brow with his sleeve. "We've got fifteen miles to the sound. The depth is anywhere from two hundred to three hundred and fifty feet. The Defense Mapping Agency has told us the soundings may be no good. They say the bottom is cluttered with sunken logs and tree stumps. Plus unchartered sandbars. An attack boat struck one two years ago, right here."

The lieutenant's fingers moved northward on the chart. It took him a second to catch his breath. "It's better once we get by Foulweather Bluff and into the sound. But then it's twenty miles 'til the strait." Jackson knew all this but let the navigator go on. It was an essential part of rebuilding his wardroom's shattered confidence.

"I calculated that at five knots we could easily be here by morning," he said, pointing at a location five miles beyond Foulweather Bluff. "That's if we started after dark, 2130 to be safe."

Jackson frowned and rubbed his chin, now covered with rough stubble.

He closed his eyes momentarily to clear his thoughts, to get balanced. He was searching beyond the highlighted pencil dot on the chart. The strait, that shallow, broad inland sea that led to the vast Pacific Ocean, that's where his eyes were now transfixed. What lay out there? Who might be lurking?

Russian visitors had never dared venture into the landlocked Strait. They were satisfied to loiter off Cape Flattery in deeper water, hoping to tag a careless Trident departing for patrol. The executive officer, squinting to study the chart from the side, interrupted. He looked puzzled, which was unusual for him.

"How the hell are we going to make it to the sound, Skipper, let alone the strait?" Jackson didn't immediately answer. His mind still focused on Cape Flattery. "I know you're there, Ivan," he said under his breath.

"What was the last position on that Akula out of Petro?" he asked the group, his head screwing left and right. Jackson referred to the latest and greatest Russian attack submarine that rivaled American boats in quietness, sensor performance, and weapons, and vastly outperformed them in raw speed and operating depth. One had been lurking a few hundred miles from the West Coast for two weeks. In a few short years, the Akulas had become the bane of American submarine skippers long accustomed to technological superiority and a very comfortable acoustical advantage. An ensign standing next to the master chief answered first.

"Ninety miles southwest of the Cape, Skipper."

"That's six hours to the entrance at fifteen knots," grunted the completely bald operations officer.

"He can go faster," reminded the XO. "None of our attack boats are near." With ample warning, US attack submarines would have scrambled from San Diego or Pearl and sanitized or "deloused" the narrow approaches to the Trident transit lanes. But this Akula had no such worry. The nearest US attack boat was a thousand miles away. "He could make it in four," the XO added as an afterthought.

"Maybe to the mouth, but he'd be crazy to steam down into the strait, Skipper," offered operations officer.

The executive officer had astutely picked up on the captain's mental restlessness. "He knows we can launch in the strait. That bastard could be sitting at the edge of our launch depth, just waiting for us to make a stupid move."

The executive officer plucked the navigator's dividers from his hand

and marked off the distance from the entrance eastward. End over end they went, the sharp points digging into the chart. “If he made the entrance in four hours, he’d need another four to get in position. Even if he slowed to ten knots, he could reach here, well past the six hundred-foot contour.” All faces leaned forward in unison to see the spot under the XO’s forefinger. It was sobering.

The ops officer scrunched his face. He was habitually throwing cold water on other people’s ideas, but he knew his job inside and out. A more gregarious man than the stiff executive officer, he was the perfect complement. The sometimes feuding pair brought a balance to tactical discussions.

“Ivan wouldn’t go that shallow; he’d lose his tactical advantage, his maneuverability. He’d hang around in seven hundred or eight hundred feet of water to maximize sensor performance. He’d let us come to him. In four hundred or five hundred feet of water with this mucky bottom he wouldn’t be able to hear shit. Acoustical torpedoes wouldn’t work worth a damn either. I’ll bet he’s counting on us to make a run for the ocean.” A chorus of nods validated the ops officer’s sensible observation.

“I don’t know,” Jackson said softly, circling his finger around the disputed location. “If I knew a Trident was alive, I’d steam up to the pier at Bangor if I had to.”

Jackson looked over at Ops. “You’ve got a point, though. There’s a limit to how far he would go. Looks like 123-30 degrees to me. After that it would be dicey. Farther east and he could get in deep shit with the bottom. You’re right.” He nodded grudgingly. “He’d be too unfamiliar with the waters to screw around.” Jackson stretched his arms out in front, resting his sticky palms on the table. He let out a relieved sigh.

“So where does that leave us?” He started to think out loud, chewing on the options—something his officers always appreciated. “We’d have to go to 123-30 degrees ourselves in order to launch, which we’re not ordered to do yet. The EAM was only an alert. No one knows for sure we’re alive. If the order comes, we could launch in the strait, but it would be a lousy choice. Someone would surely see the missiles broach, and I’d wager we’d be dead in less than an hour. Or the Akula could surprise us and slip farther east than we think and nail our ass. No, we have to keep moving and go for the Pacific. But we’ll take our time and try to draw him out.” Jackson seemed satisfied. So did the others.

“Any questions?”

The master chief spoke up. “Skipper, do you really think a Russian boat would do that? Come down the strait, I mean.” He had twice the sea time as Jackson and easily as much common sense. “It just don’t figure.”

“I’d do it,” replied Jackson, pinching the ridge of his nose to relieve the pressure. “This is war. We’ll survive by doing things the enemy doesn’t expect. He’ll be thinking the same.” The word “war” had an unsettling effect. It made the cramped room squirm.

“Could we transit faster, sir?” asked a lieutenant. “Get to deep water sooner and be in better position to detect a sub?”

“Good thought, but we can’t risk being on the surface, even at night. We know there are always agents monitoring traffic on the Canal. I’ve got to believe they’re still there. If we’re spotted, they won’t need an attack boat, they could finish us with a ballistic missile. It only takes thirty minutes, and we’d have moved along a known path.”

“You think they’d spot us at night, Skipper?”

“We can’t take that chance. We shouldn’t even have our scope exposed for any length of time, at least not until we reach the sound.” That meant a submerged transit at night. The executive officer cringed. That’s what he was afraid the skipper had meant.

“But no one’s ever done that. Any dickhead on the Russian payroll is long gone. We could make ten to fifteen knots on the surface, even at night.”

“Can’t risk it. We go submerged. We’ll lift off the bottom at 2130. We’ll follow the navigator’s plan and set down past Foulweather Bluff early in the morning and take inventory. In the meantime, get as much rest as possible and some chow. Any other questions?” Jackson looked around one final time. “Dismissed.” There was a surge for the door and fresh air.

Jackson glanced at his watch. “Lieutenant Brandice.” A medium-built, blond-haired officer jerked to a halt and looked up. “Have a seat.” Brandice struggled against the tide of bodies until he was opposite the captain and then sat down nervously. Jackson waited until the others had departed. But all had known the topic as soon as the officer’s name was called. Lieutenant Norman Brandice was the strategic weapons officer.

The lieutenant was in his late twenties, with a round face and was slightly overweight. It was a curse that plagued the constantly confined submariners who rated the best chow in the fleet. He was relatively new aboard *Michigan*, and Jackson had not gotten to know him very well, too

much confusion during refit. He disposed of any pleasantries. He looked at Brandice hard.

"When the order comes, and it will, I need to be assured there won't be any problems." The lieutenant understood, nodding, and started to respond, but Jackson cut him off.

"I know what you're going to say, but hear me out." Jackson folded his hands and rested them on the table. His eyes bored in on Brandice. "We've all gone through the drills. We try to imagine what we would do if the real thing ever happened. Well, it has. If any man has moral reservations, I won't hold it against him. But I can't have hesitation. Canvas your department, and let me know. Give them time to think it over." Jackson started to stand. "That includes you by the way."

"There won't be a problem, Captain." Brandice's tone was soft, yet firm. Jackson managed a slight smile. "That's all."

Jackson watched the weapons officer depart, and then hung his hand over the open door. He was so tired he could barely stand. "Go lie down," he scolded. The thought of an hour in his rack brought a rush of contentment. Then he flashed back to Brandice's final comment. Won't be a problem? he thought. He remembered once reading interviews with the crewmen of the *Enola Gay*. How would he feel days, weeks, years after—if he were alive? *Michigan* would make the historic suffering imposed on the Japanese people look like child's play.

CHAPTER 23

The MH-53J helicopter plunged as it crossed the jagged tree line, popping white-hot magnesium flares—a precaution against someone with a Stinger missile. The passengers clung tightly to aluminum tubing welded to the fuselage, fighting the G-forces that squeezed their bodies. The engine vibration shaking the cabin made it worse. Thomas, a veteran of countless helo rides, broke into a sweat. Aft, Genser's aide was doubled over, vomiting. The foul smell quickly engulfed the cabin, gagging his immediate neighbors.

The special ops bird flared and hung motionless then dipped and bounced roughly to a stop. Colonel Harcourt sprang to his feet, pistol in hand, forcing open the cabin door, jumping to the dirt. The pilot idled, waiting for the reassuring all-clear before securing the engines. When the twin turbines changed pitch and wound down, Harcourt stuck his head back through the retracted door and locked his eyes on Alexander.

"Follow me, sir," he barked against the racket. He wanted to get his passengers out of the helo. Sitting on the ground, it was a big, fat target.

It was 8:05 p.m. The last traces of daylight disappeared behind tall pines. The trees grew black and ominous. Alexander poked his head through the exit and led his troupe down the aluminum steps. They moved haltingly, gripping the handrail, glancing nervously across the unfamiliar landscape. They were quickly surrounded by twenty or so Rangers in full battle dress,

camouflage paint smeared over their exposed skin. All carried the recently issued, shortened M-16, the M4A. Squad leaders maneuvered the soldiers quickly and efficiently, without a sound.

"Where the hell are we?" Alexander asked the colonel.

Harcourt looked exasperated. "Change of plans, sir. The GMCC is not ready. They've had trouble getting a full crew and getting underway. It's going to be a while before we can rendezvous. My orders are to hold here."

"What's a while?" barked Alexander. He wasn't long on patience at the moment.

"Can't say, sir. Maybe two hours, maybe three. I have to keep you safe. We can't risk a linkup until the GMCC is operational and security has been set. Right now, it's a mess. We've always had a lot more time."

Alexander was beside himself. Here he was the secretary of defense, and he felt like a hostage. He needed to get back into the command loop. He needed to find out what was happening. He turned to Thomas. "We've got to get some sort of comms going. See what you can do. Coordinate with General Bartholomew. Come up with a plan."

Thomas grabbed the colonel and moved out. The other passengers were herded well away from the helo. Rangers bracketed the leaders from Washington as they marched down a narrow trail leading into the woods.

Alexander's troupe had landed on the outskirts of Mathews Arm Campground, a popular overnight campground bordering Skyline Drive. Terrified holiday visitors had been ushered to the exit by men in combat gear. A handful of stubborn campers were under a makeshift house arrest.

Winding one hundred yards through the dense trees, the group emerged into a partial clearing. Here they would wait until further instructions.

The setting was surreal. The secretary of defense and of state and top generals and admirals from the Joint Staff were gathered in a picnic area at Mathews Arm, surrounded by troops. Despite the September heat, the night brought a chill at this elevation. They all stood awkwardly in suits and dress uniforms. Except for the clothes, it could have been something out of the civil war. The only thing missing was a campfire.

At thirteen minutes past nine, Alexander convened a stand-up, ad-hoc war council. Alexander had to raise his voice to be heard. The Rangers had provided makeshift lighting.

"I want this to be short," began Alexander, kicking the dirt. "We're not going to make any decisions until I'm certain the vice president has taken the

oath of office. Besides, it will be more than two hours before the bombers reach the pole and another five or six until they complete their missions and we know the outcome. General Bartholomew?" He and Thomas had patched together a status report from various sources.

Bartholomew stepped forward. The command and control system was holding up fairly well. "NEACP is over Tennessee. Looking Glass has slipped west toward the Rockies, and the rest of the PACCS network has shifted north to help with line of sight to the bombers. TACAMO survived and are off each coast, linked to the submarines. We have confidence that all EAMs have been transmitted and received by the nuclear forces, including at-sea ballistic-missile submarines." His tone was flat, unemotional.

Alexander interrupted. "That's fine, but when does the network start falling apart?"

"Well," the general stuttered, "certain aircraft will have to come down in ten to twelve hours. NEACP can last twenty-four."

Alexander exploded. He was frustrated.

"Looking Glass was already up for hours when the attack broke. They've got to be running out of gas. The EAMs are out. We have to concentrate on reconfiguring for tomorrow and the day after." He measured the group in the dim light.

"But, Mr. Secretary," said a voice from the generals, "we may need to recall the bombers."

"That's bullshit," shot back Alexander. "The president's dead, the vice president is airborne God knows where, and CINCSTRAT is scrambling to set up his mobile command post. And we're standing in the goddamn forest!" The secretary glared, challenging someone else to make a stupid statement. "Nothing's stopping the bombers," he added.

A stunned silence descended. No one moved.

"Do we have direct comms with anyone?"

Thomas answered this one. "NEACP, Looking Glass, and CINCLANT through the helo's radios. Not the best links, but we can communicate. We can relay to CINCPAC through an auxiliary command post. No luck with CIN-CEUR yet." Thomas had been busy the last hour.

Alexander turned reflective, thinking out loud. He had calmed considerably. "We've got to get comms with STRATCOM's mobile HQ and the vice president. Get ready for round two. We have to pull the government together before we're overwhelmed. The civil authorities can limp along for a

day or two, that's it. Then they need our full attention. That gives us two to three days to fight this war and end it."

Alexander thought for a moment about what he had just said. It sounded ludicrous. Something else came into his head. He looked at Thomas. "Anything on losses?" It was a topic no one wanted to discuss. Thomas would try.

"Estimates are eight-to-twelve-million deaths." He waited for a reaction. The group exchanged injured looks, some lowering their heads. "My God," a voice cried softly.

"So far the Russians haven't hit soft targets like refineries and power plants near cities. That's what has kept casualties lower than the first estimates. If they start hitting those, the number could grow to twenty to twenty-five million. We have to watch their bombers; they're the key over the next eight to ten hours."

Alexander seemed unaffected. "The Russians?"

"Hard to say. It's all speculative." The exchange was bizarre and clinical, like talking about grain futures.

Colonel Harcourt walked up to Alexander and interrupted. He whispered a short message. Alexander's expression collapsed.

"What is it?" Genser asked softly. The secretary of state hadn't spoken since departing the helo. He correctly sensed he had no role at this point.

"*Air Force Two*," said Alexander, "*Air Force Two* has gone down. The vice president is dead."

CHAPTER 24

“Three seconds to mark. Mark,” Buck said evenly.

Joe punched a GPS satellite-provided latitude and longitude into the plane’s autopilot. They had made landfall at the southern tip of Banks Island, over seventeen hundred miles north of the US/ Canadian border. The sleek bomber rocketed straight for the North Pole, the point of no return, the line in the ice. An emergency recall would have to be received in short order, or they’d hurl their nuclear-armed bomber directly at the thicket of Russian air defenses, primed for a nasty reception.

“Right on track,” stated Joe. It was his first verbal expression in over an hour.

Their flight had been flawless ever since decoupling from the tanker over Canada. On signal, they had turned north, skirting the rugged edge of the Canadian Rockies and then dropping to the plains of Alberta. Two hours over miles of pancake-flat terrain preceded a splendid journey into the Northwest Territories, the last pristine wilds on the North American continent. Among the highlights were the magnificent Great Slave and Great Bear Lakes. The intensely beautiful and peaceful landscape, which flashed below, accentuated their fatigue and troubled thoughts. How could such a lovely world breed such a monstrosity as nuclear war? The forthcoming jab into the Russian heartland would reverse the geography of the trip through

Canada—farmland and prairie, to tundra, to ice. Only they wouldn't be admiring the scenery.

Buck grabbed and unfolded the appropriate aeronautical chart and scanned the northern latitudes. They'd pass one more major landmass, Prince Patrick Island, before traversing twelve hundred miles of frozen wasteland. Then they'd slide down the other side of the globe toward hostile Russian territory. Given their advanced position at the starting gun, they had been guaranteed the honor of being one of the first to broach the stiff Russian air defenses.

Buck mulled over their mission so matter-of-factly that he feared he had been purged of all emotion. Hard facts rolled around in his head, tempered by two years of instructor duty in North Dakota, putting planes and crews through grueling paces. He knew only too well what the bombers and the men who flew them could realistically be expected to do. Their training was good, no question, but the real thing, an actual penetration of Russian airspace, would transport them beyond anything they could ever imagine. He wasn't sure if the younger guys really understood. They would learn together, on-the-job training, with no room for error.

Buck instinctively glanced at his black chronometer, but realized the local time was meaningless. Approaching eighty degrees north, the multicolor time zones depicted on the maps drastically constricted, squeezing the cadence of life into a flatness that rendered the senses useless. Night all but disappeared in the summer, with only an ephemeral flicker of darkness visible from the ground. At altitude, Buck and his crew would never lose sight of the sun's soft glow on the horizon. But during the winter, the top of the world was plunged into eternal blackness. It was always one extreme or the other at this polar wasteland.

The far-northern environment was further degraded by ever-shifting magnetic anomalies, which debilitated radar and high-frequency communications, twisting and bending the RF energy along unintelligible paths. And only the sturdiest higher-frequency satellite line-of-sight communication links could penetrate the strange atmospherics. Bomber crews became isolated in a bizarre yet pacific world of overwhelming whiteness. The electro-magnetic permutations did, however, provide a temporary haven for those in harm's way. The same forces rendered the Russians' probing search radars impotent. But in three short hours, Buck and his bomber would become vulnerable to detection, triggering Russian

defenders like an owner releasing a vicious attack dog straining at the leash.

The air battle lineup was strikingly similar. The United States had a handful of AWACS aircraft airborne from Alaska, to be joined shortly by others rushing northward from the States. They would orbit over northern Canada and the broad approaches to Alaska, their two-hundred-mile-radius radar envelopes overlapping along a strung out battle line to pick out low-level leakers. The supporting cast were dozens of interceptors, F-15 Eagles and Canadian CF-18 Hornets, some airborne, others on alert, waiting for the emergency signal to sprint skyward, vectored by the air controllers fighting the battle aboard the AWACS. They would hunt down the lumbering Bear H bombers carrying their deadly cargo of AS-15 cruise missiles and the modern Blackjacks with a mix of cruises and gravity bombs. Few in number, the B-1 look-alikes posed the greatest threat for the outnumbered US defenders. They would be the top priority. Numerous peacetime computer simulations envisioned a lopsided US victory in the air game, but the Russians had been first out of the gate, and the Bear and Blackjack pilots would surely press their attacks.

As in most military hardware systems, the Russians mirrored US efforts down to incredible detail, never being one to reinvent the wheel when espionage paid such huge technological dividends. The Russian air-defense forces possessed the less-capable Mainstay AWACS, staged at numerous forward Arctic bases. They would string along the northern periphery of the Russian landmass, and, like their American counterparts, search the heavens and the seas for the US bombers intent on attacking Mother Russia. Despite inferior early detection and warning abilities, the Russians did possess an ace in the hole—the legions of modern interceptors such as the MiG-31 Foxhound, MiG-29 Fulcrum, and the Su-27 Flanker. These frontline aircraft, backed by huge quantities of surface-to-air missile batteries, blanketed the flat approaches to the Russian homeland. This potent forward defense would attempt to destroy the bulk of the American cruise-missile carriers before they could release their weapons and then thin the ranks of the newer penetrating bombers. At this juncture, stopping the cruise missiles was the highest priority of the Moscow planners. Once loose in Russian airspace, the diminutive, cigar-shaped flying rockets were next to impossible to track—let alone shoot down.

Much had been made about the crumbling condition of the Russian air-defense matrix. The early nineties had no doubt left holes caused by poor

maintenance. But as a system, integrity had been maintained, and shortfalls were compensated by tremendous redundancy.

The US penetrating bombers would first hit the vanguard surface-to-air missiles and then fight their way inland. Waiting in the wings were hundreds of VPVO interceptors—the new mixed with the old—and still more SAMs. Even the older Floggers and Foxbats were a serious threat to an exhausted bomber crew or a crippled plane. And fickle geography played into Russian hands. The American B-1Bs and B-2As would funnel into two distinct corridors after crossing the Polar ice cap, some east of the Urals for heavy industrial targets, while the majority would slip west, bearing down on the Russian heartland.

Although the odds seemed heavily stacked against them, the penetrators were far from helpless. The B-1B was a beautiful aircraft, sleek, fast, and lethal. It handled like a fighter, right down to the inclusion of a stick instead of a wheel for flight control. The combination of the tried and true swept-wing design with responsive, hydraulically boosted flight controls made the pilot's job a breeze. When the wings were fully forward, quick takeoffs or operations on short runways were a piece of cake. When fully swept to the rear, supersonic cruise at altitude, or high subsonic, low-level flight were the norm. The latter was the B-1B's forte, and low meant very low—on the deck, scraping the tree tops. Training runs were done at four hundred feet, the superb terrain-following radar expertly guiding the aircraft over hill and dale.

The more demanding EWO missions called for dropping to a scant two hundred feet. With the long, graceful wings laid back, the B-1B would hurtle across the earth at 640 knots like a black dagger, the landscape becoming a dreamlike blur. At night, it was terrifying. But the radical flight profile was the key to survival. Even during the peak of the day, the B-1B would be extremely difficult to track through the radar clutter generated by irregular terrain and bad weather. Any hostile aircraft would have to have a perfect intercept solution to take out the B-1B.

The Russians' weakness? An overreliance on fixed, ground-intercept control sites for their airborne interceptors, a prime target for the B-1B's supersonic SRAM II missiles. These babies would be dispensed to blast gaping nuclear holes through the VPVO's architecture. In the end, when all was said and done, the issue would be how extensive was the damage to the air defense infrastructure before the bombers arrived. The US SIOP, or nuclear war plan, called for ICBMs and SLBMs to soften up Russian

defenses by breaching broad avenues of devastation for the bombers. But that was a full SIOP. Anything less would leave the defenders essentially intact.

"Fuel consumption?" Buck began firing questions to shake his crew back to life. He had to start building them to an emotional peak before they entered the fringes of the Mainstay's radar picket line. That's where Ivan would be his freshest, and they must be too. If they could punch through that firstline of defense, they had half a chance of completing their mission alive.

"Right on target. Looks good," Joe answered smartly.

"What's the CPA to the Pole based on this heading?"

"No more than two hundred miles."

Buck glanced over his right shoulder, even though he spoke through the intercom.

"Defensive Electronics?"

Johnson sat up straight. "Built-in test reports all systems up."

"Johnson, remember they're going to screw with their search radar frequencies. Don't expect to see anything familiar. They might even use the AWACs, figuring we would have them blanked in our ESM receiver."

"I got you, Buck."

"And they might have aircraft farther north than we expect."

"I know." Johnson's tone expressed his displeasure at the tutorial.

"Ledermeyer, everything check out OK?"

"That's affirmative, Buck."

"How about remote arming?"

"Already taken care of. What's wrong? Don't think I'll be around?"

Buck didn't answer. His thoughts had quickly turned back to the mission. Every time he did, his breathing accelerated. Take it easy, he warned himself.

The clear evening sky began to give way to thickening clouds that encircled them like wisps of angel's hair. Nothing too threatening, thought Buck. Momentarily satisfied, he settled back and mentally created a map of central Russia. Slowly the key features sprang into sharp focus. He and his crew would drop down to two hundred feet as soon as they left the polar icepack, or sooner if they detected faint emissions from the Mainstay. The benefit of sensitive electronic support measures, or ESM gear, was that you could detect an adversary at over one and one half times the distance that he could get you. That's when the chess game started. Do you avoid detection at all costs? Or do you tease the Mainstay then slightly alter course and

hopefully slip by misdirected interceptors. The Russian pilots would get one pass before having to break off and hunt for other prey. No one knew the best strategy, especially when placed in the van. Buck didn't relish being the lead plane through the gauntlet looming only hours ahead.

After skimming four hundred miles over the Kara Sea, they would traverse the Obskaya Guba, an appendix-shaped, seawater gulf protruding deep into the Motherland. Buck would stick close to the shoreline, praying the distinctive contrast between land and water would play havoc with the Russians' search and Slook-down/shoot-down radars. Making landfall, he would most likely veer sharply to starboard, making a sprint for the Urals, attempting to seek shelter by hugging the protective eastern slope. The next seven hundred miles would severely tax his skills as a pilot. Switching off the terrain-following guidance system to protect against autonomous jammers sprinkled throughout the mountains, he would manually wind in and out of deep canyons and narrow valleys, skimming the earth as low as one hundred feet. He had flown the perilous route so many times in the simulators, it was burned into his brain. The 3-D display at the training center was breathtaking in its clarity; the multiple shades of brown and gray were brought to life by dual light sources reflecting off the irregular granite surfaces. By the end of the hour, he was drenched in sweat. At first he had always bounced off a canyon wall within the first few minutes, but through patience and hours of practice, he had managed to score well enough to be certified for this class-one mission, the most difficult rating in STRATCOM. If for some reason he bought it, Joe was ordered to break off and hit secondary targets along a less-demanding path. The less experienced copilot wouldn't stand a chance at the primary route.

Danger would most likely visit when Buck had to break out of hiding and line up on his first target, a large thermal power plant near Sverdlovsk. He knew the Russians were well versed in American bomber tactics—they wouldn't be easily fooled. Then the other target locations rolled across his mind—Chelyabinsk, Magnitogorsk, Kazan, Kuybyshev, and finally Volgograd. Fifteen power plants, a handful of refineries, and key oil and gas pipelines, his lone plane would cut a vicious swath of destruction that would paralyze Russian economic activity for decades.

If his mission was accomplished, Buck would guide his bomber further south, dashing for the Turkish border, and a prearranged, secret rendezvous with an American support team. Buck gritted his teeth and swore that he

would come home with an empty plane or die trying.

CHAPTER 25

The promised two to three hours had turned into nearly four. It was after midnight when Alexander and crew reboarded their helo and headed down the Shenandoah Valley. The valley was black, except for an occasional light powered by a portable generator. Power was gone as far as the eye could see.

The GMCC has been staged out of Harrisonburg, north of town, in an industrial building. The multiservice peacetime garrison had been augmented by military forces from around greater the DC area and Maryland and Virginia suburbs. That included duty personnel from the NSA at Fort Meade and the CIA at Langley. The DIA has provided analysts and linguists. It was an impressive cast.

The mobilization plan was sound for a deliberate dispersal, but not for this chaos. The troops and techs pulled together heroically to get underway, driving to the primary location and beginning the setup. It was like watching a circus troupe go through the motions—fast and efficient.

After the trip down the Shenandoah, the helo banked right and followed US 33 toward the West Virginia line. Well before the next mountain range, they dropped from the sky near what looked like a small town. When the wheels touched, it was a repeat of the previous landing. Unload, march single file, meet security, get oriented. They were better at it this time.

Thomas noticed nothing until he could make out an irregularly shaped

mound looming in front of the far tree line. It wasn't until they were twenty yards away that he saw a canopy of interwoven camouflage netting supported by a forest of ten-foot fiberglass poles. Expertly concealed was a stable of military trucks and commercial tractor trailers that comprised the NCA's Ground Mobile Command Center, an invention of the late 1980s to counter Russian ICBM accuracy and still kept on alert. The emergency compound was difficult to identify from the ground and most likely impossible to spot from the air. A near acre of the multicolored netting absorbed probing radar energy and suppressed the infrared signature of the diesel generators chugging in the night. Upon closer inspection, the plastic canopy bristled with antennas protruding from communications vans tucked below. Posted around the perimeter were pockets of Harcourt's Rangers, equipped with night-vision goggles that made them look like aliens. Dug deeply into the ground were army troops, with a full complement of crew-served weapons. The Army Rangers and supporting soldiers were prepared for the worst.

Alexander's entourage was greeted by an army brigadier with a rifle slung over his shoulder.

"General Ogden, Mr. Secretary," he shouted over the loud chugging of a nearby electrical generator. "STRATCOM liaison. First order of business is a quick change. Please follow me, sir."

Alexander nodded, vaguely familiar with the drill. A select few administration officials had been thoroughly briefed on the center's capabilities, but it had been a long time ago. Regularly scheduled crisis-management drills had avoided even a hint of the traveling command post, instead assigning congressman and senior officials to either Mount Weather or Fort Ritchie for their mandatory training.

The others followed Alexander to a nearby commercial tractor trailer in the guise of an eastern seaboard shipping company. The pinstriped silver and blue van was serviced by a broad ramp leading to a door within a door in the rear. Thomas trudged up the steep metal plank in the number-two position and ducked through the shipboard-like hatch. The dull metal interior was bathed in the soft glow of red fluorescents; a low electrical hum was the only noise detectable. A group of nervous soldiers stood by piles of clothing and gear.

"Please listen up, gentlemen," instructed Ogden, business-like in a flak vest and helmet. His M-16 had been handed off to an aide. "Remove all your clothing, and put on fatigues. We don't want anyone standing out. One of the

soldiers will help you in getting the right sizes."

Thomas had found the slat bench next to Alexander, first pulling off his shoes and socks then moving on to shirt and pants, peeling off the sweat-soaked clothing. Alexander's head was down, avoiding eye contact with his bench mate. The rush of cool air on Thomas's skin felt magnificent. He silently begged to sit for just a moment, a respite from reality. The civilians hesitated, awkward at disrobing in the truck. They seemed to be waiting for guidance.

"Looks like a large for you, sir," said a corporal. Thomas nodded in the affirmative. "Eleven-and-a-half boot," he added. He pulled on the trousers, then the socks. The corporal came back with the boots and a properly starched cap. The rest went on quickly, a brown T-shirt, a belt with brass buckle, and a loose-fitting top. When Thomas stood to his full height, he felt the tug of the freshly pressed cammies. Gone was the uniform of a desk-bound officer. It all felt proper. The corporal walked over with an olive-drab webbed belt and a holstered Beretta. Somehow he knew Thomas wanted a weapon.

Thomas cinched the belt against his flat stomach. He sensed his role. The last few years had unwittingly prepared him for this trial, the constant bombardment of strategic issues, arm wrestling the power players. He had to focus on the task at hand, guiding Alexander as best he could. His family? His heart had broken hours ago. His personal concerns had to be put on hold till another day.

The group sat quietly, hunched over, their forearms on their thighs, collectively distraught and emotionally drained. When the last had finished dressing, Ogden addressed Alexander, his hands folded in his lap. Like the other civilians, Alexander felt awkward in the military garb, tugging at the seams, moving in jerky motions and resisting the stiff fabric. They had irretrievably entered the fighting man's world.

"Mr. Secretary, we have tents for you and Secretary Genser. The others will have to make do. Both the conference van and the command-and-control van are fully operational."

Alexander stood wearily. He was in charge. The usual sharpness to his words was gone.

"General Bartholomew, I want a status of comms with NEACP and Looking Glass, and anyone else important. General Thomas, I want you and General Ogden to remain. We'll convene in the conference van in thirty

minutes. Get something to eat."

The players quietly filed out the door, ducking and disappearing into the night. Alexander addressed Thomas personally for the first time since they left the Pentagon. His sad brown eyes told the story. The usual spark and quick intelligence were gone, replaced by an extreme weariness.

"Bob, I want an accurate estimate of damage. Get me the status of our surviving forces, same for the Russians. Get the best picture you can."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Secretary."

Alexander gently touched Thomas's arm before he could leave. "Bob, I'm counting on you." Thomas stopped dead in his tracks and sighed. His eyes met Alexander's. "You don't have to worry, Mr. Secretary." He turned and left.

Alexander refreshed himself with a deliberate, deep breath. "Any plans for relocation, General Ogden?"

"We'll remain here for the time being, sir, then evaluate the situation in the morning. This is one of five surveyed sites within eighty miles, so we have options. Fallout is a factor. With the silo fields hit, we've got up to thirty hours, maybe more, depending on the winds. If we're lucky, the majority of the fallout will go due east, missing Virginia. The winds could shift, though. If it's bad, we'll have to helo you out. Maybe get you airborne."

Alexander listened intently.

"No aircraft," he said. "The Russians will be throwing everything they have at the airborne command posts once they land to refuel and re-crew. They'll have agents covering every field in the country and an ICBM RV on top in forty minutes. That's if they don't shoot them down first." The life expectancy of NEACP and the other key aircraft was thought to be twenty-four to forty-eight hours at best. If they got the SIOP off, they had done their job.

His energy fading, Alexander sat down heavily. "How secure are these sites?"

"Elements of the Rangers and the 82nd Airborne are scouting the area, looking for agents and any saboteurs. But there's no guarantee, sir; that's why we'll keep on the move."

"The bunkers?" prompted Alexander.

"If they're not hit over the next two days, they're probably OK. We believe the Russians don't know about either site, North Carolina or Georgia. If forced to, we'll get you out of ICBM and bomber range for the long haul."

Alexander looked puzzled. “You mean out of CONUS?”

“If need be, sir. The sites will be ready.” There were things even the secretary of defense didn’t know. Alexander let out a long sigh and slapped his hands on his thighs. “Very well, show me to my tent.”

Thomas stood at the entrance to the command-and-control trailer. Troopers checked his identification. The trailer was marked with the logo of a grocery chain, and except for the recessed topside compartments housing small EHF satellite dishes, even a trained observer would have difficulty distinguishing it from any other eighteen-wheeler cruising the nation’s highways. The inconspicuous entrance was through a small hatch behind the tractor’s sleeper cab. Thomas hoisted himself to the tractor then gripped the handrail and swung his body through the hatch.

His eyes adjusted slowly to the soft white glow. The hum of cooling fans and air-conditioning blowers greeted him. An officer stepped over and reported with a salute. Thomas followed through a cramped passageway between floor-to-ceiling racks of communications equipment, computer CPUs, and multiterabyte disk drives. At the trailer’s rear was a horseshoe-shaped cluster of powerful engineering workstations networked to a database server. Three operators glanced up then went back about their business.

“You can sit there, General.” The army captain pointed toward a vacant seat. His guide knelt unobtrusively, working the mouse with his free hand. He brought up a detailed globe, which hung effortlessly in computer-generated black space. A click of the mouse energized ring after ring of brightly colored satellite tracks circling the globe; the platforms themselves appeared as detailed icons in the same color scheme. The mini-satellites inched along the orbital tracks while the earth rotated imperceptibly beneath. A second click activated day/night shading.

“General Ogden said you want a detailed rundown, sir.” Thomas nodded. The officer used the mouse to rapidly rotate the globe, positioning the United States front and center. A double click zoomed until the continental United States filled the ample screen. He froze the image then popped open a series of menus to query the underlying database. He cocked his head up at Thomas, waiting for directions. Thomas paused to soak up the new view of the world that had unfolded before his eyes.

“Can you expand the view to include Canada and Alaska?”

The officer obliged with an effortless swirl of the mouse. The forty-eight states shrunk to accommodate the expanded landmass. “How’s that,

sir?”

“Fine. Start with CONUS-based forces pre-attack.”

The officer triggered hundreds of small icons, which bloomed in bright colors across the map. Bombers sortied or on the ground, ICBMs, submarines in port or near the coast, the entire US arsenal sprang to life in the wink of an eye.

“Overlay C3,” added Thomas.

The previous symbols were joined by almost one hundred others, which marked fixed communications, radar, and satellite control sites and the multitude of command centers, including the dozen or more aircraft.

Thomas pointed to a menu selection permitting a historical replay. “Run the attack at sixty-times normal.” he said, tapping the screen. The first hour of the attack would be reduced to less than sixty seconds. An additional minute would capture the devastating Russian second wave.

In the first twenty seconds, the only movement was bombers and tankers scrambling for their lives. Suddenly red symbols appeared, blotting out targets on the East Coast. Next, the US ICBMs were fired in salvos from STRATCOM bases. They were countered by hundreds of red icons, which methodically hammered targets across the breadth of the country, moving north to south.

Thomas was stunned by the sheer power of the onslaught. Nearly fifteen hundred weapons had detonated with unimaginable ferocity, yet this was still less than half of the Russians’ arsenal, one-tenth of the peak in the mid-1980s.

Thomas sagged backward in the seat, closing his eyes. His country couldn’t stand any more.

“General?” The young officer had replayed the horror show enough times to be numb.

“Too fast. Slow it down.” The captain obliged. The second go-around left Thomas with a seed of hope. So far only military targets had been hit. Industrial complexes had been spared, as had cities. Collateral damage appeared tolerable. Thomas frowned. The nasty word “relative” had crept into his thought processes, a cold-hearted frame of reference for evaluating human misery.

“Show me Russia.” The globe spun, and the captain clicked the mouse.

Now the Russians were the recipients, pounded with over one thousand US warheads. But the sheer vastness of the former Soviet Union seemed to

swallow up the weapons with little discernible effect. Thomas intuitively knew what damage had been done, but the map did show the Russians with impressive numbers of ICBMs in reserve and surviving missile submarines at sea. A sick feeling swept through Thomas. In four minutes, he had seen everything meaningful, all the pieces on the board, in space, in the air, on land, and under the sea. The United States was locked in a deadly stalemate, one that threatened to escalate into an unparalleled disaster for the country and the planet.

Alexander leaned over the soldier feverishly tuning the WSC-10 satellite transceiver. The SHF satellite link had collapsed in a heap of static. They struggled to restore comms with NEACP and STRATCOM. Various combinations of antennas, couplers, and crypto devices had failed miserably. A sudden amber synch light on the shoebox-sized transceiver signaled success.

“I’ve got STRATCOM’s mobile headquarters,” cried the youthful comm operator as the first decoded characters clattered across the adjacent daisy-wheel printer. “It’s their call sign; I’m certain, sir.”

“Send them the frequencies for secure voice,” prompted Alexander, handing the operator a message. “Keep trying NEACP.”

“Yes, sir.”

Alexander straightened. “General Bartholomew, if we get NEACP, arrange a conference call.” The heavyset vice chairman acknowledged his request. Alexander signaled Thomas to follow him out into the night.

Thomas stepped from the cramped trailer out into the sticky evening air. Deep breaths momentarily relaxed his tight muscles. The shredded plastic canopy hanging above intensified the humidity. Alexander stood motionless a few feet from Thomas and peered off into the distance.

“Now what am I supposed to do?” he complained bitterly, his hands resting on his hips. He answered himself before Thomas could. “We’ve got to get the chain of command sorted out.”

Thomas lowered his head and stared at the black ground under foot. Interleaving the National Command Authority’s hierarchy with presidential succession was a recipe for disaster. The NCA org chart positioned the secretary of defense right below the president, with power emanating from the secretary of defense directly to the various commanders in chief of the Unified and Specified Commands. They were the war fighters, not the Joint Chiefs of Staff, whose role was advisory and administrative. The Joint Staff,

the equivalent of the general staff in many foreign countries, worked directly for the chairmen of the Joint Chiefs as their analysis and planning arm. They ensured that the NCA's orders were transmitted, received, and properly executed by the CINCs, war or peace, but the words came directly from the lips of the president and his secretary of defense.

The other side of the coin, the constitutionally mandated succession list, following the now-dead vice president, was topped by the speaker of the House, then by the president pro tempore of the Senate. The chance that others farther along the seniority chain—the cabinet secretaries in order of their department's creation—would receive the call was normally dismissed out of hand. It simply couldn't happen. Alexander was actually number two after Genser in the cabinet sweepstakes, with state taking precedence over war, the forerunner of defense.

Thomas bowed his head in dismay. That would be the ultimate irony; Genser giving Alexander marching orders. For the moment, that wasn't a concern. With the president dead, Alexander alone called the shots until the proper successor took the oath.

Thomas stepped parallel to Alexander and folded his arms across his chest. He too searched the forest. His ghosts were the men and women he knew in Washington proper—soldiers, sailors, airmen, and civilians, now little more than charred dust. It was a bitter pill to swallow.

Alexander looked over at his friend, forlorn and distant. "Do we have a chance of ending this before the entire country is destroyed?

Thomas stared straight ahead, not blinking, his breathing shallow. He was enjoying the irregular tree line; his pale blue eyes delineated each tree's outline from the black smudge touching the horizon. It was soothing.

"I don't know, Mr. Secretary, I honestly don't know."

Alexander sighed sadly in reply. "What the hell happened? This is the nineties, not the seventies."

"Mr. Secretary, General McClain's on the line. But we don't have NEACP yet." The voice drifted across the compound to claim Alexander's conscience. He quickly strode the thirty yards and up the steps, Thomas behind, then grabbed the outstretched handset from Bartholomew. Every pair of eyes was glued on their leader.

"General McClain, this is Secretary Alexander."

There was a gush of emotion at the other end. "Mr. Secretary, I can't tell you how relieved I am that you're alive." Alexander leaned against the

wall. His voice dropped in tone, the words coming slowly.

"Have you heard about the vice president?"

McClain was silent for a moment. Alexander was ill prepared for his reply. The general's delivery was steady.

"Yes, sir, we received word directly from NEACP. They had comms with *Air Force Two* before it went down. The battle watch has located the speaker. He's demanding that his plane be diverted immediately. He's outraged that he hasn't been sworn into office yet. Seems the officials escorting him are requiring definitive proof that the president and vice president are dead before they administer the oath of office. He says they're stalling on purpose. Those were his words. His aides are pushing for him to can all of you. It's going to be a fucking mess, Mr. Secretary, no doubt about it."

Alexander's shoulders sagged visibly. He slumped into a nearby folding chair, tapping the phone in the palm of his free hand. Any hope of a smooth transition was crumbling. A bitter political struggle could unravel everything.

An elderly member of the House from the rural Midwest, the speaker ruled the House of Representatives with an iron fist. He had been a member of Congress for so long that people had trouble remembering what he had done previously in life. He had been a critic of the military his entire life, and now he stood on the threshold of being elevated to the presidency. Alexander blanched at the thought.

Alexander chewed on McClain's heads-up, balancing fact and emotion. CINCSTRAT, like the other senior commanders, had received special attention from the speaker of late, the gentleman taking delight in dismantling significant portions of the US military. The speaker, like others of his ilk, still smarted over the maltreatment during the years of the Reagan fiscal steamroller. Alexander had softened the harshest hatchet blows.

Shoring up his defenses, Alexander accepted the inevitable. Thomas, Bartholomew, and the others huddled around.

"When do you estimate he'll arrive, General?"

"Hard to say. Best guess is after 0300. He's scheduled to land short of your location and then be heloed to the camp."

"Do you have comms with the speaker's plane?"

"Through NEACP."

"For some reason we haven't raised NEACP yet." Alexander paused. It was time. "The speaker is to be sworn in as president immediately. On my

direct order. Pass the word through the battle watch commander on NEACP."

McClain's torrent of cursing over the circuit was drowned out by an outburst from Bartholomew. The overweight general lost control.

"You can't do that, Mr. Secretary!" he shouted. "Our military will collapse. The man has no idea what he's doing. He's a fool."

Alexander stood calmly and faced the angry man. In the dim light, his black eyes burned. "We'll discuss later what I can and can't do," Alexander replied sharply. He put the phone back to his ear.

"General McClain, did you hear me?" he asked rhetorically.

McClain didn't hesitate this time either. "Our forces will be put at grave risk, Mr. Secretary. You can't stop something like the SIOP without catastrophic effects. The bombers can't be recalled at this point, they'd be annihilated. I need time, at least three days."

Alexander let out a sigh. "General McClain, you're speculating. What do you propose, that I declare myself president?" he answered sarcastically.

"That's not what I meant, sir; it's just the timing."

Ironically, that had been Alexander's original thought. But no matter what the strategic value, it was wrong. "I understand your concerns, but pass the order, now." He added the last word with special emphasis.

Alexander unceremoniously tossed the handset and walked to the back of the trailer. He plopped down on a bench, resting his elbows on his thighs. Bartholomew bore down for another round. He prudently waited until Alexander glanced up before speaking. Thomas was ready to hit the man.

"You can reverse your decision, Mr. Secretary; it isn't too late," Bartholomew said, pleading. "We don't have proof that either the president or the vice president is actually dead. An investigation could be conducted. That's reasonable under the circumstances."

A look of disgust spread across Alexander's face. He shook his head in annoyance and incredulity.

"General, this isn't the time for legalisms."

"No, but..."

"General Thomas, what does the NUDET data show?"

"Two detonations over Washington, on the Virginia side of the Potomac."

"Well, General?"

Bartholomew retreated, muttering under his breath. "The CINCs will be furious; you're going to have a rebellion on your hands."

“What?” shouted Alexander, jumping to his feet. He had endured enough. “The CINCs will follow orders, just like you!” Alexander turned and grabbed General Ogden by the sleeve.

“Tell Secretary Genser we’ll meet in fifteen minutes.”

“Yes, sir.” Ogden quickly left followed by Bartholomew, leaving Alexander and Thomas alone with the communications crew. The clatter of high-speed printers and older teletypes filled the void, increasing in intensity. Slowly, methodically, the isolated mobile command center was connecting to survivors spread over thousands of miles, resurrecting the communications network necessary to pull together the shattered government.

Alexander motioned for Thomas to join him on the aluminum bench. The two sat, not speaking.

“We’ve got to be ready,” Alexander began haltingly. “McClain’s right; so is Bartholomew, but I had no choice.”

Thomas nodded his head in agreement. There was nothing to say.

“I have a duty to present the speaker, I mean president, with a recommended course of action. Then I can offer my resignation.”

“The speaker will be a fool if he accepts it,” Thomas replied.

“The constitution’s clear,” Alexander replied. “Everyone’s creating their own worst-case scenarios. The nation needs a president,” he said with conviction. Alexander rose, pushing off the bench. “Let’s get moving.”

The hastily erected tent provided a welcome respite from the oppressive heat in the cramped trailers. It was large, the size of two mobile homes; olive drab; and supported by thick pine poles posted every six feet. Removable lighting was strung along the sides with orange extension cords, supporting caged, bright white, naked lightbulbs. Wooden folding chairs encircled metal folding tables. Around the perimeter were storage containers and cots waiting to be assembled.

The group was small—the sensitive nature of the discussion precluding all but the most senior officials. Everyone was exhausted. Alexander reached deep to tap into his final wellspring of strength within.

He brought the meeting to order with a throat clearing. “When the new president arrives—”

Suddenly shots cracked in the distance. At first single pops and sporadic bursts then the sustained staccato of heavy machine-gun fire interspersed with sharp, piercing explosions. Closer and closer the sounds of battle came, constricting the camp like a tightening noose. Outside, shouting and cursing

evidenced the confusion and panic spreading like a wildfire throughout the compound. Ogden leapt to his feet and pulled his pistol from his holster. The handful of Rangers present unslung their weapons and quickly took defensive positions near the front and rear entrances.

“Everyone stay put,” was the order. Someone was trying to douse the lights.

Thomas dropped with the others, hugging the plywood floor. The flimsy tent material wouldn’t even slow a bullet, let alone protect against fragmentation grenades. Thomas rolled on his side and pulled his pistol from the holster, chambering a round. Sliding away from the table, he maneuvered behind a large shipping container providing an unobstructed view of the entrance. He crouched on one knee, arms outstretched, finger on the trigger.

Bursts of automatic-weapons fire ripped through the tent. The Rangers gripped their weapons, fingering the triggers nervously, eyes straining in the now dim light. Without warning, a stream of soldiers crashed through the front entrance, weapons at the ready. Thomas’s jaw dropped in astonishment. All were clad in what looked like US issue cammies, with grease paint smeared across their faces, identical to the men around them. The slight hesitation by the Rangers bought the intruders just enough time. They opened up on full automatic, spraying the interior with blistering fire, one man high then the next man low, methodically moving the length of the tent, shredding every object in sight. The roar was deafening, the short-range slaughter unbelievable. The handful of brave Rangers heroically held their ground, kneeling and blazing away toe-to-toe with the attackers. Smashed bodies sprawled backward, blasted and torn by bursts of bullets that sliced uniforms and sprayed deep-red blood everywhere. Sustained rifle fire at point-blank range offered little chance for human survival. The conflagration was over in seconds, measured in time by a single spent magazine per man.

The racket ended as suddenly as it had started, leaving only wispy white smoke mixed with the acrid smell of spent gunpowder, and the groans and moans of a few gravely wounded men. Remote, sporadic gun play still punctuated the night air. Thomas had managed to squeeze off only two rounds before a collapsing enemy soldier had knocked him flat. He pushed the body aside, the man’s blood flowing freely and smearing over his uniform. Struggling to his feet, Thomas’s mind was transfixed by the incredible carnage strewn across the floor. Crimson pools formed near the corpses; while a single light flickered eerily, creating strange shadows, which

danced across the tattered canvas, spent shell casings, and heaps of bodies. At first glance, no one appeared to have survived the onslaught unscathed except him. Thomas instinctively surveyed himself for personal damage, but the only candidate was the intense ringing in his ears.

Thomas stepped over several bodies, searching for Alexander. Where he had been earlier was identified solely by a pair of protruding boots under two intertwined dead soldiers. Looking up, he was caught off guard by a lone soldier poking his head through the tent flap, then stepping through, weapon cradled under his arm. His movement gave the distinct impression he knew what he wanted. Thomas stepped forward, raising his pistol and pointing it directly at the man's face. His arm shook slightly, giving the gentleman at the business end of the Beretta a false sense of confidence.

"Who are you?" Thomas said slowly, the resonance in his head making the words sound flat.

The soldier appeared unusually calm. He had ice-cold eyes that darted around the carnage in the tent, taking calculated measure.

"Sergeant Jimenez, 75th Rangers, sir." He smiled a shallow, false grin. There was no fear in the man's eyes, only the steady gaze of a well-trained killer. Thomas's eyes locked on the man's torso. Ranger? I don't see a patch, he said to himself. The stranger's eyes narrowed. He sensed Thomas's discovery and grabbed for a grenade fixed to his webbed belt. Thomas fired rapidly, squeezing off each well-aimed shot. The first slug caught the upper reaches of the soldier's body armor, jerking him backward from the impact but inflicting no wound. The following bullets walked north, catching the soldier square in the neck and face but not until he had pulled the pin. The loose grenade bounced on the deck the same time the man's lifeless body collapsed to the floor.

Thomas dove left just as the fragmentation grenade detonated in a blinding flash, shredding the tent sides and splintering furniture. In midair at detonation, Thomas was bowled over, thrown hard on the ground. Only a mangled pelican case had stood between him and death. As he struggled to his feet, blood streamed from his ears and nose, and a sharp pain jabbed his arm. The ringing in his ears was replaced by a dull nothingness. He collapsed back to earth and lay perfectly still in the protective blackness, gasping and choking in the billowing smoke. Several minutes passed before faint voices captured his ears. Slowly the ability to detect sound returned. A bright flashlight flickered across the far canvas, coming to rest squarely above his

face. Thomas froze. They were back for another go, the mop-up crew. He groped for his weapon—it was nowhere to be found. The only recourse left was to attempt to slide under the shredded canvas and into the night. That effort failed miserably.

"Something's moving there, sir."

Colonel Harcourt's sweaty, dirt-streaked face peered at Thomas from behind a camping lantern.

"General Thomas?"

Thomas weakly responded, raising one arm. Two Rangers grabbed him under the armpits, dragging him roughly to his feet.

"Can you stand, sir?"

"I think so." He wobbled in place, his bad hip jabbing with pain. The Rangers guided him to a crate and gently lowered Thomas to his rear. An army medic approached and gave him the once-over. One of his shoulders felt like it had been slammed by a buffalo. Blood dripped from an arm.

Others in the rescue party rigged temporary lighting, bathing the interior in brilliant, white light. While Thomas watched from his seat, Harcourt moved among the bodies, mentally noting the identity of each. He seemed unaffected by the devastation, a veteran of far worse spectacles.

"Over here," he shouted, "Secretary Genser's still alive."

Genser's shattered body clung to life despite multiple bullet wounds from the assault. A stretcher team carefully lifted his body to the taut canvas, securing the webbed straps.

"Get him to the hospital tent."

Harcourt continued to move among the dead. "That's it," he observed matter-of-factly. "General Thomas, can you make it over here?" The two Rangers had to help him.

Harcourt knelt beside one of the corpses, poking at the body's blood-soaked uniform. He rolled him on his back and began to unbutton his shirt. "See here, wrong color T-shirt. Pretty good imitation though. They've even got the right weapons, everything. The bastard's English was damned good. It's tough as hell to shoot someone wearing the same uniform. Makes you question for just a moment. That's all they need."

Thomas could barely believe what he saw. "Spetsnaz?" he asked incredulously. He struggled to kneel down next to the dead soldier. The Russian was young and strong, with a blond crew cut and deep blue eyes that stared at the ceiling.

“That’s right, sir. Twenty or so. They had us pegged. Even knew which trailers were which. Took ’em a while to figure out the tents. I figured we wouldn’t have to worry about them for a least a day or two.”

Thomas stared at the Russian’s cold face. He had found his target.

“Where did they come from; how many?” Thomas asked.

“Hard to tell.”

Thomas remembered a secret report that mentioned an unbelievable number of two to three thousand in such a scenario. He had thought it nonsense.

“We’re probably targeted,” Thomas muttered to himself.

“What was that, sir?”

“They know our position. We could be hit by an ICBM warhead in thirty minutes.”

“I don’t think so, sir. These guys aren’t fools. They would have reconned the area, designated the target, stood off. These guys wanted a positive kill. They knew their target. Thank God the speaker hasn’t arrived yet. But we aren’t taking chances. You’re getting out of here, sir.”

“What about the speaker?” Thomas suddenly remembered.

“Detoured. Same place we’re gonna fly you in a few minutes.”

Thomas noticed soldiers removing Alexander’s limp body from the human wreckage. He shuffled over as they placed him in an olive-green body bag. The secretary had absorbed a burst of machine-gun fire in the chest. Thomas knelt awkwardly on both knees and gently touched Alexander’s already cold forehead. The senseless killing had suddenly become very personal.

Harcourt’s firm hand touched his shoulder. “We’ve got to get you out of here, General Thomas. A helo’s leaving in five minutes.”

CHAPTER 26

“Nothing yet? Are you sure?” Buck’s sharp tone betrayed mounting impatience. He and his men rushed headlong toward the Russian mainland blind and deaf. In the backseat, Jefferson shook his head in disbelief as he tweaked his little black knobs for the umpteenth time. His lungs pulled hard on the oxygen hose attached to his mask, not able to suck in enough of the metallic-tasting air. Sweat dribbled down his cheeks under his glazed helmet shield.

“Man, I’ve checked the equipment over and over. I can’t figure this out. Where the hell are those guys?”

The heavy-laden B-1B bomber rocketed two hundred feet over the choppy waves of the Kara Sea, buffeted by winds that rose in intensity. Buckets of salt spray collected on the plane’s underbelly, occasionally curling over the wing’s leading edge, tossing off frothy foam. Buck had correctly skirted the northeastern edge of Novaya Zemlya, a large, mountainous, dagger-shaped island, and now stood on the Russians’ doorstep. Two hundred miles farther south lay the small, round island of Os-trov Belyy, gateway to the treacherous Obskaya Guba. And yet still no Mainstays to greet them. Something was terribly wrong.

The tension in the cockpit was unbearable, gnawing at the crew’s last reservoirs of strength. Hour after long hour had passed with no contact from

either STRATCOM or their unseen enemy. Their nerves were frayed from exhaustion; their bodies were weak from dehydration. The air-conditioned cockpit did little to remove the body heat generated under flight suits, heavy gloves, boots and helmets. But they were driven on by the knowledge that Russian nuclear bombs had devastated their home. Buck begged for that first illusive contact with the Mainstays.

The Russian defenders should have jetted far north, until their elliptical radar patterns had broached the irregular island chain strung across eighty degrees north latitude. Instead, their plane's sensitive ESM gear drew a blank. Buck's mind played with the possibilities.

My god, he thought, they've developed passive IR tracking. They've got us nailed, and we don't even know it. Or maybe it was the super-secret ultra-wide-bandwidth radar. He had read the Foreign Technology Division reports on how it could weed an incredibly weak radar signature from the typical background clutter. That technology was claimed to be the future nemesis of the stealthy B-2, whose BB-sized radar return clearly outdid the bird-sized B-1B. The experts discounted it to a man. But maybe the Russians had once again fooled the clever analysts. He cursed the wing's smug intelligence officers who laughed off futuristic sounding threats, citing technological hurdles insurmountable by the moribund Russian R&D community. The entire intelligence apparatus had completely flip-flopped from the dark days of the early eighties when the Soviets were supermen, capable of wizardry beyond comprehension. Now the former Soviets were technological invalids, incapable of turning out even the simplest consumer goods, let alone advanced military hardware.

His mental turmoil triggered another concern—targets of opportunity. "Ledermeyer, anything from Lacrosse?"

Lacrosse was the code word for the top-secret synthetic aperture radars that cruised hundreds of miles over hostile territory, penetrating clouds and darkness, plucking minute mobile targets from difficult geographic backgrounds. The newest birds had a real-time data link that dumped high-priority targets directly to the bombers in flight. It was the only hope for tracking down the dreaded SS-25 and SS-24 mobile ICBMs featured in the Russians' arsenal.

The Russians obviously knew about Lacrosse. Their bag of tricks contained counters and decoys, anything to trip up a bomber crew. For the Russians, fake launcher trains and dummy mobile missile launchers,

inflatable SAM sites, and armored vehicles were standard fare. Not to mention the thousands of surreptitious transponders and signal generators bombarding the airwaves with a symphony of bogus electronic emissions designed to overload US ESM gear. But today those airwaves were silent.

Ledermeyer drew a blank. “Negative, Buck. They won’t transmit until the first bombers make landfall. No sense giving the ASATs a frequency to home in on.”

Joe looked up from a crumpled navigational chart, worried. He had been mentally rehearsing alternate mission routes, measuring the total flight distance to Turkey, and then calculating fuel consumption. The answer always came back the same—a slim chance of making the distance. He looked over at the boss.

“Maybe the Mainstays were caught on the ground, Buck. We could come up in altitude for a couple hundred miles and save a hell of a lot of fuel. The interceptors are blind without the Mainstays.”

Buck frowned. The same idea had momentarily crossed his mind.

“We’ll stick to the plan,” he said curtly. He felt like a fat duck flying straight toward a well-concealed hunting blind.

The Obskaya Guba or Gulf of Ob suddenly sprang into view, the bright sunlight masking the long, flat shoreline. The plane was grossly out of position, screaming over the flat earth toward SAM sites protecting the Russian homeland from the twin shores. At over six hundred knots, Buck had only an instant to override the autopilot, pop up, and veer sharply to port to line up on the channel centerline. He eased back to one hundred feet after the hasty maneuver.

“You jackass,” he scolded himself. “We could have flown over some damn air-defense radar.”

“Shit, I could have sworn we were dead on track,” answered Joe.

“Take a GPS fix and update the autopilot. I don’t want that to happen again.” Buck settled back in his ejection seat, shaken and embarrassed. Hopefully, flying over the water would give them another half an hour of peace from radars blinded by excessive sea return. Problem was, there weren’t any radars, at least according to the ESM gear. Their state-of-the art avionics would carry them only so far. Buck knew that. Human skill and instinct, and the human emotions that came with the package, would make or break the mission. Since the days of the first air combat in World War I, it had always been the same; brave men with unflagging determination had won

the day.

The time ticked by, the water becoming less green and choppy in this protective finger. The featureless shores in the distance continued to sparkle and gleam in the afternoon sun.

Twenty-five minutes down the chute, Jefferson screamed into the intercom.

“Mainstays! Two of ’em! Bearing 030 and 270. Signal strength strong. Shit, they’ve got to be right on top of us.”

“God dammit,” shouted Buck, fumbling at the controls. “The bastards were lying in the weeds.” His mind raced for an answer. Sure as shit, they’d been detected, and within minutes, the interceptors would swoop down from above to blow them out of the sky. He cursed himself for being so stupid, so predictable. Ivan now had the upper hand. Well, he wouldn’t make it easy, not by a long shot.

“Ledermeyer, stand by for a SRAM shot.”

“Against an air target? We won’t hit anything.” The offensive weapons officer panicked. Mentally, he wasn’t ready. He had only seconds to ramp up.

“Just do it. We don’t have time to screw around.”

Buck banked hard to starboard, hugging the ground, leaving the shimmering Gulf trailing in the distance. He lined the bomber’s nose on the 270 degree Mainstay bearing, praying the fighters had already received an intercept vector and were committed for their initial pass. Jefferson worked feverishly, manipulating the sensitive defensive avionics, sucking up the Mainstay’s radar energy, massaging the pulses, instantaneously reradiating the subtly shifted waveforms. Hopefully, the Mainstay’s range gate would wander, feeding erroneous data into the Russians’ highly centralized air-defense network. As a last resort, Buck could shift to active jamming. Black boxes crammed within the fuselage could randomly flood the airwaves or selectively attack a range of Russian sensor frequencies.

“Where the hell are you going, Buck?” asked Joe.

“Heading straight for the Mainstay. Then we’ll break southwest for the northern-most point of the Urals. Maybe we can bluff them into thinking we’re heading west.”

“Foxhound!” exclaimed Jefferson excitedly. The Russian fighter had delayed turning on his look-down/shoot-down Pulse Doppler radar for maximum surprise, relying on the Mainstay’s directions. Chaff dispensers and IR decoy flares spit out in rapid succession from the bomber’s fuselage.

It was all happening too fast.

"Bearing?" shouted Buck, glancing over his left shoulder. Before Jefferson could answer, a glistening silver blur blasted down their port side, one thousand feet overhead. The Foxhound's fire-control radar disappeared from Jefferson's scope. Two air-to-air missiles, shot out of pure desperation, drifted off into the distance, leaving white smoke trails that quickly dissipated in the wind.

"Totally out of position," crowed Joe. "He'll never get another shot."

"Yeah, but they got us cold," Buck reminded him.

"Foxhound to starboard. Radar's locked on!" Jefferson was working his gear like a madman. More chaff dispensers spewed forth.

Buck jerked the bomber upward to break-lock.

"Missile launch!"

The second Foxhound had anticipated the course change and was dead on their ass. A pair of air-to-air missiles, released seconds apart, streaked toward them, the white exhaust trails signaling an excellent shot. Jefferson frantically switched to pulse jamming and simultaneously began ejecting white-hot flares to confuse any IR seekers. Cranking the B-1B hard through 180 degrees, the first missile passed three hundred feet to stern, trailing-off harmlessly. The second followed by half a mile. A last minute midcourse correction sent it close to starboard, detonating in an intense reddish-yellow fireball that partially engulfed the right wingtip of the B-1B. Hot shrapnel from the fragmentation warhead pierced the wing, puncturing fuel tanks and scattering metal fragments throughout the forward fuselage.

The concussion snapped the plane to port. Portions of the front windscreen shattered, cutting visibility. Dazed, Buck shook off the worst effects and nursed the wounded bomber back to base course, once again dropping low. Blending into the protective ground clutter before either Foxhound could regroup and re-attack was their only chance for survival.

"Damage report!"

"My God," gasped Ledermeyer, "Jefferson's hit. His shoulder's torn up bad." He could barely be heard over the rushing wind generated by the irregular holes punched by the warhead's razor-sharp fragments. Ledermeyer released his harness and hunched over, tending his gravely wounded comrade. Jefferson lay limp against the bulkhead, his head lifelessly bouncing each time the plane pitched upward. Ledermeyer peeled back the blood-soaked flight suit, only to see a gaping chest wound. He recoiled in

horror.

"Shit!" he panted. "His whole chest is torn open."

Buck suffered silently, forcing himself to focus on the brownish-gray ground zipping by at an incredible six hundred knots. He loved Jefferson like a brother.

"What about the gear?" he asked coldly. "Come on, Ledermeyer, answer me." The response came haltingly.

"Hard to tell. It's gonna take a while to sort out. My stuffs OK."

Joe was unscathed, battling to shake off the blast effects. He scanned meters and digital readouts, mentally calculating the health of the bomber. A glance to starboard confirmed the worst. Fuel from one of the main wing tanks sprayed like a garden hose from the pockmarked wing. His voice cracked. Joe's confidence, stretched to the breaking point by hours of uncertainty, collapsed in a split second.

"Wing's fucked up. Tip's gone." Joe eased a switch, which triggered the whine of hydraulic pumps. The swept wings slowly inched forward.

"Mechanical controls check out," he announced, relieved. "No sign of trouble with any of the engines." He glanced right once more. Hundreds of gallons of precious fuel were being atomized by the rushing air.

"We'll never make it now," he groaned, slumping in his seat.

Buck ignored the protest. He held the control stick in one hand and grabbed the aeronautical chart in the other. A glance showed them less than one hundred miles from the mountainous spine that separated Europe from Asia. Two formidable obstacles blocked his path. Layered SA-10 batteries, backed by older SA-6s, would make the Americans earn the protection of the Urals. That plus the second-string interceptors orchestrated by the GCI sites. If he hesitated, the pursuing Foxhounds would chase him down. He prayed that the fireball had been sufficient for the MiG pilot to score it as a confirmed kill and move on.

"Ledermeyer, stand by for defense suppression!"

Ledermeyer edged back to his station, staring at the maze of switches, buttons and digital readouts curved around his ejection seat. Taking a last look at Jefferson, his jaw tightened as he flipped a Plexiglas cover shielding two rows of sequentially numbered buttons. Twenty-two pairs were dimly lit, one for each SRAM missile resting in the weapons bays. He punched the first, triggering a digital readout to life. A light signaled the warhead ready to accept a data stream.

“Target,” he said. He closed his eyes and said a prayer. For all the hours in training, he was about to fire a nuclear weapon in anger.

Buck barked out a grid number while Ledermeyer punched the coordinates into a keypad. Fire-control software converted the ASCII digits into precise targeting data. The computer performed a sanity check based on a target database generated by satellite photos.

“Target accepted.”

Buck shouted a second stream of digits as Ledermeyer repeated the procedure for the next SRAM.

“Standby,” Buck ordered, leveling the bomber. Ledermeyer crisply depressed the first missile’s arming button while grabbing a mechanical level near his leg. The bomber’s forward weapons bay doors swung open with a metallic thud, revealing the rotary launcher. The launcher whined as it positioned the proper bird.

“Fire one.”

The pointed, thin missile dropped silently from the bay, wings and fins popping from the fuselage. Hanging in midair, a bright burst of orange flame signaled the solid rocket motor springing to life. The SRAM jumped in front of the bomber, disappearing off into the distance at supersonic speed. The second trailed by a short ten seconds.

“Number two away.”

In forty-three seconds, the first SRAM would detonate thirty miles down range to port of their track. The second would follow three seconds later to starboard, at approximately the same range. The two missiles, packing a double 150-kiloton dose, would vaporize the older SA-6 sites and catch any mobile SA-10s within weapon’s range, smashing fire-control radar antennas and crushing control vans and launchers.

The downside was that minutes later, they would be forced to forge through a no-man’s land carved out by the nuclear detonations in their lightly shielded bomber. Calculated aim points had provided a theoretical corridor of nearly a mile in width, but Buck knew they would catch significant radiation flying near the reddish-black nuclear clouds. He studied his watch, mentally counting the seconds. Suddenly a brilliant flash engulfed the entire sky, as if the sun had unexpectedly dropped in for a visit. Specially coated faceplates attached to their helmets protected them from the destruction power of the UV light. But the double thermal pulse cooked them in their heavy flight suits. Stinking sweat poured down their faces. Heat exhaustion was a real

possibility. The bomber's ventilation system worked overtime.

Awestruck, they didn't notice the second fireball emblazoned against the afternoon sky. The incandescent fireballs roiled and tore at the atmosphere.

"My God," cried Joe, frozen in his seat. He mumbled something else to himself, his eyes locked on the toroid's that blocked the sunlight, their surfaces constantly shifted by violent winds sucking up cooler air from below.

Buck experienced the same numbness. It was impossible to describe how he felt at that moment. The first real thoughts about the wave of death he was about to unleash hit home. The power contained in the belly of his bomber took on an almost religious air.

"It's the end of the world," he muttered. "The goddamned end of the world." He knew at that moment that he would die regardless of any skill or luck he might possess. And maybe that was fitting.

Three more SRAMs were quickly expended, assuring a straight shot for the eastern slope of the Urals. Already they were becoming hardened to the awesome firepower personally unleashed against the Russians. Buck edged the plane starboard to avoid nuclear debris. Built-in radiation-detection devices clicked persistently as they skirted the edge of the dissipating cloud. Bomber crews feared the invisible radioactivity as much as the Russian air defenses. It could silently penetrate their bodies, destroying tissue, sapping their strength.

Breaking back to port, the Urals jutted to the sky, their stark appearance befitting the surrounding bleak terrain. Not high in elevation, they nevertheless presented an awesome spectacle.

"There," announced Buck calmly. Ahead was the memorized landmark pointing directly to his flight path along the eastern slope. It was over seven hundred miles to the IP for their first target north of Sverdlovsk. Over an hour of pushing a broken airplane two hundred feet above treacherous mountain terrain with the Russians' breathing down their necks. The odds against them mounted with each passing minute. Buck had to remind himself that he wasn't alone, that he still had a crew depending on him. He had to keep them working.

"Ledermeyer?"

"Yeah, Buck." He sounded exhausted.

"You OK?"

“Yeah.”

“Start weapon allocation. Baseline mission. Use the gravities, save the SRAMs.”

“Roger.” The reply trailed off into the reverberating cabin. Buck twisted in his seat to provide a reassuring gesture. Then he jabbed Joe’s thigh, getting his attention.

“I need to know how much fuel we’re going to have and where I can land this crate. How far can we go?”

Joe looked over, but before he could respond, a pier cing alarm sprang from Jefferson’s damaged console. The still-working ESM gear had detected an unknown fire-control radar to port. Buck was trapped. Already at low altitude, his best option was to climb rapidly, leaving the protection of the ground clutter and exposing his plane to a host of air-defense radars. Instead he popped flares and inched even lower, praying the missile’s sophisticated seeker would be overwhelmed by the confusing radar pulses reflecting off the sheer cliffs and deep ravines. But the old Soviet SAM was blindly flying toward a point in space, its guidance immune to manipulation. Armed by the tremendous G-forces at launch, its 10 KT thermonuclear warhead detonated when the internal counter decremented to zero.

First came the blinding flash then the strange tingling sensation throughout their bodies. Lastly was the vicious punch of the shock wave. Five psi of overpressure hammered the plane, threatening to tear the weakened bomber apart in midair. The following dynamic winds added to the stress, bending and twisting the airframe. The bomber shuddered violently, struggling to stay whole. Buck vigorously fought the stiff controls to avoid burning into the earth. He pulled up the nose when the altimeter showed a scant fifty feet to the ground. The old, dirty bomb had been purposely detonated at altitude to expand its kill radius. Detonating at close to half a mile from their position, it deposited two-to-three-thousand-rem whole-body dose of radiation.

Buck clutched his chest, feeling like his insides were melting. Joe pitched forward, violently vomiting, writhing in his seat. He gasped and chocked, spitting up blood. Ledermeyer slumped in his seat, panting. No one could talk. No one moved.

Ionizing radiation is insidious. No two people react the same way. Four hundred and fifty rem kills half of those exposed in a few weeks; one thousand rem is certain death in a week or two. One thousand to five

thousand means immediate incapacitation in varying degrees and an agonizing death in days. After the prompt effects wane, all experience a latency period, which lulls the victim into a false sense of hope shortly before the final throes of death. Massive doses of ionizing radiation disintegrate the soft tissues of the gastrointestinal tract, making recovery impossible and death inevitable.

Buck sat passively, conserving his strength. He waited for the onslaught he knew was coming, but the debilitating effects slowly subsided. Besides a lingering dizziness and a throbbing in his head, he appeared to have been spared the worst.

“Keep pushing,” he coaxed. “Don’t give up.” He gripped the stick and focused through the damaged windscreen, squinting to weave his way through the foothills.

Joe was semiconscious. Buck pulled him back from his stick, cinching his harness to support his body weight. Ledermeyer had loosened his and was leaning on his console, unable to sit upright. He took short panting breaths.

“I need you, Ledermeyer. Don’t crap out.”

Ledermeyer managed to turn his face sideways and stared at Jefferson. For a moment, he envied his dead comrade.

“I can’t move, Buck. My arms feel like lead.”

“Relax,” Buck coached. “Breathe deep. The effects will pass.”

Ledermeyer pushed himself up a few inches, groaning.

“Oh, man, I hurt.” How could the plane have survived? he thought. Years of analysis had convinced most STRAT-COM flyers that their planes were much softer than their own bodies and that they would most likely perish in a blazing fireball, not slumped over, puking blood.

Buck shook his head to clear his vision. He had to come up in altitude, no matter what the consequences.

“You’ve got to help me get these bombs off. I can’t do it myself. Come on.”

A sharp, clacking noise grabbed Ledermeyer’s attention. Next to his station, an SHF satellite transceiver came to life. The Lacrosse downlink was live, spitting out a stream of characters across a small LCD readout.

“Shit,” Ledermeyer cursed.

“Read it,” ordered Buck.

Ledermeyer supported the thermal paper as it rolled from the printer. The first characters were an authentication, standard fare. The next began a

target description, including a confidence factor and priority.

"Priority one. Possible SS-24 ICBM train. West of Kirov. Possible multiple targets."

"They can't mean us. Someone on the other side of the mountains will have to cover it," answered Buck.

"No acknowledgement yet," said Ledermeyer.

Lacrosse broadcast target data to all airborne platforms. STRATCOM added a header to the message that recommended assignment based on planned EWO routes. But it was up to the individual bomber commanders to roger up for an assignment. Only they could make a realistic assessment of their chances.

After five minutes, there were still no volunteers. Buck haltingly reached for a switch, which would trigger a transponder near the tail. The encrypted signal, a combination of a unique identifier and position data, would bounce off a satellite and wind its way to CINCSTRAT's mobile command post. He paused before depressing it.

At this point, Kirov was no farther than Sverdlovsk, and the odds of him completing his primary mission were zilch. Taking out SS-24s would put more of a dent in the Russians' war machine than blowing up power plants. The overpowering vision of his earlier weapon's detonation still lingered. Each of the SS-24s RVs packed four times the wallop, and each missile carried ten of them. He could save a lot of lives. A quick jab signaled his commitment.

"We're going," he announced, mostly for himself. Ledermeyer didn't answer.

Transiting the Urals had been surprisingly easy. The Russians' principle air-defense threat axis was north, not east, and the plane was masked by the radar clutter reflected off the numerous craggy peaks. Buck crossed south of Vuktyl then steadied on a course that would cover a stretch of sparsely populated territory before approaching Kirov from the northeast. It was only three hundred miles to the target area, less than half an hour.

The desolate landscape of the eastern slope had been replaced on the west by lush, green forests extending as far as Buck could see. He hugged the treetops, tightly gripping the stick, fighting an abrupt, periodic shudder that started at the nose and rippled to the tail. The bomber seemed to be deteriorating at the same pace as he was. He felt nauseous, and a tenderness in his lower abdomen sent shooting pains throughout his body. Hold together,

he prayed.

"Ledermeyer?"

"Yeah, I'm still here." The words came slowly and were slurred.

"Get weapons ready. At least three"

"I'm ahead of you, Buck." Ledermeyer flashed a confident thumbs-up that Buck caught out of the corner of his eye. He acknowledged it with a nod.

The miles rolled by as the sky began to thicken with grayish-black clouds. Each passing minute increased their survival against the endless stream of interceptors. But their biggest concern would be the rings of SAMs around Kirov. Buck would forego any defensive suppression shots and hope to slip past the Russian defensive positions.

Ten minutes from Kirov, Lacrosse spit out an updated target position. A second satellite had crossed the target area and a comparison to earlier data provided fresh intelligence. Ledermeyer updated the location residing in the SRAMs guidance computer. The target was on the move, heading east toward Glazov. Buck eased the bomber to port to intercept the new track. In his mind, he could picture the slow train crammed full of nuclear warheads just waiting for destruction. He would gladly oblige.

Suddenly, the threat emitter alarm blared. To starboard, thin white exhaust trails rose from the forest, at first two, then a total of five. The intermediate range SAMs were fired too close, and he was too low for them to be effective, but their position was exposed. Searching the horizon, Buck noticed a sparsely forested depression dead ahead. And through it, he saw a glimpse of railroad tracks.

"Son-of-a-bitch," he muttered. "Dead-on." He maneuvered to follow the tracks, rising slightly to obtain a better perspective. Ledermeyer kicked in the electronic countermeasures. There was no sense holding back at this juncture.

"Bracket the DGZ, plus one on top."

Ledermeyer had read his mind. "Missiles armed," he announced.

The sweat streamed down Buck's forehead. His flight suit was soaked. He tightened his grip on the stick with two hands, settling back in the ejection seat, guiding the broken bomber. He summoned his last ounces of strength. Every breath brought more pain.

"This is it, Russ. Let's cream those bastards." His earlier hesitancy was gone. This attack had become personal.

Ledermeyer hugged the console, his right forefinger resting on the first launch switch. He watched a counter decrement inches from his face. It was

all he could do to stay conscious.

Directly ahead, the afternoon sky lit up with fireworks. Mobile antiaircraft guns pumped out hundreds of 30mm rounds. Handheld missiles flashed skyward, only to be de-flected by the red-hot flares popping outward every ten seconds. Fragmentation rounds ripped holes in the fuselage and wings, shattering equipment and spraying the interior with shrapnel. More SAMs arced upward but passed harmlessly overhead. The furious barrage was more than anyone could possibly survive.

“God damn, Buck. We’ve hit the jackpot. They’re throwing everything at us,” Ledermeyer yelled. “Must be something big down there.”

“Ten seconds...” A handheld SAM slammed into the starboard wing, blasting away the outboard nacelle, leaving the engine dangling and in flames. The mortally wounded bomber pitched violently upward, presenting a fat target to the defenders. Buck fought to keep her in the air.

On cue, the B-1B’s three missiles dropped and ignited, one after the other. The rotary launcher’s whine was drowned out by the intense racket from exploding shells. As the third bird disappeared in the distance, a stream of tracers tore through the forward fuselage, disintegrating Ledermeyer’s station and blowing out the windscreen. Buck groaned, struck by shrapnel, the rushing wind tearing at his face. He struggled to reach back, gently touching Ledermeyer’s leg.

“We did it, man. We did it.” The starboard wing snapped upward, tearing away, leaving an ugly scar of broken structure and dangling hydraulic lines. The B-1B bomber nosed into the trees, disappearing in a tremendous fireball fueled by thousands of gallons of JP5.

Seconds later, the SRAM trio detonated in sequence. The farthest warhead went first, the blast wave rolling outward, flattening concentric circles of trees. The relentless wave caught the command train parked on a spur with the full fury of twenty psi overpressure and five-hundred-mile-an-hour winds. The train, crushed by the overpressure, splintered into chunks, which bounced across the landscape, leaving a trail of debris and rubble for hundreds of yards. Not a living soul was left alive within three miles.

CHAPTER 27

At 0420, Jackson rang up all stop and pulled the plug. *Michigan* settled to the bottom, resting mid-channel, splitting the distance between Port Townsend to port and Whidbey Island Naval Air Station to starboard. They had observed only an occasional flickering light on shore—possibly headlights from some terror-stricken civilian—and no surface craft whatsoever. Normally the choppy waters of the Puget Sound would be thick with vessels of all flavors, but not now. It was unsettling, as if everyone and everything had mysteriously dissolved into the ether. The boat's sonar hydrophone arrays had detected intermittent screw noises tentatively classified as possible bulk carriers or container ships, but the acoustics were worthless for pinpointing the source. As the ops officer had predicted, their sonar performance stunk. The shallow, muddy bottom sucked up any man-made noise like a vacuum cleaner. God help them if the Russian Akula had crept farther east than they had estimated. In the meantime, Sonar would be working overtime to weed out any buried acoustical emissions from the background biologics that fouled the sensors.

A short-lived emotional lift had been triggered by an acknowledgement of their message telling the world they were alive and in one piece. The response had meant that others had survived as well, most likely tucked away in mobile command centers in the mountains of the West or the dense forests

of the Southeast. Their orders—stand by for missile launch—had been sent by the commander in chief Strategic Command, or CINCSTRAT. Any forthcoming launch order would be immediately followed by a satellite dump of critical target data. The stuff they had was hopelessly out of date. The EAM could arrive over a variety of frequencies, but the target data, compressed and transmitted in a series of burst transmissions, would have to come over the satellite submarine broadcast channel. An identical volume of traffic would take hours over a VLF circuit with its sluggish seventy-five baud data rate. Besides, Jackson doubted that any of the navy's fleet of E-6A TACAMO aircraft would still be airborne. Their time on station was barely twelve hours; then they would have to call it quits and reel in the miles of VLF trailing wire antennas. The handful of shore-based VLF transmission sites was surely rubble.

Over an hour later, the executive officer had the conn. "Blow ballast. Come to periscope depth. Maneuvering, make turns for two knots, be prepared for emergency bells." Each order was crisply repeated, followed by an "Aye, sir." The crew was holding up surprisingly well.

"Up periscope." The XO wanted the scope fully extended even before they settled at the proper depth. They might be farther from the channel centerline than he originally gauged, and he would have to react instantly. There was little margin for error.

Michigan rumbled as high-pressure compressed air forced seawater from the fore and aft ballast tanks. The diving officer, a senior chief petty officer, had the unenviable job of trying to trim the huge boat in shallow water at minimum speed. With a jerk *Michigan* let loose of the bottom and floated upward, with a slight five-degree forward angle. The senior chief patiently encouraged the junior enlisted men manning the ballast control panels, leaning over their backs, pointing here, then there. Within two minutes, he had leveled the boat, no mean feat. To his immediate right, the helmsman and the planesman struggled with the stern control surfaces to maintain course and to gently drive the boat upward. Prudence dictated that they maintain slight negative buoyancy to avoid broaching and exposing the sail. Turns for two knots barely provided needed steerageway.

Even before the announcement of "periscope depth," the executive officer hung over the large Type 18 scope. When it popped through the surface, he quickly spun 360 degrees to probe for intruders. The navigator had already briefed him on what landmarks to shoot. He swung the scope to

the first feature, a small jut of land that lay off the port bow.

"Point Alpha, bearing 347." Then he made a quick turn to the right. "Point Bravo, bearing 031." Then he looked back. "Point Charlie, bearing 212." He wasn't sure about the last one. The supposedly prominent landmark on the chart seemed to dissolve against the shimmering water. "Position in the channel looks good." At the plotting table, the Nav team furiously plotted the three lines of bearing and within seconds, had a solution. A small triangle surrounded a black dot that lay slightly off the original penciled track.

"One hundred yards right of track, recommend course 028."

The XO accepted the advice. "Steer 028, all ahead one third."

Jackson could feel the subtle acceleration as Maneuvering slowly opened the throttles that controlled the saturated steam flow to the main engine turbine. The added speed brought relief to the enlisted men manipulating the rudder and diving planes. Jackson felt like he was in control again. The XO stood upright, releasing the scope. "Skipper?"

Jackson nodded and stepped to the platform for his turn. He had slept for only thirty minutes in the last twenty-four hours, and it showed. Black semicircles hung beneath his eyes. But he sucked it up, pumped full of caffeine. The emotional tug-of-war in his skull continued. Rage threatened to breach the barrier of professional responsibility necessary to do his job.

The others looked just as miserable. Sweat stained and unshaven, the assembled sailors sat stoically, while the smell of body odor permeated the cramped quarters. Jackson knew they needed to make their dash for freedom or his dog-tired crew could collapse before his eyes.

Jackson checked his watch as he always did before peering out the scope. 0552. Pressing his face flush against the large rubber eyepieces, he saw a brightening summer-morning sky. The serene picture was masked by thin wisps of fog just beginning to melt. The deep blue waters displayed their usual chop. Tiny whitecaps formed then disappeared, like so many seabirds darting about the undulating surface. To port, the fog thickened near the shore, making any view of Port Townsend impossible. Slowly turning the periscope head to starboard, the white curtain thinned. A sick feeling gripped his stomach as a grotesque image formed through the haze. Where Whidbey used to be was now blackened, charred shoreline. Trees were splintered like matchsticks or chopped off clean at the ground, and small fires smoldered amid the carnage. Buildings weren't visible from his vantage point a few feet above the water's surface, but he could imagine their fate. He flashed back to

an image of Bangor then to the twin concussions that had rocked the boat. The destruction before his eyes rekindled the hate that had subsided. Any naive hopes about Bangor's survival were instantly dashed, crushed by the imagery before his eyes. He could only shake his head and focus his energy down the channel. He spared his weary crew more bad news.

Jackson hung limply on the folding scope handles for the next fifteen miles, shooting bearings when appropriate and scanning the horizon for any telltale sign of a vessel steaming for the open sea. They might just get lucky and pick up a noisy bulk carrier whose ample baffles would provide a safe haven. The unsuspecting ship would run interference westward through the straits. But so far, no luck.

By now the morning sun cast a soft golden tint over the sound, kicking up a blinding glare that danced across the water. Jackson squinted into the eyepiece, occasionally retracting his unshaven face and pinching the crown of his nose to relieve the strain. Steering a base course of 290, *Michigan* zigzagged across the channel centerline, seeking the deepest water possible. Bottom soundings were notoriously apocryphal, but so far they had been lucky. A true test of their seamanship lay dead ahead—an irregular bottom—the worst part of the transit. He seriously considered a short sprint on the surface.

"Control, Radio, flash traffic." The executive officer was sprinting forward toward radio before the last word faded into the air. He returned, dragging the comm and weapons officers and waving the yellow sheet. He thrust it in the captain's hand while the others crowded around the platform handrails, their faces a mixture of anxiety and fatalism.

"This is it," said Jackson, not surprised, "look at the time." The message ordered *Michigan* to launch eight of her twenty-four missiles at 0845 local, a scant forty-one minutes away. Strict procedures allowed a permissible launch window of only plus or minus two minutes. Missing the ordered attack time would jeopardize a well-coordinated attack. Second-wave bombers counting on *Michigan*'s warheads to blast corridors through surviving air defenses would be sitting ducks. Any mobile targets would have ample warning to scurry to safety. All the hard work poured into developing targeting data gleaned from bomb damage assessments would be wasted.

Forty minutes was barely time to reach the desired 550 feet of water for a successful launch.

"Get the EAM authenticated and report back immediately," he ordered

the two lieutenants. Jackson collared the XO and dragged him close.

"Get the torpedo tubes loaded and open the outer doors." The XO's dark brown eyes widened as his brow furrowed.

"You're chancing a hell of a lot of flow-induced noise from those open tubes, Skipper."

Jackson cast him loose and moved to the scope. "We've got to take the chance. If Ivan pops up, all we'll get is a snap shot." The executive officer nodded and marched off.

"Come left to course 277. Navigator, aim for a point 123-15 west, 48-15 north by 0835. Plot it." Jackson sharply slapped the twin periscope handles upward. "Down scope."

The navigation team immediately went to work, carefully laying out a multi-legged track that placed them on the mandatory spot at the precise time. The navigator stood behind, nodding like an approving teacher.

"Skipper, recommend we take the northern path through the shallows. It's the quickest, and we'll exit in about four hundred and twenty feet of water. From there, it's a straight shot to the launch point."

"Very well, the north it is."

Michigan steamed on. Shoal water lay off both beams and dead ahead. A tricky maneuver would be required in order to avoid high centering on a sandbar.

"Make turns for twelve knots." They needed more speed despite the probable onset of cavitation from the tips of the propeller.

Michigan lurched forward, a detectable hum transmitted through the deck plates. To Jackson's left, the operations officer made final preparations at the attack center. His men clustered around their chief, ready for action. Aft in the missile-launch control room, Brandice and his crew spun up the gyros in the chosen Trident missiles and input the fresh target-data bit streams into the guidance computers. Throughout the boat, sailors exercised well-rehearsed procedures for securing unnecessary gear to minimize radiated noise. The engineers braced for seawater leaks and battle damage.

"All stations report manned and ready," said the young phone talker bird-dogging Jackson.

"Right standard rudder," he ordered as they entered the first leg through the shallows.

"Right standard rudder, aye, sir." *Michigan* heeled gently to starboard; the crew shifted instinctively to port. Minutes later, the maneuver was adeptly

reversed. Halfway through the port turn, *Michigan* jerked violently, and a loud grating noise filled the hull. Sailors grabbed the nearest handhold to steady themselves.

"Shit," Jackson shouted angrily, nearly toppled from the platform himself. "Up ten degrees on the planes. Maintain speed." The navigator's face blanched.

"Skipper, nothing should be here. Nothing." Jackson couldn't blame the lad, only himself. The scraping ceased, and then a loud bang announced that the *Michigan*'s stern had bounced off the sandbar.

"We're going to broach, Skipper." *Michigan*'s huge black sail broke through the surface in an explosion of white frothy foam visible for miles. Panic crossed all the faces in Control. Any idiot would be able to pinpoint their location.

Jackson grappled to regain control, and his heart began to race. "Up scope. Slow to five knots. Get her back down, Chief."

"Aye, aye, sir." Jackson hugged the stainless-steel scope as it rose. The navigator had been correct. The shoreline lay far to starboard. "How far to deep water?"

"Three minutes at this speed. Then recommend course 260," the answer shot back.

The deceleration eased the turbulence around the protruding sail stub, reducing the boat's signature substantially. They struggled to coax the bulky submarine back beneath the strait. She finally agreed and once again settled out at periscope depth. The chief's team was drained—it had been like breaking a wild horse.

"We should be over the edge, Skipper." The navigator referred to a sudden steep falloff of the bottom. That was freedom but also danger. It was the gateway to a deep-water haven, yet a portal to an unseen enemy.

"Take her down to three hundred fifty feet. Make turns for eight knots." *Michigan* slid gracefully toward the ordered depth. The only sound in control was heavy breathing broken by an occasional cough. The entire crew was on a razor's edge, keenly aware of the danger that loomed ahead.

"Ten minutes to reach the launch point." The navigator's not-so-gentle reminder raised the anxiety level another notch.

"Contact, bearing 262," shouted the 21MC. Heads jerked in unison.

Jackson felt a surge of adrenaline kick in. Ivan was waiting, all right. The alarm was followed by silence. He leaned over and hailed sonar.

“What’s going on up there? What’s the estimated range? Talk to me.”

“He’s gone, Skipper,” reported the XO. “We barely got any signature data. Maybe it was an anomaly.”

“Bullshit, it’s got to be real. So you can’t ID it as a Russian boat?”

“It was single screw and had up Doppler.”

“That’s it?” Jackson could feel the pressure building behind his temples.

“We only had him for a second, Captain. He just disappeared.”

Jackson straightened, a frown spreading across his face. “What do you think, Ops?”

“We’ve got to launch,” reminded the bald operations officer. “In sixteen minutes.”

No, shit, Jackson thought. His thrust his hands on his hips with a huff. “Who is that guy?” Maybe it wasn’t the Akula?

“Up Doppler means inbound. No tanker would be inbound. And our ships are double screwed.”

“Except the frigates.”

“None in the area.”

“How do we flush this guy?”

“Use a decoy?” the ops officer grimaced. He wished he could reel in his stupid advice.

Jackson pounced. “Great, he’ll pop a nuke our way and still get us, despite the racket. We’re so confined, he doesn’t have to aim. Our only chance is to blow him clean out of the water before he can get a single shot off.” Jackson arched his back to release the tension. “Well, do you think he picked up us hitting the sandbar?”

The ops officer became agitated. He didn’t have any answers, unusual for him. “No way to know.”

Jackson stepped defiantly back up on the platform. He would not give up that easily. “Come right to course 330. Bring her up to two hundred feet. Let’s see if we can draw this turkey out.”

The ops officer formed a quick mental snapshot of the orders. “We could be trapped against the shore.”

Jackson didn’t answer for a moment. “Doesn’t matter,” he finally said. He drummed his fingers on the rail. “Come on Sonar.”

“Captain, depth under the keel two hundred fifty-five feet.” That was close enough.

“Very well, come left to course 270, make turns for three knots.”

Michigan dangerously skirted the two-hundred-and-fifty-foot contour, tempting providence. A minor slip, either broaching or scrapping the bottom, would be the end.

“Depth under the keel two hundred thirty-five feet. Now two hundred twenty-five feet. Skipper, we’ve got to get out of here!” The navigator was shaking.

“Left five degrees rudder,” Jackson ordered sternly.

“Two hundred fifteen feet.” There was a collective gasp. Sailors grimaced and slumped in their chairs.

“Increase your rudder to left fifteen degrees.” Jackson was struck with a sinking feeling that he had overplayed a bad hand and fate was about to bite him on the ass. “Standby to launch torpedoes. Disable the arming delay. Tubes one through three.”

“I’ve got to have something to shoot at, Skipper,” protested the ops officer.

“Pick a point mid-channel, enable active search.”

“Aye, aye, sir.” The ops officer’s sudden formality registered his protest. He didn’t say it, but he had long ago voted in favor of backing off and skipping the launch window. Other opportunities would arise. But then, he wasn’t the captain.

“Passing 260 degrees.”

“Two hundred and thirty feet beneath the keel.”

Jackson exhaled with the others, “Rudder amidships, steady on course 255.”

“Course 255, aye, sir.”

“Contact bearing 195!” Jackson leapt to the 21MC, almost hugging it. “Stronger now, seven-bladed screw. Turns for five knots. Estimated course, 180. Estimated range, three thousand yards. It’s an Akula!”

Jackson slapped his leg. “Left standard rudder, steady on course 180.”

Without being prompted, the ops officer worked the attack console furiously. A firing solution quickly popped up on the computer screen in front of his face. Now he had something to shoot at.

“Range, two thousand five hundred yards.”

“Come on Ivan, keep showing us your ass.”

“She’s turning to port, Skipper. We’re coming out of the Akula’s baffles.” He needed a much shorter range.

“Two thousand yards.” Still too far. It would take their torpedoes a good

minute to cover the distance. Ivan could slap them back in that short time. “Fifteen hundred yards. She’s nearly got a beam aspect now, continuing to port.” If the Russian skipper swung bow on, he would drastically reduce *Michigan*’s crack at a first shot kill. It had to be now.

“Fire!” The energy behind the single word jerked the ops officer’s finger down on the red plastic button. The first Mark 48 torpedo burst out of the port-side tube in a fierce blast of compressed air. Its tiny active sonar broadcast acoustical energy ten feet from *Michigan*’s hull. The 48 armed immediately and accelerated hard to maximum speed. It was immediately joined by two companions fired from the starboard tubes. The faint return from the Akula’s rubber-coated hull was followed by a blast from her own powerful active sonar. She would be fighting mad now. *Michigan*’s passive sonar instantly detected the rumblings of the Akula’s torpedo-tube doors amid the cacophony of acoustical energy engulfing both boats.

“First torpedo has acquired,” cried the ops officer. “Time to impact twenty-eight seconds.” Twenty-eight seconds was still too long. The Akula could get a shot off even in her death throes.

“All head flank!” screamed Jackson. *Michigan* lurched forward, accelerating toward her own torpedoes hunting the Akula. Their only prayer was to close the gap between themselves and the Russian boat as fast as possible.

“Two torpedoes from the Akula,” shouted the executive officer in a hoarse voice. “Coming down our throat. Range to the Akula, nine hundred yards.”

In a massive underwater fireball, the 48s from *Michigan* eviscerated the Akula with over a ton of high explosive. The shockwave caught *Michigan* head-on at five hundred yards. She jerked and bucked in the roiling turbulence as she passed directly overhead the stricken boat sinking rapidly toward the bottom. The Akula’s counter-punch passed harmlessly down *Michigan*’s starboard side, failing to arm.

Jackson held his breath and focused on the digital clock, which hung near the scope. He estimated twenty seconds before they were dead. Braced for the expected nuclear detonation that would split them in two like a ripe melon, the faint pinging of acoustical torpedoes chasing a phantom triggered a rush of emotion that made him gasp.

The ops officer panted shallowly, sweat ran down his flushed face. “He didn’t fire nukes,” he croaked. “Why didn’t he fire nukes?”

Jackson closed his eyes to regain his composure. “All ahead one-third, come right to course 270. Ops, take the conn.” He turned to the 21MC, depressed the level and said simply, “XO.” The Ops Officer stumbled into Control. Both Jackson and the executive officer cornered the navigator for a conference. He would trim *Michigan* for her ordered launch. Then the pair moved out.

Jackson slid down the ladder to the lower level, followed closely by the XO. Through the hull, they heard the distinctive clang of the massive missile-tube doors slamming against their hinges and locking in place. In single file, they traversed the narrow passageways and turned the last corner to the missile control room. Brandice was arched over the console, supervising the missile techs. Behind him stood the master chief and his guards. No one said a word. Jackson and the XO assumed their stations and removed the small stainless steel keys that hung from their sweaty necks. The much-practiced procedure assumed a sudden solemnness that they all felt. In one fluid motion, they simultaneously inserted the keys into marked slots then twisted them to the right. Red panels turned to green. The missiles were ready.

Brandice held the solid black handgrip that housed the firing key. It was attached to the console by heavy, protective cable and made a metallic grating sound as he raised it in the air. Procedure called for all present to observe his right forefinger depress the red plastic trigger. He turned his eyes toward the overhead, a blank look covering his emotionally drained face. A momentary hint of supplication faded into a cold, hard stare.

“Fire,” Jackson simply said.

One by one, eight Trident missiles belched forth from *Michigan*. Compressed gases violently pushed them past fiberglass protective covers and thrust them through tons of resistive seawater. Enough energy remained to hurl them thirty feet above the water’s surface, where the first-stage solid rocket motors exploded in a billowing cloud of orange flame and thick gray smoke. Each missile in turn righted itself, its silicon brain instantly recognizing its surroundings. Once stable, each missile began the long journey to Russian airspace.

Jackson’s thoughts turned to his own family, and how much he loved them and then to visions of Russian citizens bustling through the crowded streets of their magnificent old-world cities. Why had this madness happened? He couldn’t answer, only carry out his orders, and pray to God his missiles weren’t targeting those ancient Russian cities.

CHAPTER 28

Thomas slumped against the corrugated trunk of a thick oak, slowly sliding off the emotional high that had peaked an hour earlier. The heightened sensual awareness brought back memories of combat over the skies of Vietnam. The intoxication of facing death and escaping had troubled him then and puzzled him now. He should be trying to catch some sleep. It was nearly four in the morning.

The night had finally cooled enough to halt the constant sweating under fatigues. In fact, he almost felt chilled sitting in the night air. Shortly after the attack, he had been hustled to a waiting helo and flown down the Shenandoah to a map grid where they had popped over the mountains and headed southeast toward Lynchburg, Virginia. After touchdown, Thomas was forced to cool his heels in the company of a handful of Harcourt's men. He now sat on the ground with one of them, nursing an injured left arm, waiting for a rendezvous with an army unit assigned to escort him to the new president.

The camp doctor had extracted a jagged piece of shrapnel that had split open two inches of his forearm. Thomas hadn't noticed amidst all the commotion, until the blood started dripping on the deck in steady black-red drops. The wound was beginning to throb under the tight gauze bandage. The man with him was a major, the officer in charge. He squatted on one knee, his M-4A cradled under his arm, his free hand resting on a radio, and his eyes

locked on the clearing. Smeared face paint made it impossible to discern individual facial features. He looked like any other soldier, except tougher, which was expected from the men of the army's special operations forces.

Thomas rubbed an outstretched leg, massaging a cramped thigh muscle. "What's your name, Major? Where you from?" The Ranger didn't move and didn't answer for an uncomfortable period. The major finally accepted that the general wanted to talk.

"Benton, sir, from Kentucky." The soft southern accent confirmed the reply. Thomas focused on the Ranger patch on the major's shoulder, barely visible from two feet.

"I thought the 75th Ranger Regiment was split between Fort Benning and Fort Lewis?"

"That's right, sir. But we rotate a company every three months to the DC area as part of FEMA's contingency plans. Support the mobile command center. It was my turn in the barrel."

"You the company commander?"

"Yes, sir, Echo Company, 2nd Battalion."

"Well, Major Benton, it looks like we're gonna be together for a while."

Benton cocked his head slightly in Thomas's direction. The black eyes were hard, committed. "Yes, sir. Colonel Harcourt said I'm not supposed to let you out of my sight until I personally deliver you to wherever the hell we're going." The major's focus shifted back to the perimeter and duty.

Thomas stopped the interrogation. The major had better things to do than shoot the shit with some hobbled air force general. Although the requirement for a personal bodyguard grated on his sensibility, he couldn't have picked a better man. He was sure the others out there in the darkness were of the same caliber.

A sudden roar filled the forest; a chorus of military vehicles reverberated through the trees. The major's radio crackled to life. A Ranger monitoring the approach road announced the composition of the approaching troops. Benton ordered his men to fall back. Within thirty seconds, ghostly figures drifted from the woods, quickly setting up for an ambush, if such were required. Two M-60 machine-gun teams covered the approach while three men with AT-4s spread out behind. The rest lay flat on their stomachs, rifles ready.

A foreign call sign floated out of the radio. Benton clicked his penlight over a pad of paper with scribbled codes. Partially satisfied, he answered with

a code challenge that was properly authenticated by the strangers on the other end. He looked up.

"Our ride's here, General." Benton got to his feet and strode into the clearing. Headlights came around the bend, bathing the major in a flickering glow that eerily cast a shadow. His M-4A was pointed directly at the lights as a precaution. If it wasn't who he thought it was, he wouldn't have a chance. The lead vehicle screeched to a halt. It was a Humvee, the military's all-purpose vehicle, followed by a second and then a pair of two-and-a-half-ton trucks. All sat idling, the racket tearing at the still night.

A bird colonel, as evidenced by the shiny eagles on each collar, exited the cab. Benton stationed himself between Thomas and the men spilling out of the vehicles.

"We're here for General Thomas," announced the colonel loudly over the diesel engine's racket. Benton let him approach. Thomas had made it to his feet, limping slightly, determined to appear whole. The colonel recognized the officer moving his way.

"General Thomas?" he asked, saluting.

Thomas saluted in reply. "That's right."

"I'm to take you, the major, and his men to our camp. We'll get further instructions there."

Benton turned to Thomas and raised his eyebrows. Thomas nodded the OK.

"Saddle up," Benton barked to his men. "I'll ride with you, General." He held out an arm and guided Thomas to the Humvee. The Rangers piled into the two and a half tons, while Benton and Thomas rode in the backseat of the lead Humvee. With everyone on board, the lead driver spun a U-turn and headed down the first of a series of back roads that would eventually break out onto a state highway for the final approach to the camp.

"We're sitting ducks," observed Benton with a twinge of disgust. It obviously wasn't the way he would have done it. He had already lost many good men earlier tonight.

"We've cleared the route," answered the colonel defensively for Thomas's benefit. Thomas started to open his mouth, wondering whether the speaker had taken the oath and where he was. He thought better and said nothing. This wasn't the time or place.

After nearly an hour of winding roads, the Humvee pulled up to a checkpoint with a sandbagged machine-gun emplacement to one side.

Daylight was beginning to break. Three soldiers approached, peered in, and then waved the trucks past. Another four hundred yards brought them to a bustling tent complex. The driver stopped at the largest of the tents. A gaggle of officers surged forward and crowded Thomas as he slowly exited. They backed up when Benton crawled out, his M-4A hanging loosely at his side. A brigadier general with silver stars spoke and saluted for the group.

“General Lockstetter, sir, Forces Command J5. I’ve been instructed to keep you here until 0630. Then we’ll escort you to the president.”

That word was what Thomas had wanted to hear.

“Sorry we can’t take you there immediately, but security has to be established. General Hargesty’s orders.”

“I understand.” General Hargesty was the commandant of the marine corps.

Thomas surveyed the noisy and chaotic camp. If this place didn’t attract attention, he didn’t know what would. But maybe that was the point.

“In the meantime, General, we have a tent where you can rest.” Thomas nodded. It was an appealing thought. He doubted he could sleep, but it was certainly worth a try. Morning was already on the way.

“Major, why don’t you get your men some chow? And some sleep,” said Thomas. “Can that be arranged, General?” he asked the brigadier. It wasn’t really a question.

The brigadier straightened. “Certainly, sir.”

Benton almost smiled. “Two of my men will be outside your tent at all times, General Thomas, and others nearby.” The Ranger wasn’t about to leave his charge to amateurs.

All the attention puzzled Thomas. He wondered what waited for him down the road later in the morning. “Show me the way,” he said to the brigadier. As they walked, Thomas reflected how when he was at the NMCC, he hadn’t expected to see another sunrise. Maybe this would be his last.

A violent but short-lived, early morning thundershower left the summer air thick with moisture, while the brilliant sun pumped the oppressive heat toward a forecasted ninety-five degrees. Thomas squinted into the blinding sunlight pouring through the windshield. They had left at 0645 and now sped along frontage roads. In the distance, he could see a major highway, he didn’t know which one. He hadn’t spent much time in this part of Virginia. So far they hadn’t seen a soul. Thomas bet most people outside of a city were hunkered down in their homes waiting to be told what to do. Leaving in your

car was a good way to get killed.

The caravan reached an expansive office park set back among pine trees. The location provided decent security. The battalion of infantry shadowing the new president was dug in and ready. They weren't going to lose another leader.

Thomas sat in the backseat next to Benton. His mind slipped back in time. Only twenty-four hours earlier, he had been at home, shaving, dressing, and getting ready for the commute to the Pentagon. It seemed an eternity.

After pulling through a checkpoint, the Humvee came to a stop at an eighties-looking three-story building. Thomas couldn't recall the company logo over the double doors. Waiting was a grim-faced army major.

"General Hargesty's waiting inside, sir," he said peering through the window. Thomas looked over at Benton with a raised brow.

"Here goes," he silently said. He had grown to like the quiet major. Thomas was halfway out when Benton spoke.

"Good luck, General Thomas."

He turned and gave a short, small smile. "Thanks," he answered.

Thomas followed the guide as best he could, the effects of too much sitting clearly visible. He wished he could take something for the pain in his arm. He did note with curiosity the occasional shattered window and the bullet holes in the walls. Inside the building's airy atrium, a short, stocky figure was centered in the far doorway, hands on his hips, a scowl on his round, ruddy face. He gave an irritating hurry-up wave as Thomas walked in.

"Follow me, Bob," he grunted, turning and pointing straight ahead with his hand. "Hurry."

General Percival Hargesty was the commandant of the marine corps, with a face like a bulldog and a personality to match. Of medium height, but powerfully built, he was the quintessential marine. His hair was cropped so short it was difficult to tell how much he had, or, if he did, what color. An explosive temper kept adversaries off balance and had made him the terror of the JCS's infamous Tank. A few select friends called him Pinky, a reference to his sanguine complexion, but most casual acquaintances didn't dare risk the consequences. His testimony on the hill bordered on the theatrical, but had preserved the marine corps' force structure during the budget massacre of the early nineties.

Inside someone's private office, Hargesty plopped heavily on the edge of a large gun-metal gray desk. Thomas collapsed in an adjacent overstuffed

chair. Hargesty eyed him suspiciously, like a doctor sizing up the physical and mental condition of his patient. After an aide shut the door, he jumped to his feet and paced the room. He stopped in his tracks and faced Thomas. His tough face was serious, yet surprisingly relaxed.

"What a fucking mess," he said, shaking his head. "I was in my backyard barbecuing steaks when this goddamn army helo lands on the parade ground at the barracks. Some asshole tells me to get on board. He was ranting like a crazy man."

The head marine eased back down onto the edge of the desk and almost cracked a smile. "I'm the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs now, can you believe that? By the way, Bob, you look like shit."

Thomas locked onto Hargesty's beady brown eyes. A swell of rage rose in his breast. Certainly his blood-stained, rumpled fatigues and unshaven face weren't the picture of health, but Hargesty's cavalier attitude struck Thomas as not only inappropriate but borderline sick.

"I beg your pardon, General?" Hargesty sensed he had stepped over the line.

"Relax, Bob, no harm meant." Thomas's continued glare signaled he hadn't taken the last comment to heart.

Hargesty launched into a grueling interrogation, demanding details about everything that had happened, sucking out every last bit of information. He shotgunned questions and prodded and poked until Thomas again lost his temper.

"What the hell do you want, General? What's the point?"

Hargesty feigned hurt, conceding that he had probably pressed too hard, but definitely was not willing to apologize.

"What's the fucking point? You're the only one that's still alive. That's the point. You were there from the start, the NSC meeting after the boats were first discovered. You alone were at the NMCC when the attack was first detected. You saw how things unfolded, how the president reacted. Then you were at the GMCC last night with Secretary Alexander. You've got a feel for how the decisions were made up and down the line, and that's what the president needs. He's in left field, being fed bullshit from both sides—candy-ass aides who want to unconditionally surrender and a gung-ho CINCSTRAT who wants to unleash the entire strategic reserve. Then there are civil matters. What a pile of shit. The president needs you, Bob."

Hargesty stood with his arms folded. "Besides, you've got a reputation

as a decent strategist and someone with backbone."

Thomas sighed. "I don't have any magical answers. I'm barely functioning." He buried his face in his hands. Thomas felt overwhelmed.

"Your presence here is critical, even if you don't say a goddamn word. You'll lend credibility, legitimacy to the president. It's your duty, Bob."

Thomas looked up. The last statement was a cheap shot. Duty, my ass, he thought. He struggled to assemble his thoughts. He needed to figure out Hargesty's game. "Secretary Alexander knew there would be heartburn over the speaker assuming the presidency. You must know that the CINCs weren't thrilled. How about you, General?" It was the right question at the right time.

Hargesty gave Thomas an angry look. He leaned forward purposefully, riveting his eyes on Thomas's eyes. He folded his beefy hands and rested them in his lap. It was lecture time. "I'm a simple guy, Bob. I don't know why a supposedly merciful God let this happen, but I'm not going to get tied in knots trying to philosophize about life after nuclear war. We've got a nasty fight on our hands; it's that simple. I obey the orders of the commander in chief. And I'll personally kick anyone's ass who is not on board. I've already relieved two commanders. I may appear cold and uncaring, but I'm no different than anyone else. Hell, my wife kissed me good-bye when I got on that helo. She was crying her eyes out. And I felt like it." Hargesty slapped his thighs and stood. "That's in the past; let's go see the president. He's expecting us."

Thomas nodded. Not bad, he thought. He rose and followed the stocky general out the door and up the back stairs. Fatigue was beginning to settle in his lower back as a dull ache.

"You were hit by Spetsnaz," Hargesty offered out of the blue, "which is no news to you. A bunch of them flew in from Cuba on a couple converted Boeing 727s that stuck to commercial air corridors. How they got into Cuba undetected no one knows. Sons-of-bitches hit just about every command site in the east and military bases as far west as Colorado. They nailed our ass. So much for our vaunted operational security. That's why we can't go to the North Carolina bunker. An alternate is being worked farther south, out of ICBM range. But we won't show up there until those assholes are mopped up. We've got the equivalent of two infantry divisions tracking them down. What a waste of resources."

The topic made Thomas recall the building's bullet-scarred exterior. "What happened here?" Hargesty looked puzzled but then caught on.

“The bullet holes? Trigger-happy soldiers early this morning—when we moved in, they swore they took rounds from the buildings. Maybe they did, who knows? We never found anyone.”

They exited at the third floor where a handful of young soldiers stood guard in a U-shaped hallway covered with plush gray and burgundy carpet that was now covered with an artful pattern of muddy footprints. Stylish paintings adorned the corridor, oddly contrasting the somber mood hanging in the air. Hargesty stopped in front of a large wooden door belonging to an important-sounding law firm, rapping. The door slowly opened.

Inside, the expensive overstuffed furniture and end tables had been shoved aside, and the mahogany desks were strung end-to-end, covered with a collage of maps and charts. Mobile communications gear in hastily assembled racks covered an entire wall. Private offices had cots erected. It had all the trappings of a government in exile, on the run, thought Thomas. Not a pretty sight.

In the far corner, a tall, distinguished man looked up from the crowd of officers and civilians huddled around a conference table. He excused himself, walking slowly to where the two generals were waiting. Thomas felt uneasy, on a knife’s edge, uncertain as to where he stood. The man didn’t say a word, but reached out and gave Thomas a genuinely warm handshake that melted his anxiety and brought a flush of relief.

The ex-speaker of the House struck a much-less imposing figure in loose-fitting casual clothes. Unpretentious, he didn’t sport the usual aristocratic air that marked his imperious style within Washington’s chummy power circles. His longish white hair was thinner than Thomas had remembered, and he bore a pale expression that summoned compassion and pity. His blue eyes were deeper in color than Thomas’s, but lacked clarity at the moment.

“I can’t tell you how pleased I am that you’re alive, General Thomas,” he said sincerely. He gazed for the longest time into Thomas’s eyes.

Thomas experienced a powerful wave of guilt that washed over him for his earlier reservations about the man’s abilities. The president held his hand firmly and wouldn’t let go, clasping it with his second.

“I’m glad you’re safe, Mr. President.” The instinctive reply echoed strangely in Thomas’s head, but it had a soothing effect. He had experienced firsthand the power of orderly succession, the benefit of presidential continuity. When a leader falls, another must immediately take his place, or

chaos ensues.

The president reluctantly released Thomas's hand and gave him the once-over. His focus was on Thomas's bandaged arm and blood-soaked shirt. "We'll get a doctor to attend to you, General."

"I'm OK, sir, just a little banged up."

"Let's step over here," suggested the president, motioning to his right. They moved away from the doorway to a secluded corner. "Has General Hargesty briefed you?" The mere mention of recent events hurt, and it showed in the president's face.

"Not really, sir. I don't know anything that's happened since two or three in the morning."

The president folded his arms. "I'll be frank," he said, letting the words soak in. "I need your help. I need someone I can count on, someone I can trust." His words carried an undercurrent of desperation. The president carefully studied Thomas for his knee-jerk response. That would be the key.

Thomas was too tired to think very hard on the matter. He wanted to get on with it. And, it felt right.

"I'll accept any assignment you have for me, Mr. President."

The president was obviously pleased. His voice softened, and his face relaxed momentarily. "Good."

The president backed up a step and put his hands on his hips and sized up Thomas one last time. "It won't be easy, you know. Certain people will be gunning for you."

Thomas recalled his firm commitment to Alexander, to the chairman, to see this to the end. "I can handle it, sir." He wasn't sure what "it" meant yet.

The president didn't keep him waiting. "I want you to be my senior military advisor. General Hargesty concurs. And for now, I'm making you acting vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs. You'll be the number-two military officer in the armed forces. That's right where I want you."

Thomas's face blanched. It clearly wasn't what he expected.

Before he could muster a counter, Hargesty jumped in.

"I'll work the theater CINCs, Bob, while you'll do the strategic stuff and help the president make the tough decisions. You understand that crap. Your first job will be to call on CINCSTRAT and introduce General McClain to the facts of life. He can bullshit me. He won't you."

The gears in Thomas's mind finally began to turn.

"I'm flattered, Mr. President, but you must know that I've made more

than my share of enemies." He sounded like he was whining. He wanted to yank the words back, but they were true.

"Let me worry about that, General." The president put his hand on Thomas's shoulder. "After you get something to eat, we'll talk about your trip. I want you to brief me on your recollections of the last twenty-four hours." The president turned and took three steps but stopped suddenly. He turned his head to speak.

"I thought highly of Matt Alexander. I'm not going to second-guess decisions already made under impossible circumstances. God knows I already experienced enough of that myself to last a lifetime." With that, he returned to pressing business and immersed himself with his staff.

Hargesty quickly read Thomas's mind. "He's done a remarkable job, all things considered. He's made a believer of me." Hargesty put his arm around Thomas's shoulders like a consoling uncle. "But the president's got a problem. The government's beat up bad, and he needs our help in pulling it back together. He can't tolerate dissension within the military, no matter how well-intentioned. Any infighting will cripple his efforts to stop this war."

Thomas nodded. "I'll support him one hundred percent. You've got my word on it." A flicker of hope touched his face. "You mentioned stopping the war. Has there been any contact with the Russians?"

"Some third-party feelers. Nothing substantive. Come on, let's get you washed up and fed."

CHAPTER 29

Captain Jim Rawlings, United States Army Special Forces, parted the off-white ceiling-to-floor drapes. The discolored folds of fabric covered the picture window in the lobby of the visiting officer quarters at RAF Woodbridge. The base was nestled in the lush English countryside ninety miles northeast of London. Pulling the bundle of material aside, Rawlings stole a peek. An early morning rain squall had left the concrete sidewalks and blacktop roads darkened. The overcast clung to the base, mounting streaks of grayish black threatening a repeat of the previous shower. Despite the season, Rawlings endured miserable weather during his stay in England for joint training operations with the Brits. He much preferred the muggy Caribbean or the hot, dry deserts of northern Africa or the Middle East.

Rawlings leaned his lanky six-foot-two frame against the window and sighed. He was an Irishman with red hair, freckled skin, and pure blue eyes. Usually he fought persistent sunburn, but not here. An Alabama boy, born and bred, Rawlings loved the climate of his youth. The English weather was getting old.

But it wasn't just the weather. He didn't like change, and the army had been nothing but change. If it weren't for the challenge of Special Forces, he would have called a military-career quits long ago. But there wasn't much for a physical-education major to do these days.

In the distance, battle-dressed British Commandos patrolled the grounds, while mobile Rapier antiaircraft batteries set up shop near the crossed runways at the center of the base. Woodbridge was home to numerous RAF military squadrons and the NATO host to two squadrons of US Special Forces aircraft. Woodbridge had a twin, RAF Bentwaters, four miles down the road. The 21st Special Operations Squadron flew the MH-53J Pave Low helicopter, while the 67th SOS handled the HC-130P, a variant of the C-130 Hercules cargo plane. The Papas, as they were called, served as tankers for the helos. The extra gas gave them twice the operational range, permitting clandestine forays deep into central Europe. The end of the Cold War had thrown the war-planning process into complete chaos. Targets became obsolete overnight, and new target folders were taking years to develop. Creative mission planning became the watchword.

Rawlings released the folds of fabric and frowned. Even his normally fertile imagination drew a blank. He wandered to an old burgundy leather couch and crashed into the supple contours formed through years of rough duty. Rawlings was dressed in a blue-and-white rugby shirt, well-worn Levis, and neon-splashed running shoes. He pulled the sleeves to his elbows and leaned back to examine the ceiling, placing both hands behind his neck.

The Brits had been polite but firm. Under no circumstances was Rawlings to leave the building or make contact with his men across the campus in the enlisted quarters. And none of the phones worked. It was all very disconcerting.

Rawlings, a senior captain, was six months into the job as the commander of an Army Special Forces A-Team. His current orders had them conducting training with the British Special Air Service, direct action and strategic reconnaissance missions mostly. His A-Team was attached to Company B, 1st Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group based at Fort Carson, Colorado. The group’s area of expertise was the European theater, from the Arctic to the Med. All the Special Forces Groups were assigned an area of the world for specialization, but the once top-dog 10th had been racked by an identity crisis since the wall came tumbling down. He and his men had been in Great Britain for four weeks, had wrapped up training, and had packed for home when the mysterious lockup came down from on high.

As Rawlings sprawled on the couch and stared at a stack of old *Jane’s Defense Weekly*’s resting on a hardwood coffee table, Warrant Officer Frederico Gonzales snuck up. Gonzales was the second officer in the Team, a

veteran of twenty years of special operations from one end of the globe to the other. Burly, with a wide, friendly grin, the medium-height Hispanic's flashing black eyes, olive skin, and thick, jet-black crew cut contrasted sharply with the fair-skinned Rawlings. The assistant Team commander stood with his hands on his hips, one knee bent. His baggy cotton pants and loose sweatshirt made him look borderline fat. Gonzales's body language strongly hinted for the Team commander to start the conversation. The warrant officer certainly wasn't.

"I haven't heard a thing," is all he could say in his soft southern drawl. Gonzales had expected more and showed it with a sour face. Rawlings frowned. He hadn't quite connected yet with his second in command, the result—he thought—of the army's ingrained habit of keeping a good percentage of each Special Forces team together for what seemed an interminable period by conventional military standards. Operational efficiency was the justification; it was necessary for the Special Forces where personal relationships and teamwork were paramount. But the downside was the proclivity to exclude a new member until the man had earned his stripes. It was even worse for the Team commander. Most of his men had been together for over five years. The time, with the Brits, had helped. Rawlings had slipped into a comfortable leadership role. The men were beginning to warm to him.

"Something big, man," Gonzales answered, his voice fingerprinting him as a Latino from a Texas border town. "Got to be." The Brits had trouble understanding his inflected English, much to his annoyance. Gonzales had found a home in the army at the tender age of seventeen and never seriously considered anything else. A high-school dropout, he was now considered a hero in a town that numbered under one thousand and braved an unemployment rate of thirty percent.

Rawlings rose to place the exchange on an even footing. He ran his fingers through his short-cropped hair, stumbling for the appropriate words. "I'm gonna try to find out what's going on. Maybe the guys over at the hangars know something." Rawlings was chewing on a stubby thumbnail as he spoke. Gonzales wasn't impressed. His expression judged it as patently stupid. Man, those guys have guns out there, and they're jumpy as hell, he seemed to say.

A push on the swinging doors at the entrance to the lobby brought the young British soldier behind the front desk to attention.

Both men turned to watch a uniformed British SAS major step smartly forward. It was Major Banks, the American Special Forces liaison officer from the SAS battalion staff. He had been an amiable host, popular with the enlisted men, even graciously playing tour guide. Banks moved gracefully and mumbled a curt greeting with a face as lifeless as stone. Rawlings and Gonzales parted and bracketed the major.

"You're to gather your gear," he said coldly. "Be prepared to leave in ten minutes. You'll be taken to a hangar for staging. First flight available, you'll be off."

Rawlings folded his arms. "Off where? What the hell is going on, Major?" he said with a touch of anger.

"'Fraid I can't provide the details, gentlemen." Perspiration gathered at his temples. It was uncharacteristic of the good major and signaled duress.

"That's it?" Rawlings bellowed.

"You'll be briefed later, gentlemen. Ten minutes." Banks spun and marched off, leaving Rawlings and Gonzales bewildered.

The British military truck pulled up to the hardened aircraft shelter and braked. The camouflaged concrete half cylinder had steel blast doors big enough for a fighter-bomber at one end and backed into a mound of grass-covered dirt at the other. The structure was the typical NATO model designed to withstand direct hits from thousand-pound bombs.

Rawlings, now in his battle dress utilities, jumped to the ground and surveyed the hangar apron. The usual contingent of US Air Force personnel busily repairing aircraft were missing, replaced by still more British guards. A finger, owned by a sergeant, pointed him in the required direction. Rawlings and Gonzales grabbed their gear and waddled inside, duffels on each shoulder. Banks followed at a safe distance, sporting his own personal guards, armed, of course.

"Captain Rawlings," shouted a tall, black man, sitting on his duffel bag by the side entrance. He rose and jogged over in loping strides. First Sergeant Anthony Pickford was the senior enlisted man in the team. His smooth ebony skin reflected the dim light thrown out by the fluorescents, the hangar resembling a poorly lit cave. Inside, the steel-reinforced enclosure contained only one Pave Low helo, a big, ugly charcoal thing pushed to the rear. The other Team members formed around their officers and the first sergeant, their faces capturing a wide range of feelings.

"We heard the States were attacked by the Russians," one chimed in

excitedly.

"Nukes," added another.

"No shit?" The chatter rose till Rawlings couldn't think. His mouth dropped. Gonzales winced, making eye contact with one of the staff sergeants. Banks stayed back and feigned ignorance, wagering that an explosion was a distinct possibility.

Rawlings's world came crashing down around his ankles. He turned on Banks. "What the fuck is going on?" The SAS men with Banks fingered their weapons. Rawlings's A-Team moved to flank their captors, no set plan in mind—an instinctive but stupid move, given the circumstances.

"There's nothing I can say, Captain. We don't know the details ourselves. A decision on your status is pending in London. You'll have to sit tight, just like your aviators." Banks surveyed the stunned group with studied concentration, cataloguing their reaction.

Rawlings stared unblinkingly at the retreating major, feeling completely helpless, emotion choking back any words.

"Good day." He stepped away.

CHAPTER 30

General John McClain, the brash commander in chief, Strategic Command was at the end of his rope. Lying passively on his aluminum-frame cot, his penetrating gray eyes stared blankly at the olive-green canvas hanging loosely above. His thoughts were directed toward the fate of his brave bomber crews sent plunging into Russian airspace twenty-four hours earlier. Only a handful had reported in from locations scattered around the globe, some intact, some piles of useless junk. He gritted his smoke-yellowed teeth in frustration at his damned helplessness. His staff was scratching feverishly for any assets left in the depleted inventory that could reach the former Soviet Union. Even mothballed B-52Gs were being targeted for secret refurbishment at undisclosed sites in the Southwest. But they wouldn't be ready for weeks, if then. He personally thought it a patently stupid idea, but it had the blessing of the reconstituted Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Meaningful search and rescue (SAR) missions for missing B-52H and B-1B crews were unthinkable. Widespread fallout, impossible distances, and thousands of Russian air-defense troops roaming the countryside made the effort a pipe dream. It burned his insides raw to realize he had no choice but to write those heroic young men off. He still hadn't been able to piece together a worthwhile bomb-damage assessment of the strike results. It was still too early for the rolls of film from the high-speed cameras mounted in

the bellies of the surviving bombers or the super-secret reconnaissance aircraft close on their heels. Even the normal flood of satellite data had slowed to a trickle. The ASAT threat had forced him to move his prized KH-11 and Lacrosse birds to high-altitude havens, degrading their sensitivity. The few pieces he did have were tantalizing. The fragments painted a picture of success. But without consistent, high-confidence intelligence, he was groping in the dark. His carefully stashed reserve forces had to be committed soon, or they'd most certainly be lost. It was only a question of time until the Russians found them.

To make matters worse, the new president was sticking his nose into McClain's turf. He didn't dispute the man's constitutional legitimacy, only the questionable presumption that he possessed the requisite knowledge to juggle strategic war-fighting issues in the middle of an all-out war. McClain had willingly dedicated his entire adult life to just this purpose—to successfully prosecute a nuclear war—yet precious time was running through his fingers. The STRATCOM infrastructure was melting away under an unrelenting onslaught. Another two days, and it would be virtually impossible to launch any coordinated counterattacks. Repeated Russian ad-hoc strikes were taking a mounting toll, methodically shooting holes in McClain's dwindling land-based forces. He sensed his men momentarily had the upper hand, despite a reserve force that favored the Russians. The ferocity of the US counterstroke had caught them unprepared, and US interceptors had shot the pants off of the lumbering Bear and supersonic Blackjack bombers. Only a handful had reached their intended targets in the United States.

The key for McClain was to act immediately to press this advantage while their enemy scrambled to regroup, in order to preserve the momentum gained by the sacrifice of countless lives. The ideal weapons for that particular mission were the navy's Trident submarines safely burrowed in the seas, out of reach of the hapless Russian Navy. The Trident's hundreds of hard-target-killing warheads could easily finish the job, but they were now denied to him by NCA fiat. A few of the devastating missiles had been fired early on, but the majority of the submarine skippers had been ordered to avoid detection at all costs. The president considered the Tridents his trump card, but McClain smelled Bob Thomas on that one.

McClain's simple quarters, a ten-by-twenty-foot air-conditioned tent, was part of the extensive STRATCOM mobile-headquarters complex that

stretched intermittently over ten miles, hidden in the Ozarks in Southern Missouri. He and his assembled battle staff had been evacuated from STRATCOM headquarters at Offut AFB minutes before the antiquated underground command center was pulverized by the direct impact of a six-hundred-kiloton Russian nuclear bomb delivered by an ancient SS-19. His team was just now getting organized. CINCSTRAT's mobile command center was identical in appearance to the NCAs, but had twice the communications gear and enough computing power to run any of the national weapons labs. A spiderweb of fiber-optic cables wound through the forest, creating an entity whose sole purpose was planning the destruction of the neo-Soviet empire.

"Colonel, when does General Thomas arrive?" McClain asked the man framed in his tent entrance. He wasn't pleased one bit at having to receive the emissary of the new president. Bob Thomas was a good man, but McClain feared he was about to be reined in by the bureaucrats. One day into the war, it had been McClain's show, and his handpicked STRATCOM team was performing heroically. He wasn't about to let them down.

"The general will be here any moment, sir. We've got comms with his helo."

"Very well." McClain eased his large frame up and grabbed his cap. "I'll be in the operations tent."

The Army Special Forces Blackhawk helicopter set down on a chalk-marked field two hundred yards from the nearly invisible complex. Thomas waited until his five-man guard detachment, lead by Benton, deplaned before he unbuckled his harness and eased himself to the ground. The reddened late-summer sun was beginning to dip beneath the tree line, and a welcomed cool breeze took the edge off the evening heat. Thomas stretched to work out the soreness from the long helo flight, scanning the horizon to get his bearings. His body still ached, and his arm hurt like hell. Painkillers helped, but he had to keep the dose down.

He was flanked by his guards; Benton was at his side. Thomas had requested the major be permanently assigned to his person. Benton had reluctantly agreed, much preferring to be thrown into battle with his comrades.

Thomas had spent the late-morning hours at the president's side, absorbing the man's character and concerns to guide him on his mission. The president's steadfastness in the face of continued Russian attacks, his refusal

to be goaded into overreaction, and his tireless attention to every detail revealed a rock-solid leader. Hargesty's evaluation had been right on the money.

The president had methodically picked Thomas's brain. He had sat passively at the table, resting his chin on his interlaced hands as Thomas told the whole story, every detail. Had the new president seen his own future? Would he have done anything different?

Late in the afternoon, hopes had soared. A back-channel communique hinting at the possibility of an immediate and unconditional truce had landed on their doorstep. Unfortunately, it had proved to be apocryphal. The postmortem catalogued it as a crude attempt to gauge the resolve of the American leadership. The Russians' current leadership remained a total mystery. Thomas had huddled privately with the president shortly before the helo lifted off, soaking up final instructions. He clearly understood his marching orders. The power to remove McClain from his post on the spot fell squarely on Thomas's shoulders. It was a dirty job he hoped to avoid, one that could have serious and unpredictable repercussions.

"Welcome, Bob," McClain said sarcastically. Thomas's four silver stars on each side of his woodland-cammie shirt collar matched McClain's own, but CINCSTRAT didn't consider him an equal. He towered over the younger general by four inches, and his thick silver hair and sharply chiseled features enhanced his presence. McClain was not known for his modesty, but then again, he personally commanded enough nuclear firepower to destroy half the planet.

"General McClain," Thomas nodded. He looked sharp in freshly pressed fatigues and spit-shined boots. He wore a pistol on his hip with extra ammo clips. McClain scowled at Benton, resenting Thomas's personal guard dog.

On signal, the respective security escorts backed away. CINCSTRAT eyed his adversary suspiciously.

"I assume you want a complete rundown," said McClain preemptively. The thought turned Thomas's stomach. He was sick of constantly rehashing the battle.

Thomas's face eased. "No, just a talk in private." He wouldn't confront the general near his staff, not in such an emotionally charged atmosphere. McClain grunted halfheartedly. He was spoiling for a fight.

"Fine, let's go to my tent." The two retraced McClain's path to his

nearby quarters. The encampment seemed organized and efficient, almost giving a sense of business as usual. Most likely the constant drilling and command-post exercises, Thomas surmised. The old Strategic Air Command had lived with the threat of nuclear war every single day since its inception, and the assigned air force officers discussed nuclear warfare as casually as the next day's weather. It had always struck him as callous, but he had been a fighter pilot critiquing the hardworking men and women who did the strategic grunt work. Developing the SIOP wasn't glamorous, not by a long shot. It was a sobering, back-breaking job that produced one of the most tightly controlled and highly classified documents in the military. Paranoia about security and the arcane subject matter created a cult-like aura at STRATCOM.

Thomas sprawled backward across a metal folding chair, while McClain claimed the edge of his cot. He offered Thomas an ice-cold Coke from a small cooler by his feet. McClain took a second and popped the top.

"Thanks," said Thomas.

"I couldn't live without this stuff," McClain mumbled, taking a long, slow swallow. "I'm trying to cut down on the cigarettes." He chuckled at the ridiculous health concern.

Quickly growing serious, McClain held his can in both hands and looked Thomas square in the eye. CINCSTRAT's irritation clearly showed; he was ready for a well-practiced speech.

"The new president thinks I'm out of control, right? Some warmonger seeking to destroy all life on the planet?" McClain rose and started stalking the cramped tent. His large frame loomed menacingly, while his voice took on a sharp edge.

"We lost over one third of the bombers and tankers on the ground. The rest have been chewed up worse than we expected. Hardly any of the B-1s have reported in; they got hit the hardest. We estimate losses at well over sixty percent. The B-2s fared better, but with only fifteen operational, I can't do much." McClain stopped and stared out the tent flap, tightly gripping the half-empty can.

"Preliminary results have been sketchy, but we hammered 'em, Bob, despite our losses. I don't have all the data, but I can feel it." McClain paused and drained the can.

"We even picked up some of the mobiles. Lacrosse came through like a champ. Their air defenses are in a shambles. We can't let up, not now.

They've still got a shitload of SS-24s and 25s waiting to strike any worthwhile target that raises its head. We can't handle this tat-for-tat shit forever." Thomas braced himself for the expected finale.

"I want to turn around the surviving bombers and hit 'em again, hard. Go for broke." McClain glared at Thomas. He had many close personal friends among those sacrificed to breach the Russians' formidable air defenses. His voice rose in intensity.

"But that means I need help from the Tridents to blast the last air defenses and hammer the surviving command and control sites. We've generated quite a target list for the navy boys. We've even found a couple of nuclear storage sites. All I need is the go-ahead."

McClain thrust his hands on his hips, staring down at the man who could grant him his wish. "We've got to get the rest of those mobile missiles. That's all they've got left. The navy has cleaned up most of their missile boats, while NORAD's interceptors slaughtered their Bears and Blackjacks over the pole. If we can finish the job by destroying the majority of the mobiles, the Russians are finished. We'll have them by the balls."

Thomas silently conceded that McClain's blunt assessment was on the mark. Military victory was within their grasp. But what did that mean? He didn't know. And he had his orders. He waited a few seconds for the intensity to drain from McClain's face. He set his can on the ground then placed both forearms on the chair back.

"The president wants you to hold back," he said firmly. "No more strikes without his expressed approval. Hargesty concurs. And so do I."

McClain's explosion wasn't long in coming. "That's bullshit, Bob, and you know it!" McClain shouted. He flung his empty Coke can across the tent. His face boiled as fatigue and frustration erupted through a veneer of self-control.

"When are those stupid bastards going to learn? You don't turn the SIOP on and off like a water faucet. It can't be used like some god-damn peacetime saber-rattling exercise. We've got to let this play out; otherwise my surviving forces will get picked-off like pigeons. I'm asking for another twenty-four hours then I'll back off. Twenty-four hours is all I need."

Thomas ignored the diatribe. He folded his hands and locked on McClain's face. He waited a few moments before answering. When he did, it was slow and deliberate.

"The president's adamant. No more attacks, period. Your forces are to

pull back to staging areas and await orders."

McClain shook his head in disgust. He couldn't believe the crap he was hearing from a fellow officer. "Tell your so-called president to cram it up his ass. His party cancelled the mobile ICBM programs and then gutted the bomber force. So we let those Russian bastards get away with launching a surprise attack? Is that our stated policy? You're full of shit, Bob." The big man glowered menacingly, seemingly on the verge of physical violence.

Thomas slowly stood to his full height and folded his arms across his chest. He empathized with McClain, but his heart and head were with the commander in chief, and his patience was wearing thin. He would give McClain one more chance.

"I'll forget I heard that last comment." If Thomas had expected a thank you, all he got was a fuck-off glare.

"You don't get it, John. The country can't take any more. Physical damage and casualties are to the point where recovery is questionable. We've got to ensure that we survive as a nation. That's number one. Nothing else matters. What if the Russians let loose their entire ICBM reserve in response to stepped-up attacks? Or have a few missile boats we didn't get and target the cities? You're the one who says their SLBMs can't hit shit. Well, they could hit a city. So far, our casualties are tolerable—if millions dead could ever be tolerable. No, we've got to press for a truce, and if need be, a return to the status quo, no matter how bad that seems." Thomas paused. The explanation appeared to have fallen on deaf ears.

Thomas continued, "The president has ordered the carrier battle groups to pull back from the Russian mainland, and the fleet commanders are mad as hell. They were ready to launch air strikes against Russian coastal targets and had taken heavy casualties en route. But we simply can't afford to lose what's left of the fleet on a suicide mission. The Russians aren't the biggest threat anymore."

McClain cocked his head. His face scrunched up as if encountering a crazy man. "What?"

"It's resources, John. We can't survive more than a couple months without a massive influx of food and fuel, and no one is going to offer them up willingly. We have to have the military clout to get what we need to survive. Even the Europeans are sitting on the sidelines, waiting to see how this plays out. The world's waiting for us to fall. Screw the Russians. They won't make it through the winter anyway. The more strategic weapons we

have left, the better off we'll be."

McClain sat down and didn't say a word. He took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. A cynical gaze came Thomas's way.

"So I'm supposed to sit on my ass and let the Russians lob an occasional nuke our way and do nothing?"

"That's not what I said. The president wants individual release authority for any weapons launched."

McClain pondered his choice—acceptance of a distasteful direct order or a messy removal. It wasn't like him to turn tail and run. The seconds dragged by before he finally answered. He felt like kicking Thomas's teeth in.

"I'll rescind the general release order immediately. Happy? A lot of my men are going to die."

Thomas was relieved but wondered where he stood with the hardnosed general. Time would tell. As he stood to leave an out-of-breath major barged through the entrance.

"General, we've just picked up SS-25s coming from Rybinsk. The alert's been passed." He left as fast as he entered.

McClain jumped to his feet and grabbed Thomas by the hurt arm. "Follow me, General, and you can personally witness the destruction of our forces." McClain's peevishness grated on Thomas. Unknown to McClain, the president's messenger held the delegated authority to authorize limited counterstrikes. The president wasn't a fool.

The pair hustled to the operations tent. Inside, a crisis action team had sprung into action, forecasting the Russian RV impacts. Hampered by the total loss of the ground-based radars, they manipulated satellite short-wave IR data into crude track estimates. After repeated practice in an intense pressure cooker, they had become proficient at pinning the impact circle to within twenty miles of the intended target—close enough to sound the klaxon to military units about to be incinerated.

"Over here, sir," a colonel said to his leader. He pointed to a map of the United States covered by heavily marked-up velum. It was secured to the folding table by stacks of field manuals. His finger quickly tapped at five separate locations, a nuclear weapons storage area, an airfield, and Minuteman III silos in the Midwest.

McClain leaned forward, soaking up the report. "How in the hell did they find the storage site?" He straightened and faced Thomas, a frown on his

face. “The airfield was a decoy. At least that worked.” He stood rigidly and thought for a moment.

“Those goddamn bastards have agents and special forces crawling over the entire country, designating targets for their mobile ICBMs. We’ve even caught groups scouting our ICBM bases.” McClain shook his head. He wished he owned an army of the handy SS-25s. He walked toward a bank of computer workstations. “I don’t know how they discovered the storage site. Colonel Jenkins!”

“Yes, sir.”

“Get word to the unit at Fort Bliss to get the hell out of there. Take what they can. They’ve got less than thirty minutes.”

“Yes, sir.”

A young air force captain behind a 19-inch graphics monitor had retrieved data on the Minuteman III wing. On his display was the silo-field geometry, with color coding for silo status. A green icon indicated a surviving silo containing one of the few reserve Minuteman’s still in STRAT-COM’s arsenal. They were being held in reserve to counter high-threat Russian targets. Number-one priority was the surviving Russian military and party leadership bunkers, the linchpin of the Russian army’s command and control infrastructure. McClain leaned over his shoulder and studied the screen.

“Plot the calculated impacts.” A keystroke caused a series of four magenta ellipses to blossom on the CRT. Three blotted out a green dot, which now flashed a plea for action. To the right of each popped up a digital counter that decremented toward zero—the time to impact and detonation.

“Data looks good, sir,” reported the captain calmly. They had done this so many times in the past twenty-four hours that they were doing it in their sleep. “Launch the birds, General? Five minutes for a commit.”

McClain’s concentration left the screen and zeroed in on Thomas. He was hunched over the adjoining console, quizzing a sweat-soaked major.

“It’s up to General Thomas,” announced McClain. All eyes fixed on Thomas. He ignored McClain, not even looking up to acknowledge the statement. He wasn’t about to be baited.

“Give me the current list of Russian targets,” Thomas instructed the major. A mouse click triggered a cascade of tabular data, which presented a priority listing of Russian targets. One field displayed a confidence level. Thomas rapidly scrutinized the list, honing in on the game changers then

tapped screen repeatedly like an instructing school teacher.

"Call up those."

The target table dissolved, and a brilliant Russian map appeared. The designated targets were displayed as icons. The symbols on the screen pointed to where Thomas wanted to drop the hammer.

"Lay down the Mark 12 footprints here, here, and here." The major did as ordered, creating three large north-to-south ellipses. A MIRVed missile could disperse its deadly cargo over an area governed by missile-bus design and fuel consumption. The bus couldn't be flown anywhere they pleased. In the Minuteman's case, the footprint was large, over hundreds of miles on the longitudinal axis.

"Drop these two and pick up the ones here." The farthest-west ellipse shifted northeast. "That's it. Send the release order along with the targeting data," Thomas instructed.

The major was caught off guard. He twisted and cocked his head at his boss. His surprised look transmitted the message. McClain nodded approvingly, just as surprised.

"Yes, sir," he replied smartly, righting himself in his chair.

In ten short minutes, the Minuteman IIIs blasted skyward. They would root out hardened command bunkers and deeply buried nuclear storage sites. The launch brought a sense of satisfaction to those in the tent.

Thomas studied his watch. Two minutes to spare. McClain was chagrined.

"Well done, General Thomas. I couldn't have done better myself."

The tension engulfing the Center lifted like a fog bank before the morning sun. McClain's deep blue eyes displayed respect for his service brother. Perhaps a workable relationship could be forged after all. Thomas stepped over, wiping the sweat from his brow with his shirt sleeve.

"How about the storage site? Can't anything be done?" McClain had his hands on his hips, waiting for word from the Minuteman Wing.

"It was a secondary location," McClain answered, not looking up. "We had twenty-five or so bombs there, no big deal. Close-by is a site that has old cruise-missile warheads, hundreds of them. Thank God that wasn't it. Maybe the weapon will fall short. That's why we placed the sites so far south. But don't count on it. Russian ICBMs have more range than we thought."

"What if one of those had been heading our way?"

McClain shrugged. "Evacuate as many people as possible. The vans can

get underway in five minutes and cover ten miles in the next fifteen. Identifying escape routes is part of the site-selection process. Ten miles might just be enough. But then we'd expect them to hit us with a pattern of five or more RVs. It doesn't take a brain surgeon to figure that one out, and Lord knows they have enough RVs to do it. Sooner or later, they'll catch us with our pants down. It's only a matter of time."

The general's fatalism confirmed what Thomas suspected. They all lived with the threat of death at any moment.

CHAPTER 31

The sharp retort of steel-toed paratrooper boots slapping concrete echoed through the dimly lit corridor. Moments earlier, Thomas had been rushed through the disguised entrance that hid the command bunker in the picturesque north Georgian mountains. Resting overhead was a clever rendition of an abandoned 1950s vintage filling station, complete with a ransacked, boarded-up country store. The underground complex had been someone's brainchild during the early 60s nuclear war scare then put on the shelf. Resurrected ten years prior as part of a major command-and-control upgrade, the complex had never been finished due to lack of funds. Jury-rigged comm lines ran to truck-mounted satellite dishes in the tall pines, while diesel generators hummed under camouflage netting. Nervous radar operators scanned the skies. Rumor had Russian Backfire bombers flying out of Cuba on armed reconnaissance sorties.

Thomas strained to see as he slowly adjusted to the weak light thrown off by the fluorescents. The muggy, stale air hung thickly in the corridor, making it an effort to breathe. Perhaps it was the strain that sensitized Thomas's body to every minute change in temperature or humidity. He felt out of synch with the natural world. It took a determined concentration to husband the last remaining pockets of clarity and rational thought.

The STRATCOM escort stopped at a heavy steel door. Thomas forced

it back and stepped into the well-lit operations center. The interior had the unkept appearance of a storage shed, with stacks of wooden crates and cardboard boxes intermixed with half-assembled equipment consoles. Off to one side was an oblong table, the men seated around it resembling a meeting of the mafia at some abandoned warehouse.

“You’re late,” barked Hargesty. People didn’t even bother greeting one another anymore. Small talk and courtesy had disappeared after seventy-two hours of uninterrupted hell. The government had become a physiological and psychological laboratory experiment. The fierce weeding-out unfolded before everyone’s eyes. Many had simply collapsed, wounded by exhaustion and emotional terror. For others, it was angina or stroke. In many ways, they resembled torture victims, their overloaded brains frozen in a mindless daze. The rest, the survivors, struggled to maintain some semblance of sanity.

“Plane trouble,” answered Thomas bluntly. No one cared about the question or the answer. Thomas took a seat next to McClain; Hargesty was opposite. The others included senior officers from STRATCOM and Forces Command, none that Thomas recognized. The players changed so rapidly, he couldn’t keep score. Every encounter brought fresh faces. The growing casualty lists proliferated like the darkest days of the Civil War.

Hargesty rubbed his leathery brow while he read a message from a theater CINC. CINCPAC had reported the navy’s attack submarines were slaughtering the Russians. Two more missile-laden submarines had been added to the tally in the last twenty-four hours. The Russian sea-based strategic reserve was basically gone. A couple of surviving boats fled to coastal havens, safe from US attack submarines, but also out of missile range of most continental US targets.

“PACOM has the Russians on the run.” Hargesty tossed the message into the center of the table for public consumption. No one picked it up.

“The same reports are coming from the Atlantic,” added McClain. “Their SLBMs are no longer a threat, thank God.”

“And the rest of their fleet is on the bottom,” seconded an admiral. “The sea lines of communication are in our hands. We’ll mop up the odds and ends in the next few weeks.”

Hargesty tossed a nasty look McClain’s way. “Well, the navy’s done their part, General. When are you going to get the mobiles?”

McClain’s nostrils flared. “It’s not that easy, and you know it. I don’t have the aircraft to search every inch of Russian territory. Lacrosse has

performed well against the rail targets, but we can't find the fucking SS-25s in the forests."

Hargesty wasn't sympathetic. The painfully long silence left all to wonder what they were there for. After all, he had called the short-notice meeting. And the concentration of so many senior leaders made them all nervous.

"They still have over two hundred deployed," Thomas said, breaking the ice. "We think it's all they have left, but it's enough. Negotiations will be tough as long as they have them." Thomas had touched on a sore spot.

"Are you still pushing that cease-fire crap?" snorted McClain. "It's hopeless and you know it. Why don't you level with the president? This won't end until the Russian forces are completely destroyed."

Thomas's eyes narrowed. "It's not crap, John. You still think we can win this thing. The president's trying to end it on the best terms possible. If we'd pushed forward like you wanted, we'd have shot our wad for nothing, and the Russians would still have their mobiles. The president was right. He's still right."

Thomas was thoroughly disgusted. He pushed his chair back and stood. He had tried his best to walk the tightrope between service to the president and sensitivity to the military commanders. "Your boys are exhausted, and you can't risk losing any more planes. We need to end this now. The country's crippled, bleeding and broken." His face hardened as he fell into silence. No one met the challenge.

"Sit down, Bob," ordered Hargesty, unimpressed. He was still officially the senior officer in the US military.

Don't alienate the generals, Thomas warned himself. You need their support. He was no good to the president by pissing-off everyone in uniform. He plopped down sourly. He still admired Hargesty's judgment but was leaning more toward the president and his inner circle. The military men seemed oblivious to the wrenching task of reconstruction. The civilians, on the other hand, tended to stick their heads in the sand concerning military matters, but overall, they erred on the side of national survival. His role as the president's military advisor had created a very real barrier between him and his service peers. They didn't quite trust him anymore.

After Thomas's retort, McClain searched for a graceful exit. "Fine, you were right about not committing to a massive strike on day two; I'll grant you that. But we can't stop fighting because you're grasping at straws."

Thomas shifted from anger to frustration. “We’ve covered this before. We’re not fools. Nobody seriously thinks the fighting will completely end, but we have got to stop lobbing nukes at each other. Another two or three days, and there won’t be anybody to negotiate with—on either side.”

Hargesty’s role was to play devil’s advocate, flushing out the arguments. It was tough to tell whose side he was on. “What do you propose, Bob, ignore the mobiles, focus on a cease-fire?

“I’ve talked to the president, and he understands the significance of the SS-25s. But he wants to regroup. We need a breather. Then push militarily if diplomatic efforts collapse.”

Hargesty had a sour look. He was getting sick of Thomas referring to personal talks with the president. “He’s said the same to me,” said Hargesty testily, “but I don’t agree. We can’t let up the pressure. Not now.”

“There’s another way,” offered Thomas. “We can go after the mobiles with special operations forces. SOF is the only hope of finding the 25s. Root them out one by one”

“It’s a suicide mission,” scoffed an army general. His Army Special Forces Groups would bear the brunt. It was listed as one of their assigned missions in OPLANs, but no one had ever taken it seriously. The logistics were overwhelming, and most in the community considered it a one-way mission. The actual scenario called for such action before a nuclear exchange, not after. “You’re just going to drop them in and walk away?” he added.

Thomas was piqued by the comment. “That’s right. Air-refueled MC-130s and MH-53s can carry teams and their vehicles out of England and Germany. Teams are staged as we speak. The Europeans have been reluctant to let us use any of our conventional forces, but they’ve agreed to let SOF slip by. As to the suicide comment, with millions already dead, I hardly think that rates an answer. That’s their job. They’ll go where they’re ordered.”

“Of course they will,” said the general, “I was just saying that we would be wasting valuable forces. We may need them later, for something else.”

“There’s no higher priority mission,” said Hargesty. Thomas was pleasantly surprised by the intervention. “OK, Bob, we get them in, and then what?”

Thomas leaned forward slowly and folded his hands on the table. He considered sending in SOF the last resort. The army general was right—they didn’t have a chance.

“Two possible tactics. The first is direct action, DA. The teams would

haul in their own standoff weapons. Problem is the SS-25s deploy with company-level security and plenty of decoys. A small team in Humvees armed with TOWs or AT-4 rockets would be outgunned." Thomas paused and looked around for a map. An aide scrambled, anticipating an order. He figured the captain knew what he wanted and turned back to the others.

"Another option would be for the teams to locate, identify, and designate the targets for air strikes."

"Are you talking about orbiting bombers?" asked McClain. "It would never work. I don't have the aircraft for that. You even said so yourself."

"No, tactical aircraft. FB-111s or F-15Es with conventional ordnance. The teams could lase the target. If not, the aircraft could use cluster bombs based on GPS coordinates and carpet the area." Thomas was getting on shaky ground. It would only work for southern targets, not in the northern heart of Russia where the preponderance of SS-25s roamed.

"You've got to be kidding. It would never work," McClain snorted. "We have to use nuclear weapons, no question." The nods around the table confirmed that the others felt the same way.

"I don't agree," Thomas countered. "We've got to wean ourselves from a knee-jerk use of nukes at every turn. Conventional weapons are the only feasible choice while we're negotiating. We've got to de-escalate."

"You've got a hard sell on that one," interjected Hargesty. "If we're lucky enough to find one of the bastards, we've got to be sure we get him. We can't risk missing." Hargesty stopped midthought and reconsidered. His frown indicated a tussle underway in his brain. "But we shouldn't write off the idea completely."

McClain didn't like what he saw coming. "Fine, but where do we get the planes?"

"We've got a few aircraft left in Turkey. They can cover a thousand-mile arc with refueling," answered Hargesty

"There are not going to be any tankers. The survivors are all reserved for the bombers."

"Then it's a one-way mission, and the aircrew comes out with the team or by themselves or ditch somewhere. They don't launch until we have a positive ID on targets."

McClain rolled his eyes. The stunned army general sat mumbling. But the decision was Hargesty's. "It's a long shot, but we've got try. John, coordinate the ops with SO-CLANT and SOCEUR. I want forces in country

within twenty-four hours.” Reluctant nods greeted the last comment. The plan smacked of a terrible waste of good aircraft and superbly trained men.

“Anything else?” Hargesty turned to an aide. “Do you have the marked-up map of CENTCOM?”

Thomas slumped and breathed easy. For the moment, he had held off the dogs. He prayed the Army Special Forces would make a dent in the Russian mobile ICBM inventory and save the president from even worse decisions.

CHAPTER 32

Rawlings paced a well-worn path around dim, dank hangar. His mood was getting darker by the hour. They had sat and slept on the cold, hard concrete for nearly seventy-two hours. Food service was provided like clockwork. Their gear was delivered the first night, minus weapons. The amenities were appreciated, but the fact remained that they were prisoners.

Enough bad news had filtered through the steel doors from sympathetic guards to turn their stomachs. Major Banks had punctually called every few hours at first, less as time wore on. While sympathetic, Banks and the other Brits wouldn't mind if the Americans packed up and left their island for good. With each passing hour, the British fear and consternation mushroomed, the London leadership paralyzed by the very real threat of being dragged into a war they'd just as soon shun. Being hosts to units of America's most-potent surviving military forces exacerbated the hand-wringing at Whitehall and Ten Downing. The worst rumor had the Americans being handed over to Russians to buy peace. Rawlings doubted the British would sink so low. The rest of NATO maybe, but not the British, even in a weak moment.

The idle chatter common to comrades in cramped quarters had ceased after the first chaotic hours, each man withdrawing into an emotional cocoon. The current mood was somber. Not knowing was the worst part. For

Rawlings, being a bachelor brought some relief, but he was worried sick about his parents and two sisters at home in Birmingham, Alabama. He prayed they were unhurt. Rawlings shook his head. Nuclear war, it sounded crazy, unbelievable, yet that's what they were being told.

"We got visitors, Captain," one of the sergeants said, long before noon chow was due. Ears perked and heads swung toward the entrance. It wasn't the food detail, but an assemblage of Special Air Service brass and what looked like an American contingent. Rawlings jumped to his feet, his men forming a huddle to his rear. A hard-looking lieutenant colonel spotted him and stepped his way.

The man was having trouble transitioning from the bright sunlight to the hanger and its poor lighting.

"Captain Rawlings?"

"Yes sir." Rawlings gazed chest level and saw the name Henson on the man's camouflage utilities. He had heard it before. A battalion commander in the 7th Group out of Bragg, he recalled. In a tight-knit community such as Special Forces, officers tended to know all the higher-ups by firsthand experience or word of mouth. The colonel had a reputation as a hard charger.

The Special Forces colonel placed his hands on his hips and surveyed the group. His perfectly starched cap was perched high on a shaved head, his middle-aged frame showed not the faintest traces of leisure or lack of exercise. The colonel turned to Banks.

"This will do for the Talon," he remarked. "And the FAV's will be here within the hour. Any problems on your end?" Banks shook his head in the negative. The colonel swiveled and locked on Rawlings.

"A word in private, Captain?" Rawlings nodded.

"I'd like Warrant Officer Gonzales and First Sergeant Pickford present, sir."

Henson chewed on the request. "Fine," he shrugged.

The others in Rawlings's team wandered off without prompting. The British obediently headed for the door. The colonel waited until all were removed from earshot before beginning.

"Colonel Henson from SOCEUR, Captain. And this is Major Schultz from EUCOM intel and Major Alton from the 39th," he said. SOCEUR was the Special Operations Command in the European theater, the SPECOPS component for the commander in chief, European Command, while the 39th referred to the 39th Special Operations Wing based at Rhein-Main Air Base

in Germany, the parent organization for all special-operations aircraft in Europe.

"You've got a mission, Captain, and precious little time to prepare."

Rawlings's eyes narrowed. "What's going on, sir? Have we been attacked? With nukes? Are we at war?"

Henson scowled. "The answer to all is yes, but that's all I'm authorized to say." His frown was intended to discourage further queries.

"I think you owe us more than that, sir," said Gonzales evenly. "We've been sitting on our asses for nearly three days, worrying about our families. We need to know the score." The tough Hispanic locked his eyes on the colonel.

Henson's face softened somewhat. "I sympathize, but no one knows what the hell is going on. It's total chaos across the board. All I know is that you've got a mission, and the clock is running. The Brits will let us stage from here, but they might get a change of heart. We've got to move fast."

Rawlings, Gonzales, and Pickford passed around a troubled gaze. "Is there fighting on the continent?" Rawlings pressed.

This time Henson didn't respond, ignoring the red-haired captain. His cold stare categorized the question as irrelevant. Rawlings suppressed the urge to demand an answer. Gonzales had managed all they would probably get. Events were moving way too fast for all of them.

"You're going after Russian mobile ICBMs," Henson stated flatly. "You'll infil by Talon, patrol with FAVs and take out any mobiles you find. Simple and straightforward."

Jaws dropped in unison. Then bewildered looks were exchanged. Suicide mission, thought Rawlings to himself. He remembered the poetry lines from a college course, "ours in not to reason why, ours is but to do and die," or something like that. Rawlings felt himself in a dream. Had everyone gone mad?

Gonzales stood passively, his olive-skinned face a study in contrast. He had seen combat on more than one occasion. Protests were pointless, and he knew it. He had already begun mentally preparing, gearing up his body and mind for the task ahead. Pickford felt hung out to dry. "Man, we're not ready," he whispered to himself. Gonzales picked it up and glanced at the sergeant.

"It don't matter," he replied softly. "We'll make-do." The questions started to flow from the Hispanic warrant. "You said FAVs, Colonel? Why

not HUMVEEs?"

"The FAVs will give you more mobility. You need to go cross-country, into the forests. You don't get much protection, but that's the trade-off." The FAV, or fast attack vehicle, was a militarized dune buggy with ample firepower and fantastic mobility. Its drawbacks were no armor and not enough range. Great for reconnaissance, it wasn't designed for offensive operations.

"We don't have much experience with them, sir. A couple guys worked with them in North Africa a few years back; that's it."

"We could get you experienced drivers from another Team, but that would mean giving up slots for your men," Henson said.

Gonzales shook his head as if to say hell no. "I'd rather take my chances with our guys." Rawlings agreed, beginning to settle back to earth.

"How soon?" asked Rawlings.

"Ten hours at the most. The aircraft will be here in four. You'll get an MC-130E from the 7th Special Operations Squadron. The Germans have looked the other way while we've slipped a few out."

Rawlings flushed the stale air from his lungs. He fiddled with the edge of his cap to relieve the tension. "No time for planning," he said. "Everything goes out the window, everything." He stood back to his full height; resigned to an uncertain fate at the hands of the man from SOCEUR. "You got anything, sir, an infil plan?"

"Major Schultz and Major Alton will assist you. They've got the details." The two acknowledged the statement with nods.

"How about our weapons?" Gonzales asked.

"Within the hour," answered the colonel. He cut off further questions with a wave of his hand. "You better get moving," he suggested.

No shit, thought Rawlings.

The sun was dipping low on the horizon, shafts of crimson and orange bathing the open hanger, the mustard-colored interior lights having yet to take effect. The massive steel doors had been rolled back moments earlier, revealing the lone MC-130E, dark green and gray, poised for the long mission ahead. The spec-ops bird appeared menacing as the ground crew towed the Combat Talon into the twilight. The FAVs were loaded nose to butt, three of them, and the fourth pallet, bearing weapons and such, was perched near the aircraft's rear ramp. Rawlings and his men stood to the side, burdened with full battle dress and parachutes, faces blackened under

protective jump helmets, weapons slung, silent and contemplative. In the spreading darkness, they appeared as apparitions, blending into the surroundings—secretive men on a hopeless mission.

In the cockpit, the air force crew concluded their preflight. Rawlings surveyed his team. He fought to focus on the mission, pushing thoughts of home and family out of his mind. The last few hours had been controlled chaos, but had relieved the tension.

The planning had been superficial, with a concept of operations that resembled Swiss cheese. Unpredictable fallout, tens of thousands of Russian regular and militia troops roaming the countryside, and battalion-level forces guarding the mobile missile camps were just some of the obstacles the team would face. Their target was an area one hundred miles north of Moscow, a place called Konakovo. The mobiles were expected to be ten to twenty clicks to the north of there. They'd be covering 1350 nautical miles on the infiltration. It would be a total ballbuster. Four and half hours at 290 to 300 knots.

If Rawlings thought they had it tough, he felt for the aircrews. They were on one-way missions. The best they could hope for was to limp into Eastern Europe then ditch. The worst was ending up on the ground in Russian territory.

A voice from the tarmac broke Rawlings's train of thought. "Three minutes, Captain." His men instinctively began pairing up and checking their gear. They shuffled closer to the rear of the MC-130E. The overwhelming reality began to press home. Rawlings gazed skyward at the plane's prominent vertical tail that seemed to never end.

The special operations aircraft had arrived on schedule from the 39th's base in Germany. The Combat Talon II was an extremely capable aircraft, modified from the ground up for special operations. It featured a full array of avionics to fool enemy sensors, and, if necessary, defeat them with a flood of bogus electronic emissions. The interior lighting supported night-vision goggle operations—a must for clandestine insertion, but brutal on pilots flying at treetop altitudes. A long refueling probe graced the nose. In the rear, a modified cargo ramp permitted low-level delivery for heavy equipment. The key piece of avionics was terrain-following/ terrain-avoidance radar supported by dual altimeters and dual inertial navigation systems. It gave the Talon its renowned insertion capability in any weather and over any terrain. The plane's capacity was formidable—fifty-three passengers or twenty-six

jumpers, 35,000 lbs of cargo

“Load up.” Rawlings’s stomach began to churn. He patted each soldier on the back as they passed in single file.

Gonzales was last in the line and paused by the boss. “We’re gonna make it, Captain. No sweat.”

Rawlings forced a smile. Without Gonzales, he’d be lost. The stocky Hispanic jogged up the ramp and took his seat, his eyes focused intently on the bulkhead. The others on the Team strapped themselves in, no one saying a word. Rawlings stood alone at the base of the ramp. He glanced to his right and saw Henson in the fading light. The colonel had just seen another Team off, a stateside A-Team that had rendezvoused with a similarly equipped Talon two hangers away. He covered the tarmac in hurried strides. Rawlings stiffened and saluted. The colonel’s face showed the fatigue from three days straight on his feet.

“Good hunting, Captain. You know the score.” He hesitated for a moment, searching for the right words. “It’s critical we knock out those mobiles. No sense holding back or playing it too cautious, if you know what I mean.”

Rawlings knew exactly what he meant. Day patrols instead of waiting for darkness, taking on superior forces if necessary, foregoing laser designation for the fighters if they could get a direct kill. It had all been clearly spelled out for them.

“I understand, sir.” That was all he could say. He entered the aluminum cavern and counted heads, making sure his boys were all there. They sat passively, weapons resting on their laps. There were twelve in all, his men, his Team.

The loadmaster signaled all secure to the flight crew and raised the ramp. The ground crew backed away, ear protection in place. One by one, the four turbo-prop engines kicked over and roared to life with a momentary burst of black smoke. The air force pilot promptly taxied toward the runway, the British watching the departure unemotionally, while the air force personnel were already packing their gear for evacuation. Within a minute, the Talon was airborne, climbing rapidly, engines straining, beating the cool evening air into submission. Leveling at five thousand feet for the short flight over the English countryside, the plane turned east and began its long journey to the Russian Motherland.

The tethered loadmaster, a burly air force staff sergeant, lumbered

forward and tapped Rawlings on the shoulder. “Five minutes to the jump-off point, sir.” Rawlings shook off his drowsiness and glanced at his watch—0133—then surveyed his crew who sat in varying stages of disrepair. The four-hour-plus flight had been punishing; the terrain-following autopilot had jerked and shaken the men unmercifully as they had skimmed over both land and sea. A few had vomited, unable to handle the constant thrashing.

The flight plan had unfolded like clockwork. No air contacts were detected, the skies eerily vacant. The Germans had kept their promise of free passage. Hitting the beach in Latvia after a stint in the Baltic had been tense, but anticlimactic. The country was jet black and stone cold. Not a sign of life emanated from the ground, even when flying at two hundred feet over towns and factories cloaked in darkness. The flight crew had screamed along main arteries to avoid crossing deadly power lines but even then hadn’t seen anything with wheels. Rawlings had once rode in the cockpit of a MH-53J helo when flying a training mission at night and had come away awestruck by the crew’s competence. It took nerves of steel and a steady grip to avoid instant disaster at the hands of power lines, towers, buildings, or other obstacles.

Crossing into Russian territory had brought little change. Only spurious electronic signals danced on the airwaves, signatures of air-search radars or patrolling interceptors, none of which would be able to distinguish the Talon from ground clutter. Only once had they deviated from their base course to avoid a suspected surface-to-air missile site.

“Let’s go!” Rawlings yelled over the cabin noise. He stood and stretched out his sore back. It took a few moments to catch his balance. Six SF soldiers on each side of the pallets shuffled to the rear, past the helmeted crewmen. They hooked-up to the wire static line, bunched nuts to butts, buffeted by a violent ride. They would bail out in one continuous run into empty space, followed by the heavy pallets coasting down the rollers two seconds apart. The goal would be to have minimum separation between the men and machines once on the ground.

The loadmaster reached for the chest-high ramp lever. The whine of hydraulics triggered a rush of adrenaline to Rawlings’s body. The first crack of pitch black brought a deafening roar, and an unexpected backblast of swirling, frigid air that made them shiver. Nature’s violence, mixed with fear of the unknown, hit Rawlings. He breathed deeply, muscles tense, as the ramp lowered into place.

“Two minutes.” The twin lines, led by Rawlings and Gonzales, edged aft and bunched even closer. The ramp was completely distended and locked, the edge dropping off into nothingness. Rawlings purged his lungs and suddenly felt invigorated. The thick forest below rushed by in a blur; his eyes were unable to focus for more than a second. At only six hundred feet, there was no margin for error. A good chute pop and two swings and they’d be hitting the ground hard.

“Go.” The loadmaster gave a thumbs-up as an adjacent light panel flashed green. Rawlings gritted his teeth and leapt into Russian airspace, his static line jerking open his main parachute. It unfurled in a rush and roughly snapped him upright as he twisted back to glance at the departing Talon. The others were in various stages of deployment, and the first pallet had swung free of the plane, the huge chutes resembling mushrooms in a clump. Rawlings turned to see the ground rushing toward him. He aimed for a small clearing, smacked the dirt, and rolled. He sprang to his feet and reeled in his chute. His first thought was finding concealment. He didn’t want to be caught in the open by Russian troops.

Catching his breath, he moved through the trees in search of the next man in the jump chain. The sooner they linked up, the better. Rawlings remembered the words of an old family friend who had seen action in Southeast Asia in the secretive late fifties, when death in the jungles brought only word of a “training accident” to a distraught family. “It all gets very real very fast when your feet hit the ground,” he had offered, and as Rawlings stared into the dense Russian forest with a lump in his throat—alone—he realized how true those words were.

CHAPTER 33

Thomas and Hargesty were waiting to see the president aboard NEACP, the National Emergency Airborne Command Post. The acronym was somewhat of a misnomer—it implied a single aircraft, but there were originally four in the inventory, identically configured for the complex mission of controlling US strategic forces during nuclear war. Two were still operational on this the fifth day of the war. One had been destroyed on the ground, while the other, with its battle staff, had fallen prey to sabotage while taking off from an air force installation. Flares popping off as the plane lifted from the runway had proved inadequate against two shoulder-fired, IR homing missiles. Both were sucked up by the huge turbo-fan engines, blowing them clean off the wings. The crew didn't have a chance when the crippled plane splintered into chunks before bursting into flames.

Cruising thirty-four thousand feet over the state of Arkansas, the converted Boeing 747 airliner had been airborne for over two hours. A hasty departure had been arranged from Polk AFB in North Carolina, for some reason not yet attacked. The pattern of bases hit and those spared made no sense. It was if the Russians had thrown darts at an alphabetical installation listing.

At Polk, the president and his entourage had surfaced, risking attack while the giant plane refueled. Thomas and Hargesty had been pulled from

other duties, merging from two separate azimuths for the last-minute rendezvous. The president had sent an urgent summons. He wanted both present. They sat impatiently while the cavernous wing tanks were topped off. The unique aircraft stuck out like a sore thumb under the blazing North Carolina sun. No one felt safe until the aircraft had cleared handheld missile range.

Driven by the threat of nuclear or conventional attack, the president and his senior advisors resembled a high-tech band of Gypsies—never in one place for more than a handful of hours, looking over their shoulders. They shuffled between ground mobile command centers, slept in makeshift tent cities, held conferences in deeply buried bunkers, and endured twelve-hour stretches in the air. Rarely did they have more than two key people at any one meeting. It would be like consistently betting against the house in Vegas.

The president wasn't helpless. In the air, assorted aircraft such as the former Air Force One and theater CINC airborne command posts flew decoy missions around the clock, flooding the airways with bogus communications. Selective war-reserve frequencies had been intentionally compromised, and an occasional uncovered voice message was fed to the scores of Russians agents infecting the countryside. One plane had been shot down by an agent-led Spetsnaz team near an airbase in Indiana. The weapon of choice had been a US made Stinger missile stolen from an army stockpile years before. The later-slain agent had been identified as a local, living for years in the surrounding community, employed as a high-school math teacher. The true number of such agents was anybody's guess.

Once airborne, Thomas prepped with Hargesty for a meeting with the president. Resting in front of the generals was a heavily marked map of Europe, including western Russia to the Urals. An army colonel seated at the table, pen pointer in hand, described American, Allied, and Russian troop deployments. US forces on the European Continent were trapped like rats, while the Allies had dispersed their ground troops to defend in depth against any invasion from the east. But the Russians weren't inclined toward such a rash maneuver. The once-formidable Red Army was hunkered down in the Ukraine and Western Russia, weathering US attacks. The remaining armored divisions in Germany, leftovers from the Cold War, strong-armed their hosts into obedience. A nervous German Army acted as traffic cop, praying that the two belligerents on their soil wouldn't turn united Germany into rubble reminiscent of the Second World War.

“That’s good enough, Colonel,” Hargesty said. “Let’s go see the president.” Getting US forces out of Europe and back home to help with reconstruction was high on the president’s agenda. Nervous allies suspected more sinister motives. In other words, doing something stupid that would drag them into the conflict. No one completely trusted the wounded United States, a country with too many nuclear bombs and lacking the necessary resources for recovery. The dollar was literally worthless. How would the United States pay for anything? IOUs? Erstwhile, allies expected some nuclear arm-twisting.

The two generals traversed to the forward part of the aircraft, past the rows of operator consoles aligned neatly two by two. The battle staff worked around the clock. By now, they had fallen into a perfunctory routine of damage assessment and tracking US military units around the globe. The picture was confused and fragmented.

NEACP was literally a flying radio. The plane’s exterior from nose to tail sprouted the full range of wire, blade, and flush-mounted satellite antennas to handle the entire communications band from VLF to EHF. The airship could transmit and receive simultaneously over multiple channels to nuclear or conventional forces worldwide.

An aide herded the duo to a lounge just outside the president’s private cabin. He had spent the better part of the day on the ground, locked in tense negotiations with a delegation of hostile House and Senate members eager to immediately reconvene somewhere, anywhere. They had been among the fortunate survivors and were beating up the president to loosen the reins of martial law and turn over many emergency powers to a rump Congress. The idea was anathema to the military, and even the president had grown apart from members of his own party. He slowly absorbed the reality that only a strong, almost dictatorial, chief executive had any hope of rescuing the crippled nation.

The chief of staff stuck his head through the oval cabin door. “The president will see you now.”

They joined the president around a large circular conference table bolted to the cabin deck. Thomas and Hargesty were in fatigues, caps in hand, while the president and the civilians were in an assortment of casual clothes. Secret Service agents stood guard around the periphery. The president dispensed with any greetings. He looked exhausted. He got right down to business.

“General Hargesty, what’s the status of the Russian redeployments?”

Hargesty folded his hands in front of him. “Our satellites have detected definite changes in Russian military activities. It’s too early to detect any patterns. General McClain swears they’re staging for a major attack, as soon as they acquire targeting data. But he’s exhausted any means of breaking up the formations short of committing the Tridents.” There was that awful word again.

The president let out a pained sigh and closed his eyes momentarily.

“We need to turn our attention to the people. We’re in a race against time. Winter is just over the horizon,” the president said.

The president was at the end of his rope. The tit-for-tat exchange since the initial waves of nuclear bombs was down to a tolerable level—only two detonations reported the last twenty-four hours. But both sides were under unbelievable pressure to finish off the other before they collapsed. Communications were degrading; intelligence from satellites had dropped off, and conventional military forces were melting like heated butter. A breakdown in logistics left both sides floundering around the world. Only the remaining nuclear forces held the promise of a quick fix.

“I don’t care what the Russians are doing,” said the president softly, “I want to disengage our forces. I want to show the Russians we’re serious about negotiations.”

Hargesty let out a huff. “Untangling conventional forces will take quite a while, Mr. President. Maybe months. And I’m not sure if it makes sense.”

The president was unfazed. His troubled thoughts were elsewhere. “I understand how you feel. But I want it clearly understood that nothing is to be done that could jeopardize our efforts at negotiations. Our forces are to be disengaged as planned and only act in self-defense. Any offensive operations must be explicitly approved by me. That includes actions against third parties.” It was a short, well-rehearsed speech that he had given repeatedly in the last two days. The tone told the story. Military commanders were dragging their feet. No one wanted to throw away hard won gains.

“Yes, sir,” Hargesty nodded. He himself had heard it on more than one occasion.

The president slid a red plastic folder marked, “Damage/Civilian Casualties Estimate,” in front of him. He opened it. His mood darkened noticeably. Military matters provided a temporary refuge, a chess game to avoid the pain and suffering beating at the door. They were all reluctant to

face the terrible civilian death toll and destruction head-on.

"These are the latest casualty numbers," the chief of staff remarked. His voice trembled. Thomas grimaced as he scanned the summary. The figures were lower than early initial estimates, but still abhorrent, and climbing daily. A number over fifteen million was shocking, unbelievable. The military dead paled in comparison. But he had yet to witness the devastation firsthand. None of them had. They circumvented the duty based on security concerns, but deep down they were terrified it would cripple their objectivity and decision making. Sooner or later, they would have to face the devil in person.

The president spoke softly to the group, in a matter-of-fact voice. "I'm told that if we don't act decisively in the next week, these numbers could double within two months. Food shortages are epidemic, and fuel is almost nonexistent. Civil order is collapsing."

The president looked straight at Hargesty. His face tightened. "I need all our troops for reconstruction and soon. That means a total pullback from overseas."

Hargesty took a deep breath and tugged at the stubble on his head. He had been prepared for this. Juggling conflicting requirements from the president and the theater Commanders-in-Chiefs was proving impossible. Time and the numbers were against them.

"It's not that easy, Mr. President. A total pullback would leave a vacuum that would lead to anarchy. Foreign governments are biding their time, waiting to see what happens to us. Skirmishes have already started on more than one border. There are old scores to settle, and most have correctly concluded that they won't have to worry about the United States sticking its nose in their business. Then there are overseas resources. We've got to be able to play that game."

The president began to doodle intently on the yellow legal pad resting before him. He drew a box and inscribed the word "survival," then underlined it repeatedly. He seemed totally absorbed but suddenly looked up.

"The country's recovery is paramount. Nothing else matters. Continuing to fight overseas is pointless. If the world goes to hell, so be it."

Hargesty leaned forward to answer. He'd give it one more shot. "I have to disagree, Mr. President. Once we retreat, it will be impossible to reverse course. Forward deployment has been the cornerstone of our military strategy since World War II. We should hang on as best we can. We need the clout to secure resources. We need to rebuild coalitions."

Hargesty's argument was lost on the president. He continued to scribble, disinterested. "I'm well aware of that. But we have to establish economic viability at home. Otherwise we're doomed. People are terrified. The country is at a standstill. We need to reestablish order. And the troops can do that."

"We'll never get economic viability without access to overseas resources," replied Hargesty forcefully.

The president looked up sternly, cutting off the debate. "My mind's made up. I want to see a redeployment plan. General?" the president inquired, arching his brow.

"I will ensure your orders are carried out, sir."

The president stood, leaning on the back of his chair. His eyes were glued to a large map of the United States hanging from the far bulkhead. State boundaries were superimposed on a two-dimensional colored-relief format. "The country's falling apart. The States are screaming, and there's nothing I can do. Anarchy's spreading from coast to coast. FEMA has been overwhelmed. I fear a total breakdown of authority then mass starvation and epidemics. God knows how we're going to make it through the winter."

The president closed his puffy eyes and slowly rubbed his brow. One of his now-frequent headaches was returning. "Have you read about Europe during the Black Death?" he addressed no one in particular. "One-third of the population of Europe perished, maybe more. Corpses were stacked like cordwood, waiting to be burned. Starving peasants ate grass, and in some cases, each other. Whole towns ceased to exist. Terror gripped their lives for years; recovery took decades." An uncomfortable silence ensued, broken only by an occasional cough.

"We need every American soldier we can get our hands on. Governors and military commanders are grumbling. A few have openly defied orders, questioning the legitimacy of the government. That's why we need to seize control of all surviving industrial production to ensure equitable distribution. I never dreamed I'd be an ardent supporter of martial law, but it's the only path leading out of this wilderness."

Finished, he gazed at his audience. His voice had a pathetic touch of sadness. "I want a plan to get those troops home, General Hargesty."

Thomas didn't say a word. He had been uncharacteristically quiet during the discussion. He sensed the president had something else in mind for him.

“That’s all,” the president said abruptly. They all rose in unison and formed a loose file. “General Thomas, please stay. I have a matter I’d like to discuss.”

Thomas extracted himself from those exiting and stood with his hands on his hips. He ignored the glares of the others. He was used to it.

“Let’s sit on the couch,” the president said with a sweep of his arm. Thomas obliged.

The president offered a warm, pleasant expression, not a smile, but a face filled with gratitude.

“You’ve served me well these past few days. I appreciate your candor and loyalty.”

Thomas appreciated the words. He needed them. “You’re welcome, sir.”

The president pulled himself closer, his tired eyes suddenly alive. “But now, I have a critical mission for you.”

The president pulled a folded piece of paper from his shirt pocket and handed it to Thomas. Thomas unfolded the message and began to scan the twenty or so lines of text.

“It’s a transmission from our ambassador in Switzerland. He received it from the Japanese Ambassador. Supposedly, it’s credible. We have no way of knowing for sure.” By then Thomas was halfway down the page, studying each line. It was an offer from the Russians for direct negotiations, at a place of the Americans’ choosing. Thomas had to force down his cynicism. So far contact with the Russians had been spotty at best and through questionable intermediaries. But this was different, more direct. It had the proper tone that piqued Thomas’s interest.

“What about the Russians’ buildup? It’s real; I’ve seen it.” Thomas said.

“I understand,” answered the president. “It’s not entirely clear who’s in charge over there. This could be some splinter group.” The president locked onto Thomas’s eyes. “But it could be legitimate. I have to take the chance.”

Thomas nodded agreement. They both understood that they were on the threshold of renewed, large-scale fighting.

“I’m asking you to go and meet the Russians in my place. My heart says it should be me, but my head realizes my duty is here.” The president leaned back. “You’ll have full authority to represent the government, and I’ll accept any terms you get. You pick your team.”

Thomas was stunned. He believed with all his heart that the president

was right—the fighting had to stop. But an inexorable force was building against them, a mountain of fear and hate pushing everything out of its way. He was tired, more tired than he had ever been in his life. He felt inadequate and very, very small.

"You're hesitating?"

"I'm a soldier, sir, not a diplomat. There's no room for error on this. Are you sure?"

"That's precisely why I picked you. There's no time for analysis and rehashing proposals. No developing negotiating positions. One pass, that's all we'll get. The person I send has to think on his feet. I have the utmost confidence in you."

Thomas looked at the man he had come to respect. "I'll do my best." He couldn't believe what he'd just said.

"I know you will." The president stood, signaling Thomas to do likewise. "So far, very few people know about this. I want to keep it that way for now. When you're safely on your way, I'll spread the word. There are leaders who would be bitterly opposed to this."

"I understand," replied Thomas. Within seconds, he had come up with his own short list of people who would be more than happy to put a bullet in his head to stop such negotiations. "It won't be easy on your end either, Mr. President."

"I'm prepared for the worst." They would both be playing a dangerous game. The president stuck out his hand. It was steady as a rock. Thomas grabbed it firmly.

"It's up to you and me," the president said, "Go make peace, General Thomas, and God be with you." When Thomas let go of the president's hand, the air force four-star general had tears in his eyes.

CHAPTER 34

Rawlings and Gonzales squatted, carefully examining a laminated map, which detailed the surrounding territory for fifty miles square, their assigned patrol area and supposed home to a battery of Russian SS-25 mobile ICBMs. The last satellite dump hadn't provided the slightest clue as to where the transporter/erector launchers, or TELs, might be hiding, and the day's ineffective patrolling hadn't gleaned much either. The high point of the patrols had been tire tracks in a patch of damp soil that resembled an SS-25 transporter's unique tread pattern. The telltale signature had disappeared after half a mile down a side road that dead-ended at an impassable ravine. They had been warned about the Russians' proclivity toward deception, and the ICBM troopers were the best in the business. Rawlings and his men were looking for a needle in a haystack, where the haystack would be trying its best to kill them.

The tall stand of trees surrounding the Green Berets' clandestine base camp blocked the direct sunlight, scattering constantly varying shadows about but trapping the day's heat. Rawlings wiped his dirty and sweaty brow with the back of his hand and replaced his floppy camouflaged bush hat. Black-and-green grease paint still covered his freckled face, the pattern now broken by cuts and scratches sustained when crashing through the thick underbrush in the right-hand seat of the FAV. They were all tired, nerves

frayed. Rawlings secretly hoped for contact with the Russians. Anything to break the tension. The Special Forces captain stood and stretched while Gonzales stayed put, still studying the grease-pencil-marked map.

“I don’t know. Maybe we should try more to the north. It looks open,” Rawlings said. The overwhelming stillness floating through the air made him feel like he was in a cathedral. The unnatural quiet wore on them.

Gonzales frowned. “Maybe, but that terrain twenty miles out will play hell with trying to get the jump on the Ruskies.” Rawlings had given up on stealth or tactical surprise. Time was running out. And, for some crazy reason, he just wanted to get it over with. He wanted to search and clear their assigned map grid and then head west and try to make it to the Baltics. He grimaced. Hundreds of miles, much over flat, open steppes. It was a joke. But what the hell.

“This crap around here is too thick. We can’t make decent time or cover any ground. It is great for an ambush—theirs.”

Gonzales rolled his parched tongue around his lips and furrowed his brow. “You might be right. They’d expect our flyers to concentrate on the thicker forests. Maybe we should move the camp?”

“We’ll stay put, and see how it goes tonight.”

“Sounds good, Captain,” Gonzales said with a touch of indifference. He rose and moved off to check on the Team. He too had drawn a blank on creative thinking.

Rawlings walked over to his men sprawled out next to one of the FAVs. “Sergeant Pickford,” he said in a hushed voice, “we’ll move out at 1900 hours.”

Pickford glanced up, and then the lean, black sergeant nodded slowly and turned to the others. “OK, fellows, let’s draw straws and see who stays.” The twelve men in an A-Team come in twos. There are two officers, medics, comms, ops/intel, heavy weapons, and light weapons. Four would stay with the gear and one of the FAVs, the backup. Everyone begged to go, figuring that the stragglers would be dead meat once the shooting started.

Rawlings broke open a box of MREs and rummaged to find something suitable. He headed to the nearest fallen tree for a backrest. Not really hungry, he sliced open the heavy olive-green pouch with his knife and began to pick at the food. He sighed and looked off into the distance. The day had been unproductive. Rawlings knew he was being cautious. The others sensed it but didn’t complain or second guess. He wanted to get oriented, get his feet

on the ground. Tonight would be their first real test.

The previous night had been a near disaster. The temperature had been incredibly cold for late summer. The dense forest canopy had made a shambles of their timetable. It took over an hour just to assemble the men, and then they scrambled to collect the gear and outfit the FAVs and stash the pallets and cargo chutes in the brush and clear the area. Fortunately, all the FAVs had survived the drop intact. The whole exercise took way more time than he thought it would. He still worried about the amount of gear hidden under tree branches and dirt. If the Russians discovered the stuff, they'd swarm the area with hundreds of soldiers. He prayed the vast forested expanse worked as much against the Russians as it did against them.

Morning had peeked over the horizon by the time they got underway at a little after 0600. The three-vehicle convoy had moved cautiously, gear piled high in the FAVs. Rawlings called a halt five miles from the drop zone, not wanting to risk detection. The suppressed exhaust from the engines seemed to echo forever in the thick, primeval forest. Choosing a concealed site for the camp, the team set up claymores on the two most likely approaches. At 1000, Rawlings had split the men into three sections, each hiking out on a radial 120 degrees apart. In retrospect, it had been a bad plan. Isolated from each other, unfamiliar with the lay of the land, they would have been easy prey for Russian patrols. Luckily, everyone drew a blank. No signs of anything out to a four-mile radius.

Rawlings took a final bite of the half-eaten MRE and flung the remainder into the bushes. Maybe the Russian squirrels can stomach that shit, he groused. He glanced back at the supply cache. They had food and water for a week and plenty of ammo. And later? The land was most likely stripped bare. The only hope for supplies would be pillaging the Russian soldiers they could kill while on the run. Stop the daydreaming and get moving, he admonished himself, and sort out a plan for the night's patrol.

"All set, Captain," said Sergeant Pickford. Rawlings was seated on the hard dirt taking one last look at the grid map with a penlight. A few minutes before 7:00 p.m., the fading Russian twilight was transformed into total blackness near the forest floor. There'd be no moon tonight, a mixed blessing. He ran his finger over the intended route, memorizing the significant landmarks. Once underway, there wouldn't be time to take another look. Bounding along over the rutted dirt trails or going cross-country at thirty to forty miles per hour, he'd be lucky to think straight.

The two FAVs would transit five or six miles in single file then split at what looked like a road junction. Staying in a rough line abreast, they would continue north, never straying more than two or three miles from each other, staying in reasonable support range if trouble struck. If either FAV got a bite, they would signal via an encrypted satellite link to provide a heads-up to the other crew. Problem was, even with a spot beam, the US satellite downlink transmission could be detected by the Russians with a wide-band receiver. They would have to take their chances. If no targets were found, they would link up at 0330 and backtrack to camp. The next cycle of darkness, they would repeat the process on a different azimuth. If they had two nights of no contact, Rawlings would consider packing up and moving the camp. Then it would most likely be day and night patrols. Time would be running out. With multiple A-teams combing the vast countryside, it would only be a matter of time before the Russians caught on and flooded the area with troops, helicopters, and fighter jets.

Rawlings clicked off the tiny strobe and stood, gathering his M-4A carbine in the process. He checked his watch then walked over to Gonzales's FAV. Looking like the VW dune buggies that plied the trails of Baja, California, the FAV sported a custom tubular frame with a smattering of Kevlar panels for protection. The four-cylinder engine had decent power and specially designed manifolds and mufflers to reduce exhaust noise. Tires were standard off-road types.

The FAV's two distinctive features were the gunner's swivel seat, resting on a caged platform behind the driver's and navigator's heads, and the two meshed baskets on either side, like those attached to helicopters for transporting the injured. The gunner had a short-barreled .50 caliber machine gun aimed forward, but by releasing a pin, it could pivot and man a rear-mounted M-60 7.62mm machine gun. AT-4 anti-armor missiles were strapped to the frame within easy reach. The navigator had a mount for an additional M-60. Tonight both baskets were full—the port with a fourth man cradling an extra AT-4, and the starboard with extra gas, additional small arms and ammo, and sniper weapons, both 7.62mm and .50 caliber, for taking out targets at long range.

Rawlings turned to the troopers left behind. "If y'all get compromised, get the hell out. Try and make it to the rendezvous."

Gonzales turned his head toward Rawlings. He was harnessed in and wore a black motorcycle helmet with the night-vision goggles protruding

three inches from each eyeball, just like the driver. The gunner and the fourth man settled for clear-lensed motorcycle goggles, needing the wider field of vision to accurately fire their weapons and provide a wide-area search capability underway. Gonzales hated the night-vision monstrosities. It was like staring down a wrapping-paper tube. But testing had shown them indispensable for driving the FAVs at high speed at night. Each man had a small microphone hanging in front of his lips for close-range communications.

"We're ready, Captain," he said formally yet calmly. Gonzales always did that before an evolution, adopting a serious tone, no matter how insignificant the task. Rawlings swore Gonzales had ice water in his veins. Personally, he was scared shitless.

"You lead to the road junction."

Gonzales nodded. "It ain't so bad, Captain. If they're out there, we're gonna nail them assholes." The same words from anyone else would have sounded boastful. From the warrant they were reassuring. Gonzales signaled his driver to start the engine.

Rawlings appreciated the pep talk. When the lead FAV's engine kicked over, his heart leapt out of his chest. Damn, they were noisy! His driver followed suit. Three strides put Rawlings by the passenger side of his FAV. He stepped into the right-hand seat and buckled the heavy harness, cinching his back tight against the padded seat. The FAVs rode surprisingly well, the racing-quality suspension removing all but the most egregious bumps and potholes.

Gonzales's man pulled out, accelerating smartly, with Rawlings twenty yards to the rear. The four Special Forces men left behind stood helplessly. They would spend the night a few miles from the camp, buried in the brush in case visitors came calling. Hopefully, the morning's first light would bring the dull throbbing of the returning FAVs and not the sound of Russian infantry BMPs.

The run to the junction had brought nothing unexpected. The decent dirt and gravel road allowed them to settle in, get into a rhythm, and adjust to the conditions. After the first few miles, they had forgotten about the racket. They were convinced they could outrun anything coming after them. The key was to keep on the move.

At the junction, Gonzales split hard left, waving as they disappeared. Rawlings and his men bore right. The dirt road narrowed, becoming more of

an improved trail. They were on their own now, blasting along in the moonless night, plunging into a world where the difference between winners and losers was only a matter of seconds and facing down your fears was half the battle.

The FAV flew down the trail at over forty miles an hour, due north, bucking and jerking, and everyone instinctively gripped the frame despite the harnesses. The cold wind stung Rawlings's face, the occasional bug strike feeling like a sharp slap or a bee sting to the cheek. The incessant bouncing made it almost impossible to see through the goggles. Both he and the driver had to flex their neck muscles and shrug their shoulders to steady the thin tubes which sucked up faint IR signatures. Trees on either side flashed by, blurring like a picket fence seen from a highway, their branches arching into an impenetrable canopy. Aircraft or satellites wouldn't have a prayer of spotting anything underneath. Just maybe, Rawlings thought, the Russians will have their guard down.

They slid around a corner and were startled by the sight. The driver slammed on the brakes, and hunks of dirt were kicked skyward by the spinning wheels, a cloud of dust billowing up around the FAV. Ahead, timber scraps littered the ground as far as they could see, and the narrow path was blocked by tree trunks, remnants of clear cutting.

"Damn it," said Rawlings as the dust cleared. He stared at it for the longest time. The map didn't mention anything about this.

"Are we going to backtrack, Captain?" asked Pickford from the basket. The prospect didn't thrill him. Covering the same ground twice was asking for trouble. But they had to do something and fast. Sitting still was a cardinal sin.

Think, Rawlings scolded himself. The only sound was the purring of the idling FAV. It seemed like an eternity before something came to him. "They had to get this timber out of here somewhere," he said. "Even a tractor would leave a trail. We've just got to find it." The crew's reaction indicated a thumbs-up. "Go back a couple hundred yards; see what we can find." The driver nodded and spun a fast U-turn then headed out at low speed.

"There," shouted Pickford, his arm extended toward an almost-invisible cut through still-standing trees. They had easily missed it at forty-five miles per hour. It angled off to the northwest. "Take it," ordered Rawlings.

For two hours, they picked their way through the crude path cut by a tractor and beaten down by logging trucks. In some places the trees still

stood, while in others they were cut clean like summer wheat. Their pace had slowed to a crawl, the rough going exhausting and frustrating them. If they didn't find a main road soon, they'd never make the return rendezvous. The satellite channel had been conspicuously silent; Gonzales's team had evidently drawn a blank as well.

Suddenly Rawlings's night-vision goggles filled with minute ghostly figures four hundred yards ahead below a ridge-line. He grabbed the driver's arm. "Get in those trees," he said, pointing to the right twenty yards from the trail. The soldier obliged and cut the engine. Pickford unbuckled and leapt from the basket; the gunner stayed put and swung the .50 caliber toward the target. All he could see was a small fire in the distance that looked like a flickering candle.

"Think they saw us?" Pickford asked.

"Don't think so," answered Rawlings. He couldn't believe it. The Russians must have heard the FAV. Down near the Russian camp, an engine roared to life. They heard a truck rumble off. So they have vehicles in the area. Maybe we caught a break, Rawlings thought. But we'd have to move fast.

"How many of them, sir?"

Rawlings strained with the goggles. Eight, maybe ten, he wasn't sure. Four or five sat around a fire, others milling about. "Count on a dozen, worst case," he said. They all unsaddled and huddled around Rawlings. He crouched and drew a crude map in the dirt. They had about four hundred yards to cross with some cover. The maze of broken trees and branches would work in their favor.

"We'll go in like this," he said, drawing imaginary lines above the ground. They'd have two on one flank and one on the other. "Sergeant Pickford, we'll need a sniper over-watch. Somewhere around here. What do you think?"

"I'd put him more down the right side, better line of fire." One of the other soldiers was already unbundling the 7.62mm sniper rifle. With a nod from Pickford, he moved out smartly.

Rawlings thought for a minute. "If we don't do this quietly, we're screwed. We'll try NODs, but see how it goes." NODs, or night-vision goggles, were great for room clearing, or confined spaces, or anywhere you have the edge in numbers and surprise in the pitch black. In the open and outnumbered, they would need their full range of vision for the final assault.

The NODs would just get them in position.

Pickford handed out silenced 9mm H&K MP-5 machine pistols. They would be for the close work. They'd use their noisy M-4As only as a last resort.

"Let's move," ordered Rawlings. The three Green Berets split and plunged headlong into the trees left and right. They would flank the camp and then spring the ambush. It was a straightforward routine they had practiced many times. Rawlings was in the group of two. Pickford, the most experienced, moved alone. He bobbed and weaved through the fallen trees like a cat. He easily got a fifty-yard lead on Rawlings.

The team CO moved more deliberately, using his NODs to keep an eye on the Russians as he and the other man moved forward. The figures in the camp seemed oblivious to their presence. Within minutes, they had closed to within one hundred yards. He could now see a lone sentry huddled near a tall pine. The man was closest to Pickford and would be his. Pickford waited until Rawlings had closed the gap before dispatching the guard with his knife.

Staying low, crawling where needed, Rawlings and his teammate worked their way thirty yards from the camp. Some Russians were seated, others standing; all seemed oblivious. Rawlings couldn't believe how sloppy they were. The men pulled their NODs down around their necks and gave their eyes a moment to adjust to the light from the fire.

Rawlings took a deep breath and mentally rehearsed the last thirty yards. He signaled Pickford. The three rose together and sprinted over open ground. A Russian with his AK-47 slung and a cigarette stuck to his lower lip glanced over at the shadowy figures moving in the darkness like a broken field runner. The man's eyes widened as he saw the nearly black silhouette suddenly on top of his position. Rawlings raised his MP-5 to the shoulder and squeezed a short burst. The gentle ripping sound from the silencer downplayed the ferocity of the steady stream of 9mm jacketed slugs that tore into the guard's chest. Before the Russian hit the ground in a heap, all hell broke loose. Russians cursed, grabbing for weapons while the Americans fluidly moved among them, dispatching the entire complement in fifteen seconds. The Special Forces men surveyed the fringes of the camp for stragglers signaling each other as they ran among the corpses.

"Got 'em all," announced Pickford, returning out of breath. They had done it without having to use their carbines or the sniper.

"Get the FAV up here," said Rawlings, massaging his red hair,

hyperventilating from the rush of first combat. It had been too easy. He kneeled down to examine the collar tabs on the first man he had killed. Interior Ministry troops, he groused, nothing more than militia. He stood and kicked the ground. “Shit,” he huffed. They might not even be near an SS-25 site. They should have run into Strategic Rocket Forces troopers if they were on the trail.

The FAV rumbled up, the men storing excess weapons and then climbing in. “Which way, Captain?” asked the driver.

“Stick to the north,” Rawlings said, still breathing hard.

They motored on in silence, wondering if the men they had ambushed would be missed. Was the outpost due for a radio check? They would soon know. Covering another two or three miles, the forest parted, and they ran smack into a paved road. The instantaneous switch in their collective mood was palpable. Did they dare? They would be able to cover a hell of a lot of ground.

“Northeast,” instructed Rawlings, sounding like he knew what he was talking about. They took off with all fingering their weapons. The tension became unbearable. Rawlings felt numb, tearing down a paved Russian road, lightly armed, ready to get swallowed up by some Russian infantry company over the next rise. “God,” he prayed, “get us back in the trees.”

They crested a gently sloping hill, and there it was. “Lordy,” said Pickford, the first to see. Three-quarters of a mile below them, spread out in a meadow, were half-a-dozen huge camouflaged nets, small white lights outlining the shapes of TELs and trucks beneath. It was a sloppy job of concealment. Rawlings was winded by the discovery. Even without a moon, he could clearly count the vehicles. It was a full SS-25 battery—three TELs and support vehicles, including infantry BMPs. The racket rising from the meadow was a godsend. The clanging of heavy machinery echoed in accompaniment.

“Damn,” Rawlings said to himself, “there must be two hundred Russians down there.” The odds were overwhelming. The FAV driver had moved to the side of the road, parked behind a massive tree, and secured the engine. Rawlings bet the Russians had just set up camp. That meant there was a good chance security positions hadn’t been set. They could capitalize on the commotion if they moved fast.

Pickford couldn’t stop staring at the incredible sight. “My God.” He turned to Rawlings. “What now, Captain?”

“First thing is to get a satellite message off. We’ve got to get the target coordinates back to STRATCOM.” His communications man obliged, expertly fingering the coded keys. Rawlings signaled, and they huddled close. More than anything, he wanted to keep it simple—and get his men out alive.

“OK,” he whispered, “We’re gonna move in for sniper shots. There’s too many for a direct assault, and we’d need to get in close with the AT-4s to get a clean shot.” No one gave him an argument. “One round into the propellant will blow those babies sky high.” Everyone nodded in agreement.

“Sergeant Pickford,” Rawlings said in a tone that meant a shitty assignment was coming, “we need to find their picket line.”

Pickford swallowed hard. He knew it had to be him. He was the best stalker in the company. “Yes, sir,” he said as he moved off.

“Watch out for booby traps,” Rawlings added.

“No shit,” Pickford muttered under his breath, vanishing into the trees and brush.

The two staff sergeants moved to the FAV and quickly unloaded the sniper weapons. First was the formidable .50 caliber. Set on a tripod because of its bulk, it could reach out accurately to a couple thousand yards on a good day. They would leave it behind for this action. It was too much weight. The bolt-action 7.62mm Remington, a militarized hunting rifle firing match ammo, carried easily to eight hundred yards with a steady hand. Some experts could extend that to over a thousand. With a starlight scope, the netting, and the trees, less than six hundred would be the goal for a high-probability hit tonight. If they did it right, they could be hauling ass before the Russians knew what hit them.

Pickford returned in twenty minutes. He had spotted a Russian outpost six to seven hundred yards from the main camp. A newly dug machine-gun emplacement was flanked by hastily strung strings of antipersonnel mines, and sentries were posted every forty or fifty yards. He thought he saw a SA-7 missile team to the rear but wasn’t sure, and luckily, he hadn’t spotted any dogs. He hated messing with dogs.

“How about sensors?” Rawlings asked. Tiny acoustic or IR detection devices could be spread out randomly on the most logical approaches and tip the Russians off.

“No way to tell,” Pickford said.

“I didn’t detect any radar,” Rawlings offered. He had used the equivalent of a police radar detector to scan for low-power, antipersonnel

radar. Nothing had showed. The place looked clean.

They sat in a tight circle behind the FAV, eyes glued on Rawlings. He drew his plan in the dirt, the penlight cupped in his blackened hand. “Snipers set up here and here,” he said, highlighting two locations outside the security perimeter. It would push the shots to maximum effective range, but they had no choice.

“If nothing blows after a couple rounds, you’re probably shooting at a dummy. Switch to another target. Fall back after thirty seconds to here,” he said, jabbing the ground. “Sergeant Pickford and I will split the difference between your positions and cover your retreat. We’ll meet back here and get out as fast as we can. Remember, our job is to get a quick, clean kill and get away.”

Rawlings pulled himself up on his knees. “Any questions?” Nothing. He pulled back his sleeve to read the luminescent dial of his watch. “Open fire at 2250. That should give you plenty of time to get in place.” The men got up and moved off, sniper weapons slung over their shoulders, M-4As across their chests. What a group, Rawlings thought. Not a hint of hesitation.

“Let’s get in position,” he said to Pickford. They both carried their carbines and hefted an AT-4 for cover fire.

Dampness had crept into the meadow, glistening drops of moisture clinging to needles and leaves, illuminated by the faint light radiating from the camp. They stepped deliberately, searching for booby traps or sensors, traveling a few yards, then crouching and scanning the tree line. Rawlings and Pickford settled into a depression that overlooked both the road and the camp. They would be no more than two hundred yards from each sniper. It was 2248 by his watch. Rawlings flicked off the safety of his M-4A and waited, staring intently at the shadowy figures under the nets. For a moment, he felt good.

Rawlings instinctively flinched as a Russian voice boomed in the distance. Before the unintelligible words disappeared into the night, a BMP mounted heavy machine gun lit off, the rapid retort shattering the calm, tracers spraying the location where the left-hand sniper was positioned. A flare popped overhead, and Rawlings could see Russian infantrymen surging forward in a wave. There were so many of them! Panic welled up in his chest.

The right-hand sniper opened up, the sharp crack signaled a well-aimed shot, but no detonation. Shit? wondered Rawlings. Did they put bulletproof panels over the missiles? They should’ve used the 50 caliber, he scolded

himself.

“We got to move, Captain,” said Pickford, “or we’re goners.” The heavy gun ceased, only to be replaced by AK-47 fire and grenade explosions, the Russians overrunning the position on the left. He felt sick to his stomach. Another crack to his right brought an incredible brilliant flash that lit the night, followed by a deafening roar that rocked the entire meadow. The copper jacketed 7.62mm slug had pierced the rocket-motor casing and ignited the solid propellant, shattering the TEL into a thousand pieces. An incredible orange fireball roiled the camp, the heat palpable even where they crouched. The Russians nearby had been incinerated.

The Russians turned their attention to the Special Forces sniper on the right, unleashing a blistering volley that swept his position like a firestorm. “Captain,” Pickford insisted, grabbing his arm. “We got to go. Nothing we can do here.”

Rawlings followed Pickford, moving low back toward the FAV. So far the Russian troopers hadn’t spotted them. When they reached the hidden vehicle, Rawlings collapsed on the frame, panting. He turned and faced Pickford. The experienced sergeant had an expression that brought no solace to Rawlings. You know what you’ve got to do, it said. This was not the plan.

Rawlings struggled to catch his breath. The clatter of small arms continued in the background, the missile camp in chaos, a conflagration fueled by dry timber raging, consuming everything in its path.

“If we’re gonna hit them, it better be now,” Pickford said evenly.

“OK,” Rawlings replied. He said it without thinking what it meant.

“You drive, I’ll man the fifty.”

Rawlings crawled into the left seat and fired up the engine. Pickford climbed into the gunner’s seat and chambered a round in the .50 caliber. Rawlings shifted into first gear and eased onto the road. He was headed smack into the middle of a hundred angry Russians.

Hitting asphalt, Rawlings gunned the engine, lifting the front wheels on the ground. The FAV’s engine spun to maximum RPM, the exhaust echoing ominously down the road.

“There,” shouted Pickford excitedly. The surviving TELs had pulled away from the spreading fire, seeking safety. They were dead ahead, bare-assed in the open, along with BMPs and mobile antiaircraft batteries. Pickford began to pour continuous fire into the lead TEL, the tracers arching into the lumbering transporter. Rawlings roared down the road. The Russians

were stunned by the volume of fire, but recovered quickly. The 25mm chain guns from the BMPs ripped the road with withering fire, the explosive shells blasting chunks of concrete skyward, but labored to find the range. Rawlings zigzagged with AK-47 slugs pinged off the frame. He felt one crease his right leg. He gritted his teeth and drove on.

The lead TEL suddenly disappeared in a gut-wrenching concussion that looked like a mini A-bomb detonating in their faces, consuming nearby support troops in an incredible yellowish-orange fireball. The second TEL in the train careened of the road into some trees. The surviving Russians fired even more intensely. One of the BMPs finally got calibrated. Rounds walked up the road and into the FAV, spinning it off the road where it tumbled end over end, coming to rest as a pile of useless junk.

Rawlings unbuckled himself and crawled out from under the wreck. He gagged and vomited as he turned to see Pickford literally ripped to shreds by the chain gun's 25mm rounds. He could barely right himself against the twisted frame. His right leg was shattered, pain shot throughout his body. His head was ringing. He struggled to focus. He was alone and nearly in tears. The smoke stung his eyes; the noise assaulted his ears, shattering his sensibilities. He sat dazed. Nearby was an AT-4. He managed to grab it and crawl a few yards from the FAV.

An RPG round swished through the trees and clipped a nearby fir, detonating in a roar, hot metal fragments tearing unmercifully at the branches. The remaining SS-25 TEL gunned its engine desperately trying to escape. Small-arms fire continued to strafe Rawlings's position. He managed to get himself upright behind a log. He was only eighty yards from the last TEL.

Shouting came from his right. They had him. A searchlight swept his position, a heavy machine gun kicked in, splintering the nearby trees. Rawlings steadied the missile tube on his shoulder, the helpless TEL filling the sight. Tears filled his eyes as he pulled the plastic trigger. The rush of the small rocket brushed his cheek, the stabilizing fins deploying, the solid propellant accelerating the deadly antiarmor warhead. As the missile flew true to the target, the Russians raked his position with fire, flinging him backward. Captain Jim Rawlings died without seeing the thunderous explosion that ignited the surrounding forest like matchsticks and consumed everything in its path.

CHAPTER 35

Thomas sat in the private quarters on board *Air Force One*. The newest model of the presidential plane made the one retired in the early nineties look like a flying Greyhound bus. He had protested the arrangements, but the president had issued a direct order. He lacked the attendant staff that normally accompanied the president. The huge plane held only eleven passengers besides the normal four-man air force crew and two attendants.

Besides Thomas, Benton, and four other Rangers were the acting secretary of state, an interpreter, a doctor, and two military officers—one army for communications and one air force computer expert for proposal analysis. The latter was most likely a McClain plant. The lieutenant colonel had come direct from CINCSRAT's staff in the field, and most certainly had his orders—warn the general if Thomas was giving away the farm. The ranking civilian in the crowd, an ex-senator and now acting secretary of state, had been told to keep his mouth shut. Thomas would be running the negotiations. It was quite a cast, but Thomas only truly trusted Benton. The tough Ranger had become much more than a mere bodyguard; he was a confidant and friend. Benton possessed a simple Southern charm and educated dry wit that put the chaos and pain into perspective. Easily passed off as a dull country boy, the physically hard major possessed an unshakable faith that uplifted Thomas. He didn't want to face the Russians without

Benton watching his back.

Rumor had a US arms-control contingent from Geneva on the way to lend assistance if the bartering became bogged in technical detail. They would remain in the background, locked in some second-class tourist hotel until needed. Everyone had their spin, what to discuss, how to act, including the tone of voice to convey just that special message. Thomas had silently suffered the nonsense. No one would face the hard truth that the chances of success were slim to none. No one except the president. The man had wagered the house limit on this one. His inner circle would be apoplectic if they knew the latitude Thomas had been given.

The send-off had been telling. The president's face exhibited depths of despair that said it all. It reminded Thomas of late Civil War pictures of a war-weary Abraham Lincoln. His incredibly sad, hollow eyes and the facial lines that seemed to go on forever hinted at a tragic story that only the owner could fathom.

Thomas sat in a pale peach overstuffed chair, slumped, with his legs spread apart, in his shorts, enjoying a cold soft drink. An earlier wander by the full-length mirror had shown a lean body that had dropped over a pound a day, revealing muscles that had lain unseen from years of slothful desk duty. Intrigued, he had stepped closer. His freshly cut hair seemed suddenly to have encountered a snow flurry, the specks of white and gray having multiplied tenfold.

He couldn't imagine a more bizarre backdrop for what were surely his final days in uniform and in the service of his country. He loved that country more than his own life. It was something he was never fully able to describe. The passion had always caught in his throat. The patriotic stirrings had always been there on national holidays or when visiting battlefields that recalled unimaginable bravery and courage. But now it became personal. His country was dying.

Why did the new president believe so deeply in him, far more than he believed in himself? Why had God chosen him for this impossible mission? What was it about him that gave hope to others in these desperate times? He had shaken his head in puzzlement, unable to answer the myriad of questions that tumbled through his brain.

On the adjacent king-sized bed lay two uniforms, air force dress blues and a set of pressed battle dress utilities. The dull black stars and flat-black JCS crest hanging from the left breast pocket were barely visible on the

mottled black, brown, and two shades of green cloth. The latter suited his mood, he decided with a grim satisfaction. The dress uniform, with all its parade-ground properness, splashes of bright color, and rows of silver stars on royal blue carried too much psychic baggage and painfully reminded him of a not-so-distant past.

Thomas's mind drifted down another channel. He recalled a dry textbook he read over fifteen years ago, which clinically described the aftermath of a limited nuclear exchange between the United States and the former Soviet Union involving economic targets. Only three hundred to five hundred large weapons were needed to destroy a vast majority of the heavy industrial base in each country. What he had found incredible were the detailed graphs developed from sophisticated computer models showing recovery as a function of time. In some scenarios, only five years were required for total recovery—a span he found patently fraudulent. He wondered if deep in some underground bunker the computer analysts and their models were grinding away, predicting how soon the nation would return to an acceptable level of economic production, one that could sustain the surviving population. If he failed, their FORTRAN models would be nothing more than harsh reminders of a failed age.

A rap on the cabin door roused Thomas from his pointless reflections. "Enter." It was Benton. The normally reticent major almost cracked a smile at catching Thomas in his underwear.

"Fifteen minutes to touchdown, General Thomas. The men are ready." Benton pulled back through the aluminum door. After the ground rules had been communicated—no weapons allowed by the opposing parties once off the planes—Benton had handpicked his most capable hand-to-hand fighters. He wasn't taking any chances in some crowded conference room if a free-for-all erupted.

The jumbo jet banked starboard for the final run to Tenerife, capital of the Canary Islands situated off the west coast of Africa. The Canary group consisted of five main islands and smaller odds and ends sprinkled about. Owned and administered by Spain, they provided neutral territory where the belligerents could meet. Despite Spain's persistent flirtation with NATO, the Russians acquiesced, considering the alternatives unacceptable. Symbolically, Tenerife was nearly equidistant from the Russian and American capitals.

The Spanish government had arranged comfortable quarters in town and

a meeting hall well away from the crowds. They had also established strict rules of conduct. The United Nations had hoped to be cohosts but was in chaos, acting more like terrified patrons fleeing a theater fire than a world body concerned with the fate of the earth. The nation states most concerned were the Europeans. Closest to the conflagration by treaty and geography, they felt the heat and had the most to lose if negotiations collapsed. The next round of strikes, if it came to that, would most certainly be violent and widespread. Facing annihilation, the Americans and the Russians wouldn't care if innocent bystanders got caught in the crossfire. The Spanish had permitted their European neighbors observer status for the talks, but they were strictly forbidden to communicate with either party. The warning was unnecessary. America's allies were avoiding her like the plague.

It had been lonely over the Atlantic. All commercial air traffic had scattered to the four corners of the globe the day fighting broke out. Thomas and his group had the skies to themselves. The Russians would be the only other plane in the air that morning, coming from the northeast.

The Russian delegation was a mystery. Each side was groping in the dark. Some pundits said the new Russian president was a second-tier party boss from Saint Petersburg. But all agreed the Russian military held the real power. Was it any different in the United States? Thomas thought. The civilians wouldn't admit it, but they silently lived that reality daily. A united US military leadership could pull the plug on any government. The odds were slim; however, as the distasteful prospect of ruling a crippled nation of over two-hundred-million hungry, terrified people was anathema to the generals and admirals. It wasn't in their blood. The civilians correctly sensed that reluctance, both sides acknowledging boundaries, sensitive to time-honored customs and traditions.

The rest of the Russians' current leadership was shrouded in a fog. Only time would tell if the new ruler had the authority to commit the Russians to anything. That was the Americans' greatest fear—a fragmented Russian leadership spinning out of control.

Thomas knew the mirror image impacted the Russians equally. Did the new American president control anything besides a ragtag party of Washington's erstwhile elite? Confidence building was the watchword for both sides. Enemies would struggle to resurrect the trust that had been slowly fabricated, layer by delicate layer over the years, and which had evaporated in seconds less than one week prior.

The big plane touched down in black puffs of burnt rubber and screeching brakes. It taxied to a designated holding pen on the tarmac and was quickly surrounded by heavily armed Spanish troops. Light-armored vehicles sat off to the side. A contingent of officials was moving forward even before the big engines began to coast down. Steps on wheels rolled from a nearby hanger. The greeting was done with military precision.

Air Force One's forward cabin door swung open. Benton was the first one through, fitted out in full battle dress, sweeping his head from left to right, giving his personal seal of approval before any of the others would be permitted through the portal. At the bottom of the steps, he was unceremoniously relieved of his M-4A and pistol and patted down. A thorough check with metal detectors would come later and at more than one location. The Spanish hadn't ruled out the possibility of cached or air-dropped weapons and less-than-honest intent. The Americans and Russians wouldn't be allowed to pass gas without the hosts knowing it firsthand.

Thomas followed the other Rangers, who fanned out in a semicircle, weaponless, determined to protect their leader with bare hands, if necessary. He squinted in the bright tropical sun, having shunned sunglasses that made him look like a third-world dictator. His hip had settled into a dull ache that he all but ignored. His wounded arm was healing nicely. At the bottom of the portable steps, a Spanish general officer stepped up and snapped a proper salute.

"General Antonio Vasquez. A pleasure to meet you, General Thomas." He wasn't smiling. "My men will help you with your baggage and equipment. Once off the plane, you will not be allowed to return until your departure." His English was excellent and his manners impeccable. His aide stood open handed. Thomas unholstered his pistol and presented it with a slap to the palm.

"I will be your host during your stay," the general continued. "If you please, we must leave. The Russians will be landing momentarily, and they insist that the American delegation be off the premises before they commit to a final approach."

Thomas grunted in the affirmative. The bastards were already pissing him off before he had even seen their faces. The Spanish soldiers had the Americans' equipment off the plane and headed for waiting vans. The retinue fell in behind Thomas. The Spanish general herded Thomas to the lead sedan, kindly offering the backseat. The American ambassador had begged to be

present but had been rebuffed—wrong party. Some things never change, thought Thomas.

Thomas's chauffeur wasted no time. He gunned the engine and headed for the airport's sprawling main gate. Spanish soldiers crawled over the entire complex, blocking intersections and searching everyone in sight. Thomas's Spanish host refrained from chitchat, which suited him just fine. He stared blankly at the passing palms, the tropical shrubbery that exploded in color, and the typically worn and architecturally varied structures that lined the highway, all of which gave these island paradises their special flavor. Probably a great vacation spot, he mused. But not for him.

CHAPTER 36

Thomas paused at the threshold of the ornate wooden doorway, bracketed by twin potted palms and spit-shined Spanish Marines. He felt a gut-churning anticipation like a Roman gladiator of the first century. Twenty paces down the polished wooden floor lay his personal arena. The American team had preceded him to the appointed meeting place by half an hour to handle the logistics. At the negotiating table, the acting secretary of state, William Collettor, would be on his immediate right, while Major Brinkman, the army communications man would be to his left. Collettor had been selected by the president for his scholarly expertise on the Russians, including a crude understanding of the language. In a pinch, he could perform double duty as an interpreter. He was an elderly gentleman of medium build with gray hair, who hadn't weathered the week well. Thomas had questioned his suitability, but felt he couldn't hurt.

Brinkman was a bookish-looking man with a bald head and a very un-army body, who specialized in satellite communications and was a whiz with the latest communications technology. The major would have a portable satellite transceiver complete with CRT, keyboard, and crypto at his disposal. A coax cable ran through an open window to a small dish antenna on a tripod pointed at the nearest DSCS satellite. He would sit like an attentive court recorder, capturing the dialogue on the fly, sending words in chunks directly

to the president and his team. Back at the hotel, a secure voice link had been established for more lengthy consultations, a post-game wrap-up. The military used the term “hot wash-up” for such conversations. The president had insisted that communications be kept to the bare minimum in order to not signal confusion or weakness. Thomas felt secure that he wouldn’t be micromanaged, at least initially.

Lieutenant Colonel Hopkins, a trim, midforties McClain staffer with thinning brown hair and wire-rim aviator-style glasses, would sit next on the left. His weapon was a powerful pizza-box-sized engineering workstation. His machine contained three million lines of *C* program code developed and optimized to analyze different negotiating positions in near real time. It was a direct descendent of the software programs written for STRATCOM ad-hoc targeting, but much tighter and cleaner. Classified top secret, there had been reluctance to expose the sensitive algorithms to compromise. Thomas had balked at bringing STRATCOM’s wunderkind, regardless of security concerns. Thomas knew for a fact Hopkins had spent considerable private time with Hargesty and McClain reviewing potential strategic options. He couldn’t hold that against the reserved colonel, who calmly read a novel on the flight over. In the current electrically charged atmosphere, people tended to gravitate to known masters, and Thomas certainly wasn’t that.

The Russian language interpreter, a slender young woman in her early thirties, had come from the NSC staff where she had been a rising star. Her name was Sarah Tillman. She was of medium stature with short-cropped chestnut-brown hair that flowed around an attractive Mediterranean face. Tillman would sit directly behind Thomas, whispering, translating verbatim the torrent of Russian expected to be thrown his way. His words would be translated by his opposing number’s aide, with an alert Tillman hopefully keeping the intended meaning pure. It would be a thankless task, but Thomas had been assured that the woman was the best in the business. Thomas talked to her briefly on board *Air Force One*, and she seemed bright, dedicated, and to have no delusions about the upcoming battle. She would be center stage and could scuttle the entire process with one honest slip.

Benton would stand directly behind Thomas. Paranoia came with his newfound trade. He would personally break anyone’s neck that came within reach of the general. The other Rangers covered the rest of the contingent, spread out laterally, two facing forward, two backward. They had walked through various scenarios in back at the hotel but were helpless if someone

opened up with firearms. Even their Kevlar reinforced flak vests had been impounded.

Thomas shut his tired eyes and put his hands on his hips and sucked in one last, deep, lungful of the delicious tropical air. It was sweet with a flowery fragrance carried by a light breeze that danced over nearby gardenias. He grunted to break nature's spell and moved forward, removing his cap midstride, Benton in tow. The building's interior was freshly painted and spruced, but the efforts hadn't concealed its apparent age or lack of regular care. The light pink stucco structure was old, and a touch of fatigued oozed from the ancient walls. It almost seemed annoyed at having its peacefulness, full of grand wedding receptions and magnificent diplomatic and charity balls, disturbed by a mob of ill-mannered soldiers in steel-toed boots. Any worthwhile furnishings had been removed, preparing for the bar fight everyone sensed. A hush fell in the main hall as he entered. There were thirty or so spectators besides the contingent of Spaniards, pushed to the sides, sporting headsets for house-provided interpretation. The meeting had initially been billed as secretive, but snowballed into a circus. The Americans were certain the motive was less than altruistic. The world rightly feared both belligerents, but much more terrifying was the notion of the two giants hatching a deal in private. No, the world community would be well represented, thank you.

Thomas's people were in place. Rising smartly, the military members saluted as he approached. The opposite side of the long table was bare. That was fine with Thomas as he had hoped for a few moments to collect his thoughts. A sudden mental flash brought a grim reminder. In Thomas's distant past, he had visited the Panmun-jon Truce Village straddling the DMZ. A barracks-like structure, the Korea complex sat on the imaginary border in an imaginary village but with very real guards and a strict code of conduct. When packed with angry-faced soldiers from both camps, the atmosphere was explosive. He prayed today would be different.

The Spanish-provided hall was somewhat cheerier, the tone less threatening. Large French windows adorned the swirled plaster walls, a welcome cross breeze cooling the room considerably. Double sets of French doors at either end were secured for the moment. The table was rectangular but not wide enough to prevent someone from leaning forward and jabbing an opponent in the face, a possible oversight by the hosts. Spectator chairs were limited to the two ends and were occupied by a mix of faces. The world

press had gotten wind of the meeting at the last minute but had been strictly forbidden.

Thomas moved laterally and, one by one, warmly shook the hands of his people, including the Rangers protecting his rear. Following protocol, Thomas then stepped to where General Vasquez stood, resplendent in dress uniform, and followed his expert lead through a short receiving line of dignitaries that had formed, unannounced, out of the spectators. The introductions were brief and strained, stiff and perfunctory. Most pondered why the Americans had sent only this obscure general. When Thomas finished the chore, they quietly melted back into the woodwork.

Word had filtered to the American camp that the Russians were furious with the makeup of the US delegation. They would be bringing twice the complement, all high-level officials, or so they said, and considered the perceived affront a public slap in the face. They accused the US leadership of lacking sincerity, of sabotaging the meeting before it even started. The Spanish had been mortified but powerless. The insistence of the American general to wear battle dress fatigues had made them squirm. Thomas was hardening to the meeting, impatient with his hosts, who were walking on eggs where the Russians were concerned, and bitter toward the Russians, who were deftly playing to the world stage. McClain’s influence was beginning to weaken his intellectual defenses. He knew only too well that CINCSTRAT was winning converts back home. A possible US attack was only days away.

It galled Thomas to no end that the Russians now insisted that the whole ghastly episode was an unfortunate accident, perpetrated by unscrupulous rulers on both sides, long since dead. But survival dictated that both he and the American government swallow their thirst for revenge, ignore the blatant lies, and instead focus on preserving what remained of their suffering homeland. The Russians were content to do likewise, now far more worried about the menacing Chinese, staging on the long, unprotected border, and furious Europeans. The final straw had been the successful US air and land raids that ate into their inventory of mobile missiles. The decision to send in the US Special Forces had proven correct, paying handsome dividends. But the investment had cost hundreds of lives and chewed up valuable units. Thomas knew that few of the aircraft returned, and well over half the men were either dead or unaccounted for. Without their full complement of reserve SS-25s and SS-24s, the Russians had little left to bargain with, but plenty to do serious damage.

Thomas took his seat and waited patiently, passing the time by conferring with Collettor and Tillman. He asked her opinion on an opening statement, drawing from her substantial experience. He would be inclined to get right to the meat. Collettor was proving to be a worthwhile asset, possessing a deep understanding of the Russian character in contrast to Thomas's own limited exposure. Thomas felt the gray-haired acting secretary of state's gentlemanly manner might come in handy. While they waited, the buzz filling the room rose until the Spanish foreign minister signaled for silence. There was a stirring near one set of the French doors. General Vasquez stepped smartly across the room. The Russians had arrived.

The final Russian lineup had been provided one hour before start time. Leading the pack was the new foreign minister, a brute named Gennadi Burbulis. Thomas caught a glimpse through the gaggle of officials and concurred with the intelligence report. He was an active duty Russian general from the far-east who had been ordered to change stripes for appearance's sake. He was dumpy with almost no hair and an alcoholic's pitted face and red-veined nose. He was the one to watch, the story went, the bulldog that went for the throat.

He next recognized a marshal, the noteworthy Marshal Ivan Silayev, the old commander of the Strategic Rocket Forces, hauled out of retirement in desperation. He was the father of the former Soviets' mobile missile force. Immaculate in a Red Army dress uniform, the old marshal appeared frail. On his heels was a tall, intense officer, standing ramrod straight, his penetrating eyes sweeping the room like an air search radar, interrogating friend or foe. His was powerfully built with a jet-black crew cut shaved close at the ears and a chiseled, swarthy face that sat on a pair of uncompromising shoulders. He momentarily locked his eyes on Thomas. Their gazes met, neither yielding. The Russian was distracted by the marshal, and broke the lock. That was Colonel General Strelkov, deputy for plans of the Strategic Rocket Forces, a fast-tracker who flew through the ranks in the early nineties. He had made general at the tender age of forty-five, incredible in the Russian military society where gray hair or a bald head was mandatory for respectability and credibility. The others in the Russian retinue were a mix of military and civilians. Thomas picked out an admiral, probably a submariner, and a thin, wisp of a man that he correctly identified as the chief interpreter. Collettor had related a worn State Department anecdote that the Russians must keep their interpreters in prison outside of required working hours, given their

universally emaciated appearance and disheveled dress.

Thomas turned to Tillman. “Feed me anything you pick up.” She nodded affirmatively. “Focus on Burbulis and how he works with that general to his left,” he added, furtively fingering Strelkov. “Don’t worry about the old marshal.”

When the Russians broke ranks and headed directly toward the table, it happened. Thomas didn’t want it to happen, but it did. One seldom gets one’s way in these matters. All the mental rehearsals, the anger and frustration beaten back and tucked safely away, the cram course poured into him by the president and the State Department experts, none had prepared Thomas the moment of truth. Unbridled fury swelled from his chest and caught sideways in his throat. His sanity momentarily slipped gears, threatening to unleash the floodgates of his dark self. Adrenaline coursed through his veins, carrying pure, unfiltered hate. He had never felt like this in his life. They drew closer, these Russians who had cursed his world.

God, I can’t do this, he screamed to himself. Thomas swallowed hard, but the anger and pain wouldn’t pass. Please, Lord, help me, he begged. Tillman sensed the reaction, herself panting in shallow bursts at the building tension. She calmly put her hand on Thomas’s forearm and whispered something. He placed his fingers on the back of her hand, not turning, but nodding slightly. It hurt that she knew but helped that she understood. Thomas dug down deep, to depths he hadn’t imagined existed in his soul, searching for the strength to carry him through. “Thank you,” he said softly, his hand slipping back before the last words left his lips. The monster had been forced back into its cage for the moment.

From their stone faces cut with hate, the Russians harbored no good will either. General Vasquez was apoplectic. The Spanish foreign minister gripped his large head between his hands, ready to scream. Plans for a formal introduction were folly. No, they were potentially deadly in this volatile atmosphere. The hosts would shrink out of sight and hope for the best. Both sides glared so hostilely that the entire assemblage squirmed in their seats. The air stank like superheated steam in an old frigate’s engine room, today mixed with an aerosol mist of high-octane gasoline. One spark and the walls would blow outward in a deafening roar. It dawned on more than one sane mind in the audience that this meeting was a terrible mistake. Benton edged forward. The Russian Spetsnaz baboons guarding their leaders moved likewise.

The Russians stood awkwardly, undoubtedly expecting the Americans to rise in deference. They would be disappointed. Burbulis finally seated his contingent with a grunt. The chairs scraped and screeched across the wooden floor. A foul cloud hung over the Russian lineup. Burbulis presided over his men in the manner of a small-town judge bent on a hanging. The Spanish foreign minister started to speak but lost courage. The silence continued unabated. Thomas leaned forward toward the single chrome microphone at his place, Tillman following like the umpire over a hunkered-down catcher.

Thomas would break the ice. He took a quick survey of his team and began. His voice was steady and rock solid. “My name is General Robert Thomas, military assistant to the president of the United States, and vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.” He paused to read the words’ effect on the hedgerow of stubborn faces that bore the stamp of a congenital bunker mentality. Only Strelkov seemed attentive. For the rest, it was like talking to a brick wall. Thomas continued slowly, gauging his cadence to synch with Tillman’s necessarily delayed translation.

“The president desires an immediate end to hostilities and is willing to go the extra mile for peace. Too many have died; it is time to stop the fighting.” Thomas straightened, never taking his eyes off Burbulis. The old man fought to escape the stranglehold but couldn’t. His only defense was to lash out at this upstart who had the nerve to occupy the same room.

“Who are you?” he blurted out arrogantly. “Why does this president of yours send some nonperson to do his dirty work? What authority do you have?” The scarecrow next to Burbulis struggled to keep up. His nasally voice blurted out the translation in spurts, lending an accusing tone, like that of a well-oiled prosecutor. Finished for the moment, Burbulis rolled his bloodshot eyes to his comrades, and a smug look crept across his ample face.

Responding to the lead, the Russians stared at the general seated across the table. Contempt dripped from their lips. They noticed the tag on his fatigues that said US Air Force. A creature of STRATCOM, they concluded with a nod. Just like that beast, McClain, who was most certainly running the show. So, the American government had been captured by the old Strategic Air Command coterie? This new president was powerless, a puppet.

Thomas ignored the sweat beading on his brow and leaned forward once more. He squeezed his interlaced fingers resting on the table to relieve the tension. “I have complete authority, granted by the president, to negotiate in his name. You have should have no concerns, Mr. Foreign Minister.” He

gestured to Major Brinkman. “I am in direct contact with the president as we speak.”

Burbulis chopped the air. The Americans and their technology! It made his sick! “No concerns, you say? This from the treacherous Americans who propelled the world down this path? The scheming Americans who had disarmed Russia through lies and deceit? The Americans, who when we defended ourselves, escalated the conflict to the cities and factories of Russia? No concerns you say? Hah!”

Burbulis’s hands trembled with rage. Thomas was watching a master in action. The anger reigniting within him threatened to explode like a smoldering volcano. Deep breaths bought only partial relief. He started to respond to the foul-breathed Russian’s accusations, to throw the lies back in his fat face, but pulled back, remembering the president’s counsel—“you’re my only hope.” Brinkman tapped Thomas on the arm, a message had come through. He leaned slowly to his left and read the backlit-twisted LCD screen. It was a personal from the president—“get past Burbulis,” it said. “He’s the bully to draw you out. The old Marshal Silayev holds the keys.” It also said something about secret communications.

Thomas boiled but realized the Russians were waiting. “The president is prepared,” Thomas began, all ears in the room hanging on each word, “to make certain unilateral confidence-building measures to show good will. This would hopefully be followed by similar moves by you.” The stone faces were unimpressed. Thomas swallowed hard and pressed on.

“These steps would be followed by a general cease-fire, under the auspices of the United Nations, with observers permitted at all key command posts and weapons depots in both countries. The president wishes to stress his willingness to take the first step.” Thomas forged ahead, despite the reaction of the people opposite, who appeared as if they had just been offered poison.

“All US strategic bombers and tactical aircraft in Europe and Asia will begin a pullback to the continental United States. This would be followed by __”

“Nonsense,” blasted Burbulis so loudly the walls shook. “Cosmetics. I will tell you what you will do.” The room gasped at the breach of etiquette—the Americans had the floor. The obese ex-general had to refresh his memory as to the party line. He crouched low and whispered with Strelkov. The intense colonel general of the Strategic Rocket Forces spun a furious torrent of words into Burbulis’s waiting ear, tapping the table strenuously in

accompaniment. Thomas let him play his game.

The old man nodded and shook his sagging jowls in defiance, like a lion after the kill. “First,” he said, jabbing a sausage-like finger in Thomas’s face, “you will fly all your bombers to Latin America, where they will be turned over to the host countries for internment, until after a permanent peace treaty. We shall do the same, to African airports. The arrangements have already been made.”

Thomas blanched. The Russians didn’t have enough bombers left to mention, while the United States still retained fifty or sixty operational B-1Bs, B-2s, and old cruise-missile carrying B-52s.

“Next,” Burbulis said with a flair and a thump on the felt-covered hardwood table, “all your Trident submarines, along with our Delta and Typhoon ballistic-missile submarines, will report to designated European ports, to be put under United Nations guard before they are summarily scrapped. Only skeleton crews will be allowed to remain. Attack submarines are excluded.” Burbulis swung to the audience, who beamed in anticipation with a renewed sense of hope. “We consider this a worthy sacrifice to peace, to part with these seaborne weapons of mass destruction, a gift to future generations, if you will.” He nodded his massive head, very pleased with himself. The room overflowed with gasps of wonderment and spontaneous excitement; a torrent of whispers resonated to a crescendo that threatened to blow out the windows. The Spanish repeatedly called for silence. “Once these actions have been taken, peace will fall into our laps. It is quite easy, you see.”

Hopkins punched numbers into his workstation in an avalanche of keystrokes. The initial results trickling down the screen were sickly and catastrophic. His stricken face must have mirrored the panic sweeping his STRATCOM bosses back home. Burbulis had conveniently omitted ICBMs, where the Russians still had the edge, and verification was all but impossible. Thomas’s mind went blank. In all the detailed preparations, they had never considered a move such as this. The Russian missile boats had been slaughtered wholesale and sent to watery graves in the Pacific and Atlantic. They might have one or two left. The Russians were pushing unilateral disarmament at the Americans’ expense, and the rest of the world, especially the Europeans, would give a standing ovation. Nothing would please them more than for America to rid herself of the Tridents.

Burbulis delightedly watched Thomas squirm; a sinister smile curled the

corners of his thick-lipped mouth. “These are the only terms acceptable to the Russian government. We shall see if this American president truly wants peace.” Burbulis broke into a grin that sent shivers down Thomas’s spine. Every second he hesitated worked against him. He pressed forward.

“The Foreign Minister has conveniently omitted ICBMs from his offer. Perhaps he wishes to rethink the proposal.”

“They are destroyed,” Burbulis countered. “They are not a factor. Your Special Forces were very clever and very effective, I must admit.” The Russian chess master was using the Americans’ own success against them. It was mate in two moves.

“Our satellites show otherwise,” Thomas shot back. “Hundreds of mobile ICBMs remain in your inventory. In fact, you were in violation of the START Treaty levels by as many as three hundred missiles.”

Burbulis dismissed the charge with a wave of his liver-spotted hand. “Speculation,” he demurred. “You Americans see mobile missiles under every tree and rock. We have a standing offer for observers. If they dare brave the fallout from your indiscriminate attacks against our country.” Burbulis looked to the old marshal, who sat pensively. “Perhaps you have real proof?” Then to Strelkov. “But then, maybe not,” he said with a huff.

Thomas’s clear blue eyes were on fire. His throat ached from holding back the tide of epithets. His fury was beyond containment. “Your terms are on the surface most appealing, Foreign Minister,” he said with a snort, “but I’m afraid a short history lesson is in order. Your country precipitated this war with a brutal-and-savage surprise attack,” he said, his face seething with anger. “The United States rightly defended itself. Your plan failed miserably but not until after the deaths of millions of our citizens, but now we have the advantage. Your so-called terms are nothing more than a ploy to gain through deceit what you failed through treachery.”

The bulky Burbulis pushed himself from his seat with his massive arms and arched forward across the table, toppling his microphone and nearly knocking his interpreter to the floor. He raised his trembling fist and sent it crashing to the wood with a thud. “I will not be lectured by you. Why are you so reluctant to part with your precious Tridents?” Burbulis hunched forward like a linebacker ready to charge. “Perhaps it is because you wish to annihilate the Russian people, to further your monstrous attacks. We attacked only military targets, while your bombers and missiles struck the very heart of our country, including our beloved Moscow. You are the butchers; the

world will know." Tillman was now performing double duty, her Russian counterpart incapable of coping with the stress and invective. She didn't mince words; Thomas needed to know.

Thomas felt himself being inexorably sucked into a black hole. "We have not attacked your cities; you know that's a goddamn lie."

"You Americans are no better than the Nazis. Your extermination campaigns in Vietnam are proof. And you will have the same fate as Hitler and his SS cronies. We will fight you to the bitter end. The Russian people will never surrender." His voice rose to a shrill cry. "The world knows who the aggressors are. It is the Americans who refuse to embrace peace. You wish to terrify and bully the entire world with your nuclear weapons!"

A chord snapped in Thomas's brain. He thrust himself forward into the Russian's flushed face. The muscles in his arms flexed and bulged with rage, his hands balled into fists. "Hundreds of years and two revolutions in the last eighty have not changed the Russian character. Your capacity for lies is unparalleled."

Strelkov shot upward and joined the foreign minister on his feet. "You would do well to hold your tongue. You Americans are far from virgins when it comes to the truth. Everyone knows your country has wished for just this war for decades, a chance for complete dominance over the planet."

"That's crap," barked Thomas. He shot a finger toward the younger general's chin. "The lies won't work. For years the Strategic Rocket Forces have been nothing but lackeys, groveling at Moscow's feet, nursing your wounded pride."

Strelkov's face turned purple. He swung an awkward roundhouse punch that Thomas easily batted away. Thomas shoved his open palm into the colonel general's face and flung him backward over his chair. Strelkov landed in a heap with his feet pointed toward the ceiling. Burbulis beat a hasty retreat before he suffered a similar fate. The Spetsnaz troopers slipped forward, edging closer to the Americans. Benton grabbed Thomas and yanked him to safety before the largest of them could get his hands on him. Half the spectators bolted for the exit while the others cowered on the deck. Spanish Marines rushed in and brought their weapons to bear, panicked and confused.

"Criminals!" Burbulis shouted, himself restrained by his people. Strelkov had been helped to his feet, tugging at his tunic. The Spetsnaz commandos began to move again.

“Time to get you out of here, General Thomas,” Benton ordered his superior. Thomas strained at the major’s grip but followed his lead. He felt a sudden flush of embarrassment and humiliation, fed by the realization that he had failed miserably. He couldn’t control his temper, despite the stakes. You stupid bastard, he scolded himself. The president of the United States entrusts you with the prestige of his office, and you waste it like a spoiled child. Negotiations that had been expected to last days had just collapsed in less than fifteen minutes, and the Russians had emerged the apparent victors.

CHAPTER 37

The president's fallen champion sat on the edge of his hotel bed, his sweat-stained face buried in his hands, his jumbled thoughts suspended in time. Thomas was waiting for the secure voice connection to the president. Major Brinkman hunched over, working the linkup to the satellite transceiver, performing the final test and checkout before synching the signal with the eastern United States. Thomas was not relishing the conversation. He rubbed hard against the black-and-gray stubble that had grown since the day before, distracted by bitter memories, past and present.

Thomas was disgusted, mortified at his contemptible performance. He had faltered when he should have been strong, collapsed in the face of adversity. The president had commissioned him alone, on the most critical of missions, risking his own prestige and credibility. The mess he created was likely irretrievable.

Benton opened a set of French doors that introduced a large enclosed balcony featuring glass-topped tables and bamboo chairs. Various potted plants and purple-and-red bougainvillea draping the plaster walls provided color. The pleasant late-afternoon ocean breeze wafted into the second-story suite, billowing the cotton drapes like a nomad's tent. The only sound was the soft hum of communications equipment ready for service. Benton stood with his arms folded in the doorway, staring out toward the far-off ocean. His men

were in the hall and on the main floor, in constant contact by radios stuck to their ears.

"Ready, General Thomas," Brinkman reported. "The president's command center is on-line."

Thomas wearily raised his head in response. "Thank you, that will be all for now." Brinkman grabbed his cover and headed for the door. Benton started to follow but was halted midstride. "I want you to stay, Major Benton."

Thomas reached and picked up the handset, resting it on his thigh, his palm covering the mouthpiece. "Go ahead and close the doors." Benton complied and drew the drapes then took a seat in a cushioned chair opposite the bed. His face was nonjudgmental; his manner was relaxed. He and the general had come a long way in a short time.

Thomas raised the handset into position. "General Thomas." His tongue felt like a dry log in his mouth.

"This is the president, General Thomas." The habitual satellite two-second retransmission lag was always irritating, but especially so now given the nature of the exchange.

Thomas didn't hold back. "Mr. President, I acted like a fool. I disgraced myself and humiliated my country. I betrayed your trust. I apologize. I'm offering my resignation effective immediately." He felt the world lift off his shoulders with the confession. They had expected far too much from him. Benton frowned at Thomas, his head dropping in disappointment.

The line was silent for several seconds. The president's voice was conciliatory, yet solemn. "I can't fault you, General Thomas; you did all that was humanly possible. But I'm afraid I can't take you up on your offer. You're to finish your mission."

Thomas sat erect, puzzled. "But, sir, it's over. I've failed. There's no chance of another meeting. The Spanish would be fools to put us in the same room again."

The president took a deep breath that could be heard over forty-six hundred miles. "You have to try again," he said, with special emphasis on the second word. "I won't hear otherwise." The words had a ring of finality.

Thomas didn't answer, having no meaningful response handy; only a sigh seemed appropriate. He waited for the president to explain.

"I'm under tremendous pressure," he began. "Hargesty and McClain, everyone really, is pressing me to act. The evidence is there. The Russians are

staging for an attack, and just about everyone is demanding a preemptive strike. The Tridents, the bombers, everything. I'm at my wits' end, General Thomas. I feel like I'm losing my mind. This is how the president felt at the NMCC, isn't it? You know, don't you?" The explanation evidenced a man on the edge.

Thomas's head sagged into one hand; the other gripped the handset even tighter. The memories flooded back. The helplessness, the anguish, none of them would survive if history were repeated. His heart ached for the man on the other end of the line, a man he had come to respect and admire, a man the country desperately needed in one piece, functional, in command. Now this new president was threatened with the same fate as his hapless predecessor, being overwhelmed by dark forces he couldn't comprehend, let alone control.

"I don't know what to say, Mr. President," Thomas said softly, a touch of sadness in his voice.

"Stop this; you have to. Don't force me to give the order for military action. It's madness. You know that better than anyone." The president's voice trembled.

"The Russians' demands were outrageous, impossible, and they knew it," Thomas answered evenly. "You'd be overthrown, sir, pushed aside, if you ever agreed to such terms. It was a trap, and we were suckered." The president ignored the rationale.

"I don't care. You have to try again. I'll leave it up to you. What you think is best. You know what would be acceptable. You have to succeed. You have to!" The president was almost in tears.

Anger finally broke through Thomas's mounting frustration. "I'm not a goddamn miracle worker, Mr. President. Those bastards don't want peace. Hargesty and McClain are most-likely right."

The president's reply rose in intensity equal to Thomas's. "Why do you think I sent you? I knew this might happen. Probably nothing you could have said would have mattered. But you held your ground and acquitted yourself well. You did better than you think and better than anyone I could have sent in your place. That was only the first round." The president paused. "We have word, back-channel, that the Russians are willing to meet again. Tonight."

"You're kidding?" Thomas blurted. It was a stupid thing to say. The president ignored it.

“Meet with them, General Thomas. You’re our last hope. You can’t even begin to know how fervently I pray to God each and every hour that you’ll succeed and that the country will be saved.”

Thomas slowly shook his head in surrender. “I’ll try, Mr. President. I’ll try.” He readied himself for an awkward good-bye.

“There’s something else,” the president said, his voice lower, his tone cautious like a man unsure of himself—like a messenger with bad news. Thomas smelled disaster. It came before he had adequately prepared. “Your family. They said I shouldn’t tell you, not yet anyway. I disagreed. I owe it to you, General Thomas.”

Thomas shut his eyes, as if that could block the awful news. His throat constricted, and his eyes brimmed with tears. He mentally staggered, off balance, grasping for a handhold. This was too much. What did they want from him?

“The explosions near Washington. Your wife was injured, but will recover—a couple of broken bones, cuts, and bruises.” A moment of hope shone forth, a light in the endless darkness. “But your son. He was outside without a shirt. He never had a chance with the burns. So many were burned; the hospitals and burn units were overwhelmed. I had to tell you. I’m terribly sorry.”

Thomas slumped onto the bed, a deep primordial moan emanating from his lungs. He just barely managed to grip the handset. He broke into quiet sobs, the tears streaming down his cheeks. He hurt more and deeper than he ever dreamed possible.

Benton jumped to his feet. “General Thomas?” The major stepped over and placed his hand on Thomas’s shoulder, squeezing in a gesture of reassurance. “Sir, are you all right?” He sat on the bed next to Thomas.

Thomas couldn’t answer with words. Instead he nodded weakly, righting himself and wiping the most obvious tears with his rolled-up sleeve. He sat motionless and breathed slowly, staring off into space. He picked up the handset and looked at the black object like he had never seen it before. Thomas slowly raised the device to his ear. He was beaten. He swallowed hard before speaking.

“You did the right thing, Mr. President. I’ll always be grateful that you told me.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” offered the president once more.

“I suppose,” said Thomas with a sniff, “that I had better get moving if

I’m going in for another round.”

“Good-bye,” the president said.

“Good-bye, Mr. President.” Thomas set the receiver in its cradle and looked over at Benton. “My son’s dead,” he said with a look that only a fellow parent could understand. “My son, who made it known to all he wouldn’t be caught dead in the military; my son, who teased me about my obsession with duty; who always told me I could make a hell of a lot more money somewhere else—is dead. Burned to death by a goddamn nuclear bomb fired by some bastard half a world away.” Thomas felt a dull lifelessness tug at his core.

“He couldn’t have died instantly. No, he had to lie in his own puss and body fluids, to dry out, in agony. It should have been me. I’m the soldier.”

Benton couldn’t answer. Thomas shifted his gaze from Benton to his own face in the mirror across the room. He felt a sudden revulsion for his chosen career, for his whole adult life, wasted, flushed down the toilet in a single sickening moment. “Fuck it. Fuck the Russians. Fuck the whole goddamn world.”

“I’m sorry about your son.” Thomas looked into Benton’s eyes and saw shared pain and fear, fear for his own family somewhere in Georgia. Memories began to flood Thomas’s thoughts. Memories of his son as a mischievous youngster. As a young man who on occasion gave his dad fits. Then he had thoughts of Sally and his daughter. What of them? It was all so confusing, so hard to understand. He had to stop trying. Thomas wiped the last of the tears and massaged his face with both hands. “I need to be alone.”

Benton understood. He silently stepped to the door and left without a word. Thomas stood to full height, surveying the extent of his current, shattered world, observing the four walls that held him prisoner. He felt like a stranger, a visitor to a hostile planet. He had no one to turn to. Thomas fell to his knees and prayed with all his might. He desperately needed help.

The grounds were deserted, a probable casualty of the afternoon’s debacle. The tropical moon cast mysterious shadows over the granite steps leading up to the conference-hall entrance. A fresco of pink angels and attentive cherubs graced the well-formed arch over the threshold, beckoning the weary and sinner alike. Thomas was surely both. He glanced up at the happy heavenly tribe and then on to the stars that spread like a canopy of sparkling lights over a world he wished were his.

Few Spaniards, or others for that matter, remained within the

compound’s walls. For the hosts, only General Vasquez and a lower-level foreign ministry official dared show their faces, along with dozen of guards. Officially, Spain had washed their hands of the matter, and the UN and European observers had politely declined the rematch. The majority had already filed lengthy postmortems with dire predictions of renewed nuclear exchanges within forty-eight hours. Panic spread through the capitols of the world. Governments prayed for peace but expected the worst.

The early evening had brought little relief from the stifling daytime heat that universally plagued the tropics. The seasonal westerly breeze had vanished, the humidity hanging heavy; the thick sweetness suspended in the air was now an enemy. Such evenings shorten tempers and promote mischief. Thomas sensed an eerie and troublesome foreboding. His troops sensed it too.

The heavy crystal chandeliers were woefully inadequate, only a dull, yellow light emanated from candle-shaped bulbs. Every footstep echoed down the hall.

Thomas took stock of his band; they were holding well. He proceeded unflinching, correct and erect, every inch the officer. He suddenly realized his hip didn’t hurt—the humid tropical climate having worked wonders.

The Russians were already in place, half their afternoon numbers. The Americans took the same seats, not speaking nor paying heed to the dwindled Russian delegation. Thomas said a few words left and right then turned and placed both forearms on the table, interlacing his fingers and forming an arrow pointing directly at his opponent. The microphones were gone, unnecessary where one could hear a pin drop. The Americans had left their high-tech gear at home. Brinkman waited in the foyer with his satellite equipment.

The meeting would be informal and most-likely short. Thomas had his instructions. He studied the faces poised before him, their weary and bloodshot eyes tracking his. It was an odd feeling, much different from the anger that overwhelmed him in the afternoon. The still night seemed to have sucked the aggressiveness out of them all. Thomas felt a numbing resignation to the whole affair.

Gone were the Russian interpreter and the other foreign ministry bureaucrats. Seated opposite Thomas was the old marshal, Silayev, while Burbulis, looking exhausted, was to the right, not quite so imperious. The climate seemed to be taking a heavy toll on the obese Russian. The fire was gone from his gray eyes, now lifeless and dull; his cheeks sagged under

mussed hair. Perspiration collected on his wrinkled forehead and dripped to the table. Strelkov was to the left, angry and defiant still, smarting from his personal humiliation. His dark eyes and swarthy complexion basked in the waxen light, happily at home where the shadows ruled. He was that kind of man. The veins and muscles in his neck bulged in anticipation.

Silayev looked strangely out of place. One would have thought he had been transported in time as his uniform and physical appearance remained unchanged from the afternoon session. His remaining white hair was neatly combed, his chalky face dry and unemotional. But his deep blue eyes flashed intelligence and a sound wisdom, even for an enemy. Thomas had missed it in the first confrontation. He had ignored the president's instructions to his own detriment. He wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

The two ranks sat quietly for the longest time, neither side anxious to start. Maybe due to the fear of failure, the somber mood sobered the room. Or, just maybe, they were all exhausted.

The old marshal spoke to Tillman, his voice surprisingly strong and steady.

"He says that I should interpret for both parties," Tillman said with a touch of surprise. Thomas nodded approval.

Silayev calmly removed a silver cigarette case from his tunic and cleverly popped it open with one hand. He removed a lone smoke then glanced up and shoved the case across the table at Thomas as casually as if the two were sharing a drink at a local neighborhood bar. His experienced eyes captured Thomas's intense gaze, a shoulder shrug from the marshal passed for an offer.

"Tell the marshal no thank you," he said to Tillman. Silayev was unfazed by the rejection. He lit his cigarette, his thoughts elsewhere, obviously delighting in the first drag of the thick smoke. His exhaled smoke mixed with the curling trail from the cigarette's tip, spiraling toward the ceiling. One of the chandeliers was flickering off in a corner. Diffracted light from the handful of outside floods filtered through open windows. The inside temperature was several degrees warmer than outdoors.

"It seems we are at an impasse," Silayev said matter-of-factly, sounding disappointed. "Perhaps the general has some thoughts? I'm afraid our position still stands, and given the gravity of events, is quite reasonable and moral. Many others agree."

Thomas gave Silayev a noncommittal grunt. Collettor cleared his throat

and looked down. The other Americans sensed a building storm. The Rangers, who had been at parade rest to the rear, stiffened.

"Unfortunately, your offer is unacceptable," Thomas announced clearly, all through Tillman. The Russian faces tightened. "However, there may be a middle ground."

Burbulis poised to jump in, but Silayev cut him off with a chop of his hand. Burbulis fumed, but obediently remained silent. Silayev was definitely calling the shots. He prompted Thomas to continue with a professorial nod of his white head.

"We can't be expected to turn our ballistic-missile submarines and bombers over to some third party to be impounded and destroyed. The issue, rightly or wrongly, is sovereignty, and that we, the United States of America, will determine what happens to our nuclear weapons." Thomas calmly poured himself a half glass of ice water. It tasted wonderful as it slid down his dry throat. His hand was steady as a rock; his mind was surprisingly clear. The Russians were becoming impatient. Thomas drained the last of the water and continued.

"We could place our submarines and bombers under observation, out of operational range, but under our control. Likewise for yours. We would even provide the overhead imagery to the UN or whomever to monitor our systems."

Strelkov dismissed the idea with a huff. Preposterous, he seemed to be saying. Silayev permitted his mate's body language to stand as the official group response.

"Tokenism," Strelkov said with a wave of his strong hand, "a sham. They could be brought to bear in hours. What proof do we have that they wouldn't?" His black eyes bored in on Thomas.

Silayev nodded. "That is the question, isn't it? Trust?"

The old marshal pulled himself upright in his chair, smoothing out the wrinkles in his Red Army tunic. He conducted inventory and dusted a fleck of lint off his sleeve.

"We must change our thinking," he said without preaching. "The past is immaterial, irrelevant. I've seen much in my day, the most horrible judgmental errors and fools acting as if they could actually control human events to their liking. But the last week has shown how wrong we have all been."

Thomas's ears perked to the barest hint of an apology. The marshal

continued in his pleasant, but cutting tone.

“I see the difficulty of our proposal, but what would you have us do? Your submarines hold us hostage, threatening to turn already considerable destruction into annihilation. They have to go. We have little left, but we will not be hesitant to use it,” he said, his voice rising at the conclusion. So much for an apology, thought Thomas as the words crashed on the table. The effect was not lost on the Americans.

Thomas had played the unfolding script an hour earlier while washing up, his version having strayed from this ever so slightly. The Russians were as predictable as their pathetic annual grain harvest. But to be brutally honest, Thomas couldn’t fault their argument or their hesitancy to sign up to an American promise of fidelity based on blind faith. No, the old Soviets would require an air-tight contract, the facts and figures scratched in indelible ink, duly notarized and blessed from above. Nothing changes, Thomas mused. The world marches to its own drummer, with an inertia that man can only dream of impacting.

“I think we’re all tired of the theatrics, the posturing, and the charges and countercharges,” Thomas offered without apology. “You’re absolutely correct, Marshal Silayev, it boils down to trust, and that is sorely lacking, perhaps irretrievably.” His voice had a sarcastic cast that incensed all but Silayev. The marshal feigned indignation, watching carefully, observing each facial muscle movement, every blink of an eye. The tension level escalated amid the silence.

Before Thomas could continue, Brinkman came crashing into the main hall, out of breath, his pudgy face as white as a sheet. He aimed for Thomas and thrust a printout in front of the general.

“Sir,” he stammered, “from the command center.” Brinkman bent over, hands on knees, unable to catch his breath. The others looked on in astonishment.

Thomas swiftly read the three simple lines of text, his blood pressure ratcheting up a notch with each hard carriage return. “Forces placed at DEFCON TWO—attack imminent. Satellite coverage indicates Russian mobile ICBMs commencing launch preparations. US forces readied for EAM receipt. President wants recommendation ASAP. Hargesty.”

Thomas did his best to hide the news, but failed, his face losing color, his jaw tightening in distress, not determination. The Russians sat passive, pensive, yet somehow knowing. Thomas suppressed the urge to curse and

scream and hurl himself at the wall of SOBs opposite him. Instead he turned inward; the moment of truth had arrived. The solution lay within. Did he have the strength, the courage?

Thomas passed the message to Collettor who gasped, all but paralyzed. He lowered his head within his folded arms. The Russians keyed in on this much more dramatic response.

Thomas took in the scene deliberately, scanning left to right, drinking in the moment. He would remember this simple room the rest of his life, this misplaced, out-of-date reminder of another, much more refined age. He recalled the president's plea—you must succeed at all costs. Thomas stood abruptly, his ice-blue eyes ablaze, his fists resting knuckles down on the table in confidence. The collective teams jerked in startled unison.

Strelkov jumped to his feet, cursing. Burbulis failed at the same maneuver, instead acquiescing to an upright position that required the assistance of a Spetsnaz trooper. Guards of three nationalities positioned. Thomas's eyes locked on the marshal, seemingly to grab him by the collar and raise him from his chair in one swift motion. Silayev sensed the rock-hard resolve. It left him flustered. Two Americans reached to haul Thomas back. He politely shoved them away.

"Trust," Thomas announced. "There's no other way." His words filled the room but left the impression they were meant for others.

Silayev displayed confusion for the first time. It was Strelkov who once again answered.

"What are you talking about? Some sort of cowboy showdown? You have been watching too many of your movies, my friend."

Thomas stared the colonel general of the Strategic Rocket Forces into the ground. Strelkov took a step back.

"I'm going to go with you."

"What sort of trick is this?" Strelkov shot back. "We are not fools." He whispered a warning to Silayev.

By now everyone was standing. Colonel Hopkins became unnerved. "You can't be serious, General; I won't allow you. They'll pump you full of drugs and drain your brain. The president would never allow this. You know too much."

Collettor jumped in. "He's right, General, you have no authority to do such a thing."

Thomas turned and looked at the two, annoyed, but forgiving. "The

president gave me full authority over this mission," he said. "I answer to no one."

Hopkins turned to Benton. "I'm ordering you to stop him, Major." The Russians were still confused, the Americans only slightly less. Benton didn't hesitate. He stepped forward and looked Thomas in the eye.

"General Thomas, I'll go with you." Thomas placed his hand on Benton's shoulder.

"No, Major, this is my hand to play."

"This is madness," shouted Collettor. "The president will be horrified."

"You're a traitor to your country," barked Hopkins. Thomas turned on the colonel in a fury. He stood face-to-face, almost striking him, but instead brought his finger to within an inch of Hopkins's nose. "Shut your damn mouth. And stay out of my way." The colonel backed off. "I was just—"

"Shut up!" thundered Thomas.

The room was dead silent. "Want an interpreter, General?" Sarah Tillman offered with determination. "I might come in handy." Thomas thought hard.

"I can't ask that of you."

"You don't have to ask, sir; it would be my privilege."

When Thomas turned the Russians were in a huddle. They'd glance his way and then bury their heads once again. After a few minutes of awkwardness, the Russians broke.

"Do you expect someone, something in return?" Silayev asked.

"No," Thomas answered. The Russians were incredulous.

Thomas pulled his cap from the table and moved through the Americans. They shook hands in turn. At the end of the receiving line, Benton stood proudly.

"Major Benton," Thomas said, holding his hand outstretched, "I want you to find my wife and daughter, tell them both I love them. And report personally to the president. Tell him I did my best, and that my prayers are with him."

The hardened Ranger snapped to attention and crisply saluted. "Yes, sir."

Thomas returned the tribute. "It's been an honor, Major. I mean that." Thomas wheeled in place and marched round the table. He didn't hesitate as he stepped across the imaginary line into the enemy's camp. He anticipated the ritual as he stopped, ramrod straight, arms raised, ready for the frisk. The

Spetsnaz troopers converged and obliged, thoroughly, yet respectfully. With one at each elbow, Thomas stepped to Silayev and once again captured the old marshal with his eyes.

"Shall we go?"

Silayev showed no emotion, only grudging respect. Even the sullen Strelkov stood his distance.

"Yes, we will go." He then turned to Strelkov. "Contact Moscow immediately. Tell them what has happened."

Thomas took a last look at the Americans across the table. "Strange," he thought, "how different the room looked from this side of the table." The American air force general, emissary of the president, and vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, walked off, surrounded by the enemy. There was no turning back.

Thomas exited immersed in a sea of Russians. Stepping into the milky moonlight, Thomas stopped, his escorts bracing to shove onward, but told to hold by someone's silent command. Thomas raised his head to the heavens and admired the multitude of stars, brighter than before, blazing against the inky blackness, magnificent and awe inspiring in their stark mystery that never lost its freshness. The nocturnal breeze had resumed from the west with a refreshing coolness. He smelled the flowers again, their fragrance carried aloft, pungent and spicy, and for a moment, he thought he heard approving words from the president whispered in his ear.

"Your imagination," he mused. He grunted softly, a small dose of reality breaking the magic spell. For the first time in a week, Bob Thomas felt at peace.

CHAPTER 38

Thomas shifted uncomfortably in the narrow seat on the Russian command and control aircraft. *Air Force One* it was not. The plane was a converted Ilyushin IL-76 transport that had only a semblance of creature comforts. The majority of the interior space housed communication stations and computer terminals manned by Russian officers. Only a short section in the aft of the aircraft contained row seating for passengers. Sarah Tillman had been escorted forward immediately after takeoff. Thomas' row-mate was a solid looking Spetsnaz trooper who had been silent but respectful. His English speaking friends were most likely the ones in the United States who had attacked the mobile command center in Virginia and spread havoc across the eastern US.

They had departed immediately for the airport after leaving the conference room. At first the Russians didn't know what to do with him and Tillman. She had shadowed Thomas, essentially ignored by the Russians. Ad-hoc and confused were the words to describe the band making their way to the waiting transportation. The old marshal had slipped away much to the consternation of the rest of the group. He had pressing business with Moscow he had informed them curtly. After arriving at the airport, Thomas had stood quietly, patiently, as the Russians talked awkwardly amongst themselves, seemingly unconcerned that Tillman was sucking up every word and

discretely passing the high points to Thomas. The gist was that the Russians were both perplexed and angry. Being thrown off script like this was not to their liking. It seemed that they had arrived with a tightly orchestrated plan and that Thomas had thrown a monkey wrench into the works. The marshal had returned and signaled to board. Once all were settled onboard, the pilot had taxied to the runway and they were airborne in seconds.

Twenty minutes into the flight, a junior Russian officer approached. His English was passable. He might have even spent time in the United States.

“General Thomas, please follow me,” he said. Thomas glanced at the Spetsnaz man to ensure it was acceptable to leave. He gave Thomas a quick nod of his head. Thomas rose and followed the young Russian officer forward. As the two passed mid-fuselage, Thomas noticed that all the communications stations were manned and the operators appeared fully engaged--a flurry of activity. A good sign or a bad sign, hard to tell, he thought.

Toward the cockpit there was a door leading to a small conference room —a broom closet, really. The small space, painted in a drab, pea-green color, contained a round aluminum table with four chairs attached to the deck. On the table were a pitcher of water and several glasses, and some sort of pastry on a plate. The walls were covered with a variety of maps and charts. It was unsettling to see the continental US depicted from the Russian viewpoint. Several had grease pencil markings in Russian. Hopefully, Tillman was making mental notes. He’d remember to quiz her later.

Seated at the table were Marshal Silayev and Tillman. The marshal signaled for Thomas to sit.

“The marshal requested my presence,” Tillman said somewhat sarcastically. “We’ve spent the last ten minutes talking about Russian literature, very surreal. Testing my fluency, I suppose,” she added.

“I guess you passed,” commented Thomas. The marshal ignored their chit-chat.

“Well,” Silayev began, wasting no time. He looked somewhat agitated. For the first time the marshal showed noticeable fatigue from the day’s events.

“We don’t have much time, you and I.” He reached up and unbuttoned the top of his tunic. His movements were slow and labored.

“Moscow is skeptical but willing to see if we can reach agreement. Quite a performance back there, I must admit,” he said with a touch of

admiration. “But unfortunately we must develop something concrete, not speech making.”

Thomas sighed. True, he had bought some time. But now what? He clearly understood what the marshal was intimating. But who was Moscow? He sensed the Russian leadership was in chaos. Maybe STRATCOM had been too successful in their counterstrikes. You have to leave someone to make peace with, he thought. You need rational people who can make an informed and dispassionate decision. Did someone like that exist in Moscow? Or would it be a cadre of diehards seeking an advantage and thirsting for revenge. He could certainly understand that. As for himself, he’d be making it up as he went along. Par for the course.

The marshal leaned back and folded his arms across his chest. “The first order of business is to understand whom you represent, and what authority you truly have. I assume the words back in Tenerife were for the benefit of the observers—that you personally represent the president.” Silayev paused to think. Thomas sat stoically.

“Who is the president, anyway? We assumed the military was in charge. Many in Russia believe General McClain possess the only meaningful power at this point.”

Silayev studied Thomas. “We will not negotiate with General McClain. He has laid waste to our country,” he added emphatically.

Thomas almost screamed. My God! We laid waste to their country? Thomas closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Maybe we should have finished these bastards off, he thought. Just maybe the world would be a better place—at least for the people left on the planet.

“General?” coached Tillman. He opened his eyes and saw a slight scold on her mouth. He acknowledged the gentle reminder and regrouped.

“I can assure you I represent the president, the former Speaker of the House. The president and vice president were killed; the president was at the Pentagon when it was hit with a nuclear warhead,” he said angrily.

“Unfortunate,” said Silayev, obviously unmoved.

Thomas struggled internally but concluded that the only option was full discloser. At this point there was nothing to lose.

“The US military is definitely not in charge. Martial law has been declared, but even now the federal government is reconstituting itself. Congress may be reconvened in the fall.” He made the last comment for appearances’ sake. He wanted to impress on the Russian that the American

system was superior, resilient, that America would triumph, that America would rebuild and regain her place in the world. But the old man sitting across from him didn't give a shit and certainly didn't want a lecture. If you go for some cheap political advantage, then it's game over, he reminded himself.

"General McClain still heads STRATCOM, but reports to General Hargesty, the new chairman of the Joint Chiefs. The chain of command is intact and functioning. We don't have a secretary of defense at the moment, and I don't know when we will. I'm the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs and I also work directly for the president on security issues. That's why I'm here. That's it in a nutshell."

He drew a slightly puzzled look from Silayev. He realized that the last words didn't translate well.

Silayev unfolded his arms and leaned forward, hands on the table. "He must think very highly of you, this new president, to send you to these negotiations alone." He reached for his glass and filled it with water.

"Moscow has very little on you. An unknown." He paused for a moment. "Maybe that is for the better," he said, but his voice showed ambivalence.

Thomas stared hard at the marshal but didn't speak.

"No questions for me?" asked Silayev, somewhat surprised.

It was Thomas' time to lean in. "To be honest, I don't care who may or may not be in charge in Moscow. I probably wouldn't understand the lash-up anyway. I have to believe I'm looking at the man who matters at the moment."

Silayev grunted approvingly. "Very well, my American comrade, let us begin. What do you propose?"

A hundred scenarios whirled in Thomas' brain. Where to start? There had to be some common ground, a basis for negotiation. He knew that the Americans had the upper hand at the moment; they sat in a stronger strategic position. But to gloat or pressure the Russians would be counterproductive. Their advantage could vanish in a second, with the push of a button. No, he needed to preserve some semblance of the old status quo, no matter how distasteful.

"Why don't we agree what's not on the table." Thomas paused and took a deep breath while he gathered his thoughts. "For us it's our Trident submarines and handful of surviving bombers. I assume for you it's all of

your mobile ICBMs."

Silayev didn't react. He sat passively. Thomas went on.

"At this point we're equally concerned with all the other countries with nuclear weapons. There are simply too many unknowns going forward. Who can we trust? Who will help us with recovery? We need to maintain a credible deterrent, and I have to believe you feel likewise. The Chinese, the British, the French. Not to mention all the other smaller nuclear states." Thomas laced his fingers and placed his hands on the table. He needed some feedback before bothering to say more.

The marshal almost smiled. "Go on," he requested. It wasn't what Thomas was anticipating. He expected some push-back. At Tenerife all the Russians could talk about were the surviving Trident submarines and how they had to go. What had changed? he wondered.

"If we can agree on a framework like I've just laid-out, the next order of business has to be to permanently lower the alert levels, to completely halt any strikes, and to get our respective forces back on our own territory. That includes any ground forces we have in each other's country. It has to be complete and fast. No recriminations, no hostages." He emphasized the last words.

He knew this would stick in the throats of many of his countrymen, but he couldn't see any alternative. They had all lost close friends and family—on both sides. The more they separated their respective forces the lower the probability of misunderstandings.

Some life came back to the old marshal's eyes. "What you have said is certainly worth considering, General Thomas. Let me think for a moment."

Another thought came to Thomas. "If we can do this, then everything else is negotiable. One more thing. We're not interested in getting anyone else involved in negotiations—NATO, the UN, no one. This is between the two of us."

Silayev nodded approvingly. "I completely agree."

Thomas weighed in for a final point. He felt like he was making headway. He had been saving this one.

"I can even envision an agreement that permits both sides to re-build their nuclear stockpiles in the next few years." Thomas couldn't believe he had said this, after all they've been through, but neither side could go cold turkey on destroying the last of their arsenals or living with current, reduced numbers of weapons. They needed a new equilibrium—both between

themselves and with the rest of the nuclear powers—the same old death-pact born of the cold war. Both countries faced a hostile world that considered them equally guilty for the outbreak of the fighting. At this juncture if both the United States and Russia vanished the collective world body would cheer.

Silayev gestured with open hands. “Sound proposals,” he said, appearing to not quite believe what he had just heard. Could this American actually deliver? He shrugged and mulled his own question. Why not? he concluded. The marshal slapped the table top with his hand.

“I’m satisfied we have a workable framework. Let us put this to the test.”

Thomas looked puzzled. What?

“We’re going to talk directly to your president.” Silayev grabbed a handset from a wall bracket and barked orders to the communications people. They had already established communications with the latest American command center earlier that evening to report Thomas’ departure. They had confirmed what the Americans most likely had heard earlier from Thomas’ support team.

Thomas had a sudden sinking feeling. He wasn’t sure this was a good idea. “Don’t you think this is premature?” he asked. He was worried about the reactions of the president and the military men on the other end of the line. He had gotten used to—if you could call it that—being around the enemy who had launched a surprise attack against their country. He tolerated them because he had no choice. He wasn’t sure how Hargesty or others would respond. It could sink any negotiations before they even began.

“I don’t think you appreciate the urgency,” Silayev said. “We have a window, a small one at that, to begin the long road to peace.” The marshal understood he had to exploit the opportunity to talk to the American leadership directly, and to do it with Thomas by his side. He wouldn’t try to get Thomas to understand his constraints. It would be pointless. The Russian leadership was a mess, different factions vying for supremacy, maneuvering for advantage. For the moment the majority looked to him, the voice of experience, to get an acceptable deal. But his credibility had a short shelf-life. He had to deliver—and fast.

The American government had hastily relocated when word was passed that Bob Thomas was leaving Tenerife with the Russians. All previously used fixed command and control locations were suddenly considered far too risky. The current set-up was at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, of all places.

Miraculously still untouched, it provided logistic support and the nearby airfield at Pope Air Force Base. But, no one was getting comfortable. They were all ready to leave at a moment's notice. The president and company were in one of the many headquarters buildings on the base. They sat around a large wood conference table in a fairly spacious room, tastefully decorated. It almost felt normal after a week on the run. The president was joined by Hargesty, McClain, and the president's chief of staff. The attendance was kept to a minimum as the pending conference call was sure to be contentious and was necessarily close-hold.

Hargesty and McClain were appalled at Thomas' move, or stunt as Hargesty had called it. When word was first passed to the Americans Hargesty had exploded in a fury of swear words, sputtering and pounding the table. The president had refused to pass judgment on his man.

"Bob Thomas has lost his mind," groused Hargesty, still visibly upset. "You should never have sent him alone," he added. "And now where going to talk to the fucking Russians?"

McClain nodded in agreement. He chaffed at the prospect of dealing directly with the enemy. He would prefer to finish the Russians off—the sooner the better. "I don't see what we're going to get out of this," he offered calmly. He had resigned himself to the session. Going through the motions, he thought.

The president sat passively. He wouldn't be baited by the military men. He understood their position, and certainly sympathized, but he had a higher duty—the long term survival of over 260 million Americans. The country was bleeding and broken, and he needed peace to begin the Herculean task of recovery. The building pressure was almost unbearable. Only peace would permit him to begin pulling all the pieces back together again. In his heart he knew he had made the correct decision. And, it appeared General Thomas may have bought them badly needed time.

They all waited in anticipation for the communications hook-up being patched together from their location to the Russian plane. It was taking longer than normal as security required a circuitous route through a number of landlines and nodes to ensure that their current location couldn't be pinpointed.

A communications major knocked and entered the room. "We have comms with the Russian aircraft, Mr. President. We'll patch it to the conference line."

“Thank you, Major,” said the president.

“I’ll be outside the door if you need me, sir.”

Even before the door shut behind the major the line came to life, crackling with static over the oval, flat speaker resting in the middle of the conference table. The Americans sat in silence. The president decided to make the first move.

“General Thomas?” he asked cautiously. ”Are you there?”

“Yes, sir, I’m here.” The president perked-up. “I’m on a plane with Marshal Silayev, the former commander of the Strategic Rocket Forces. He led the Russian delegation to the talks in the Canary Islands. He’s my host if you want to call him that.” Thomas paused for a moment. The president thought he sounded well.

“Ms. Sarah Tillman is also here, translating for the marshal and me. He insisted on her participation. She was invaluable at the sessions in Tenerife.”

“Thank God you’re safe, General,” the president gushed. “I can’t tell you how happy I am to hear your voice.”

“You’re probably the only one,” he said sarcastically, pre-empting Hargesty and McClain. I assume General Hargesty is there with you?” he added.

“And General McClain,” Hargesty said. His frustration was obvious in his voice. “Needless to say I’m not happy with your grandstanding, but we’ll save that for another day.” He didn’t say anything more as he had his marching orders from the president.

The marshal correctly sensed the building tension and stepped in. “Mr. President, I am Marshal Silayev. I represent the Russian government. I’ve been discussing various proposals with General Thomas. I’ve come to understand your faith in him.” He paused for a moment to see if the president wished to speak. Nothing came, so he continued.

“I believe we can make peace. The general and I have had frank discussions and I believe we have a basis to move forward. But first, both countries must draw back from the current state of alert. We don’t have a great deal of time. The longer our forces are on heightened alert the greater the chance of a miscalculation.

“I completely agree,” answered the president without hesitation.

“Sir,” interrupted Hargesty, “we don’t even know what the hell General Thomas said to the Russians. What he may have committed us to.”

“This will take time, Mr. President, my staff needs to analyze any offers

or counter-offers," added McClain. "It's complicated." He didn't say that he had absolutely no faith in anything the Russians might propose.

"We don't have time," said the president sharply. "Marshal, we're ready if Russia is. If we see signs of a stand-down in Russian forces we will immediately go to a lower alert level. You have my word."

Hargesty and McClain knew they had lost. The president wasn't even listening to them. The weary leader of the United States sensed he had an opening and he was going to take the gamble. There was a period of silence as the military men around the president stewed. The chairman broke the impasse.

"Just what the hell did you say, Bob?" asked Hargesty. "Just remember I have to deal with the fallout from everyone in the chain of command. I have to make this work."

This was the moment Thomas had dreaded. The second guessing was sure to start. He wasn't sure if it all made sense even to him. He took a deep breath.

"I told the marshal that our Tridents and the bombers were non-negotiable and that we'd treat their mobiles the same. I said we don't want any third parties mucking things up and that we had to disengage all forces, even those on each other's territory immediately with no questions asked. The faster we disengage the cleaner it will be." Thomas paused to judge his audience.

Hargesty and McClain exchanged surprised looks. "What's the catch?" Hargesty quizzed

"That's it?" said McClain. He was dumbstruck.

"I mentioned that over the near term we would be open to negotiated increases in weapons from current force levels to ensure that each of us feels protected against any future hostile acts by others—restore some sense of stability. The marshal agrees."

McClain sat shocked. He had just heard everything he wanted to hear. He desperately wanted to begin refurbishment of old bombers. Hargesty seemed satisfied but was always the pessimist. But, he could live with this, if it were true. The outlier was the president. He had a frown on his face.

"Are you talking about an arms build-up, General Thomas, after all we've been through? Have we not learned anything?" pressed the president. His voice was troubled, visibly angry.

"No, sir, selected increases, just to reach sufficient numbers so each side

doesn’t feel they’re on the verge of losing their deterrent. I know it sounds crazy, but I believe it’s the one step at this point that would actually be a confidence-builder. Give each side some flexibility so they don’t feel boxed in. We could cap numbers well below the old force structure levels. As much as I wish nuclear weapons would disappear from the planet it’s not going to happen. But we need to ensure that whatever weapons remain they don’t give either side any incentive or ability to strike a decisive blow. I believe it can be done.”

The marshal didn’t want to lose the moment. “Everything that General Thomas has proposed is doable. I’m confident we can make this work, Mr. President. I suggest that General Thomas immediately develop the details with Colonel General Strelkov and my staff. We stand ready.”

The people in the conference room at Bragg didn’t get to see Thomas’s look of astonishment and disgust. Strelkov? That thug? The marshal must be insane. The fates did have a sense of irony, thought Thomas. But, he would walk through hell to get an agreement that would lead to peace.

The president sat very still. He struggled internally with the bitter pill he was being asked to swallow. Maybe this was their best hope? He sat for what seemed an eternity without speaking. He finally moved and formed his words. His voice became strong.

“Finish the job, General Thomas,” directed the president. “You have my full support.” He looked directly at Hargesty and McClain to ensure they understood. Neither general said a word.

“Marshal, do we have an agreement?” the president asked tentatively.

Silayev answered without hesitation. “We have an agreement.”

The president had one more issue. “When you complete your mission, General Thomas, I need you back here, immediately. You will let him return, won’t you?” he asked the marshal.

“Of course,” answered Silayev generously.” In the meantime General Thomas is our guest, not our prisoner,” the marshal added with emphasis.

“Let us know what support you need, Bob,” said Hargesty. He suddenly felt optimistic. “We’ll get you whatever you want, either on this end or we’ll get the people to you.” Hargesty had to admit that Thomas had apparently succeeded—more than he could have done himself and more than he thought possible. The president had been right in putting his full trust in Bob Thomas after all.

The president and his two generals exchanged wary glances. All seemed

satisfied for the moment. So that was it? the president thought. He recapped the last few days in his mind. He had most likely spared the nation from further attacks. But had he protected his country for the future? Could anyone guarantee anything? They were all heading into uncharted territory. It felt different than he thought it would feel. He felt let down. But when he thought clearly for a moment, he realized Bob Thomas had delivered. It was up to all of them collectively to gain the peace. They couldn't let it slip through their hands. He nodded his head in satisfaction. Yes, this could work. They would make it work. He was extremely pleased with his general. The more he thought about it, the more he knew how much he owed General Robert Thomas.

"God's speed, Bob," said the president with emotion in his voice. It was the first time Thomas could remember the president calling him by his first name. "We're all praying for your success. You've done your nation a great service."

"Thank you, sir," replied Thomas. The line went dead before Thomas could continue. But he really didn't have anything else to say.

Silayev decided it was time to smoke. He removed a cigarette from his case and slowly lit the tip. He seemed to enjoy the moment.

"We have our work cut out for us, General Thomas," said Silayev calmly.

"Yes, Marshal, we do." His thoughts turned to working with Strelkov. The next few days would test him to the fullest. But, failure was not an option. The president was counting on him, and even Hargesty and McClain knew this was their only shot at peace and a fighting chance for recovery. Thomas honestly believed the Russians wanted peace as well. The nightmare had to end—and soon.

Thomas sat quietly while the marshal enjoyed his cigarette. In a few hours he would be somewhere in Russia, piecing together a plan to save his country. He knew he had to work the big strategic issues; that's what would be remembered in the history books, but in his heart he knew he had to get the brave Americans still fighting on Russian soil home. He wouldn't abandon them. Yes, after a cease fire, that would be the first order of business.