

The First End

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Chapter 1

“Be ready!” shouted the leader of the operation, while approaching the danger zone. The fishing boat rode the waves of the High Seas much like a rodeo rider in one of those wild fields that never fully revealed their secrets. Rusty stains marred the hull, adding more ugliness to an already ugly ship. About 40 meters in length, the converted whaler seemed alone in the sea. Indeed, if one looked closely enough, the Chinese men who manned her were not very interested in fishing. The single crane was positioned over the side and a long steel rope had been lowered into the water.

Inside the bridge, Wong Lee studied his sonar instruments carefully. He was able to keep track of his two divers as they scoured the sea bottom for technology waste. Several large waste contractors frequently disposed of military waste by sinking parts into the ocean depths.

For some time, the Indian Ocean had become a dump. Companies benefited from the chaos and anarchy in Somalia to disperse military, nuclear and other waste. Somalia had become a toxic land.

Military giants such as the United States turned a blind eye to the practice, secretly utilizing these contractors to save a dollar or two while condemning the practice from the armchair of the media. As long as the sensitive material was destroyed, who cared how it happened.

Lee had been on this assignment for over two years, and in all that time they had found little that was worth the effort. Most of the sensitive components, such as circuit boards, memory chips, and other electronic systems were so corroded and destroyed by the salt water as to be practically worthless. Still, Beijing insisted on the covert search, no matter how many useless reports he had written and sent their way. Personally, Lee felt it was better to intercept the waste contractors before they unloaded their cargo, but that would simply create an international incident.

One of his subordinates stuck his head into the cabin door. “Sir, a boat is approaching. They have ignored our warnings to ward off and are still coming.”

“Pirates?” Lee asked, his heart racing. He didn’t fear pirates. There was enough firepower on board to lay waste to a good-sized vessel, but a firefight just might relieve some of the monotony.

“Maybe. It’s rather small, though.”

Lee checked the radar screen, which confirmed the observation. The approaching craft couldn’t have been carrying more than five people. “Hold fire. Keep weapons out of sight. If anything looks suspicious, we’ll sink it.”

“Yes, sir!” The man left to relay the orders.

Lee considered his options. One could not be too careful this close to Somalia. Pirates were known to scout potential targets before trying to capture them. This small vessel could be on a reconnaissance mission. If so, a show of force might just convince the pirates to look for easier prey, but if not a show of force might be

relayed to several nearby governments, effectively blowing his cover. Lee hated situations like this. It would be so much easier just to blast them out of the water and to ask questions later.

Lee made his way down to the deck and was handed a pair of powerful binoculars. He trained them on the approaching vessel. Indeed, it was small, and he seriously doubted that the vessel had a powerful engine based on its current speed. "Hold fire," he ordered again, directing his command to his first mate, Ho Ningh. The gaunt faced man, thin as a whip, but with a temper that belied his frame, nodded, looking somewhat disappointed. "Have the divers surface on the other side of the boat. I don't want them spotted."

Another sailor left to carry out this command.

Lee trained his binoculars on the approaching vessel. Now he could see two young boys standing in the prow of their boat waving fruits. "Hawkers!" he yelled, informing his crew of the nature of the approaching vessel. "Orders stand!" He turned to Ho. "Keep an eye on them. Buy some fruit and then send them on their way. But if they are overly curious, kill them."

Pirates routinely employed boys to act as spies for them, marking vessels for plunder and capture. If these two boys were other than sellers of fruit, he would kill them out of hand and be done with it.

"Yes, sir," Ho agreed, fingering the safety of his automatic weapon. Ho was bloodthirsty, but he was also loyal. He would not disobey his orders lightly, Lee was sure.

Returning to the control tower, Lee checked on the progress of his two divers. They were still scouring the sea floor, and had made no indication of any significant find as of yet. Their air supply readings indicated that they had another half hour before they had to surface, more than enough time to get rid of the two hawkers. Because of the steep drop—nearly 800 meters to the Indian Ocean floor—they had brought along a sophisticated submersible. The unwieldy sub had to be stored in a special compartment of the ship to keep it from being visible by fellow ships.

Keeping one eye on both the radar and sonar screens, Lee flipped open his laptop and began filling out his report. He hadn't heard from Chen yet, and frankly, he didn't much care to. Chen's ranking was equal to Lee's in most respects, but while Lee reported directly to the army, Chen reported to the secret service. Chen's shadowy and vague orders gave him much more latitude than Lee enjoyed, something that infuriated Lee no end.

As if the thought of the man conjured him, Lee's satellite phone began ringing. It was Chen. Sighing, Lee answered it. "Lee here."

"Wong?" Chen responded. "My agents are scouring the city, but so far we've come up with nothing. I've enlisted some of the filthy street urchins to keep an eye open, but so far we've only come up with a few items not completely destroyed by these idiot pirates."

"What have you found so far?" Wong demanded.

"Most of it is naval...Indian, I think. They are the dominate power in these parts. The pirates stay away from them for the most part, but they've managed to capture a few pieces." There was a pause. "I was hoping to come aboard while my agents search."

“Stay focused, Chen. Beijing is breathing down our necks to find some US technology they can give their scientists.”

“I know why we’re out here, Wong,” Chen snapped, irritated. “I just don’t see why I have to stay in this filthy city one moment longer. The men on the ground here are perfectly capable, and you know it.”

“I can’t justify that with Beijing,” Wong lied. Beijing would never know, but Wong didn’t much care for Chen. Chen wasn’t really under his command. They possessed the same rank, more or less, and both were up for promotion. Wong was determined not to let the sly Chen get the advantage of him in this assignment. “You’re just going to have to run things from land. I’ll pass on any information you need as it comes in.”

“Wong, I don’t take orders from you.”

“True, but I don’t take them from you either. How do you propose to force me to make landfall. This is about the mission, Chen. Nothing more. Stay focused. Scour the pirate’s lairs if you must, but find something useful for Beijing.”

“This is a complete waste of time,” Chen muttered over the crackling line. “Beijing knows there is nothing out here. The US wouldn’t be stupid enough to let anything out of their sight.”

“It may be something lost in the two wars they fought here in the Middle East, fool. Who knows how much tech is just lying around in the deserts or at the bottom of the sea here! That’s why we’re here, so that’s what we’ll do.”

“I don’t much care for your tone of voice, Wong.”

“I don’t much care what you think,” Wong snapped back. “Perhaps you should start looking through the city dumps. Sifting through the garbage may help you focus on the task at hand.”

Chen muttered something very unpleasant regarding Wong’s ancestry and hung up. Wong sat back, deep in thought. He didn’t like Chen at all, and before this assignment ended, the two of them would no doubt have a confrontation of some sort. Wong decided that he would come out on top no matter what the risks or what he had to do.

Chapter 2

Bill shook his head, staring dispiritedly out the window of the taxi. Athletic, still in his late thirties, Bill Gardner hated what had become of his city. His skin crawling, he almost tugged the sleeves down on his white shirt, decided against it and instead rubbed his hands on his jeans—as if he could clean off the filth of the city by doing so. He closed his eyes behind his dark sunglasses and tried not to think what the scorching July heat would do to all the refuse in the city. Already, he could smell the sour and pungent aroma that hung like a dark cloud over the city—even with the windows up.

“The city should do something about this,” he muttered. In fact, he didn’t understand why the Mayor of New York hadn’t done something. This was getting out of hand.

The taxi driver heard him. "The garbage?" he asked. "Yeah, it's pretty bad," he finished, answering his own question.

Bill stroked his well-groomed goatee. "Any word when the strike will end?" he asked, knowing that most taxi drivers knew the news before the broadcasters even had the chance to announce it.

"No. Wastend employees still refuse to drive the trucks. They demand more pay and more benefits before they return to work. I just don't know why the company doesn't just either give in to their demands, or hire a whole new batch of employees. The trash has been piling up for a week now." The gray haired driver pointed to the dumpsters of a prominent hotel, which were overflowing with bags of trash, much of it just lying in plain sight.

The questions raised by the taxi driver touched upon Bill's lawyer instincts. "I bet it has to do with the union. The union won't allow any more new hires, trying to back the company into a corner. If the company just gives in, they run the risk of going bankrupt or passing on the higher costs to you and I."

The driver swore. "You know, I've been flushing as much trash down the toilet as I can. At least the sewer still works. My neighbors finally took all their trash to the landfill themselves. It's a 45 minute drive one way! I can't afford to do that!"

"I think we're all screwed until the strike ends," Bill replied, sighing.

"The Mayor needs to do something," the driver muttered, echoing Bill's thoughts from earlier. "He should have never made that contract with Wastend to begin with."

The corporate lawyer knew exactly what the driver was referring to. The topic had been a favorite one of local talk shows over the last few days. Two years ago, the Mayor had signed a citywide contract with Wastend to pick up garbage for most of the city, effectively driving out all other competitors. At the time, it had seemed like a good deal as Wastend had negotiated fees that were lower across the board. Now, the downside of that contract was rearing its ugly head. With the competition gone, there was no one to take up the slack when Wastend employees went on strike. Oh, there were one or two tiny companies that were picking up trash, but they were waging a losing battle in such a large city.

No, this strike needed to end, and it needed to end quickly.

The taxi rolled to a stop in front of the corporate offices for Helm and Weiss Law Firm. "Here you are, mister. That'll be \$15.22."

Bill handed him a twenty. "Keep the change."

The driver shrugged. It wasn't much of a tip, but Bill was in a hurry to get to his office. The air outside had begun to smell faintly of refuse, causing the lawyer to recall what one commentator had described as unsanitary conditions about to incubate a whole host of diseases. Great. Just what we all need. He hurried inside, where the recycled air at least smelled better. When he reached the eleventh floor, he moved through the lobby of his office.

His secretary, Cassie Byrne, smiled as he came in. "Good morning, Mr. Gardner."

"Cassie. I see you beat me here as usual."

"Always, sir."

He chuckled, and went over to the coffee machine to retrieve a hot cup. "What's my schedule like for today?"

“You only have a 9 o’clock with Tim Hunton of the School of Technical Developments. He wants to discuss the legal ramifications of adding an extra layer of security in the classrooms. Oh, and management has requested that we re-use the coffee cups to cut down on the trash.”

Bill regarded his Styrofoam cup sourly.

“Management suggestion or law?”

“More of a royal decree, complete with capital punishment for first time offenders,” she replied with a straight face.

Bill chuckled again. “Cassie, half the time I can’t tell when you are serious.”

“And I’m not?” she asked seriously.

“We shouldn’t be using disposable cups anyway.” answered Bill.

Continuing to chuckle, he entered into his spacious and somewhat lavish office. “I’ll be preparing the briefs for the Stark case until Mr. Hunton arrives. See that I am not disturbed.”

“Yes, sir.”

Bill hadn’t even arrange the papers or turned on his laptop when his desk phone rang. He picked it up. “Yes?”

“Sir,” Cassie said. “I have a man on hold who insists that he speak to you right away.”

“I thought I said I didn’t want to be disturbed.”

“I know, sir, but this man is very insistent, and he threatened to see to it that I get fired if I didn’t get you on the phone.”

“He what? Who is this idiot?”

“He didn’t say, sir.”

Bill had risen to his six foot two height, his muscles clenching in anger. He didn’t like it when someone threatened his staff. “Put the fool on. I’ll take care of this.”

“Thank you, sir.”

There followed a click and with no semblance of grace, Bill demanded, “Who is this?”

“Is this Bill Gardner?” a deep, rather gruff voice, replied.

“You blasted know it is, mister. I want your name. How dare you threaten my assistant!”

“Calm down, Mr. Gardner. I was only trying to motivate her. I needed to talk to you without her knowing who I was. My name is Frank Vellore. I am the CEO of Wastend.”

That caught Bill off-guard some. He paused and got his anger under control. If this really was Mr. Vellore, no wonder he wanted to keep this conversation a secret.

Secrets were no stranger to Bill. His military past had often put him in positions where secrets were as common as breathing. Several of the operations he had participated in were still classified as top-secret. Even the mention of the code names would most likely land him in jail. One such operation had taken place in Columbia to combat drug trafficking. But that was the past. Now, he just wanted to focus on his job as a lawyer and deal with new cases he received every day.

“Okay, Mr. Vellore, you’ve got my attention. But if you want my cooperation, I suggest that you stop threatening my staff.”

“Easy enough to do. Look, Mr. Gardner, I will get right to the point. I wish to retain your services in helping me end this strike.”

Now, Bill’s heart began to race for a completely different reason. A job like this could propel his career well into the next hierarchy of lawyers in the nation. This would be a dream job, being that it would be so televised and public. “Why me?”

There was a pause, and Bill almost regretted asking the question. Finally the voice said, “Because you possess the skills and expertise that we need.”

Something about that answer didn’t seem right to Bill. Shouldn’t Vellore be more interested in his experience and success in the court room or at the negotiating table? What skills and expertise did was he referring to.

Before he could question the Wastend CEO further on it, Frank asked, “Can you come down here immediately? We have much to talk about and plan for, and not much time. I need this strike to end soon.”

Bill thought about it. Finally he nodded, even though Frank couldn’t see the gesture. “I’ll be there in an hour. At your main offices?”

“Yes, and please don’t tell anyone where you are going or who you are meeting with. I need this to be completely confidential, Mr. Gardner.”

“I understand.”

“Good. Thank you, Mr. Gardner.”

“Don’t thank me yet, sir. I’m on my way.”

He hung up the phone and stood behind his desk thinking. Why had he been called? He was a good lawyer, if he could indulge in a bit of boasting, but there were many other high profile lawyers with much more experience than he had in this sort of thing. No way was he going to turn down the opportunity, but still, he had to wonder.

He packed his laptop, stuffed some standard authorization forms and confidentiality agreements in the case too, and appeared at his office door. “Cassie? I need you to reschedule that appointment with Mr. Hunton.”

“Reschedule?” She looked at the clock. “But sir, he is due to be here in the next ten minutes.”

“Then give him my apologies and reschedule if he is willing. If he is not...” Bill shrugged. “Oh well. But, I have to go.”

“Very well. What do I put down on your hourly logs?”

“That I am in a meeting.”

“Where?”

“Undisclosed, per client request.”

“This is most unusual.”

Bill grinned. “Don’t you know it, sister? Look, Cassie, I can’t tell you where I am going or who I am meeting. This needs to be kept confidential. I’m sorry, Cassie.”

Cassie was a pretty girl in her mid-twenties. She was actively working for her degree in criminal justice and working part time for Bill. She was very intelligent, so he had to be careful what he told her.

“How long will you be gone?” she asked.

Bill glanced at his watch. “I don’t really know, but my guess is all day. I’ll call in when I know more.”

With the essentials out of the way, Bill hurried out of the office.

Chapter 3

General Hynes watched the President's speech with a sense of foreboding. "Why is he doing this?" he demanded of no one in particular. "This project was to remain secret. Now everyone knows about it."

"To be fair, sir," Major Dobb said in his soft spoken voice, "the Russians and Chinese already knew about our new TACAIR prototype." He shrugged. "I would hardly call it a secret."

Hynes threw a frown at his aide. "That's beside the point. The President doesn't have the right to go around revealing military secrets."

"He is the President, sir."

"That doesn't mean much," Hynes grunted, waving his hand in dismissal. "The ability to deliver a speech and sway few masses of ignorant followers does not preclude military intelligence. I'm telling you, people are not going to gulp down such crap."

Dobb wisely decided to change the subject. "What does this mean to the project?"

The general drummed his fingers on the table while staring at the monitor. The President was droning on about his support for the military, his appreciation for all they did, and so on and so on. Hog wash! The man was a politician, nothing more. "I don't know. The President isn't done yet. I got a feeling he's about to blindside us."

They both turned to the monitor to listen. The President continued, "As a result of this research, we have established a climate that has made us few friends across the globe. The world must enter into a new phase of friendship and understanding, and the United States should pioneer the way." The President paused to scan the room, the camera catching every movement with startling clarity. Tension built, Hynes could feel it even though he wasn't physically there. "Therefore, in a conciliatory gesture, I am ordering the cessation of all experimental military projects, including the advanced next generation tactical aircraft TACAIRs Project. All prototypes will be dismantled immediately, and a special oversight committee formed from the international community will oversee the dismantling of these warplanes."

"What!" Hynes practically came out of his seat. "He can't do that!"

"He's the President," Dobb retorted, sarcasm evident in his voice.

"Doesn't he know what that will mean to our national security? Doesn't he understand the implications?"

Dobb didn't respond, but turned back to the monitor. The President's voice droned on, "We can no longer be a nation apart. We must embrace the fact that we are a world united by our humanity, and to think otherwise would be to continue the cycle of violence that has been the staple of our society for so long. Things must change, and we will begin that change here and now."

"Stupid, stupid, stupid," General Hynes muttered. "Get me the Sec-Def on the phone, Major. Maybe he can talk some sense into the President."

“And what if he can’t? The President just went public with this, General. To rescind an executive order of such a magnitude would be embarrassing to say the least.”

Hynes fumed. He completely understood the ramifications, even if the President did not. Didn’t the man know that there were people out there who would not play by his rules? They only wanted power and wealth, and they would be willing to do anything to get it. “What are our options?”

Dobb looked surprised. “I don’t know that we have many other than obeying the President’s wishes. If we have to dismantle the TACAIR project, how are we going to do it?”

The general began drumming his fingers again as he considered the problem. “Who did we use to get rid of the other prototypes?”

“The older models?”

“Yes.”

“Most of the material was recycled—I suspect we will do the same in this case. What we can’t recycle, we need to destroy and dispose of safely.”

“What can’t be recycled?”

“Some of the equipment is specialized...hardened titanium meant to withstand a pounding and protect the computer cores. These will have to be disposed of discretely.”

“Who did we use in the past?”

“Wastend. They hold nationwide contracts as well as most of the major governmental contracts. They do business worldwide.”

“Isn’t that the company that is on strike right now in New York?”

“It is?”

“I don’t want to use them. They’d be more trouble than they’re worth right now.”

Dobb looked uncomfortable. “I’m sorry, sir, but they have a proprietary contract with the military. I think we have to use them.”

Hynes swore. “They did good work before?”

“They disposed of the computer modules of several of our former aircraft prototypes.”

Dobb listened to the general’s fingers drumming on the table. Finally the grey haired general stood to his nearly six foot height. “Fine. If we have to use them we will. Get the CEO on the phone. Tell him our situation and order him to end this strike now. If we have to use them, I don’t want to wait.” He glanced at the monitor that showed the President fielding questions from the press corp. “I got the feeling that the President will want immediate action on this.”

“I agree, sir.”

“Call the other joint chiefs. They all have a stake in this.” The four-star general threw one more irritated glance at the TV monitor. “Madness. Let’s hope someone can talk some sense into the President before it is too late.”

Chapter 4

Bill paid the taxi driver off, and was just about to start for the main doors of the Wastend Corporate Headquarters, when a man wearing a chauffeur's uniform waved at him from the door of a long limousine parked just up the street. "Mr. Gardner?" he called.

"Yes?"

"Please." He opened the door and indicated that Bill should get inside.

Shrugging, Bill ducked into the black car and sat across from a large man, bordering on fat, white hair, and a long, lined face. Bill recognized him immediately. "Mr. Vellore."

"Mr. Gardner." The man nodded a greeting. "Thank you for coming." He hit a button on his console. "Robbie, take us to the Per Se Restaurant at Columbus circle." He looked again at Bill. "I hope you like French."

Bill shrugged. "It'll do, although it is a bit early in the day for lunch."

"Less people to disturb us." The *Wastend* CEO hit another button and then gave his full attention to his guest. "Mr. Gardner. To be direct, I need your help in ending this ridiculous strike."

"I gathered as much." If the man wanted to talk business, Bill was game. "What do they want—and I don't mean what everyone else thinks they want, but what they told *you* they want."

Frank spat out a curse. "Those thrice cursed pigs want to put me out of business, that's what they want!"

"I don't understand."

"They all want a 15% pay increase across the board, larger pension plans, and better health insurance."

"Okay. What is the problem with giving that to them?"

Frank cursed again. "Aren't you listing, Mr. Gardner? If I give in to their demands, they will ruin this company. We can't sustain a level of cash flow to justify the increases. We'll go bankrupt inside of a year."

Bill saw the problem immediately. In order to land the huge contracts, Mr. Vellore had to cut the basic prices so steeply that his margins were barely enough to bring in a profit. If the employees got what they wanted, he would not be able to sustain it."

"Doesn't the union negotiators understand your situation?" he asked.

Frank snorted out another curse. "I doubt it. They demand that we make cuts in other areas...areas that in the long run would allow a competitor to come in and steal our contracts."

"Aren't you already in breach of contract?"

"Not yet. I had a clause inserted into my contracts to cover this scenario. But I only have two more weeks, and then I will lose all of them." Frank leaned forward, his eyes intense. "I just got a call from General Hynes office. You no doubt heard the President's speech this morning?"

"I got the short version from the taxi driver."

"Well, they need to dispose of some highly sensitive equipment in order to fulfill the President's order." He poked himself in the chest. "I have the contracts, but I need this strike to end now."

The limousine pulled to a stop and the driver opened their doors.

"Come. We can talk it over in the restaurant."

The Per Se is one of the best restaurants in New York that offered its visitors a unique menu, a striking view and an environment of intimacy.

Bill learned that Wastend held most of the military disposal contracts, and that if the strike didn't end soon, the company would lose all of them. The result would be catastrophic to the company. The only thing that Bill couldn't quite understand was why he had been picked by Vellore in the first place. Every time he broached the subject, the wily CEO just skirted the subject with a wave of his hand, or muttered some curse before changing the subject.

Bill did manage to get a dollar amount that the man was willing to pay for his services. The amount shocked him. It was easily half his entire year's wages. He idly wondered if the man could pay that much, why couldn't he budge with the union?

Finally, towards the end of the meal, Vellore slid a piece of paper across the table. Bill looked at the phone number written in a precise hand. "That is the Union Leader's number." Frank explained. "Her name is Rita Sully." He added a few profane and uncomplimentary descriptions of the woman. "The fat cow is waiting to hear from you."

Bill raised an eyebrow, letting the 'fat cow' comment pass, seeing how Vellore didn't have much moral ground to stand on in that department. "She's expecting me?"

"Yes. I arranged a meeting for two this afternoon at my offices. Please call her and let her know that you are coming."

"Very well. Anything else?"

Frank tugged on one ear. "There might be, Mr. Gardner, but now is not the time to discuss it. Solve my strike problem and then we'll talk."

"I'll do my best, sir."

Before meeting the union representative, Bill decided to pay a visit to the waste treatment plant and see things for himself. When he arrived, the sheer ugliness of the plant immediately caught his attention. The entire place reeked of shabbiness and ill-maintained equipment.

Only a dozen workers were on the site, men and women who for whatever reason had refused to join the strike and continued to work. But they didn't look pleased, Bill noted. More than likely, they labored under huge financial pressure and felt they had no choice. Sweat ran down their faces and they looked to be in a state of shock or numbed disregard. The machinery that cleaned the city water from the sewers hummed in discord, and many of the remaining workers didn't even wear gloves or masks as they worked on the filthy machines.

Suddenly, a cry of pain resonated through the building, blending almost congruently with the sounds of the machinery. Hurrying over to see what had happened, Bill found one of the employees holding his sliced hand and staring numbly at a broken shard of glass, blood staining the jagged edge. Blood seeped from the man's fingers and fell to the floor to blend in with the other discolorations there.

Bill looked around, thinking someone would come over and see if they could help, but no one did. No one even looked up from their jobs. Cursing, Bill rushed to the injured man and shouted for someone to bring a first aid kit. A lady, startled by the commanding tone, rushed away to return shortly with a bottle of

alcohol and a few small Band-Aids, not enough to cover the wound. Cursing still, Bill managed to find a somewhat clean piece of cloth. He ripped off a strip and began cleaning the wound.

"You'll need to get this looked at," he told the man.

The man just nodded.

"What's your name?"

"Raoul."

"I'm Bill. This is a real nasty cut buddy, so be careful." He finished cleaning it, but the blood still leaked out. He bound the wound as tightly as he could. "Why do you continue working here while the others are on strike?"

The man shook his head. "What choice do I have? If I stop working for even a day, my family will go hungry. We are not traitors at all, we are not what the strikers think of us anyway. We just have to keep working."

"My autistic child also needs to have his medication, who gonna pay for it? We need to work, that's it." the woman who had helped said softly.

"This is intolerable," Bill muttered. He retrieved his cell phone. "Look, I'll call 911. You need help."

"No! Please don't do that!"

"You need to see a doctor."

"Please don't call! I will be fine."

"I have to."

"Please don't!"

"Why?"

"I'm illegal in the country."

Bill struggled with what to do. He knew he should call, though the wound wasn't life threatening and should heal fine—though it no doubt would leave a nasty scar. "Are you sure you don't want to see a doctor? Your injury could get worse."

"I will be fine, sir. I will be just fine."

Bill had heard enough. He had seen enough. For him, the employees of *Wastend* deserved more than a pay raise. They needed a place where they could work and retain their dignity. Bill left the factory with a sense of bitterness, and a firm conviction to push the company *Wastend* to make concessions.

At exactly two that afternoon, the "fat cow" Vellore mentioned walked into the conference room at *Wastend* Corporate Headquarters. She was anything but fat. Her slim figure was tantalizing in a tailor-made business suit. Her auburn hair was rolled into a tight bun that allowed her high cheekbones to be displayed more prominently.

Bill rose and offered his hand. "Miss. Sully."

She took it, her grip firm and strong. "Mr. Gardner. A pleasure."

Bill chuckled. "Well, we'll see about that after our negotiations are concluded."

Rita allowed herself a slight smile. She noted the absence of anyone else. "So, Mr. Vellore really did want just us to meet."

"He felt that we would be more amicable to an agreement if neither of us were surrounded by a scowling team of representatives."

Rita's smile broadened slightly. "We'll see." She gestured to a chair. "Shall we?"

"We shall."

They talked for three hours. Bill reiterated his client's position and Vellore's fears of bankruptcy. Rita countered by showing profit figures, and describing current employee working conditions. Bill explained that the profit figures were bloated and did not portray the true nature of the company's earnings, especially when factoring in sizable loans. He conceded that the employees were entitled to a better standard of living, and she grudgingly let the profit figures go as a bargaining chip.

In the end, Bill agreed to try to get Mr. Vellore to agree to a 5% pay raise across the board. If he could secure that concession, Rita felt she could get the union to sign off on it for a year—with the understanding that negotiations would continue under the new agreement for the duration of that year.

"I think that in a year's time, things will be clearer," she said, rising to her feet. "The union will expect something more substantial by then."

"It gives everyone time to make adjustments," Bill agreed, also standing. "Perhaps an improved economy and renegotiated contracts will solve everyone's problems."

"Let's hope so." She extended her hand. "I must say, I was surprised to find a lawyer working for Mr. Vellore so...easy going."

"It's all a facade," he said, winking. "Underneath, I'm a ravening lion." They shook hands. Bill said, "I'll present this to Mr. Vellore immediately, and contact you with the results."

"Let's hope for something favorable. I think I can get my side to agree to this." She sighed. "It will be good to have the trash removed."

"Yes it will."

Vellore's house sat back from the main road by a good quarter mile. The long driveway was lined with trees, perfectly manicured to match the lush green lawn that swept out into the distance on all sides. One of the bays of the five car garage was open to reveal a luxury car inside. Another one was parked outside.

Bill climbed up a few steps towards the gigantic doors, when one opened and Frank himself stepped outside.

"About time you got here. Did you set them straight?" A hopeful gleam glinted in his eye.

"Let's talk inside," Bill suggested.

"Yes. That would be best."

Once inside, Frank began pointing out expensive pieces of art, bragging as to how he had come to collect them. Bill's gaze stopped on a picture in a small frame of bronze deposited on the edge of an antique piano. The girl pictured within looked to be in her twenties. She was smiling at the camera and proudly wore a green t-shirt with a large inscription. "This is my daughter, Lisa," Frank said, noting his gaze. "My one and only daughter. I'm very fortunate to have a daughter like her, a brilliant student at Harvard University and an engaging person. She is chairperson of the organization Eco-Waste, the non-profit organization."

"Is waste a family issue or something?" asked Bill.

"A family issue? Yes, I guess so and also a business," Frank replied.

"Or you are using the issue for the business."

"I like you Bill. I really do," Frank muttered unconvincingly. "Come. We go to my office."

In Mr. Vellore's office, a bit later, Bill outlined the proposed agreement that he and Rita had hashed out. "I was under the impression that it is essential that the employees return to work," he explained. "So I proposed a stopgap, something that would give you time to work out your differences, but at the same time getting your workforce back on the job. They have agreed to suspend things for a year."

"That's great news!" Frank exclaimed, rubbing his hands. He froze, his eyes tightening. "So what's the catch?"

"They want a marginal increase in pay immediately."

"How much?"

"5%."

Vellore's face tightened. "Impossible. I can't afford that. That would be millions of dollars."

Bill could hardly credit his ears. He had been so sure that Frank would agree. It seemed so simple. "It might strain you for the interim. But, after you had the chance to renegotiate some of your contracts—"

"I said, no!" Frank cut in. "Impossible. It won't work."

"But—"

"Look, Mr. Gardner. Your job wasn't to compromise. Your job was to get my employees back to work."

"If you don't give them something, Mr. Vellore, they will just continue the strike."

"That is unacceptable!"

"It is a fact!" Bill calmed himself down. "Sir, I talked at length with the Union Leader. She was absolutely firm on this point. Without you giving them something, they will just continue the strike. I understand that it is not what you wanted, but I believe that it will be the closest you get. If you fight them here, I fear they will just demand it all even if you change your mind later."

"Mr. Gardner, please understand me. I won't change my mind. This company can't afford a 5% pay raise. It would seriously undermine our ability to function. I am not in business to placate some disgruntled employees, I am in business to make money! This is my company! I built it from the ground up! I won't let a few measly, third rate, middle class scumbags dictate how I run my business!"

Bill sat across from the CEO, fuming. Finally he looked up. "Is this your last word on the subject?"

"It is."

"Then I will inform Miss Sully."

For several days, Bill hadn't seen his girlfriend Karen. Finding time in both of their busy schedules proved problematic at times. Bill had many cases to deal with and Karen was just busy with her advertising projects.

Feeling despondent over the day's events, Bill decided to break away and make a surprise visit to see Karen. He took a taxi and headed to Brooklyn where Karen rented a rather modest apartment. When he arrived, he used the intercom to buzz her rooms, but got no answer.

He stood there, scowling, unsure what to do next. An old lady arrived and immediately recognized Bill. "You need to get in, aren't you?" She asked.

"It would be great, Ms. Carson." he replied.

"If there is no answer, you can come over and wait, Gardner."

“You bet, Ms. Carson.”

The old lady let him in the building and Bill took the elevator to the third floor. He knocked on the door several times, but still got no answer.

Bill finally sat down on a step of the stairs and waited. He needed the time to think anyway. Shortly after, Karen arrived, shopping bags in hand. She looked tired, but her eyes brightened the instant she saw him.

“Bill! What the heck are you doing sitting on the stairs?”

Bill got up immediately and removed the bags from Karen’s hands. He kissed her on the cheek and let her open the door. Karen seemed having trouble to open the door.

“Hiff the key, Karen.” Bill asked.

“What did you say?”

“Turn the key in the other way...‘hiffing the key’ like showing the upper teeth...you know what I am saying?”

Karen smiled, while introducing the key in the right position and the door opened.

“Maybe I should make a copy of the keys,” she said brightly, moving into the apartment.

“Only if you think I will have need of it,” he teased.

They both entered the apartment. Once inside, Karen helped him put the groceries away and then they retired to the living room with a pair of glasses filled with brandy and some ice. Karen turned on her computer and started some soft music playing.

He looked at her, openly admiring her beautiful form. Her skirt fell past her knees, but couldn’t hide how beautifully shaped her legs were. Bill leaned over and kissed her on the cheek again. She shifted to stare into his eyes.

“Are you going to stay?” asked Karen.

“I am afraid not. I’ve got a lot of work to do. My current client is a bear. Honestly, I would rather be working on the other side.”

“Bad day?”

“Oh yes. I’m representing the company Wastend. I’m just concerned, that’s all. The president of the company is both fishy and arrogant. He could be extremely dangerous too.”

An hour later, Bill tore himself away from his girlfriend and said goodbye. Both knew that this new case could dominate his time and neither knew when the next time they would see each other. Not happy, at all, he left determined to see this through.

Chapter 5

Bill paced in irritation. He knew somewhere in his subconscious that his resentment of the turn of events that had kept him from closing out the deal between the workers of Wastend and the CEO of the company, was the source of

this act of immaturity of walking back and forth for no apparent reason. Still, he paced.

His assistant, Cassie, came in carrying a folder, causing him to slow down and stop behind his desk. "Sir," she began, "Rita is on the phone again. What shall I tell her?"

"I have nothing to tell her," he said, waving his hand. He wished he did have something to offer the union representative. "Mr. Vellore still won't see reason. The man is a first rate narcissist if you ask me."

"What should I tell her? This is her third call."

"Tell her I'm not in," he shot back.

Cassie raised one of her pretty eyebrows. "Sir..."

Bill rolled his eyes. Cassie's impeccable honesty was both a source of refreshment and irritation at times. "Oh very well." He grabbed his jacket, his briefcase, and the folder from Cassie's hands. "I'm leaving."

"Sir?"

"Tell her that I just stepped out of the office. By the time you get to the phone, it will be true."

She frowned at him, and his own irritation caused him to frown back. "When will you be back?"

"When I step back through that door," he shot back. Storming out, he closed the main office door none too gently.

At street level, he almost hailed a taxi to take him home, but thought better of it. He needed a different environment to shed his irritation. A popular bar was located a street over and, at this odd time of day, shouldn't be too crowded. He decided to go there. The brisk walk helped some, and once there, he found the place practically deserted as hoped—except for a few loafers with nothing better to do than waste someone else's hard earned income on booze and cheap beer.

Bill sauntered up to the bar and sat about two stools away from a pair that looked to be regulars, judging by the way the bartender ignored them and their pleas for additional refills. They were clearly drunk, so Bill decided to ignore them too.

"What's yer pleasure?" the bartender asked, placing both hands on the bar between them.

"Straight rum," the lawyer answered.

Shrugging as if to say that it was Bill's funeral, the bartender pulled a bottle off the rack and poured a shot into a glass. He slid it across to Bill, who caught it deftly in one hand.

"No napkins," the barkeep mentioned. "No waste."

Bill nodded his understanding, and silently cursed the Wastend strike. Even here, in his solitude, the blasted thing rose up to haunt him. Deciding to sip the rum instead of downing it, he hunched over the bar and tried to block out every other sight and sound.

Never before had he failed to sort out a problem. He had won every case in his career, including a couple of high profile ones that had gained national recognition, but nothing like this case would have. This case would have been a needed feather in his cap. But that idiot CEO just wouldn't set aside his own pride

and ego for the betterment of his company or the city. He snorted in disgust and shook his head in mock self-pity.

The barkeep noticed. "You good, buddy?"

"Yeah, just getting tired of all the trash lying around."

"You and everyone else."

One of the barflies, a seedy looking individual with speckled hair, turned toward him. "I'll tell you who the trash really is; it's them blasted lawyers and uppity-ups in Westend that are the real trash. I say we should throw them into the garbage dump. Maybe then they'll understand what they're doing to the rest of us."

At the mention of lawyers, Bill had stiffened, but quickly forced himself to relax. He didn't need any more pressure. An idea struck him. He looked over at the challenging expression of the bar bum and wondered if the drunk was one of the Westend employees on strike. He was on the verge of asking when he changed his mind before his mouth could open. He didn't want any trouble. He turned away, nursing his drink.

"Hey, what do you do?" the barfly demanded of Bill. "All dressed up and looking so important. You important, fellow?"

Just wanting the idiot to leave him alone Bill said, "I'm a lawyer." It was the wrong thing to say.

The man started to guffaw. "You? A lawyer?" He slapped the top of the bar and stood unsteadily to his feet. "You one of them lawyers that is making this strike last so long?"

Sighing, Bill shook his head. "Go back to your drink, friend."

The man turned a bit redder. "You telling me what to do, shyster?"

"I'm asking you to leave me alone," Bill snapped, growing irritated.

"You ambulance chasers are all the same. You milk situations like this Westend mess just to line your pockets off the pain and troubles of others." The man moved closer, jabbing a finger towards Bill. "This wouldn't be a problem except for people like you!"

"What?" the lawyer demanded incredulously.

"You hear me, you—" the barfly started to poke a finger towards Bill's face.

Without thinking, and irritated beyond normal limits, Bill's old military training reared up and took control of his body. His hand flashed upward with the speed of a viper, snatching the foolish barfly's finger in a vice-like grip. Bill twisted violently, sending the man spinning to slam into the bar face first. Exerting excruciating pressure on the man's hand to keep him from moving, Bill bent over and whispered. "Return to your drink, foolish man. You have no clue what you are talking about."

Shoving the man away so that he fell heavily to the floor between two of the stools, Bill returned to his drink. That should have ended it, but the barfly's friend, a portly man with red cheeks and two chins, took exception to the rough handling of his drinking partner. "Hey now," he bellowed, standing up and starting towards the lawyer. "You don't mess with Mickey or his friends!"

The burly man took a giant swing at Bill, who saw it coming from so far away that he figured he could finish most of his drink before the larger barfly could actually deliver the punch. With another sigh, he leaned away and watched in

fascination as the meaty fist swung past his eyes. His attacker grunted when he didn't make any contact, his swing turning him partially around.

It was too good of an opportunity to pass up. With a well-placed kick, Bill sent the portly man stumbling forward to fall head over heels when his body got all tangled up in one of the tables.

"Hey!" the bartender protested. "Don't break anything!"

Bill grinned, suddenly feeling good. The bartender was more on his side than the two bums attacking him. The lawyer just needed to be considerate enough not to break anything. Well, he could do that.

Standing up for himself, Bill delivered a powerful punch to the first barfly - who had just regained his feet. The blow lifted the man several inches straight up off the floor. He came down, eyes crossed and swaying dangerously. Bill shoved him onto one of the stools, from which the barfly proceeded to slowly slip off.

By then, the bigger friend had regained his feet. With a bellow that seemed more bull than man, he charged Bill, lowering his head as if he would ram the lawyer right through the bar. Bill waited until the last second and then spun away, catching one of the fellow's arms as he barreled by. He waited for the man to slam painfully into the bar—which held against the impact, thank God—and then with a deft twist, pinned it painfully behind the man's back. Using leverage and pain to control the larger man, Bill had him laid out on the floor in a choke hold.

"Now," Bill said in a jovial tone of voice. "You have a choice. I could break this arm, and then continue breaking bones until you decide to quit, or you can quit now. What will it be, my friend?"

For a moment longer, the portly man struggled against the lawyer's grip. Finally he relaxed and chuckled. "You ain't no lawyer man."

"What makes you say that?"

"Mickey knock lawyer good. You ain't no lawyer. You knock Mickey good."

Shaking his head at the absurd logic, Bill said, "So what will it be? You want to go back to your drink?"

"Yeah. But what about Harold there? You knock him good too. He out."

"He would have drunk himself unconscious anyway. I just helped him to it faster."

The portly man chuckled. "That's the truth of it! Okay, we have a deal."

Bill let him up and the big man ambled back to his spot, still chuckling and talking to his oblivious friend, who had slumped down unconscious between two of the stools. Well, *whatever makes one happy*.

The bartender nodded at the lawyer. "Thanks for not breaking anything."

"My pleasure." Bill looked around. "But, I should probably still leave."

"That you should, friend. When Harold wakes up, he'll be out for blood. The fool could never control his temper."

"Thanks for not calling the cops," the lawyer said as he started for the door.

"They both needed a good spanking, anyways."

Feeling better, Bill walked out of the bar. He didn't know what he should do, but an idea brought on by his impromptu fight crept into his mind. Smiling, he hurried towards his office.

Chapter 6

General Hynes drummed his fingers impatiently. He looked over at Major Dobb. “Well? Is he coming or not?”

Dobb glanced at his computer screen. “Security logs say Frank Vellore cleared checkpoint Beta ten minutes ago. He should be here shortly.”

Hynes went back to his drumming. He hated having to even talk to the CEO of Wastend, but the President’s instructions were clear. The ultra-stealth TACAIR prototype had to be dismantled and destroyed. But Hynes would be hanged if he allowed any of the technology to fall into the wrong hands. He would see it destroyed completely or heads would roll. He had no illusion as to what would happen if certain other governments got their hands on the technology, and too often decommissioned technology lying around in a warehouse somewhere just disappeared, only to turn up in the hands of those who should have never even known of its existence. No, it would be destroyed...permanently.

A knock on the door was followed by a plain looking woman sporting silver lieutenant bars on her shoulders. “Sir, Frank Vellore is here to see you.”

“Thank you, lieutenant,” Dobb said politely, his voice shifting to a softer pitch. “Please show him in.”

Hynes frowned. He absently wondered if a budding romance was developing between the major and the lieutenant. Shrugging the thought away, he focused on the task at hand.

Vellore walked in dressed in an expensive Kiton business suit that Hynes felt sure had set the man back at least \$5,000. Great. There were fewer ways to say, ‘I’m better than you,’ than by wearing an expensive business suit into a meeting where the other participants wore \$100 uniforms cut for the air force.

“Mr. Vellore,” Hynes greeted the man, reaching a hand out. “Thank you for coming on such short notice.”

Frank shook the General’s hand and took a seat without being asked to. “Well, your message spoke of something important...and mentioned profit as well.”

Right to the point, I see. Hynes seated himself across from the Wastend CEO and clasped his hands together in front of him. “Did you, by chance, see the President’s news conference last week?”

Vellore pursed his lips together. “I saw it, but to be honest, I didn’t pay much attention. As you no doubt know, I am having some issues of my own.”

“Yes...well, that is part of the reason why I asked you to come here. The President’s new appeasement agenda—excuse me, peace agenda—requires us to dispose of some rather sensitive technology.”

“How sensitive,” the CEO asked, leaning forward eagerly.

“The item in question requires level 4 disposal protocols.”

“Level 4,” Frank breathed, excitement showing on his face. “Level four requires dismantling and melting in various locations. Very expensive.”

“I understand the complications,” Hynes retorted sternly. “Since you have an exclusive contract with the military in matters such as this, we are forced to deal with you.” Now it was Hynes who leaned forward. “But to be honest with you, I

don't think your company is up to the task. Your strike is causing quite an uproar in New York I hear."

Vellore waved the comment aside. "It is nothing. The workers will grow tired of not being paid and return to work shortly." His eyes shifted, a sure sign that the man's greed was rising to the forefront of his thoughts. "What sort of commission are we talking about with this job?"

Stifling an angry retort, Hynes motioned for Dobb to take up the conversation. The major nodded. "We can give you a 100% bonus on top of your normal commission of 7% of the value of the item to be disposed of."

"7% eh? Not bad. What is the item?"

Dobb looked at the general for permission, and got it with a slight nod of the head. "It is a prototype for a new full stealth TACAIR fighter."

Vellore's eyes widened. "Production costs for the current TACAIR model run upward of \$125 million!"

"\$143 million to be exact," Dobb confirmed. "This prototype is special and cost us \$200 million."

Vellore sat back. "That's \$14 million you're willing to pay for disposal."

"Yes."

"It's a deal!"

Hynes frowned. "Can you do it though? That's the question we all have. With your company in turmoil, what guarantees do we have that you can do this correctly? Parts must be dispersed to no fewer than three separate sites, and the parts at each site cannot, in any fashion, be able to be reconstituted into anything that would tip someone off as to their purpose and origin. Each metal and plastic part must be completely melted down. Every serial number, ID mark, or wording must be totally obliterated without any trace. I did mention that this disposal must follow level 4 protocols, right?"

"Not a problem. I will require the money in advance, of course, but with it I can get this job completed easy enough. I have five secure sites around the nation that can handle this. All of them have been independently vetted by the military and other government agencies. The strike as you know is focused mainly in New York." Frank shrugged. "I'll just not use the facility we have there. See? No problem."

Hynes didn't feel or look convinced. But he had no choice. This had become a presidential priority, and he had been personally tasked with the burden of getting this done quickly. The President wanted movement within a week of his announcement, something to feed the press and bolster positive political opinion.

Politics.

He hated every bit of it.

"Okay. Dobb, run through the details," he said at last. "Let's get the ball rolling."

Later, in his limousine, Frank pulled on his chin in thought. \$14 million dollars was just what he needed. He could circumvent the union altogether with money like that and hire new workers. The Union would have to sue, of course, but by the time the dust settled he would be too far ahead of the ball for any litigation settlement to really hurt him.

The only real problem was that the disposal protocols that needed to be followed were expensive. It would cost him \$4 million, minimum. That still netted him a

hefty profit, but even a single million would be vital to keep his company afloat in the coming months.

No, he needed another way...a cheaper way.

He pulled harder on his chin, trying to think. An idea invaded his mind, but it was too risky. He tossed it out. A bit later, the idea snuck back in and he paused to look at it in his mind's eye before tossing it out again as merely improbable. Before the limousine reached his offices, the idea had slithered in once more, and this time, he took a hard look at it. Could it work?

He pulled out his cell phone and made a few calls. Eventually, he reached an old acquaintance from his youth.

"Steve, it's Frank."

"Frank!" Steve's rough voice replied. "It's been a long time, you son-of-a-gun. I hear the trash business has you down in the dumps."

"Ha-ha," Frank muttered. "You always were the class clown."

Steve chuckled. "I know. But hey, no offense man, but you should have gone into the shipping business. I don't have a union to deal with."

"Well, that's kinda the reason I'm calling, Steve."

"What? You want to get into the shipping business now?"

"In a way. Steve, how would you like to make a quick \$ 2 million?"

There was a long pause. "Are we talking something illegal, Frank? You know that I won't have any part—"

"Hardly illegal," Frank lied smoothly. "Look, the government has contracted me to dispose of some sensitive equipment. They want it discretely disposed of at sea. And, well, I have a proprietary contract with the military for all sensitive waste disposal, so they naturally came to me. I thought of you."

Another pause followed. "You did, eh? What's the cargo and how much?"

"I can't really tell you the details about the tech itself, you understand." Frank had to make this mysterious enough to make it look legitimate and if actually following some of the level 4 protocols gave him that edge, he would do it. "But the dismantled tech should weigh no more than 50,000 pounds."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"That's a lot of money for a small cargo."

"Yes, but it is sensitive, and you need to be discrete. That is what I would be paying you for. The cargo will come in crates from a variety of sources. All you have to do is sink it where no one would ever find it."

"Well, that's the trick. Many of these waters are scrutinized. I would probably have to go to the Indian Ocean to do it right."

"Honestly, I don't care where it gets done, just as long as it does and that it never comes to the light of day again—ever!"

"Okay, Frank. I'm intrigued. Send me the details over a secure line and we'll get things set up."

"Thanks, Steve."

"Hey man, \$ 2 million is nothing to sneeze at."

"Make it three!"

"Two and half, ok?"

"Amen to that."

Chapter 7

Two months later...

Ali watched as his brother walked home.

Well, Ryobi wasn't really his brother in the truest sense of the word, though both boys had known each other for practically all their lives. Orphaned at the age of four, Ali had wandered around until Ryobi, then six years old himself and orphaned, had taken the younger boy under his wing.

And home, if you could really call it that, was a tattered tarp spread out in a corner of the several miles square city dump. Occasionally, Ali and Ryobi would move their residence closer to whatever area the trash was being discarded. This was important to their survival, Ali knew. They weren't the only scavengers who called the city home. If they didn't follow the trash, they would have nothing to eat or sell.

Ali had heard once that he lived in a place called Somalia, but he really didn't know what that meant, or even what it may imply. He knew there was a larger world out there. Occasionally he would spot someone with white skin, or blond hair, or slanted eyes, and even once, blue eyes. These people were like exotic aliens, and he had no real concept of where they came from or what they were doing in the streets he occasionally haunted.

The sprawling trash heaps consisted mostly of rusted metal parts and rotting food stuff. Paper was also in abundance, and when collected made a decent blanket during the occasional chilly nights. Most of the things that came to the dump were worthless, since locals had the tendency to use something until it couldn't be used anymore. However, occasionally, if they were able to fight off the other boys—girls didn't survive this life and had other ways to make a living than as a boy, Ali didn't understand yet—they would find something of actual value that could be sold. Mostly, they just looked for discarded foodstuff that could potentially be their next meal.

Competition was so fierce, that the moment you found anything edible, you ate it immediately, else a fight would break out. Though fights broke out anyway. Ali and Ryobi worked as a team, Ryobi often fighting off other boys that ventured too near, thus allowing the smaller and more agile Ali to scrounge. Ali always shared what he found.

Ryobi's dirty face looked pinched in annoyance as he stomped up to Ali. "It's worthless." He tossed the gadget onto the pile of rubbish before Ali.

Ali grinned, knowing how irritated his older friend got when he couldn't sell one of their finds from the dump. "How can it be worthless? It looks expensive." He picked it up and examined it. He was already intimately familiar with it since he had found it two days ago. The black, rectangular object was heavy, the outside shell made of some incredibly hard and dense material. A few English letters and numbers were written on one side, although the last two had been scratched off

somehow. He had tried to pry the outside casing off, but without success. He had no idea what it was.

“We’ll, it’s still worthless,” Ryobi insisted again. His black face reflected a typical Somalia heritage, and his 13 year old face bore the impatience typical of a young teenager. “No one knows what it is, so no one will buy it.”

Ali, two years younger than Ryobi, but perhaps more streetwise, looked up. “Did you try Korfa?”

Ryobi snorted. “Of course, I tried him. He just cursed at me and threw it at my head.”

Ali nodded. That sounded like Korfa. “Well it looks important,” he said, trying to justify future attempts at pawning it off on someone. “Maybe Osman would be interested.”

Ryobi snorted at that. “He promised to cut off your hand the next time he saw you, remember?”

“Aww...he wouldn’t really do it.”

The older scavenger rolled his eyes. “Look around you, Ali! This is Somalia. Not America. He would cut your hand off in a second.”

America. A land of legend and about as reachable as the moon to Ali. Still, Ryobi was right. Ali turned the object over in his thin, dirty hands, thinking. “What do you think it went into?”

They both knew it was some type of electronic component. But since the most advanced electronic equipment either had ever seen operational was an old tube style TV, they couldn’t for the life of them figure out what it might be.

“There is a guy,” Ryobi said, slowly. “He’s Chinese. I showed it to him. I think he might be interested.”

“He say so?”

“No. He tried to pretend that he wasn’t. But I could tell. He asked me where I had found it.”

Ali looked around at the huge waste dump that lay on the fringes of the city. This was his home, his and Ryobi. They shared it with about a score of other scavengers who fought ferociously over any scrap that might have some value to it. Everything was dumped here, from normal household waste to industrial garbage—mostly twisted and rusted scrap. Ali remembered one person complaining about the overwhelming stench about the place, but Ali could recall no other home. He didn’t smell anything. He had once overheard a white skinned man mutter something nasty about ‘dumpster-divers’ when Ali had tried to sell him something on the streets. Ali had no idea what the man had referred to, except that the man hadn’t been very pleased with Ali’s appearance.

“You mean, he wanted to know if you stole it?”

“Yeah, I think.”

“What did you tell him?”

Ryobi shrugged. “We got it out of the landfill. That’s true enough, right?”

Ali thought about it. “You think you can find him again? Maybe he would buy it if we offer him a deal.”

“Maybe.” Ryobi didn’t seem very interested. “I just don’t think it matters. It is broken.”

“How do you know that? We can’t even open it. Besides, maybe someone wants it because of the metal. I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

“Maybe,” the older scavenger muttered again, unconvinced.

Ali jumped to his feet, eagerness playing across his features. “Come. We shall find this man and make a deal with him.”

Ali seemed to retract a little “We will ask for good money, otherwise, we just keep it”. His older friend stood much slower, his expression dubious. “I met him in the government district. That’s all the way on the other side of town.” He peered at the sun. “It’ll be dark by the time we get there.”

Ali’s smile faded. “Oh. I hadn’t thought of that.” His stomach growled. He wanted something to eat, and didn’t relish scrounging for it. He had secretly hoped that selling the black box would allow them to eat freely for several days. He considered his options. “Okay. We’ll go tomorrow and see if we can’t find this Chinese man. We’ll try to be back before the trucks dump the new stuff.” The ‘new stuff’ was the daily trash brought from the city and seafront wharves.

Ryobi rubbed his stomach. “Okay. Where do you think we should go to get something to eat?”

Ali hid the metal box with the rest of their stash and started walking. “We’ll find something,” he assured his friend. “We always do.”

But they never even made it out of the landfill. Three men appeared out of the gloom, surrounding them as they neared the landfill exit. All three looked Asian, possibly Chinese. Ali hadn’t seen many from that part of the world, so he couldn’t be sure. One, shorter than the other two, pointed to Ryobi and said something rapidly in a language that Ali didn’t understand.

One of the other men, a bit taller with jet black hair slicked straight back and wearing a double breasted suit stepped forward. His hands were clasped behind his back, but though his manner was unthreatening, Ali felt suddenly nervous all the same. Ryobi did too, for Ali could hear his friend swallow. The man looked the two boys over and then speared Ryobi with a small smile. “Boy, I hear you had some object or other that you were trying to sell. I would like to see this metal box of yours.”

Ryobi swallowed again and looked at Ali for help. Ali nodded. The situation didn’t look good. These men weren’t here to buy the box. They were here to take it. Ali determined to make it difficult for them. He wanted to at least get a meal out of it. His friend looked back to the men. “I don’t have it. Ali, here does. He knows where it is.”

The Chinese man turned to Ali. “You have it?”

“Yes. It is safe. I know where it is.”

The man turned an unsympathetic gaze back on Ryobi. “Then I guess I don’t need you.” Before Ali could do anything, the man pulled one of his hands out from behind his back. Ali heard a weak, sharp pitched sound emanate from the some object in the man’s black gloved hand.

Ali turned to Ryobi, confused, but froze when he saw the look of horror and pain that seemed to be etched in his friend’s face. “Ryobi? What—Ryobi!” His friend collapsed in a heap. In the late evening light, Ali spotted dark fluid spreading over the rubbish from underneath his friend. He leapt towards his injured friend,

thinking to help, but strong hands grabbed him and yanked him upright. He found himself facing the barrel of a silencer.

“Your friend is dead,” said the calm Asian voice. “Give us the object and we’ll let you live.” The man pushed his face a bit closer. “There is no sense in you dying as well. Take us to it now.”

Ali could hardly move except for an uncontrollable shaking that suddenly overtook his limbs. His jaw clenched so tightly that he felt he couldn’t speak even if he wanted to. The man who held him, shook him until his teeth rattled. With incredible effort, Ali managed to point in the general direction of his stash. “It’s over there,” he stammered out.

“Very good. Take us to it.”

They dropped Ali, who fell face first next to his dead friend. For a long moment he stared into Ryobi’s open and sightless eyes. Someone kicked him painfully in the ribs and he grunted as he felt a rib crack.

“Now boy! Hurry!”

Climbing to his feet, Ali staggered off towards where he and Ryobi had made their home. He just wanted the men to go away. Tears blurred his vision, and he almost walked by the simple shelter of rusty aluminum sheets that served as his home. He turned into it and fell to his knees. Shortly, he had the black object out. “Here,” he whispered.

The Chinese man snatched it away and examined it minutely in the failing light. After several moments, he sighed in satisfaction. “Beijing will be most pleased,” he said. He turned to his two companions and rattled off something in Chinese. One of the men nodded, taking the object from his superior and running off. The black gloved leader turned back to Ali. “Tell me boy. Did you find anything else similar?”

“N-no.”

The man seemed to think on that for a bit. Turning more fully to the boy, he said, “My name is Chen. What is yours?”

Ali didn’t know what it mattered, but he managed to mutter his name.

“Ali? A strong name. Maybe in your next life you will come to something better than this.” He swept his hand around at the landfill. “Buddha teaches that suffering is the way of all things. Your suffering is but a means to an end. In this, I shall help you.”

He brought his gun up. Terrified, Ali just stared at the black hole in the silencer attached to the end of the barrel. He never knew when Chen pulled the trigger. He never knew anything more.

Chen turned from the body of the second boy he had just murdered. He didn’t care for killing children, but both boys had seen his face and they couldn’t be allowed to live. The piece of American technology that they had discovered was, unfortunately for them, much more valuable than either of their lives.

He turned to his one remaining subordinate. “Get me in touch with Wong immediately.” The man bowed and turned to run off. “Wait.” Chen held up a hand and the man froze. He pointed to the bodies of the two boys. “Afterwards, come back and burn the bodies when you are done.” The man nodded and ran off. Chen followed more slowly, thinking about what they had found and what it could mean to his nation’s war technology. He should get a promotion for this. He smiled.

Out on the converted fishing ship, Wong moved with irritation to the bridge. The communications officer had sent word that Chen was trying to get in touch with him again. Cursing Chen's parentage, he muttered aloud, "If this is another one of his whimpering demands to return to the ship, I'll shoot him myself!"

Entering the bridge, he shooed the communication's officer out of room and snatched up the satellite phone. "Lee here. Chen, this had better—"

Chen cut him off curtly. "I need an immediate exfiltration."

"Chen, we are in the middle of a scavenging operation out here! I can't just close everything down because you are in a hurry."

"This can't wait, Wong. Beijing is going to want what I found immediately."

"What did you find?"

"American technology. I've been able to trace the part to an essential component to the TACAIR fighter."

Lee suddenly sat up straight in his chair. "Did you say the TACAIR?"

"Yes!"

The TACAIR was America's latest and most advanced fighter jet. The fighter was expected to use an adaptive versatile engine technology to allow longer ranges and high performance. They had proclaimed that it had no rivals, able to outmaneuver anything in the skies, almost invisible to radar, and had the ability to penetrate any airspace at will. Beijing would indeed want this immediately.

"You are certain about this?"

"Very. You know that one of their F-35 Lightning II had been destroyed six months ago when the pilot inadvertently tried to fly into a massive storm front. We've known for some time that the Americans never recovered everything from the crash site."

"And you think you found a part."

"An important part," Chen stressed.

Lee fidgeted. He knew his duty, but it irked him that Chen had found something when he had not. With another sigh, he said, "Very well Chen. I will give you rendezvous coordinates in the next hour. I will inform Beijing. I guess they'll have us sail to Indonesia, first."

"Why not go directly out of Iran?"

"Because the Americans monitor everything around Iran. We will be detected. Do you want to run the risk of being caught with the part?"

There was a pause over the phone. "Fine. Make it happen."

Lee hung up and rubbed his eyes. He hated this. Chen would get all the credit and a promotion, and inside of a couple of months, Lee would be right back here, trolling the Indian Ocean for useless scraps of technology.

But, if something happened to Chen...

Lee grinned. Chen was dispensable, although the part he had found was not. The only reason Chen had contacted Lee was because his own avenues of communication with Beijing had failed. Lee's ship had been decked out with the latest technology in communication, although from all outward appearances, Lee commanded nothing more than a rundown fishing vessel.

He would radio Beijing and inform them of the find, if not the finder. He would make it sound like he had discovered the part. The voyage to Indonesia would take time...time enough for a fatal accident to befall Chen.

Grinning even wider, Lee leaned over and pushed a button on the ship's internal comm. "Ho Ningh, report to the bridge," he ordered into it.

While he waited for his first mate, he began to plot. Ho could be counted on to help. He didn't like this assignment any more than Lee did. Yes, it would work. It had to work.

Chapter 8

"Thanks for coming on such short notice," Frank Vellore said from across his desk.

Bill nodded, none too happy to be back. "It's been nearly three months since you broke off negotiations with the union," the lawyer began. "I don't plan on helping you unless you are willing to make some concessions."

Vellore hit a button on his phone and spoke into it. "Rob, make sure we are not interrupted for any reason. I don't care if the President calls. Don't bother me."

"Yes, sir," a tired voice sounded over the speaker. Bill assumed Rob to be the butler of this mansion. For whatever reason, Frank Vellore had requested that Bill come to see him at his New York house, a sprawling mansion with security so tight that it would do the Pentagon credit.

On the way in, he had spotted guard dogs roaming the grassy premises, laser sensors sensitive enough to detect a small rodent, guards that roamed the perimeter, and what might be a sniper loft with a dominating view of the grounds around the house. Anyone who tried to approach the house would be under watch—and possibly in a set of crosshairs—for quite an uncomfortable amount of time.

The house itself rambled over the grounds, sporting Victorian architecture. Bill suspected that the majority of the house was deserted and that Frank had his office and bedroom moved into a different room each week to prevent a pattern from developing. He would like to meet Frank's head of security. The man must be an insufferably paranoid jackass to meet Frank's approval.

Sitting back, Vellore regarded Bill with an odd expression. Bill might have called it fear, but he doubted the tough old dog ever feared much in his life. Worry. That's it. Vellore was worried.

"I didn't call you here to help with the strike. I have another job for you."

Bill stood up. "Sir, I came as a courtesy, nothing more. I don't know how you got enough money to hire other workers to circumvent the union, and I really don't care. The city is happy that the trash is being picked up, so I don't see why you need me. Frankly, I don't really want to work for you anymore."

Frank pointed at a chair. "Shut up, Bill, and sit down."

Bill blinked and felt his eyes narrow dangerously. "Don't order me around, sir."

"Do as I say. You'll want to hear this."

"I—"

"Sit down!"

The tone threw Bill's mind back to basic training as the order sounded awfully similar to that of an irritated drill sergeant. He sat down out of pure reflex. Angry more at himself at his kneejerk reaction, he fixed the CEO of Wastend with a stern look. "That is your last warning, sir."

Vellore leaned forward. "I really don't care about your warnings, son. You will listen to me because this is a matter of national security."

That got the lawyer's attention. "Fine. I'll hear you out."

"Good." Vellore took out an expensive cigar and lit it with an equally expensive lighter. He didn't bother offering one to Bill. "Over two months ago, the military contracted me to dispose of some highly sensitive technology. But while in transit to the disposal site in the Indian Ocean, the cargo ship slated to do the disposal was attacked by Somali pirates. The ship and crew were held hostage for a week before a British warship succeeded in chasing the pirates off." With a long puff on his cigar, Frank paused to see what effect his words were having. Bill sat ramrod straight as if being debriefed by a general. Satisfied, he continued his narrative. "The pirates were trying to beach the cargo ship, but the Brits intercepted her before that could happen. Most of the pirates got away by virtue of being able to quickly make landfall."

Bill understood. "But you don't know if they made off with any of the decommissioned technology."

"Exactly. The captain and three other crew members were murdered and the manifest list has disappeared. We have no idea what was taken and what wasn't...if anything. The rest of the cargo was disposed of as planned, but I need someone to go over there and see if there is any danger that some of this technology could have fallen into the wrong hands."

A seething rage began to boil inside of Bill. He couldn't believe the man's arrogance. In a cold voice, he said, "You want me to do this?"

"Look Gardner, this is a sensitive issue. I don't really fear those Somali savages getting their hands on any of it. They wouldn't recognize any value in it even if they had an inkling of the importance of what they had. No, I'm worried about other foreign agencies getting their hands on this. I need a man who is widely travelled, able to speak several languages, understands the region, and has the training and expertise to pull this off. That's you, Bill Gardner."

"Why not let the government or the military take care of this?" Bill asked, his eyes narrowing. He could see where this was going. "Why come to me no matter what my credentials are?"

"Because before I involve the military, I want to make sure there is a real reason to do so. There is no sense in making this an international incident and - once the military is involved - wind of the operation is likely to get out. We don't want intelligence types from thirty different countries crawling around Somalia trying to figure out what we're doing there." Frank shook his head. "This has to be done discretely and completely off the books."

Bill disagreed wholeheartedly, but he wasn't prepared to say so just yet. He wanted the man to hang himself first. "This is an investigation. By the time I get there, I will be working a cold case in a hostile environment. You do know that the Transitional Government is a joke, right? Their influence is hardly worth noting,

so basically it is a messy, anarchist state. The risk of getting kidnapped is rather high.”

“My file on you says you can handle yourself.”

“Not against twenty armed mercenaries hoping to extract money from some rich US citizen. They’ll see me as fish bait.”

“It’s not going to be all that bad. I’ve already contacted the Transitional Government. They are anxious to help and to establish some sort of diplomatic ties with the US.”

Bill snorted, rolling his eyes. The man certainly was brazen enough. “Like that will happen any time soon.”

“Agreed, but they don’t know that. They are desperate. They’ve agreed to give you a dozen men as escorts and bodyguards for the duration of your stay.”

The ex-marine raised an eyebrow, impressed despite himself. “How many of them are reliable?”

Spreading his hands in a gesture of ignorance, Frank leaned back. “I know this is dangerous, Bill. I’m willing to pay you half a million dollars to do this.”

Every muscle in Gardner’s body froze. “Half a million?”

“Yes. This is important. Very important.”

“Expenses too?”

“Yes, yes. Expenses too.”

Bill sat perfectly still. The rage inside of him threatened to boil over. The man had the audacity to think that Bill could be bought off with money! What Frank had done bordered on treason, and now he was trying to cover his own rear end, and wanting to put Bill at risk to do it!

No way!

The ex-marine exploded into action. He came out of his seat in a rush, vaulted the desk and planted both feet squarely into Wastend’s CEO’s chest. With a strangled cry, part pain, part surprise, the man flew backwards, his chair going along for the ride. Body and chair crashed heavily into the back wall, shaking at least two pictures loose to come crashing down around the startled man.

Following close behind, the lawyer grabbed the older man’s wrist, twisted, and then pulled sharply, yanking Frank right out of the chair and to his knees before the enraged ex-marine.

“Who’s your contact at the Pentagon?” Bill yelled.

Frank, his face contorted in a painful grimace, cursed at Bill. The lawyer put more pressure on the wrist hold, and the older man cried out in pain. From his labored breathing, Bill guessed his kick had knocked all the wind, but not all the fight out of the old fool.

“I want that name or so help me, I’ll break your arm. If that doesn’t get me the information, I’ll just keep breaking things until you tell me.”

“Let go of me, you little prig!”

“Wrong answer.” Bill twisted sharply, and something gave with a sharp snap.

Howling in pain, Vellore writhed along the oak floor. Bill reached over and grabbed the man’s other wrist. “Who is your contact at the Pentagon?” he demanded again. “And don’t lie. I will know.”

“General Hynes!”

Bill knew Hynes from his days in the military. They had occasionally crossed paths when he had been deployed on special assignment. Once in particular during Operation Coffee—a reference to Columbian coffee, or more specifically Columbian drug cartels—Hynes had personally taken the field with Bill to oversee a raid deep in the jungles.

With little regard for the man's pain, Gardner dragged the CEO over to his desk, just as someone started to pound on the door, demanding entrance. Bill stooped down to look under the desk, and sure enough found a holstered pistol strapped to the underside of the desk, the barrel pointing to who ever sat in the desk across from Vellore.

"You're a real piece of work, you know that?" Bill muttered. He pulled the gun out, a .357 mag, checked to make sure it was loaded and raised it towards the door just as it burst open and three armed men spilled in.

"Stop!" he snapped, using his best military voice. "If you don't want your employer to get hurt, put your guns down."

All three hesitated, two of them glancing towards a short man wearing dark fatigues. The man's face looked like it had gone through a meat grinder, and Bill could only guess at the dark tale that lay behind it. He had no time to ponder such questions. He hauled Vellore up and rammed the barrel of the pistol into the man's temple.

"Drop your weapons," he ordered again. Scar-face nodded and all three let their weapons fall to the elegant carpet that had been spread over the rich wood floor. "Good." He pointed to scar-face. "You can stay. Tell your thugs to leave." Scar-face nodded again, and his two underlings backed up until they were outside the office. "Good. Now close the door."

"What do you want?" scar-face demanded after the door had shut.

"Are you head of security?"

"Yes. Roy Newman."

"Very good. What I want, Roy Newman, head of security, is for your boss here to make a phone call to the Pentagon. Once he does that and I get to talk to someone there, I will leave."

Newman glanced at his employer. "What did you do to him?"

"Broke his wrist. He has proven to be...uncooperative, and he needed a bit of motivation."

A slight smile played briefly across the security chief's face. If Vellore had noticed it, he would most likely have broken the man's legs before the day was out. He probably would anyway, but Bill found it comforting to know that there was little love lost between the CEO and his security chief.

"What now?" Roy asked.

"You can have a seat there." Bill pointed to a chair off to one side. "Oh, are you wired?" The man nodded curtly. "Then toss it. I don't want you communicating with your men until after I leave."

"What makes you think you'll leave here?"

Smiling, Bill shook Vellore, who groaned in pain. "I have a free ticket." After the security chief discarded his communication system, Bill turned his attention back to the CEO. "Okay, Frank. You have a call to make. I don't want any excuses either. Don't let them give you the runaround. Tell them it is an emergency, invoke

whatever clearance you have, pull any strings you need, make any threats you have to, but get General Hynes on the phone.” He paused and made sure that Vellore could see his smile. “Or we go back to breaking things.”

If anything, Frank’s face turned even paler. He nodded, most of the fight knocked out of him.

“Excellent.”

Ten minutes later, a voice came over the speaker of the phone. “What is so important, Vellore? I was pulled out of a staff meeting.”

“General,” Bill said. “You may remember me. I’m Captain Bill Gardner. I was attached to a special op under your command back in 2006.”

“Captain Gardner? What the blazes are you doing? I was told that Frank Vellore needed to speak with me on a matter of national security.”

“That is more or less true, sir.”

“Well?”

Bill shook Vellore who groaned. “Tell the man,” he ordered.

Slowly, and with great reluctance, the CEO repeated his story. When he finished, the line was silent for a long time. Finally, the general’s voice came through the speaker. “Gardner, get your butt over to the Pentagon, now. We need to talk. As for you, Frank, this action of yours borders on treason. I’ll make it my personal mission in life to take you down.”

“General, don’t be so hasty,” Bill warned. “You could use him still.”

“How?”

“Let him foot the bill for this. Whoever you send over there needs a legitimate excuse. Vellore can provide that excuse. He has already started the process of trying to cover his tracks. Let him proceed...or rather proceed under his name and company. This should provide you with some cover for the operation. The wily fox is right about one thing. If the other intelligence services get wind of what is happening, it will turn into a turkey shoot over there.”

“Fine. I’ll consider it. I still want you here, Gardner.”

“I’m not in the service anymore, sir.”

“You are now. I’ve just reactivated you.”

“You can’t do that!”

“I just did, Captain. Listen! You have benefited from the military. You used our program *Vol Ed*. Your education as a lawyer was paid for by us. Now it’s your turn to give back to those who have made you what you are now. Get over here! That is an order.”

His enthusiasm for this entire situation diminishing rapidly, he muttered, “Yes sir.” He glanced at Newman. “Sir?”

“What?” The general sounded impatient now.

“Getting out may be problematic. I sort of created a bit of a mess here and the security chief here would like nothing more than to teach me the folly of such behavior.”

The chief smiled at that.

“If you are not in my office in six hours, Gardner, I will personally turn the national guard loose on Mr. Vellore’s house. I’ll arrest everyone there for treason. Will that help?”

Bill glanced inquiringly at Newman. The man nodded. “Yep, that will do.”

“Okay, sir. Looks good on my end.”

“Get over here then!”

The line went dead.

Standing back up, the security chief nodded to the door. “You best be going. I don’t want to get arrested because you got stuck in traffic somewhere.”

Bill grinned. “That would be a bit of bad luck for you, wouldn’t it.”

The man snorted in reply.

Chapter 9

“You really want me to do this?” Bill asked, dumfounded.

“Yes, you gonna do it, Gardner!”

“Forget it. It’s too risky.”

Hynes nodded. “You’re the one who sold me on it.”

“What? How?”

The conference room was filled with aides and other strategic planners, even a few intelligence types conferred together softly at the end of the large cherry wood table. The General leaned forward, pressing his knuckles hard against the tabletop. “This has to be a covert operation. You are a lawyer, not a soldier—”

“You just—” Bill tried to protest.

“Don’t interrupt me, soldier!”

Bill clamped his mouth shut, but he idly wondered if anyone else in the room noticed the obvious contradiction. From the looks of them, they didn’t care either way.

“Captain, the Somalis and anyone else looking into your visit there will think that you still work for Wastend on some project. I don’t care what. I’ve taken your advice and we will be using Frank and his company as cover. You will be there to find out if we’ve been compromised. Sec-Def has already signed off on this, so no more arguments.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Good. What I want you to do is determine if any of the sensitive components have been compromised. If they have, I want you to retrieve them.” Haynes drummed his fingers on the table, his shock of grey hair seemed longer than regulations allowed, but generals often got away with things like that. “Will you do it?”

Gardner blinked in surprise. “I wasn’t under the impression that I had a choice, sir.”

“Of course you do. I just needed you to understand the gravity of the situation before I gave you that choice. You’ll be compensated of course.”

Bill sat back in his chair, thinking. The money was irrelevant, and at best, the entire mission would take about two to three weeks—assuming he didn’t get killed or kidnapped. Then, of course, there was the whole national security issue. Whatever else Bill was, he was a patriot. He had spent nine years in the marines, risen to the rank of captain, and even served a term with JAG while he acquired

his law degree. No, he couldn't sit idly by and allow a threat to his nation to go un-addressed. The general had him pegged.

"Okay. I'll do it."

"Good. You'll go in as Vellore had planned. The Transitional Government there must not know that this is now a military operation. We do not want to give them any hint that we are open to negotiation—not until they crack down on the piracy problem. That comes from the top. If you are at risk, you will be on your own."

"I understand, sir. Do you think that the government there will actually provide an escort?"

"Yes. We've been able to verify that. The problem you will face is their reliability. There is no way to know where their loyalties really lie. At the first sign of trouble, they may turn on you to save their own skins."

"That's a comforting thought."

Hynes grinned. "It will be just like in Columbia."

Steel groaned. "I hope not. Both of us got shot on that one."

Rubbing his side where he had been shot those years ago, the general grimaced. "Don't I know it." Rising to his feet, Hynes stuck out his hand. "I knew you would go. I have commandeered Frank's private jet. It is fuelled and ready to leave JFK airport as soon as you can get there." He paused. "Oh, one more thing. I've engaged the services of a forensic pathologist to travel with you."

Bill stopped just short of shaking hands with the man. "What for?"

"My contacts there have reported some unusual murders that have taken place in Merca, during the last few days."

"Merca?"

"That's the closest city to where the cargo ship almost ran aground. Street kids, mostly kids who live in the city's huge landfill have turned up dead, their bodies mutilated and burned."

"You think there is a connection?"

"There might be, my friend. When there is an unusual amount of attention focused on trash, yes, I'm curious." Haynes came around the table and started walking towards the door. "Her name is Lieutenant Lorna LaCruz. She has been working for me on and off on special assignments for some time."

The ex-marine nodded. "Whatever you think is best."

"Good. I'm glad we can agree."

Bill followed the general out, wondering if there would be any more surprises along the way. "They always messing up with me! No letup," he muttered.

Two days later, Bill ordered his men to spread out around the landfill that dominated Merca's poorer section of town. Idly, Bill wondered if any one section of the old city could be called anything but poor. In an effort to blend in, Bill and Lorna had dressed in clothing that were little more than rags, and no one carried anything that even looked remotely valuable—though all twelve of the Somalis tasked as his escort sported automatic weapons. And travelling with a convoy of three military type jeeps certainly didn't do much to lower their profile.

"This city was once prosperous," remarked Lorna.

"True," responded Bill. "Merca was a great city once, established in the fifth century, I think. The first settlers controlled the region as a trading center and Merca grew into a prominent administrative center in the Ajuraan Empire."

“Pretty smart.”

“Yeah, I got my moments and I read a lot too. The region was known by the ancient Egyptians as the land of Punt. The coast was also known by the Romans and Greeks as an important landmark, and for the Indians it was an important commercial center for products such as myrrh, incense, and gold. The Arab traders settled on the Somali coast and Islam became the main religion from the thirteenth century on. Overtime, several countries became interested in the coast of Somalia, including Portugal—their settlement efforts failed—and even Italy, led by Mussolini, managed to acquire several territories in the region. The same coast is still the envy of many nations, but this time, for different reasons, it’s use as a dump.”

“A country without rules, without state! How could that happen?” wondered Lorna.

“In 1969, General Mohamed Siyad Barre seized power in a coup d’état and replaced the democratically elected government. Barre forged close ties with the USSR and declared the country socialist. Somalia then brokered a deal with the Russians, who had supported the Marxist government of Ethiopia during the conflict over the control of the Ogaden, an Ethiopian territory. Each time, the town of Merca tries to recover its glorious past and heal. Attempts were made to revive the city. They even tried to brag about the beautiful coast of the town to attract foreigners without success. The warlords are sometimes discreet, but they control everything. In Merca, terrorists are scattered among the population...not that easy to spot.”

“I can’t imagine how these guys control just about everything!” Lorna mumbled.

Bill nodded. “I know. But the war lasted several years. The Ogaden conflict led to the removal of Barre and has weakened the country, resulting in a political vacuum and a catastrophic economic situation that seems to last forever. Famine has become the staple diet here. The country fell under the rule of warlords whose sole purpose seems to be illegal gain and plunder. Al-Shabab took control. Somalia is now a failed state.”

They arrived at the dump and Lorna immediately got out and looked around. “The bodies were reported found over there,” Lorna said, stepping up next to him. Lorna was a short woman, not very attractive, but with an incredibly sharp mind and wit that had Bill laughing and smiling for most of the plane ride over. They had gotten on well—something he couldn’t say for the leader of his bodyguard contingent.

Luk Bol, a name so obviously not Somali that Bill suspected him to be an agent for the Transition Government more than a bodyguard, had made it clear, right from the start, that he didn’t like Americans and by extension, Bill Gardner also suspected that the man was a pirate, but he wisely kept his suspicions to himself.

Bill looked distastefully at the city dump. There had been nothing done to try and keep it away from the city, and he had begun to smell it even several miles away. Shacks and hovels had grown up around the edge of the waste dump, and ragged, half-naked children romped in the streets and through piles of refuse as American children did on a sanitized playground back home.

“Well, we might as well get this over with.” He and Lorna walked towards the mounds of refuse. Smoke rose languidly into the air here and there, a testimony to

the residents who haunted the place—although they had spotted no one. Bill suspected the automatic weapons his body guards carried had something to do with that. He stepped carefully, picking a path that looked less filthy—if possible—than the others. Lorna followed, saying nothing. Her capacity to do what needed to be done without complaint amazed Bill. That alone should earn her an accommodation.

Their guards, more used to environments such as this, spread out on order of Luk Bol, flanking their wards and watching the surrounding trash heaps warily. Bill noted that only Bol wore combat boots. Two or three others had on worn tennis shoes, but the rest of the soldiers walked with Chinese sandals.

The stench was awful. Bill had never smelled anything so repugnant. It burned his nostrils, and his throat quickly became raw from trying not to breathe through his nose. But he managed, as did the uncomplaining woman who walked behind him.

Half an hour later, they stumbled across two badly burned and mutilated bodies of children. That alone made Gardner want to retch. He had seen a lot of death during his military career, but the bodies of children always bothered him profoundly. The indiscriminate slaughter of innocents finally proved too much for Bill, who mustered out of service after what he had witnessed in Columbia. He didn't appreciate having those memories forcefully brought back into his mind. He turned away, refusing to look.

Lorna noticed. "You okay?"

He shook his head. "Not really. This...this is monstrous."

Lorna sighed. "I understand."

Whatever distaste she might harbor, she hid it well. Opening her satchel, she slipped on some dark blue gloves, and then with some unnamable instrument, she began probing the bodies.

Bill just looked at the horizon, wondering what the last thing these poor children had seen. The sun had just begun to set, and despite the trash, the blazing colors were beautiful to behold. He hoped that these children had at least time to enjoy this before being murdered.

"These children didn't die due to the fire," Lorna observed. "They were both shot first."

"What is the placement of the wounds?" Bill asked, refusing to look.

"Heart shot on the slightly larger corpse. Head shot on the smaller one."

"Execution style?"

"The head shot one for sure. The heart shot was done from slightly further away based on the entry wound. I'm sorry, but it's really hard to tell. Whoever burned these bodies certainly didn't leave much to go on." She looked around. "It's not as if this is a state of the art laboratory."

"Is there any chance of having any of this analyzed?"

"Here?" She gave a soft snort, glancing sidelong at one of the armed mercenaries pretending to be a bodyguard. "I doubt they even know what laboratory is." She used a tool to gently extract a burned strip of cloth. "I can probably have this sent back to the States for analysis. The chemical compound of an accelerant is like a signature. Hopefully, I'll be able to tell you where the compound was manufactured if not the one who purchased or used it."

Bill crossed his arms, thinking. "That would at least be something," he mused. "I guess our best bet is to find a witness."

Lorna frowned. "You think there were witnesses?"

"Yeah. This isn't like our landfills back home. This one is home to all sorts of displaced people. Children, mostly, I suspect."

"And what makes you think they'll talk to you?"

"We can offer something."

"Like what?"

"We can take pictures and offer them for free. Children love to be taken in pictures," he muttered aloud, hardly hearing her.

Lorna stood, frowning. "Pictures?"

"Yeah..." Bill looked around. "Right about there, I think." He pointed to one of the less used entrances to the landfill. A rambling series of shacks and shanties were built along the edge and even now he knew that dozens—perhaps hundreds—of eyes were watching them. Bill grabbed her arm and started pulling her back towards the jeeps. "Come along sweetheart. How good is your photography skills?"

"What?"

"You can use my camera and my portable printer. We can give them pictures they can keep as a memento."

"Uh...okay? What are you doing?"

"We need a few more things though," he mused, ignoring her. "I'll make an appeal directly to General Hynes. That ought to get the ball rolling."

A small smile of glee played across the woman's lips as understanding dawned on her. "Oh this is going to be rich. Come on, I want to make this call!" Now it was she who pulled him along.

Almost two days later, Bill and Lorna set up a stand. Lorna had scrounged up a table from somewhere and some chairs to go with it. The equipment had been delivered under heavy guard, something that Lorna found downright hilarious. She started calling their bodyguards 'Pics Commandos.' Fortunately, the mercenaries misconstrued the reference and beamed with pride anytime she ordered them around using that nomenclature.

In a street corner, Lorna and Bill set up shop. "The day will be long. You could have prepared something to eat."

"Do I look like a housewife to you?" she retorted, allowing herself to be pulled along. "And don't call me sweetheart or I'll break your legs."

"You would too," he chuckled. "How many pictures do you think we can take and get developed?"

"That depends how many people want one."

"Yes..." He turned to look at the mercenaries. "Go back to the jeep and wait for us there," Bill ordered Luk Bol.

Bol eyed him with downright suspicion, but he clearly didn't have any real reason to argue against the order. The jeeps were not so far away that they couldn't keep an eye on their two American guests, and their material—no matter how insane—seemed to be a bit overboard for an escape attempt.

He waved his men away and they grudgingly trudged back to the jeeps where they lounged around, smoking and fingering their weapons.

“Well, hopefully the natives will still come out,” Lorna said, eyeing the mercenaries distastefully.

“Men and guns are a common sight around here. But taking pictures is probably a little rarer. If the soldiers look non-threatening, we can expect some business.” He looked at the camera. “Just don’t tell them we are Americans. We might be violating some sort of religious taboo.”

“You’re planning to give all the pictures away, right?” she asked.

“To the first few, yes. The rest will need to answer some questions. I’m hoping that if the first get a nice picture, we’ll find ourselves with a steady business.”

“I hope they don’t just kill us and take the camera,” she grumbled half-heartedly.

“That’s what your commandos are for. With a show of strength like that, I doubt we’ll see much trouble. I just needed them far enough away that people feel safe enough to approach.”

Right on cue, their first customer appeared. She looked to be no more than five or six years old and she approached hesitantly, eyes wide and focused on the camera.

“Looks like you’re up,” the ex-marine said softly to his companion.

Lorna smiled at the young girl, ignoring the girl’s matted hair, ragged clothing, and awful stench. “Hi there, sweetheart,” she said. “Would you like to get a picture taken of you?”

The girl clutched a ragged looking doll under one arm. She nodded slowly, her eyes big and round. Bill wondered at sending a small child to the strange Americans first. He suspected that many people were watching them right now, and he had spotted furtive movements from dark windows and shadows to verify the notion. Maybe they thought that a little girl would have more success, or maybe the girl was on her own.

Lorna snapped a picture and plugged the camera into the laptop they had set up nearby. The printer hummed to life and began printing. Shortly thereafter, they had a picture. “There you go, honey. All for you.” She handed the picture to the girl.

The little girl immediately grabbed the picture and ran off. Bill suspected that there would be a fight over the picture.

When people learned that portraits were being offered for free, everyone rushed toward the foreigners. Young and older came in droves, it seemed. Each was exposed to the camera with his or her favorite pose. In front of the camera, an old man found his strength and his youth. He got rid of his cane and asked Lorna to take picture with him. Lorna accepted. Bill took the picture. Before leaving, the old man asked Lorna if she had something for his irritated skin.

“Can I see?” asked Lorna

Lorna dug into her bag and pulled out a tube of cream she handed to the man. “You definitely have to see a doctor, sir.”

The man left. He was happy with the picture and the treatment Lorna gave him, but her advice mattered little to him.

“I find that many people suffer from skin problems, you think it’s normal?”

“Of course, it is not. In this lost region, foreigners are engaged in weird activities, using the water to discharge waste of all kinds, including uranium

radioactive waste, mostly, and also industrial and chemical waste...Since the containers have washed up on beaches, many of residents have fallen ill, suffering from mouth infections, abdominal bleeding and skin problems, among other diseases...United States, along with United Nations are working on the issue to find a solution. We have to put some trust and hope on them..."

Bill stopped talking for a moment. He was concerned about the situation. Bill didn't necessary support radical positions of some environmentalist, but as many citizens of the world, he preferred to live in a responsible and healthy world "Unfortunately, we might be facing the same problem soon." added Bill.

"What do you mean?" asked Lorna.

"Fukushima disaster...Nuclear waste were found in the pacific. A tide of radioactive trash and chemical waste is pushing ever closer to North America...They get rid of their waste in the water and they continue to blame the current and strong waves."

A teen girl wearing a scarf on her head shyly approached. The locks of her black curly hair exceeded the headscarf she was wearing.

"You can remove your scarf if you want, honey!"

Lorna realized that the girl did not understand a word of English. She caught up in Arabic, making signs with her hands.

"*Hijab, hijab!*"

Startled, the young girl immediately put her hand on her head holding the scarf and ran off, leaving the Americans looking after her in bemusement.

Bol sauntered over, smiling menacingly and spoke dryly, "You are not supposed to take pictures of our women here." Lorna ignored Bol and continued enjoying her new activity. Their next two customers were older children, and the next three were teenagers that came out of the landfill. They came slowly, eyes drifting more often than not to the lounging soldiers off to one side. Only the powerful click of the camera kept them coming.

"Can you take a picture of the three of us?" one asked.

"Sure."

The boys immediately shifted into different poses, laughing at each other as they tried to outdo each exaggerated pose. One of the youths pulled out a gun from the waist of his pants and waved it in the air. Pretending nothing was wrong, Lorna took several pictures.

While she was printing them off, Bill asked the youths, "Why carry a weapon?"

"We pirates!" responded proudly one of them.

"Hope you have no intention of kidnapping us," Lorna said slyly.

"Worry no, ma'am! We job at sea, not land. Land, Al-Shabab takes care."

"But you probably know everything that happens in town, don't you?"

"You bet. Merca is home town."

Bill said, "We're here to find out who killed those two boys over there." He nodded towards where the bodies of the boys had been buried under the refuse of the landfill.

The three teenage boys glanced at each other and darted away like spooked animals, not even getting their pictures.

"Oh, very well done," Lorna muttered sarcastically. "You should volunteer to be a diplomat."

“Hey, they’ll be back.” He looked towards where they had disappeared. “I think.”

“Aren’t you the cynical optimist.”

He threw her a mock glare. “Well, we know one thing, anyway.”

“What’s that?”

“They did see something.”

She turned to look around. “I suppose you’re right. But are you sure their deaths have to do with the reason we’re here?”

He glanced her way. She had not been told the specifics of the mission since it was need to know. “I have no idea. But the timing, the location, and the circumstances fit. Actually, I’m hoping it is nothing, and that this is just some random killing.”

“If it is?”

“Then we get to go home.”

It took all day. They took hundreds of pictures, all the while asking short questions about the deaths of the children. No one gave them anything. Some shrugged, some ran away, and some just shook their heads. Bill got the feeling that everyone knew what had happened, but they weren’t about to tell the white strangers.

But along towards sundown, having stored their equipment, Bill spotted the same trio of teenagers that had run away at the beginning of the day. They all looked nervous and approached in a manner that allowed them the greatest distance from the soldiers—who still lounged around the jeeps.

Lorna saw them coming and had their pictures ready to go by the time they stepped near. Before taking the pictures, Bill asked, “We’re looking for those who killed the children. Do you know anything?”

One scrawny boy of around fifteen years old, nodded slowly. “See Korfa.”

“Korfa? Who is he?”

“He knows,” the other one said. They snatched their pictures and ran off.

“Well,” Lorna said watching them run away. “I guess we have our first lead. This is so exciting,” she finished without a trace of emotion.

Bill laughed. “Isn’t this why you signed up for the army? To hand out pictures?”

“Naw. I signed up to hang around stupid men.”

“I’m insulted.”

“You can’t be,” she replied seriously. “You’re not smart enough.”

He laughed again. “Come on. We need to find this Korfa character.

Chapter 10

“Okay, first we need to figure out who Korfa is before we go looking for him,” Bill said. “There must be hundreds of Korfas in this city.”

“It’ll take forever,” Lorna said. She sat back in the seat of their jeep, filing her nails. It was such a feminine thing to do that it looked completely out of place in their surroundings. At the same time, it helped to put him at ease. She had

wrapped a Hijab around her head some time ago, least someone take offence in the predominately Muslim nation.

“Perhaps,” he agreed. “Still, these scavengers wouldn’t have dealings with just anyone. My guess is they would only deal with someone in two categories.”

“Yeah? What two?”

“Food and junk.”

She frowned, thinking. “Makes sense. They would scrounge up things dumped in the landfill and then try to pawn it off on a junk dealer, who would then try to pawn it off on some ignorant sod looking for souvenirs.”

“I doubt there is much of a tourist industry here. But that is a possibility. The other one is food. They would know all the places where they could scrounge for food, restaurants, hotels...things like that.”

“But as you just pointed out, there probably isn’t much of a tourist industry here. Just how difficult would a restaurant or hotel have it here in this town?”

“Pretty rough I would imagine.”

“No matter what, we should help this country.”

“I guess that leaves the junk dealers.” She pointed towards the city. “Driver! Tallyho!”

Bill smirked. “You’re the driver.”

She glanced at the steering wheel in front of her. “So I am. Imagine that.” She threw him a distressed look. “Chivalry is dead. Where is a gentleman to chauffeur me around?”

He shrugged, and settled more solidly in his seat as if he intended to stay there forever. “Not so easy to find, preciosa. Just drive, please!”

She shook her head. “Isn’t that the truth.” Starting up the jeep, they began driving towards the center part of the city. Behind them, Luk Bol and his men piled into their own jeeps and followed. So far the mercenary captain had been content to leave them alone and let the two Americans conduct their investigation. Whatever he may have thought about the entire thing was beyond Bill, but he did notice that the man took care to report to his superiors—whoever they may be—only out of earshot of either American.

Bill wanted to wrap this entire thing up quickly. He had a bad feeling. Over the last couple of days, Lorna and Bill had taken to sharing a hotel room—perfectly platonic, of course—solely for safety reasons. Both slept with loaded side-arms they had managed to smuggle in with their luggage.

As the three jeep convey snaked through the city, he noted that their surroundings didn’t get much better. In fact, the main city looked and smelled better than the landfill only if you were generous. Trash still littered the roads and walkways, but here and there someone made an effort to either organize the trash or remove it. The street gutters were open sewers. Chickens wandered freely throughout the main street and couple of goats even trying to climb trees to snatch the few remaining leaves. Difficult for all to live in such hostile place ravaged by nature and war.

Any working vehicles were owned by armed men, and at several junctions in the pock-marked road they had tense moments where their convey had been intercepted by another band of armed mercenaries. Each time Luk Bol had roughly pushed his way to the front and ordered the men to stand down. Every

time, they listened. Bill didn't know who Bol really was, but it was becoming obvious that the pirates and mercenaries in the country were afraid of him.

Lorna tuned a corner, and without warning, a throng of people dancing, laughing, and clapping their hands surged across the road. Lorna slammed on the breaks, barely able to avoid running over a pair of grinning men. They slapped the hood of the jeep and laughed before moving along with the crowd.

"What in the world?" Bill muttered. He stood up and tried to peer over the crowd. "We'll never get through this. What's going on do you think?"

Lorna leaned out carefully. "A party?"

Bill listened, and suddenly his eyes grew wide in wonder. "It sounds as if Merca has a new Mayor."

"A Mayor? When did this happen?"

"I don't know."

"Was he elected, or did the provisional government send him down?"

"I don't know."

"I mean, isn't it dangerous to be a government official down here? Who is this guy?"

"I don't know."

She threw him an irritated look. "What do you know?"

"About this?" he gestured with his chin to the crowd of happy people. "It looks like Merca has a new Mayor."

"You're impossible."

"Well so is this crowd. We'll never get anywhere and I don't want to turn our pic commandos loose on this crowd. Someone will wind up dead if we try to force our way through."

As if verbalizing the possibility conjured the actual, Luk Bol seemed to materialize next to their jeep. Four of his men lingered behind, fingering their weapons. "Why you stop?" he demanded.

Bill pointed to the crowd. "That. What's going on? Seems like their celebrating something."

Bol studied the crowd of people, listening to the cheers and chants. Suddenly his eyes tightened noticeably. "Come," he ordered. "Follow me."

Curious to know what was going on, and seeing few other options, Bill and Lorna hopped off of the jeep. Bol began shoving his way through the crowds, three of his men fanning out to assist and one followed close behind the Americans. Bol wasn't gentle. He shoved, kicked, and used his rifle like a club to clear a path. Some tried to protest, but either one look at the mercenary's face, or a solid punch sent the objector fleeing in any direction that would get them away from the cold faced man.

The two Americans followed in his wake. Bill wanted to protest such treatment and he could tell that Lorna did too, but they dared not say anything. *Not now, at least*, the ex-marine vowed silently to himself.

Eventually, they came to a large square jammed with people cheering. In the center of the square, a wooden platform had been raised and a man stood atop it, holding an ancient looking microphone and energetically haranguing the people.

"The new Mayor, I take it," Lorna whispered.

"Yeah. Luk Bol doesn't seem none too pleased, though."

Lorna chanced a glance the mercenary's way and saw the most vengeful face she had ever seen. "That's the truth."

Bol grabbed one of his men and yanked him near. He whispered something to the man who nodded, grabbed another of the armed mercenaries, and then trotted off. The pair of them cutting through the mass of people much like Bol had done.

"What do you think that was about?" Lorna asked softly.

"No idea. But, I don't think the new Mayor will like what's about to happen."

"Think they'll arrest the man?"

"Don't know."

"Stop that," she muttered.

He grinned tightly at her and turned back to the situation at hand. Bol didn't have any room on his face for a grin. He stared menacingly around him and soon the crowd drew back from him, leaving the mercenary as the only island of humanity in the entire square.

The man with the microphone hadn't noticed the new arrivals, or if he had, he was choosing to ignore them. From the limited bit of Arabic Bill understood, he knew the man was appealing to the people to rise up and fight for their freedom. The people cheered, but the lawyer wondered if they even knew what the man was saying. Music was blaring across the square, and the large number of people were dancing and laughing.

Bill said, "Looks like the people are using the new Mayor's arrival as a reason to celebrate."

"What exactly are they celebrating?" Lorna asked. "They don't seem to be paying the Mayor any attention."

"Noticed that too? I bet they just want to celebrate. I don't think this city has much to laugh about normally."

"That's probably true for the entire country," Lorna agreed.

"True."

One of the soldiers left behind with Bol pulled out a cigarette and a lighter. He quickly grew frustrated when he couldn't get the lighter to produce a flame. With a curse, he threw the lighter into the ground.

Gardner's attention was instantly riveted to three children who appeared seemingly from out of nowhere and dived to the ground in an effort to retrieve it. One girl of around eleven years of age came up with it. She tried to dart away but ran face first into one of Bol's soldiers who cursed, grabbed her by the hair, and delivered a stunning slap to the side of the girl's face. He drew his hand back for another blow when Bill intervened.

He took two steps and caught the soldier's wrist as it descended, stopping it cold in his vice-like grip. The soldier's eyes widened in surprise when he discovered he couldn't move his arm at all. Bill stepped into the man, his eyes boring into the black irises of the Somali mercenary. "Try to hit her again, and I will kill you," he said calmly.

The man released the girl, who fell heavily to the ground and lay there blinking in confusion. The soldier used his free arm to try and draw a pistol, but Bill jabbed a finger into a nerve cluster at the man's shoulder and the man lost all interest in his gun as severe pain shot through his arm and shoulder. He gasped and fell to his knees, doing his best not to scream.

Looking around, the lawyer noted that Bol was observing him with a look of interest. He had not moved to interfere, or Bill would most likely be dead, but his eyes had lit up in a way that made Bill uncomfortable. It was the look of a predator who had caught the smell of another predator in his territory. Bill said, "I need to talk to the girl. I think she has information I need. Tell your man to back off."

Bol regarded the ex-marine steadily. Finally he nodded.

Bill still had the soldier by the wrist. He let go and shoved the man away. Turning, he found Lorna already assisting the girl up from the dirt. He knelt down and turned his most disarming smile on the girl. "Don't worry. We aren't going to hurt you," he said in his best Arabic. She looked quizzical at first, and then repeated what he had said, correcting his grammar. He nodded. "Thank you. What is your name?"

"Marwa," she said shyly. She didn't look as frightened now. He judged that to be a good thing.

"Hello Marwa." He nodded to the lighter which she clutched tightly to her chest. "Do you plan to sell the lighter?" She nodded slowly, suddenly suspicious. He laughed. "No, sweetheart, I'm not going to take it from you. It is yours to sell." She relaxed again. "I have some things to sell too," he said. "I hear that a man by the name of Korfa is a good man to do business with. Is this so?"

Her tongue flicked out to moisten her lips. She nodded. "Korfa doesn't cheat us as badly as some of the others do. But he doesn't always buy everything. He only wants the good stuff. You have good stuff?"

"I have some good stuff," he assured her. "Where can I find him?"

She pointed in a generally easterly direction. "Two streets over. Look for a shop painted blue. It's the only one."

He nodded. "Thank you, Marwa. Where are your parents?"

Her eyes shifted off to one side. "Dead," she said in a half whisper. She turned and darted into the crowd, moving in the direction of the platform.

"Well," Lorna said, moving next to him. "We now know where Korfa is."

"Better than nothing," he agreed. For a few seconds he watched as the girl expertly dodged around the revelers, making fast her escape. He silently wished her luck.

An explosion rocked the ground under Bill's feet. He staggered and then fell over as someone in turn fell into him. He landed hard, but shot to his feet almost the instant he hit the ground. His ears rang from the explosion, so everything seemed muffled by the high pitched ring.

Where the platform had been, a large plume of black smoke rolled into the air. People were screaming, crying, and shouting. Those at the fringes of the explosion stood for a few moments in stunned disbelief. It wore off quickly, and suddenly the entire square became a sea of chaos as people panicked, running any which direction in their efforts to get away from the source of the explosion.

As people cleared out, Bill could see people lying on the ground. Some rocked back and forth in obvious pain while others lay perfectly still. Too still. The smell of blood and mud mixed with the smoke, searing his nostrils with the foul odor. He glanced around for Lorna and found her climbing shakily to her feet. She yelled

something, but the lawyer shook his head, pointing to his ears. She nodded, but Gardner felt tremendous relief that his partner was okay.

Then he remembered the girl, Marwa. She had run towards the platform just before it exploded. He started to move into the sea of destruction, desperately hoping he would not find her among the wounded and dead. He stepped over one woman, who grabbed feebly at his ankle, her other hand missing and blood pulling around the wound. Bill defied the rules and traditions to rescue the lady. He knelt and ripped off part of the injured woman's skirt and quickly bound the wound lest she bleed to death.

Several bodies lay nearby, pierced through with wood fragments from the platform. And then he saw her. Marwa's body rested near a man's body. Blood ran in a thin trickle from her mouth, and her eyes looked surprised, as if death hadn't been part of her escape plan when she had run from the strange American. In her hand, she still clutched the useless lighter.

Bill sat back and pulled his knees up to his chest. An unbidden tear escaped one eye and traced a dirty track down his cheek. He had seen death and destruction before...more than he ever wanted to relive. But he could never get used to sights like this—children, their lives cut short to further the selfish and greedy ends of wicked men. He stared at the motionless body for long moments, until a dirty and blood stained hand fell on his shoulder.

He looked up into Lorna's concerned face. "Are you alright?"

He blinked. His hearing had returned and the ringing had faded into a small irritation. "I got out of the military because of things like this," he said softly. "I don't understand it."

She sat down next to him, watching as men and women started to pick their way through the death and destruction. Some were clearly there to help the wounded, while others took advantage of the situation to scavenge the dead. Bill didn't have the energy to help the first or run off the second. He felt little comfort in Lorna's presence.

"This is why I stay in," she said at last. "Someone has to try and stop this madness."

Bill shook his head. "Why? Why do this?"

Lorna's voice lowered. "I think Luk Bol did it."

The lawyer's head snapped around. "What?"

"Remember? He sent two of his men off towards the Mayor. He didn't look too happy with what the Mayor was saying."

Gardner surged to his feet, murder in his eyes. Luk Bol had wandered off to the edge of the square where he now sat on a short wall, watching the results of the carnage his men had created—and no doubt to keep an eye on the two Americans. Bill took one step before Lorna jerked hard on his arm, pulling him around.

"Don't," she snapped. "If you attack him, his men will kill us."

The only thing that stopped Bill from jerking his arm out and heading over to break Bol's neck was that Lorna would surely die along with him. He stood, trembling as adrenaline, anger, and helplessness warred in his body and heart. Finally, he relaxed and nodded once. "Let's find Korfa and get this over with."

Chapter 11

There was no way they could keep a low profile now. The explosion had made the entire city nervous, and a convoy of armed men didn't help. People scattered at their approach, disappearing like bats exposed to sudden light.

"Pull over," he said, irritated, as they neared where Marwa had indicated Korfa's store to be located.

Lorna glanced over, but did as requested. Bol's men pulled over behind them. "What's the problem," Lorna asked.

"Korfa will disappear the moment he sees these idiots with guns!" He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "We need to ditch these clowns and talk to Korfa alone. Course, I would just love to kill everyone one of the murdering whoremongers."

"Yeah, I know how you feel. What do you propose?"

"We need to get away from the vehicles too. Everyone around here knows that only men with guns have a working vehicle." Bill hopped out of the jeep. "We're going to have to walk, and we're going to have to do it without an escort."

Lorna followed more slowly. "You're the boss, boss. But isn't that a bit dangerous?"

"Probably, but we'll never find any answers like this." He turned and walked back to where Luk Bol sat, idly fingering his automatic weapon and eyeing the American dangerously. Bill had to repeat to himself not to kill the man. "Look, buddy, my partner and I are going to walk from here. How can we contact you when we are finished?"

The mercenary's face was a study in sulkiness. The man's bald head glistened in the heat, and somewhere, someone or something had chewed off his left ear, leaving a mass of scar tissue and a small hole where the ear used to be. His eyes narrowed, causing long wrinkles to appear on his face. "No. We are to be going with you."

Bill waved the comment aside. "That won't work. People are hiding from you. Scared. Big explosion, remember? I can't find the murderers of those children unless I can talk to people. Give me one of your radios and I'll call you once we are finished.

Luk obviously didn't believe a word of it. He shook his head. "No. You can't be going alone. It be too dangerous, man."

The lawyer frowned. He detected a bit of a South African accent from the mercenary. How odd. He paused to consider his options. No doubt Bol had been ordered not to allow the Americans to leave his sight, which made sense. Bill would have done the same thing if Luk Bol had come to America, but with all the fear in the city, he needed to do something. "Fine. One of your men may go with us. But he can't carry one of those." Bill tapped the weapon Bol held. "Concealed sidearm only."

The slobbering lips of the mercenary seemed to dry up noticeably as he sucked them into his mouth in thought. Finally he nodded. "I'll be going with you then."

“Fine. Whatever.” Bill turned and started back towards Lorna. The woman looked calm, but the slight shift in her stance spoke of edginess. “Okay,” he said for her ears alone. “I got rid of most of the riffraff.”

She noticed Bol handing over his rifle to one of his subordinates and checking his sidearm. “Looks like we got the king of riffraff coming though.”

Bill glanced back, his expression dark. “Well, you know, we can’t have everything in life. But if I get have a chance, I’m going to...”

“Keep a lid on it,” she replied. “If he ends up dead, we’ll never get out of the country. Not alive anyway.”

Bill’s lips thinned in frustration. Finally, he shrugged. “I think he thinks this is a waste of time—our hunt anyway. He probably believes us to be spies.”

“Exactly what would we be spying on?” she asked, rolling her eyes.

“Exactly.”

When Bol caught up to them, the trio set out into the town. Immediately, they began to see more people. Every pair of eyes held deep suspicion, but they didn’t disappear or run away as Bill approached, though they intentionally kept their distance. From the few people he did see, he spotted an older man who sat in the shade of a doorway.

“Good sir, I’m looking for a man named Korfa,” he said, addressing the man in his spotty Arabic.

The man wielded a dull knife and was carving away at a piece of wood. Without looking up, he shook his head. “I don’t know any Korfa,” he said—or at least he thought that was what the man said.

Bol frowned and moved forward, no doubt to try more physical means of extracting the information. Bill cut him off, giving him a dangerous glare. “Try to interfere in my business again and I goddamn guarantee you a trip out of this sorry land in a body bag!” Bol didn’t react. “He would be a seller of...items...” he continued with the old man, trying hard to remember his Arabic. “I have something to sell.”

The old man looked up briefly, taking in the faces of the three who confronted him. The lawyer had no doubt that he had correctly sized-up his unwanted guests up. He pointed down the street with his knife. “That way.”

Thanking him, the trio moved on down the road. It took time, but eventually they found the blue building that Marwa had mentioned. The shop was a seedy place, not too far from the landfill. Piles of junk lined a narrow walkway that meandered, more or less, down the center of the small building. Branches in the path led to more of the piled junk. Bill couldn’t see anyone, so he yelled, “Korfa!”

“Here!” came the response in Arabic. The voice sounded as if it had come from the back of the shop.

Shrugging, Bill moved ahead, followed closely by Lorna and Luk Bol. They took three wrong turns before finding a way to a short counter where a middle aged man sat looking at several pieces of metal before him. He wore a white, grease stained apron, small spectacles, and a long beard—equally stained. He glanced up at his visitors and switched to English. “Ah! Americans! So glad you come to my humble shop. Best shop in city! Best deals! You buy?”

Once again, the ex-marine had to step in front of Bol before the mercenary could get close to the shop owner. The man had a one track mind.

“Yes,” the lawyer said, leaning up against the counter and pulling a wad of money from his pocket. The man’s eyes grew round with greed and a small twitch developed near his right eye. “I want to buy some information. I was told you may know what I want to know.”

The man put his hand on his chest. “If Korfa know, you will know,” he promised, never taking his eyes from the wad of bills.

“Excellent.” Bill peeled one of the bills off and set it on the counter, not taking his hand away. “Two boys were brutally murdered and then burned in the landfill a week ago or so. I was told that you might know something about it.”

“Very sad, very tragic,” Korfa said, pulling the bill from out of Bill’s grasp and making it disappear under his apron. “I knew the boys.”

“Do you know why they were killed?”

The man stayed silent, staring back at Bill and wearing an infernal smile that radiated greed. Bill sidestepped Luk Bol again, giving him a withering look. “I’ll handle this.” He turned back to the shop owner and placed another bill on the counter. “Do you?”

The man took the bill and shook his head. “No. One boy tried to sell me worthless metal same day killed.”

Lorna stepped up. “Do you mean that one of the two murdered boys had tried to sell you something the same day he was killed?”

“Yes.”

“What was it?” she asked.

He remained silent until another bill had been deposited on the counter. “I do not know what it was. This big.” He held his hands out. “Black...very heavy. Worthless.”

“Why was it worthless?”

“No open. Just metal.”

Bill thought. “Was there any writing or markings on it?”

Korfa nodded.

“What?” he asked, handing over another bill.

“Symbol and writing. English.”

“What was the symbol?”

Korfa considered his response. He didn’t possess the vocabulary in English necessary to describe what he had seen. But he could draw it. Taking out a piece of paper and a stubby pencil, he drew the symbol for Bill.

Bill and Lorna looked at it and both let out a sigh. It was the US Air Force symbol. Lorna might not know the significance of it, but her innate intelligence told her that it couldn’t be good that an object belonging to the Air Force, had been offered for sale halfway around the world.

The lawyer, however, knew what this meant. A piece of the aircraft that had been ordered destroyed, had not been destroyed. Somehow the pirates had succeeded in getting some of the components off the ship before it had been reclaimed. He needed to report this as soon as possible. It seemed obvious to him that someone had killed the boy for the object.

Lorna thought so too. “You think this object is why the boys were killed?”

“Probably.” He looked back at Korfa and handed over another bill. “One more question. Do you know anyone who is looking for American metal?”

The man grinned broadly and nodded. "Sure. They sometimes come here to look. They never say, but I overhear."

"Good. Who?"

"The Chinese."

Bill and Lorna let out another collective sigh.

A direct satellite link from the cockpit of the private airplane allowed Bill the opportunity to talk to General Hynes privately. Lorna sat in the passenger section enjoying a bottle of cold, filtered water—an improvement over anything else they had to drink recently. Luk Bol waited in his jeep outside, keeping a wary eye on the American plane.

"Our experts confirm," the General said through the video screen, "that the object in question is the main CPU of the prototype. It runs the targeting algorithms, early detection systems, and evasion modes. Installed properly, it can be lethal in unfriendly hands. We must retrieve it as soon as possible."

"That might be a problem, General," Bill said. "As far as I can tell, the piece was smuggled out by the Chinese about a week ago. No doubt their scientists are examining it as we speak."

The General cursed, and Bill watched the man begin drumming his fingers on the table. "This is not acceptable, Captain."

"How dangerous is this piece? Can it be reversed engineered?"

"The general consensus is that it cannot be. Opening the seal on the box renders the CPU worthless. All data will be lost and without the data, the schematics are worthless too."

"But..."

The General sighed. "But there is nothing to stop them from using the one they have. It is more of a plug and play piece of technology."

"General, if I may, why build something that would be so easy to use by the enemy? This isn't some blasted home computer we're talking about."

"This was a prototype, Captain. It was never meant to go into combat. Heck, it was never meant to leave US soil. If we started mass production, we would have engineered a piece that would be worthless or at least secure if it fell into the wrong hands."

"I see."

"The point is, Captain, they can use the part they have. They couldn't duplicate it, perhaps, but they could build a single aircraft around it or modify one they have to be compatible with its systems."

"That's not good."

"No it isn't. At the very least, the Chinese would have a single superior aircraft capable of creating havoc over the skies of less advanced countries. Blast it, Captain, it could cause our own Air Force significant problems before we could shoot it down!"

Bill sat back, trying to digest it all. "It seems certain the Chinese have it?"

Hynes nodded. "The analysis of the burned cloth that Lieutenant Lorna sent us confirms that the accelerant used was of Chinese origin. This is too much of a coincidence to ignore. A pickup in the chatter of their intelligence services suggest that something big is going down."

"Is there any way to retrieve the object?"

“Now that it is on Chinese soil? Very unlikely. Even if we knew where it was at, we would have no way of getting it short of a full military strike. The President is loath to commit to something that extreme.”

Yes, Bill could see the political fallout of that incident would make the Cold War look warm and fuzzy by comparison. “So what do you want me to do?”

“Right now? Return Stateside. Once we locate the part, we will try to put a covert plan into action to either retrieve or destroy it.”

“So I’m done? I can go home?”

“You can come home, son, but we’re far from through with you. The Joint Chiefs are reluctant to bring too many more people in on the secret of this disaster. We want to keep the people who are in the know to as few as possible. That means you will remain on active duty until this crisis is resolved.”

Gardner sighed. “Meaning what, exactly?”

“Meaning that it will probably be you that we send to retrieve the object.”

Heaving one last deep sigh, Bill said aloud, “Why me?”

“Because we love you, son.”

The lawyer rolled his eyes. “Since when did the military love anyone?”

“Oh, we love you. We love you when you follow orders.”

“Figures...sir.”

“Always does.”

The line went dead, leaving Bill to his own thoughts. He sat in silence for a moment, thinking. Finally, he stood up and walked to the cockpit of the plane. The two pilots sat chatting as he opened the small door. “Get the plane ready. We’ll be leaving soon.”

“About time,” the blond pilot muttered. “This isn’t the most hospitable country in the world.”

“The freaking country has gone to blazes,” the other red-nosed pilot agreed.

“Just get us ready to takeoff. I have a little business to attend to.”

The blond pilot eyed him askance. “You going far?”

“No, just outside.”

Both pilots turned to see Luk Bok leaning casually against his jeep. One other soldier sat in the jeep, wrapping a red handkerchief over his head. Bill recognized the soldier as one of the two had been ordered to kill the Mayor.

Good.

“He doesn’t look to be a very sociable fellow,” one of the pilots whispered. “You sure you just don’t want us to take off right now? We have clearance.”

“Somalia doesn’t have an air force do they?”

“No. Just a collection of rickety boats and lots of guns. No planes to speak of.”

“Do they have a treaty with a neighboring nation with an air force?”

“Nope,” blond pilot responded. “Their government is still not officially recognized by any nation that I know of.”

“Good.” Gardner spun on his heels and made his way to the door. Lorna met him there, having overhead the conversation.

“What are you going to do, Gardner?”

“There is no justice in this city. I thought to add a bit before we go.”

She put a hand on his chest. “Don’t. You may wind up dead, and I don’t know how I can explain that to the General.”

He brushed her hand aside. "You saw what he did, Lorna! You saw that little girl. I'm not going to let him get away with it."

"Don't try to kill them," she insisted. "That won't make matters better."

"I won't kill them. But if you don't get out of my way, I'll move you myself." His anger came bubbling up, a cold, lethal rage that seethed like a cauldron too long on a fire.

Startled, Lorna stepped back, and Bill swept by her and pushed open the door and activated the extending steps. Before the lieutenant could say anything else or attempt to interfere, Bill was down the steps and marching towards the two mercenaries.

Both saw him coming of course, but the driver took one look and then went back to being bored, figuring that Bol would talk to and deal with the ugly American. Bol stood up straighter and took a firmer grip on his automatic weapon. Perhaps it was the way Gardner walked or the expression on his face, but Luk Bol knew instantly why Bill was coming. He grinned as the American walked up to him. "Hey, man, you going to teach me a lesson, eh?"

Bill nodded curtly. "More than that, Bol. I'm going to give you a new career."

The inference was completely lost on the murdering mercenary. The only warning Gardner received was the when the smile dropped off the pirate's face. Bill ducked as the big man swung his rifle viciously at the ex-marine's face. The moment the rifle cleared his head, Bill launched a vicious blow to Bol's solar plexus. The attempt to take Bill's head off had turned the mercenary's body slightly so that Bill's blow didn't hit square. The glancing punch only succeeded in knocking the pirate into the side of the jeep.

He staggered, trying to regain position to keep the American from hitting him again. Bill had other worries. He snapped a kick at Bol's weapon hand, and succeeded in knocking the rifle from the other's grasp. The assault weapon hit the side of the jeep and clattered to the ground.

Bol cursed, and launched himself at the lawyer with a roar. Although not trained in hand to hand combat as Bill had been, Luk Bol possessed the instincts of a brawler who knew how to fight dirty. Gardner twisted to avoid a knee to the crotch and then felt himself practically bowled over as the pirate grappled with him.

Bol was stronger...much stronger as Bill found out. With a surge, Bol lifted Bill over his head and threw him bodily to the ground. Bill hit the hard packed dirt with a short cry of pain as he felt one of his ribs crack. He kept the presence of mind, however, to roll partially aside to avoid a heavy boot that tried to smash his face in. He then grabbed the boot, and using it as a fulcrum, twisted around and cut Bol's feet out from under him.

An angry cry escaped the pirate's lips as he too found himself flat on the ground. Bill took advantage of his opponent's situation and rolled over the top of the other man, delivering an elbow to the man's nose that shattered it. Continuing his roll, Bill came up off the ground having found and captured Bol's lost weapon.

The other pirate had slowly come alive with the fight and Bill found him standing in the jeep with his own weapon trained in the direction of the two combatants. He never expected the American to come up with a weapon of his own and so stood their mutely while Gardner calmly shot him once in the head.

“Sorry, Lorna,” he muttered. Well, he would worry about breaking his promise to the woman some other time. He spun around in time to see Bol grasping for him. He slammed the butt of the rifle into the man’s ribs and heard a satisfied crack of a broken rib. “Now we’re even,” he said loudly, standing to his feet. He pointed the assault weapon at Bol, who seeing no chance of escape, paused and spit at the American.

“Well, get on with it then,” he barked, wiping blood away from his crushed nose.

“Remember that girl I was talking to?” Bill asked. “The one right before your men killed the Mayor of Merca?”

“What are you talking about, man?”

Bill sighed. The man didn’t even remember the girl. The man’s twisted mind probably never recalled any of the carnage or individual faces of his victims. “You killed her.”

The man glowered. “I killed many people, man. So you kill me now?”

“No. I’m going to change your career.”

“What you mean by that, man?”

“You’re going to become the prey instead of the predator.”

Bill calmly shot Bol in the right kneecap. Bol screamed and grabbed at his shattered knee. He screamed again when Gardner shot him in the left kneecap.

“You’re never going to walk again,” he hissed, tossing the gun over the jeep where Bol couldn’t readily get to it. “I suspect in a country like this, they will find little use for a cripple!”

Tears of pain and fury seeped from the wounded man’s eyes. He cursed and swore as the lawyer walked away. Bill put the man out of his mind. He hoped somewhere the little girl would rest more peacefully, knowing that the murdering scum would probably not live long enough to hurt anyone else.

Lorna and the blond pilot met him at the door to the plane. “You can leave now,” he said to the pilot.

The man looked past Bill to Bol, who writhed in agony on the ground. “Yeah, I think we better.” He scurried off to get the plane off the ground and headed towards the United States.

Lorna said nothing. Her eyes were a mystery to him. He didn’t sense condemnation, sadness maybe, but no judgment. Bill figured that even if she didn’t say so, she agreed with Bol’s fate.

“Let’s go home,” he said, wincing as his broken rib caused a stab of pain to lance through his chest. “I may need to see a doctor.”

Bill was badly injured. He was probably hit by some object during the fight. Moments later, he plunged into the darkness, leaving Lorna and the pilots to worry about his condition. Nobody knew if he would make it through.

Chapter 12

It took six months for the dreaded call to come in. Bill had returned, nominally, to his law offices, where his colleagues had pestered him to no end on his mission

to Somalia on behalf of Wastend. They didn't know that Wastend had nothing to do with the actual mission, but Bill figured even hinting otherwise would land him in a military prison somewhere. 'National Security' and 'Top Secret' had been flung at him so many times since his return that he felt jumpy just thinking about it.

His cracked ribs had healed nicely, thanks to a military doctor that General Hynes had secured for him. Gardner suspected that the doctor had been ordered to get the ex-marine back into tip-top shape, for the man acted more like a drill sergeant than a doctor when it came to ordering Bill around. He found himself running more and doing more exercises than he thought appropriate for a man healing from injuries.

But Bill was under no illusions. He knew that as soon as something concrete could be determined regarding the whereabouts of the component the Chinese had managed to acquire, he would be shipped off to deal with it.

Surprisingly, there had been little fallout as to his vigilante actions against Luk Bol. Either Lorna had failed to report the incident—highly unlikely—or the military really didn't care what happened to a pirate mercenary working for a nominal government likewise filled with rebels. Bill suspected the latter. At any rate, he was just glad that he didn't have to listen to a lecture or spend time in jail as a result of his actions.

Sighing, Gardner picked up the special cell phone Hynes had given him. "Hello?" he answered. "Pizza Hut. How may I help you?"

"Very funny," said the not so funny voice of General Hynes. "Pack your bag, Captain Gardner. You are leaving tonight."

That undoubtedly meant a long flight. "Ah, can't this wait? I've got a hot date tonight—"

"Cancel your imaginary date, Captain. This is an order."

"How'd you know it's imaginary?" There was a pregnant pause over the phone. "You've been watching me?" Another pause. "Now General!" he started to protest.

"Pack your bag. A car will pick you up outside your apartment at 6 tonight. Don't be late."

Gardner sighed. "Where am I going?"

"United Arab Emirates."

"The UAE?"

"Correct. There is a military exhibition being held there in Abu Dhabi, the capital. Purportedly, some of the regions most advanced technological advances will be on display. We've just received intelligence that the Chinese have decided to participate at the last moment."

"Oh? I suppose this is significant?"

"Yes. They are going to display a new stealth fighter jet for sale."

"Ah. They've managed to plug your little device into one of their systems."

"So it would seem."

"You want me to steal it back or blow it up?"

"Right now we just want you to verify that it is our technology being used in the aircraft. We think the Chinese are trying to sell it. They know they can't manufacture more than the one they have, so politically, the technology is a liability. It will hurt future relations with us, and they know it. So, they're trying to

pawn it off to the highest bidder, knowing that eventually we'll get around to destroying it."

"But in the meantime the Chinese manage to win some concessions from one of the oil powers in the region," Bill finished.

"Exactly. Find out if it is our tech being used and anyone interested in buying it. Once we know, we'll be able to track the aircraft easier, and either intercept it before transfer or hit it on route."

"You sure you just don't want me to blow it up in the UAE?"

"That would be a political nightmare if it got traced back to us," Hynes replied. "The seven sheikhs who control the emirates are friendly to the US right now, and have allowed us to stage operations against Afghanistan from their country. We would lose all of that if we blew up that plane while on their soil."

"I hate politics."

"Don't we all. Pack your bag, Captain."

"How will I know which aircraft is the Chinese's?"

"They are only bringing the one. Look for the one with all the Chinese guarding it."

"Sounds easy enough."

"Perhaps. Don't get killed or caught."

Bill sighed, and clicked off the cellphone. He understood the implied warning. If he was caught, he would be disavowed, nothing more than an American tourist on his own. He stood up from his desk and walked to his office door. "Cassie, I'm going out of the country again."

Cassie looked up from her own desk. "Again?"

"Yep."

"But you have appointments all this week."

"Cancel them."

"Okay, but should I reschedule?"

Gardner shook his head. "I don't know how long I'll be gone. Recommend Aaron or Valery to them, and have Victor pick up the rest of my caseload for the time being."

Cassie raised an eyebrow. Effectively, Bill was cancelling everything. Well, it couldn't be helped. He hoped that the government would compensate him somehow for all of this. Cassie, ever curious, cleared her throat. "Uh, is this for Wastend again?"

The gridlock between Wastend and the union had finally been settled by the governor. He had stepped in and dictated the terms to both the company and the union, by basically warning that if the entire lot wasn't back to work in two days, he would shut the company down for good. The net effect was a compromise between the CEO, Frank Vellore, and the union. The employees had gone back to work with a pay raise and additional benefits, if not everything they had wanted. Vellore just grumbled, knowing full well that if he didn't cave in, General Hynes would bring him up on criminal—if not treasonous—charges for his neglect in the disposal of the TACAIR prototype.

Personally, Bill thought Vellore should go to jail for a long time, but Hynes had decided to use Vellore for his own purposes, and the CEO found himself in a position where he could hardly refuse.

“Yes. Vellore has some legal matters he wants me to attend to in the UAE.”

Cassie blinked. “What business does he have with them?”

Gardner shrugged. “I’ll get all the details later. All I know is that I’m being paid a lot of money to go...so going I am.”

Cassie looked vaguely relieved, figuring that if her boss was being paid, then so would she. She dropped the issue and began calling up Gardner’s schedule on the computer. Bill grabbed his briefcase and trotted out the door. It was 4:30 in the afternoon. He didn’t have a lot of time.

Bill looked at the smiling man and tried his best to smile back. “I have a reservation for Bill Gardner,” he once again told the hotel attendant. The little man bobbed his head and slowly poked one finger at a time on the keyboard.

“Beel Gardenar,” he repeated slowly, butchering the name. Bill could see that the man was typing in the name all wrong.

“No,” he leaned over the counter and typed the name in himself. “Bill Gardner. Bill Gardner. Like that.”

“Ah,” the Arab man’s eyes brightened and he hit the enter key. Bill’s name must have come up for the man’s eyes brightened. “Here you are! Room 216.” He scanned a keycard and handed it across the counter. “Welcome to Dhabi! Welcome to the Park Hyatt Hotel!” He said the name like ‘hi-ate,’ but Gardner got the drift.

Bill accepted the card and smiled back. “Thank you, my friend.” He handed the man a twenty dollar bill, knowing that this was the best way to get the hotel staff to be willing to do favors in the future. The man positively beamed in pleasure.

When he got to his room, he deposited his luggage on the bed and ran a hand through his hair. He was tired, hungry, and irritated. Still, he felt it was best to take a look at the Military Exhibition before he turned in for the night.

The Park Hyatt was located only three or four blocks from a series of government warehouses where the exhibition was being held. Even from this far away, Gardner had spotted the sheikhs’ security forces patrolling the streets. Bill had a legitimate reason for being in town, but he wasn’t so confident about a reason to attend the exhibition. He knew that any American who just wandered over would be turned away, or watched so closely that anything he did would be analyzed by several intelligence agencies across the world. No, he needed a better reason to be at the exhibition. He needed an invitation.

Fortunately, one of the seven ruling sheikhs’ sons was staying at the hotel and was reputed to be around Bill’s age. Hynes’ intelligence reports painted a picture of a man drunk with power and ego. It was to this latter part, the ego, that Gardner needed to leverage in order to get the necessary invitation. From what he understood, the man would be playing at a game of cards down in the hotel lobby this very moment.

Taking some time to freshen up, Bill eventually found his way to the roomy lounge downstairs. A group of boisterous men sat near the hotel bar, hunched over a deck of playing cards. Two other men stood nearby, obviously bodyguards. One watched the table and the men playing, and the other watched everyone else.

One of the players sported a well-trimmed goatee and wore several gold rings on each hand. His clothing looked expensive, so Bill marked him as the sheikh’s son, Fareed. He wandered over to the table, both bodyguards turning their attention to him as he approached. “Is there an open seat?” he asked in his weak Arabic.

Fareed looked up, saw the American and smiled. "Sure, pull up a chair," he said in fluent English.

"Thanks," Bill replied, pulling a chair over from a nearby table.

"By the way," Fareed said, "you asked if there is a *chair opening*."

"Blast. I'll never get your language down!"

Fareed laughed. "True. Arabic is so much more expressive than English."

Bill didn't rise to the bait. He had spent long hours on the flight over, studying the man, and knew that his desire to prove himself superior to anyone else—particularly westerners—often got the better of him. His father had to bail him out of trouble more often than not, and Gardner suspected that the bodyguards had a dual role in this regard—keep the son out of trouble!

"I'll just have to trust you on that one," Gardner said. "Since I haven't mastered your language yet. Maybe, I'll be better at cards."

Fareed grinned and began dealing out the cards. "Poker, Mr...?"

"Gardner. Bill Gardner. Just call me Bill, and Poker is fine."

"Call me Fareed." He introduced the other three players at the table and soon all five fell to looking at their cards and eyeing one another like tom cats.

Hynes had provided enough money to lose—winning wasn't the idea here—but Bill had been warned not to get too extravagant. Since he was at best a mediocre poker player, he wasn't worried about winning much. As they played, he began talking.

"You have a very quaint little country here, Fareed. This is my first time here, so it's all new to me."

"Quaint?" Fareed asked, pronouncing the word as if he wasn't quite sure what it meant.

Bill shrugged, "Well it isn't the United States, but it seems pleasant enough."

Fareed's hands tightened around his cards, bending them slightly. "The greatness of a nation is not determined by its landmass," he retorted.

"Ain't that the truth," Bill agreed cryptically. He threw his cards down on the table. "I fold." The sheikh's son grinned at that, raising the stakes by a hundred dollars. Bill continued, "Still, it's a good thing you have powerful neighbors who wish you to stay independent. I imagine a lot of countries would love to get their hands on your oil reserves."

"We don't need them!" he shot back. One of the other players called, and Fareed lost, irritating him further since the man he lost to looked to be from Europe somewhere. "We are strong enough to take care of ourselves."

"You are?" Bill asked as if this bit of news was completely surprising. "I would have thought that if someone like Saudi Arabia decided to invade, you would be powerless to stop them."

"They wouldn't dare." The card game was ignored as Fareed focused his anger on the American. "We may be small, but no country on earth would dare to invade us."

Bill made sure his demeanor and tone didn't reflect a challenge, just doubt. "I suppose so," he said as if reluctant to believe. "I just didn't think the UAE had the military technology to pose much of a defense in the face of a determined enemy. I thought you relied on treaties with other nations to protect your borders."

Fareed stared at the innocent looking American for a long time. Finally, he slapped the table hard enough to cause the deck of cards to tumble over, spreading them across the table. “Come with me, American,” he snapped, standing to his feet.

Bill stood up more slowly. “Uh, where are we going?”

“I want to show you something. The United States looks down on everyone that she doesn’t control. I want you to see that we are more than capable and able to compete on a military level.”

“Fareed, I didn’t mean any insult. I was just led to believe—”

“Lies!” the Arab snapped. “We are strong. Come. I will show you.”

“Where are we going?”

“There is a military exhibition being held right now in our city. You will see technology there that will rival anything that the US can field.”

“Uh, should I be going to something like that?”

Fareed waved it aside. “You will be my guest. I want you to see and take word back to your people that we are strong.”

“My people?”

“No doubt you are a spy.” He stopped Bill from interrupting with a protest. “Most Americans who come here are, but it is of no consequence. We have nothing to hide and it is good for the US to know how strong we are. Come.” He looked at one of the guards. “Get my car. We will be taking the American to see the exhibition.”

Without waiting to see if the American followed, he marched towards the front door. Bill followed, and found that the bodyguards had fallen in step behind them. They didn’t protest this impromptu tour, so Bill figured they were used to their charge’s impetuous behavior. So far, the planned had worked—all except for the accusation of being a spy. That had hit too close to home, and he wondered if it wouldn’t land him in hot water later on.

Fareed’s car turned out to be an expensive luxury car rather than the expected limousine. The deep blue Rolls-Royce Phantom rolled to a smooth stop at the curb. The Arab waved for the driver to get out and jumped behind the wheel himself. “Get in,” he ordered.

Bill noticed that four other vehicles, SUV’s to be precise, were pulling up and around the sheikh’s car. “Your body guards won’t object?”

The man snorted, smiling. “They do what I tell them to do. If they thought you were a threat, they would have already killed you.”

Bill chuckled at that, not sure if the man was joking or not. Nevertheless, he determined not to do anything that might cause the bodyguards to react in a negative manner. He moved to the other side of the car and jumped in beside the spoiled young man. The car certainly lived up to its reputation. His job as a lawyer had brought him into contact with many wealthy men and women, and he had seen his share of expensive cars over the years, but this one took the cake. He couldn’t believe how expensive everything looked, and the v-12 engine purred like a lion.

A bodyguard jumped lightly into the backseat, an action that Bill’s new young friend ignored. Bill ignored him too.

Laughing suddenly, Fareed hit the gas pedal and the car shot out into the street, leaving the more lumbering SUV's behind. He glanced over at Bill, who sat in astonishment. He had never experienced such power in such a car before. "You like? Yes?"

"Yes!"

Pleased that he had made an impression on the American, Fareed broke every speed law and arrived at a large domed building not too far away. The building looked to be a gigantic coliseum of sorts...certainly large enough to hold any number of aircraft and military vehicles. A dozen guards wearing indeterminate military uniforms stood outside the main entrance, carefully scrutinizing the various people who came in and out of the building.

Leaving the bodyguard to deal with the car, Fareed waved one of the soldiers away as he approached the pair. "The American is with me. I will see that he causes no problems," he said in Arabic.

The soldier hesitated, and Bill guessed that the guards had orders to make sure few Westerners got into the building. He suspected that any Westerner actually inside was an arms dealer, dealing in illegal weapons. But seeing who the American was with, put a whole new light on things. The guard nodded, saluted and returned to his post.

Bill and Fareed walked in unmolested.

Chapter 13

Bill had no idea what to expect, but whatever he expected, he was unprepared for the full scope of the exhibition. It wasn't that there were a lot of people milling about—there wasn't—but the people who were about all looked to be older. For whatever reason, Bill had expected a younger group of people. He realized belatedly that these were military commanders sent by their respective governments to either oversee an exhibition or to procure equipment beneficial to their militaristic endeavors.

Despite the obvious military bearing that most everyone had as they walked sedately from exhibit to exhibit, there were no markings to identify them—other than facial features and language. Bill had no doubt that most, if not all, of the Arab nations were represented. In addition, he thought he heard a delegation that spoke Russian, and he noticed several Asian groups walking about in tightly clustered packs.

The domed building could have easily been converted into a sports arena—and Bill suspected that the original purpose of the building had been used for just such a purpose. However, all the seating had been removed, creating a huge floor space to house the various exhibitions. In the large hallways that surrounded the central exhibits, smaller exhibits had been set up to allow potential buyers to try out various weapons or to watch recorded demonstrations.

But it wasn't the smaller ones that Bill was interested in. His eyes were drawn to the center of the dome where several military aircraft sat at rest, looking like

nothing more than birds of prey perched, but ready to explode into lethal action at any moment. Fareed saw where his eyes were riveted.

“Ah, you are interested in the aircraft?”

“They look particularly magnificent,” Bill agreed, hoping that his interest hadn’t given him away. “I’ve always been fascinated by jets, from my childhood.”

“Come,” Fareed said. “Let us look.”

The pair of them, and a few obvious bodyguards, wandered over to the aircraft. The first few were obvious Russian designs, but the attention of the groups in that area were focused solely on a sleek looking aircraft with a Chinese flag painted on the fuselage. Bill guessed that around a hundred people were congregated around the aircraft.

One voice rose above the others. The lawyer couldn’t make it out, so he turned to his escort. “What is happening here?”

Fareed listened and then turned to the American with an expression of surprise. “They are bidding on the aircraft right now. This is an experimental fighter plane, or so the Chinese delegate is saying. They have only made this one and are willing to sell it off to the highest bidder.”

“What’s so special about it?”

“I don’t know.” Fareed looked troubled. Bill guessed that an open bid was rather unusual for an exhibition. A large display screen was playing back footage of the aircraft in action. Bill studied it and was impressed. The aircraft’s design made it highly maneuverable and stealthy. More than that, the pilot had superhuman reflexes. No human could fly a plane that good. It was impossible. No, this had to be the integration of the top secret technology that the Chinese had stolen from the US.

Hynes had explained that the core computer component had an adaptability feature that let the computer learn the style of the pilot. It learned what maneuvers were favored and could anticipate their use and execute them quicker than human reflexes could. It stored the data, and aided the pilot in executing difficult if not impossible maneuvers. The net result was an aircraft far more maneuverable and flown by a pilot-computer combination that gave the pilot an unprecedented edge in combat.

Indeed, the Chinese had found a way to adapt the technology even if they couldn’t reproduce it. They were trying to sell it, knowing that they could make a killing off of the sale, whilst ridding themselves of a potentially volcanic political situation at the same time.

Taking out a piece of gum, he offered it to Fareed, who turned it down. He popped it into his own mouth and chewed as he began edging forward to get a better look at the aircraft. Fareed followed, also curious. The ex-marine managed to get close enough to the ladder that led up to the cockpit. Two Chinese guards stood there, eyeing him suspiciously.

“Can I take a look?” he asked in Arabic.

One of the guards looked ready to protest, but Fareed intervened. “Of course you can take a look. This is my country, and this is an exhibition.”

That prompted a Chinese man to detach himself from the bidding and approach. “May I help you?” he asked in accented English.

“I just want to look at her,” Bill said, pointing to the cockpit.

The Chinese man frowned. "My name is Lee Wong. Now that the bidding has begun, we are not allowing anyone else to examine the aircraft."

"I'm not trying to buy," Bill countered. "I just want to look. I've never seen anything like this." He turned to Fareed. "If this is what you are talking about regarding your country, then I guess you're right. But I don't know..." he trailed off, doubtfully.

Fareed immediately turned towards the Chinese man. "I demand that you let my friend examine the plane. He will not harm it and you are free to make sure he takes nothing up there with him and that he only looks. But this is an exhibition, and this is my country."

Lee's face bunched up in tightly controlled anger. He opened his mouth to say something, but undoubtedly, knowing who the young man was, kept him from spouting out any foolishness. He snapped his mouth closed and tightened his lips. He was a guest in Fareed's country and to refuse the request would be a very serious breach in manners.

"Very well," he said at last. "He may examine the cockpit."

Bill started towards the staircase when a shorter Chinese soldier stepped in front of him and gestured with arms outstretched. "Hey," he protested. "What's this?"

"Surely you would not mind being checked for instruments that might accidentally damage the sensitive equipment on the aircraft, would you?"

I doubt it is all that sensitive, Gardner thought to himself. He chewed furiously on his gum, trying to look indignant. Finally, he relented. "If you must. I didn't ask to come here."

"True enough," Fareed said, trying to placate the irritated Chinese soldier. "I asked him to come."

If that had any effect on Wong Lee, he masked it well.

Gardner mimicked the soldier's arms, holding them away from his body as the man deftly searched him. He removed the pack of gum, the gum wrapper and Bill's wallet. He handed these over to Wong Lee, who glanced through the wallet. "Mr. Bill Gardner?" He glanced at Bill. "This says you are a lawyer."

"Yep."

"What brings you to this country?"

"What is this? An interrogation?" Fareed asked, now growing angry himself.

Bill held up his hand. "It's not an issue. I am here on behalf of Wastend Inc. I have been asked to examine the legalities of certain contract concerns in the region. My job is to make sure everything remains above board."

The lawyer held his breath. If the Chinese man remained suspicious for any reason, he would refuse to allow Bill up the staircase. In that event, the entire mission would be jeopardized. He needed to get a look into that cockpit. Lee studied the American for long moments, before finally nodding. "Please be brief. As you can see the bidding is still underway and the potential buyer may be irked to see someone lingering in his new fighter jet."

"Of course." Bill mounted the steps, making a show of being a bit clumsy and ignorant as to what he was doing. At the top of the stairs, he glanced into the open cockpit. Naturally, he didn't see anything at all that resembled the missing US technology. But he knew it would be there, somewhere deep and protected. He

bent over to examine some of the controls, but still didn't see anything out of the ordinary. He turned and clamored back down the steps before Lee resorted to hauling him back down himself.

Chewing, he nodded to the Chinese man his thanks. "You are most gracious and have done a superb job."

Lee's eyes narrowed even further if that was possible. "You know something of military aircraft?"

"Hardly a thing. When I was a kid, I once owned a picture book that showed all the US military jets." His brow furrowed in thought. "That would have been...25 years ago, I guess." He glanced back at the jet. "Things sure have changed since then."

Put at ease, the Chinese commander nodded and handed Bill's things back. "Yes. Now please be on your way. The bidding is drawing to a close."

Bill nodded and joined Fareed. Together they wandered over to some of the other aircrafts. They spent the remainder of the evening looking around. Bill was sure to allow himself to be suitably impressed to put his companion's ego at ease.

At some point he took out another piece of gum and slipped it into his mouth so he could chew on something besides air. His last piece of gum was now safely attached to an out of the way niche in the cockpit of the Chinese fighter plane. He had allowed it to drop from his mouth while bending over the controls, deftly catching it and hiding it away where it wouldn't be easily discovered. He had been assured that the isotope breakdown in the gum would be harmless to him, but would emit a detectable amount of a certain type of radiation that can be detected up to a half mile away.

The US knew ahead of time that the plane would be sold, but they had no idea who the buyer would be. They needed a way to find it that normal detections would miss. To find the plane, they would need to be within a half mile with a Geiger like counter, but Hynes figured that was better than nothing.

Finally, Bill had enough. "Thank you Fareed for this. I found it all quite impressive. I see what you mean. Your country is very influential."

"Indeed," the Arab responded smugly, pleased. "It was my pleasure. Do you wish a ride back to the hotel?"

Not wanting to pass up the opportunity to ride in the Rolls-Royce Phantom again, he said. "You bet!"

Laughing, Fareed led them out of the military exhibition. Well, things had gone according to plan. That was something to be thankful for anyway.

Lee turned to one of his subordinate after he watched the American and his young companion leave. "Find out everything you know about this Bill Gardner. I don't like the way he looks."

"That's got to be one of the most common US names out there," the young intelligence officer and an expert on the US protested.

"Granted. Here, maybe this will help." He pulled an American driver's license out and handed it to the other officer.

The man glanced at the New York driver's license and the picture of Bill Gardner and grinned. "Yes, this will help out quite a bit. What do you want me to do with the information I find out?"

“I want you to give it to me and flag the man’s passport. If he every sets foot in China, I want to know about it five minutes later.”

“Yes, sir!” Saluting, the earnest young man ran off.

Lee turned back to regard the fighter plane. Finding that bit of technology had indeed given him a promotion. More than that, after the ‘accidental drowning’ of Chen, he had replaced the intelligence officer in the field, accompanying the aircraft that now housed the technology he had stolen from Chen.

Yes, it had been quite the accomplishment. His murder of Chen had allowed him to rise to the United States equivalent rank of Colonel, and he had been given the honor of providing security for the technology. Too bad they couldn’t recreate it. Chinese scientists were working on it, now that they got the basis and knew, more or less, what it could do. They were trying to come up with their own version. They were still many years away, but they would persist. In the meantime, they needed to get rid of the one they had. He had suggested that they simply throw it back into the ocean, but that suggestion had been universally laughed at.

“The Americans will never believe that we just threw it away,” one general had replied, chuckling at Lee’s naivety. “No, we need to get rid of it in such a way that the Americans know we got rid of it.”

That didn’t make much sense to Lee. “Are you saying that they know we have it?”

“Of course they know! They’ve undoubtedly known for some time.”

“Why haven’t they done anything about it?”

“Because all we’ve done is study it and run some tests with the one we got. If we put it into actual combat or found a way to reproduce it, then you can expect the Americans to act. No, we will sell it and let some other country worry about the Americans.”

Politics had never been Lee’s strong suit, so he just snapped his mouth shut and pretended like he understood. Nevertheless, it had been made very clear to him that he needed to protect the technology while it was still in Chinese hands. They stood to make a lot of money from this one sale, as well as strengthen their influence in several regions. If the Americans could steal back the technology or destroy it, all of that would be wasted.

With all that in mind, he didn’t trust this Bill Gardner. It seemed too much of a coincidence that an American would pick his aircraft to look at above all the other ones. No, something didn’t feel right. He would have to have the man followed...perhaps even killed, if the opportunity arose.

Lee nodded to himself. Yes, he might just have to kill Bill Gardner. The prospect didn’t bother him in the least.

His pleasant musings were interrupted by an Iranian and another one of Lee’s aides. They walked up together. “Colonel, this is General Najib. He won the bid, he is buying.”

Lee bowed to the general. “It is a pleasure to meet you, sir. I hope you will be pleased with your new acquisition.”

Najib was a short man with a beard that had gone grey. He wore a military ball cap that hid his head, but Lee suspected the man had started to go bald. He seemed fit enough, looking trim and healthy. The Iranian wore a number of

decorations on the front of his uniform, informing Lee that he was dealing with a combat veteran.

“We shall know once we put it through its paces,” he said. “It is one of the conditions of our purchase.”

“Of course,” Lee agreed. “As you have no doubt been told, our government won’t turn over possession until all funds have been delivered...including any trade concessions that were included in your bid.” Lee knew that Beijing had been monitoring the sale of the aircraft carefully. They had made the final decision as to who would purchase it.

“I quite understand. My government will be in contact with yours in the next couple of days to arrange a live demonstration as well as making arrangements to transport the aircraft to Iran.”

“You have made a wise decision. This one plane will give you dominance in the region for many years, that I can promise.”

“It had better,” the general muttered darkly. “You only have one of them. We would pay handsomely for more.”

“Alas, General, we decided to sell only the one. We figure that once the superiority of the aircraft become generally known, we wouldn’t have to use them ourselves. Just knowing that we have them should serve as adequate deterrent.” The lie flowed smoothly from Lee’s lips. He had rehearsed it until he nearly believed it himself.

Despite that, General Najib looked doubtful. “Either way, Colonel, we will be in touch.”

“Thank you, sir.”

With a parting salute, Najib departed. Lee sighed. He would be too busy in the coming days to give much thought to the American. *Too bad*, he thought to himself. *I really wanted to kill him.*

Chapter 14

Bill’s flight from the UAE got rerouted in midair. No explanation was given except that information would be forthcoming once he landed in Kuwait. The plane landed on an American military base, a left over from the first gulf war and now used as a staging area for operations in Afghanistan. The moment his plane touched ground, a slack-jawed, gangly corporal stuck his head inside and yelled, “Is there a Bill Gardner on board?”

Bill was the only one on board other than the pilots. “I’m Gardner, son,” he said to the young man.

“Your presence is requested at the CP.”

Sighing, Gardner got out of his seat and followed the corporal to the Command Post. Inside, a thin faced man, wearing a moustache too large for him, glanced up from a computer. “Gardner? I’m Colonel Robbie Bush. Everyone just calls me CR. I have General Hynes standing by. He wishes to speak to you.”

“Of course he does,” Bill muttered. CR got up from the chair and left without any further conversation. Sitting down, Bill saw the face of General Hynes as he talked to someone just out of camera view. “I’m here, General.”

Hynes looked into the camera and grunted. “So you are. Look, Captain. We have reasonable intel that Iran has purchased the Chinese fighter. Did you place the tracker.”

“Yes, sir. Besides getting cancer, we should be able to track it, if we get close enough.”

“You won’t die, son.”

That’s debatable, he said to himself. “You want me to go to Iran?”

“No. You wouldn’t last long there. We want you to go to China and blow the thing up before it can be delivered to the Iranians.”

“China!”

“That’s correct Captain. China.”

“I thought you said that it would be guarded too closely for a saboteur to be of any good.”

“That was when it was a small component and hidden in one of their top secret facilities. Now it is in a fighter plane. There are only so many places they can conceal that. Besides, all you have to do is blow it up in transit. That should be much easier.”

“Yeah, I can see how easy it will be,” Gardner said, rolling his eyes. “Do I get back up?”

“Sorry, we still can’t afford to pull any regular military units out for this. We cannot afford to have anything traced back to our government. Destroying the component on Chinese soil could be construed as an act of war. No, you will go in as an independent agent, working for Wastend to clean up their mess. Is that clear?”

“I don’t like this, General. I don’t calculate my odds of surviving to be going up much. It wasn’t my fault that the part went missing. Why take it out on me?”

“Sorry, son. I’m not. You just happen to be the only asset in place to get the job done.”

Something felt off about the entire explanation. Bill didn’t understand the politics involved or necessarily how decisions were made at the top, but he still felt like an undue amount of pressure was being put on him to accomplish this mission alone. Surely they had top secret units who specialized in what they were asking a retired military captain to do. So why me? he asked himself silently. Despite his reservations, he still knew that he would go. His own patriotism and sense of duty demanded nothing less from him.

“I’ll go, General. But I still don’t like it. I wasn’t trained for this type of mission—at least not alone. I haven’t been active in years. Isn’t this a job for the CIA or something?”

“It’s your job now, Captain. And going isn’t a request. It is an order.”

“Yes, sir!” Inside, Bill heaved a silent sigh. This would be a much more dangerous mission than the other two he had already taken. A lot more dangerous. He felt apprehension begin to intrude on the fringes of his mind. He had gotten out! *Why couldn’t they just leave me alone!* “Anything else, sir?”

“You will be ferried about to confuse anyone watching, but eventually you’ll be taken to Hanoi, Vietnam. From there, travel to Haiphong and look for a man by the name of Nao Hu. You will be equipped there and assisted across the border into China.”

“Why there?”

“It is the best place to smuggle someone into China.”

That seemed rather unlikely, but he wasn’t about to tell the General that. “What then?”

“You need to make your way to Beijing. We believe the plane will be transported over land somehow, through Afghanistan to Iran. You need to take it out before they get to Afghanistan.”

“Why not just fly the plane there and then ship the pilot home?”

“They fear it would be our best chance to shoot it down. We still have troops in Afghanistan. If they fly it over, we can ‘accidentally’ shoot it down. But if a large Chinese convoy travels across the country with diplomatic immunity granted by the Afghan government, anything we do to it will be construed as an act of war.”

Although the explanation made sense—at least on the surface—Gardner still had an uneasy feeling that he wasn’t being told everything. “Very well, General.”

“Get going, son.”

The line went dead.

As if that singled his doom, the corporal appeared as if by magic. “Your plane is waiting, Captain.”

Heaving a worried sigh, Bill got up and left with the earnest young man.

The route taken to Hanoi was indeed convoluted. To avoid Iranian airspace, they flew south to a remote British Island known as Diego Garcia Island. He changed planes and flew northeast to Singapore, and then on to Hanoi. Each time he switched planes, but each time the airplane was a Wastend company jet. If they were trying to keep a low profile, they failed miserably. He suspected they just wanted to keep anything he did firmly attached to the Wastend company. Bill idly wondered how many lives had been lost all for the gain of plausible deniability. Way too many, he decided.

Two days later, he touched down in the hot, steamy city of Hanoi, Vietnam. The place had changed significantly since the Vietnam War in the 1960’s and the border war with China in the 1970’s. For the first time in decades, Hanoi was on friendly terms with the United States. Recently, an exchange of information as to the fate of many missing American soldiers had been released, finally putting a period at the end of the lives of many people.

The primary result for Bill was that he wasn’t regarded with outright suspicion and hostility. His white skin, brown hair, and height made him somewhat of a novelty to the shorter, dark-haired, darker skinned Vietnamese. Unfortunately, that didn’t bode well to stay incognito. He stuck out like a sore thumb. He was so obviously American that he began to wonder what General Hynes was thinking. No, he began wondering if the general was even sane! This was an impossible mission!

With nothing more than a backpack meant to aid in his survival of the jungle-like terrain, he wondered how he was going to find a bus headed to Haiphong. His lack of knowledge of the local languages seriously handicapped his endeavors in

this capacity. Good grief! He didn't even know Chinese all that well. How was he supposed to operate in China? He began to think that Hynes was not crazy after all. The man was plainly deranged.

Bill walked slowly off the tarmac, still wondering how he was going to get to Haiphong. He heard that a billion people in Asia were trying to learn English. Hopefully, one of them worked at the ticket booth at the bus station.

It never came to that. A man in a matchbox looking van slid to a stop in front of him and a man, looking more Chinese than Vietnamese, stuck his head out. "You Bill Gardner?"

Gardner's eyebrows shot up. "That's me."

"Good. You get in. We go now."

The man wore pajama like clothing, a light colored fabric that held up well in the sweltering heat and humidity. A pointy straw hat tied loosely under his chin seemed to be more a part of him than a mere accessory. Bits of dark hair stuck out from underneath the hat, and he wore the widest grin Bill had ever seen.

"Uh...where?" he asked, taken back.

"Haiphong. You come with me. We friends."

Bill didn't know how true that last statement might actually be, but he opened the driver side door—the handle consisted of a rusty wire strung through the equally rusty sickly green door panel—and sat down on a metal seat. *Great*, he sighed to himself. *This is bound to be the bumpiest ride in human history.*

He wasn't far wrong. Apparently the van had no shocks or struts to speak of.

"I am Nao Hu," the short Asian man said, grinning ear to ear. "I your friend."

"Yeah, friends...um, look, Nao Hu, you aren't Vietnamese are you?"

"No. Chinese. You American."

"Yeah. What are you doing here in Hanoi?"

"I am...what you say...fugitive."

That sounded ominous. "What happened?"

Nao Hu's smile disappeared as if it had never existed. "Two years ago, Chinese government took my mother. Political. I try to get her out. I fail. Come here." The man then launched into a long dialogue in his native tongue. Bill had no idea what he was saying and could only pick out a word here or there. But it didn't matter; he got the gist of the story from the few English words that the man had spoken. Hu's mother had been kidnapped for political reasons and was being held in some communist jail. His failure to free his mother meant he had to live in exile. Bill understood immediately why this man had been selected to help Bill get across the border. He had clearly done it before, and Gardner suspected more than one time.

The road they travelled upon twisted and turned through the choking jungle underbrush. At times, the trees were so thick that Bill could barely distinguish the road from the jungle. And bouncy! After just the first mile, Gardner felt as if he had undergone a beating from an angry Sumo wrestler. Everything hurt, and there was absolutely no way to make the hard metal seat any more comfortable.

After Hu's first initial conversation, the man had lapsed into silence, his smile seemingly gone. Not that Bill was interested in conversation. His full concentration had to be on trying to prevent a bump from slamming his head into the roof of the small van. He already had several bruises from not being quick enough.

About three hours later, Hu looked over. "We almost there. Soon."

“And then what?”

“We wait one day. Go north. Cross border. I help.”

“You’ll help me with my mission or just across the border.”

The small man shrugged. “Fate knows.”

That also sounded ominous.

Soon they came to a small hut built into a clearing somewhere outside the city limits of Haiphong. Getting out of the van proved to be a challenge. Every muscle and bone ached with a persistency he had not experienced since a mission to South America years ago. That time, he had contracted malaria. He cursed the abominable car and silently vowed never to step foot in the beast again.

Hu, on the other hand, jumped out of the van as fresh and spry as anyone Bill had ever seen—and he had made the trip along that cursed road twice! Hu motioned towards the shack. “My home. Come.”

They entered the small single room hut. A cot, looking as if it was wilting in the heat and humidity, sat in one corner. A single table with a radio, some paper, and a dirty bowl of left over rice sat in another corner. The dirt floor looked clean enough, if one discounted the sprouts in the corners, and a single wood shuttered window faced north.

There was no second cot.

The only other distinguishing feature was a large chest situated at the foot of the cot. Hu went over to the cot and chest, tossed his ballcap onto the bunk and flung open the chest. “Come. Your equipment.”

Bill walked over and glanced into the chest. He picked up a .45 auto, four extra clips, a large knife, boots that could be used for both in and out of the city, and a heavy bag. Glancing in the bag, he raised an eyebrow and looked at Hu. “C4?”

The man grinned. “Big boom!”

“Sure is.” Bill didn’t relish carrying around this much explosive. He quickly calculated, and had enough to destroy a good size warehouse with everything and everyone inside. Ouch. And they expected him to waltz all over China with this stuff! Insane. “Look, Hu, I got to talk to General Hynes. Can you contact him?”

“No. Radio receive only.”

“How do you...” Bill trailed off, realizing the futility of trying to figure this all out. Hu reminded him of those weirdo survivalists who loved to rough it just to prove how tough they were. Though Hu may have a different reason, he certainly didn’t seem to mind his sparse living circumstances.

“Tomorrow, we go. We get sleep now.”

Looking out the window, Bill realized that night was falling. Somewhere, a large cat screamed his anger at missing a kill. More ominousness. With another sigh, he looked at the cot. “Who gets the cot?”

Sometime before the sun came up, Bill found himself in the van once more. The road they followed north wended and crept through the underbrush. For whatever reason, the route proved to be less bumpy than the first road from Hanoi. Neither did Hu seem particularly interested in getting to their destination in a hurry.

“We cross border fifty kilometers east of Lang Son.”

“We?”

“Yes. I go with you.”

Bill breathed a sigh of relief. He didn't relish trying to move about a country when he didn't even speak the language. The few words he did know amounted to swear words. He would need a guide, someone who spoke the language, and someone who knew how to hide. Hu, hopefully, could provide that and if not, maybe he knew who could.

“Isn't it dangerous for you in China?”

“Yes.”

“But you are going anyway?”

He shrugged. “It dangerous here too. I go with you. Help you. American government free my mother.”

“They promised to free your mother?”

Hu licked his lips and said nothing. He didn't need to. The doubt and hope that warred over his features told the true story. The US government wouldn't dare risk an international incident to rescue one woman who held no political clout. They had merely hinted to Hu, stringing him along with the hope that if he helped the US, they would in turn rescue his mother one day. Bill knew it to be an empty hope at best, maybe not...Nao Hu probably did too, but this was his mother. He would not give up hope.

Gardner admired the man and felt sorry for him all at the same time. He couldn't guess the man's age. The man's face was lined, but the lines seemed more stress lines than age lines, and though his lack of English and large grin made him seem rather backwards, a simmering intelligence lay just below the surface. Gardner had no doubt that if push came to shove, this would be a very dangerous and cunning man.

“What is the plan?” he asked.

“Wait.”

The lawyer took the hint and settled back to wait. He spent the time trying to figure out how he would possibly get to Beijing, even if they managed to sneak across the border without being spotted or detained. No doubt Nao Hu could contrive of a way, but the mission seemed ill planned and ill conceived. How could one man who barely spoke the language infiltrate and destroy a Chinese plane, no doubt protected by some of the most sophisticated equipment the Chinese had? He looked at the satchel containing the C4 explosives. Just being caught with that would mean either a death sentence or the rest of his life in a secret military prison.

Something wasn't right about this entire mission, but he just couldn't put his finger on what it might be. He trusted General Hynes, but he seriously doubted his ability to succeed. Sighing, he shoved these unproductive thoughts aside and focused on the next step. One step at a time, he decided—just take things one step at a time.

Sometime later, Hu pulled the van off the road and into a thicket of trees. “Come,” he said, jumping out of the vehicle. Bill followed suit and found the smaller man rounding the van with a machete in his hands. “Cut branches and hide van,” he instructed.

Shrugging, Bill took the machete and set about cutting down large branches to conceal the van from prying eyes. Hu pulled two packs out of the van and began

stuffing supplies into each. Gardner noted that the man had no weapons, nor did he add any to the bag. Bill frowned at that, but said nothing. When the van was sufficiently hidden, Bill retrieved the satchel of explosives and put them into his own bag.

“Where do we go from here?” he asked as the slighter man shouldered his pack.

“Follow. I show.”

They marched for thirty minutes through the thick terrain until they emerged on a high bluff that revealed a treacherous landscape of canyons and mountains. Hu pointed to a gorge below them. “We go there.” He pointed to the top of the mountain that the gorge bisected. “Border there. No one know we cross.”

Gardner considered. “How long will this take?”

“Four days to Ningming. We take train there.”

Bill looked perplexed. “Four day hike?”

Hu shrugged. “Not know this word.”

“Four day walk?”

Hu’s eyes lit up. “Yes. Good walk.”

Gardner sighed. He wasn’t going to like this, not one bit. “Are there any dangers?”

“Always dangers.”

“I mean human dangers. Are there any Vietnamese or Chinese we need to worry about once we get down in the gorge?”

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes.” Hu shrugged. “Chinese have...how you say...post down there.”

Bill considered. “How many men are likely to be there.”

“Three.”

“Okay. Great. Glad to have everything cleared up then. So what are we waiting for? Let’s go.”

Grinning from ear to ear, Nao Hu began the descent into the gorge.

Chapter 15

It had taken most of the rest of the day to reach the small military post built into the side of the gorge. Bill hadn’t gotten a lot of information out of Nao Hu, but he did get enough to understand that this route had once been a major smuggling corridor. Even if no one was using it much, the Chinese still felt the need to establish a presence in the area.

The Vietnamese, on the other hand, ignored the area, despite tensions between the two countries that existed since the border war. Hu claimed that once a month, a Vietnamese patrol would scout the post, seeking to make sure that no military build-up was taking place in the narrow gorge. The Chinese, bored, would often invite the Vietnamese patrol in for drinks, before sending them on their way. It seemed the tension existed more at a government level than in the rank and file.

Still, Hu said it would be better to avoid the men at the post. Bill quite agreed. An American dropping in for coffee would not have the same effect as the predictable Vietnamese patrol would.

The rocky gorge was navigable only by a narrow trail that wound its way along the bottom. The post, looking more like a rundown shack than a proper military establishment, was built on a ledge about fifty feet higher than the gorge floor. Music, and voices raised in argument, filtered down to Gardner's ears.

"What are they doing?"

"They try have fun. Relax."

Bill didn't know if the man meant for him to relax, or was trying to describe what the men in the post were doing. Either way, he forced his muscles to relax. The trail began an ascent towards the post, abandoning the gorge floor due to large and impassable boulders. They would be forced to walk within feet of the men in the shack. Hopefully the guards would just stay inside until he passed.

"They can't see American," Hu whispered. "Else they die."

Bill understood. They couldn't afford to be seen. No doubt they had a working radio inside to report anything untoward, and even if he disabled the radio, if he was seen, one of the men would undoubtedly hike out to report the American. If he was seen, he would need to kill the men. All of them. That left a bad taste in his mouth.

Slowly, they inched their way up the trail, careful not to dislodge any rocks that might alert those within the shack that someone approached. Bill slowed his breathing, and allowed his focus to gather on the task at hand. More deaths resulted from panic and overreaction than anything else. He needed a clear head and sharp wits.

The trail passed right by the door to the shack, allowing only about six feet from the door to the ledge and a fifty foot drop to the bottom of the gorge. A five story fall was nothing to sneeze at. The back wall of the shack looked to be either the cliff wall itself, or it had been built right next to the cliff wall. It was entirely possible that another room had been dug into the wall to allow for more room. A single window by the door faced the ledge and the trail. Bill and Hu would need to sneak under the window and by the door without being seen, and also make their way down the trail and into the rocks on the descent side of the trail without being seen.

The shack itself was a low built thing that could be climbed over on the cliff wall side, but Bill didn't hold any faith that attempting such a rash action would go unnoticed by those inside.

Slowly he moved forward, Hu now following as Bill's natural instincts for leadership assert themselves. Utilizing every trick he had ever learn when in the military, he moved catlike along the trail, careful to use the larger rocks as stepping stones and avoid the crunchy gravel as much as possible.

He got to within ten feet or so of the shack when the door swung open and someone partially stepped outside. Most of the man's body remained inside as the soldier continued his argument with his companions inside. That could change at any moment.

Bill realized several things in the instant the man had opened the door. First, the moment the man moved outside fully, he and Hu would be spotted. Secondly,

he had no weapon other than the explosives and his knife. Neither weapon was ideal in this situation.

With no hesitation, he pulled Hu after him as he scrambled silently forward. He reached the side of the shack and hugged the wall beyond the view of the door. Hu, his breathing also under control, looked at Bill in concern. Both understood that if the soldier decided to move their way down the trail, they would be spotted instantly. If he was just going to the ledge to relieve himself or get away from his companions for a moment, then they might stay safely out of sight until he decided to re-enter the shack.

The lawyer held his breath and edged forward until he stood just around the corner. If the man stepped in their direction, he would have to act quickly. This first guard presented no problems, but it was the two others inside that Bill was concerned about.

He waited.

Suddenly the Chinese soldier stepped into view. No doubt the man merely wanted to take a stroll, for he certainly didn't notice them at first, but Bill didn't hesitate. He lashed out with a powerful kick that launched the man out over the ledge. With a despairing cry, the man fell from sight.

Almost seemingly like one motion, Bill recovered his balance and yanked Hu around, pushing him to the corner of the shack where the wall met the cliff face. "Climb," he ordered.

Hu understood the gravity of the situation, and he started to climb the shack wall just as the other two guards, having heard their companion's cry, came running out the door to look over the edge.

Bill hoped fervently that the two guards would mistake the man's fall for an accident and not look around for other possibilities. Hu, nimble as a cat, darted up the wall and rolled onto the shack's roof. Bill Gardner followed more slowly, finding scant hand holds on the splintery wood, and praying that the two other soldiers wouldn't turn around and look.

Neither did. They talked excitedly as they looked over the edge, pointing and arguing amongst themselves as they tried to locate their dead companion. Bill managed to get to the roof, and he followed Hu's example and rolled along the top until he came to the other side of the shack. He dropped down and crouched in the shadows there next to Hu. They waited.

Finally the two soldiers ran down the trail in the direction that Bill and Hu had come from, that being the quickest way into the gorge and to the body of their companion. Gardner regretted the murder, for murder it was. The man had been innocent and Bill had killed him in cold blood without so much as a chance to defend himself. No matter how necessary the man's death might have been, Bill felt ill.

Hu whispered in his ear, "They gone. Come. Stay low."

They hurried along the path until the shack had disappeared behind them. Once Bill felt safe enough, he pulled his companion to a stop. "Wait. What will they do about this incident?"

"Report it."

"I know that, but will the Chinese react swiftly and come to investigate, or will they just ignore the incident, thinking it an accident?"

Hu shrugged. "Who knows?"

"Yeah, who knows..." Bill ran a frustrated hand through his hair. More than ever, he felt like this mission was doomed to failure. He just couldn't see how he, mostly alone, could meet his objectives. Shaking aside the feeling, he turned towards the trail. "Okay, my friend. We have a long walk ahead of us, so we might as well get started."

Hu nodded and they trotted off. Gardner couldn't help but think that both of them were somehow dupes in a conspiracy that reached well beyond what they knew of.

High up on the mountain another Chinese soldier lowered his binoculars and considered what he had seen. The two men, one looking to be a white man, American, Russian, or European—he didn't know which—had slipped by the watch post below. He hadn't seen how the pair had made it past the guards below, but he had clearly heard the death scream of one of the soldiers. He didn't need to see it to know the man had fallen off the ledge and into the gorge. Accident or not, the timing was suspicious. He was in no position to do anything about it. His role was to observe the Vietnamese border and report any troop movements, and this secret watch post was isolated.

He rubbed his tired eyes. He had been up here for four months and he longed to be back home. Sighing, he moved to a small shack situated under some trees. He needed to report this. He hoped the report might jog someone's memory that he was out here all alone. Maybe, he would even be relieved and sent home. Anyway, someone was sure to be interested in the fact that a white man had slipped across the border.

Nearly two weeks later, Bill and Hu finally reached Beijing. Bill had no doubt that if the little man hadn't been along, he would have been captured or killed long ago. Hu knew where to go, what to avoid, and where they could find food and shelter. Bill found it all surreal. He felt like a fugitive, and every sound put him on edge. He wondered how long before a door was kicked in and soldiers would surround him. He didn't relish such a fate. No doubt he would disappear into some hidden prison where he would die a very lonely death.

Hu somehow maintained a level of optimism that put Bill to shame. The small Chinaman seemed invigorated by the cloak and dagger lifestyle. The man's hope and faith in seeing his mother released kept him going.

Hu led Bill through a suburb of Beijing filled with immigrants from all over. There were enough large white men walking around to make Bill's presence less notable to the local populace. Hu seemed to know exactly where to go as they made their way through the tall apartment buildings.

"We stay here," Hu explained. "Many Americans. Many Brits. You fit in."

"That's good," Bill replied. "Tell me, Hu, how are we going to find this plane? How do we even know it is still in the area?"

"Still here," he insisted.

"How do you know that? If Iran bought it, why hadn't they delivered it by now. It has been over two weeks since the auction."

Hu shrugged. "I told need..." he seemed to struggle with his words "...demonstration," he finished. "Iran no buy until see what plane can do."

That made sense. They would want a live demonstration before the funds change hands, so the Chinese government wouldn't risk moving it until afterwards. That gave Gardner a very narrow timeframe in which he could accomplish his task. He didn't imagine that either the Iranians or the Chinese were anxious to delay the transfer for very long. No, the demonstration would take place shortly, of that Bill had no doubt, but how to find out when and where.

"Do you know anymore?" he asked his guide.

Hu shrugged again. "No. Only know in Beijing."

"Okay, then I'm going to need a map and someone who knows everything about the city." He thought about it for a bit. "Preferably a thief."

Hu blinked in confusion. "A thief?"

"Oh yes. Thieves make it their business to know where everything is. They need to know where to steal and where not to steal. If anyone knows, it would be a thief." Bill smiled. "Yes, that would do nicely. Can you get me the map?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then I'll go get us a thief."

Hu regarded Gardner with a look that questioned the sanity of the American. "How you find a thief?"

Bill chuckled and shook his head. "Don't worry, my friend. I'm an American. I'm a big fat target for a wily thief. All I need is a large wallet and directions to the shopping district. The thief will come to me." He looked around. "Where do I find you?"

Hu pointed to a hotel. "There. I no go in. I wait for you."

Bill understood. This district housed many foreigners, and only Chinese of influence and money would come here. Gardner imagined that a significant amount of international business took place in such lobbies. "Fine. I've got some money, so when I return with our thief, we will figure out where to stay." He nodded towards the hotel. "I don't know if we should stay in something so obvious."

Hu grinned. "Large store two kilometers that way." He pointed towards the east. "You go there. Catch thief."

"Thanks."

Gardner walked for perhaps a mile before finding a large shopping mall. The mall was thronged by people, many tourists and foreigners who had plenty of money to fling around. He looked down at his scruffy looking clothes and realized he needed to change into something else. Currently, he didn't look like a rich American.

Finding a clothing store, he purchased new clothing using a credit card—nothing fancy, just expensive casual ware. It felt good to be in some clean clothes. Since the train ride into the heart of China, he had managed to find the time to take a shower or two, but his serviceable clothing looked...ill-used, to say the least. He still carried the satchel with the explosives in it, his knife, and a handgun he had picked up along the way. He had enough money to live lavishly for a time, but the sooner he could complete this mission the better.

Looking more like a rich American, he began strolling from shop to shop, keeping his eyes out for any pickpocket or would-be thief. He knew better than to wonder into isolated areas—especially outside—where a gang could simply beat

him and take what they wanted. No, he needed a solitary thief, one with a quick wit and nimble fingers.

Bill had several other reasons for wanting a thief. Thieves would not be used by the government to spy on either their own citizens or the many foreigners in this part of the city. In addition a thief would most likely know ways around the city that others, even professional spies, would not. General Hynes had given him the tracker to locate the beacon he had stashed aboard the plane. But he had to get within a mile of it to be sure, and a thief would cut down the search time significantly.

People thronged around him, chatting, laughing, and hurrying about their business. Occasionally he spotted security mingling with the crowds, and once he saw a group of slurry teenagers slinking through the crowd, dressed in styles ten years outdated in the States.

The mall atmosphere resembled those back home, except more of these people felt comfortable in tight spaces, jostling each other, brushing up against one another in lines or at counters. Americans would find the invasion of personal space disquieting, but here in China such contact was the norm. In addition, Bill realized, it allowed the pickpockets more opportunities to lift a wallet or piece of jewelry here or there.

For thirty minutes, the lawyer wandered around the mall without spotting a single person who might be a thief. It dawned on him then that he needed to make himself conspicuous—an easy mark. How to do that? He spotted a jewelry store situated in the corner of a junction of the mall. Perfect.

He wandered in and pointed to the most expensive men's watch in the place. "I would like to see that, please."

The salesman's eyes lit up. No doubt he was already calculating his commission on a watch that cost nearly nineteen thousand dollars. "Of course, sir," he replied in passable English. "This is a very good choice. The Jaeger Amvox5 just is perfect for any occasion, providing just the right amount of flash and decorum."

Gardner nodded, knowing the rehearsed speech meant little to the salesman. "Let me see it."

The man retrieved the watch from the secure case and handed it to Bill who looked carefully at it. After a moment, he snorted and tossed the watch back on the counter—much to the horrified man's astonishment. "What is this!" Bill demanded, raising his voice. "Do I look like an idiot! This watch is just a cheap imitation!" Actually, Bill had no idea if that was true or not. But in China, who knew for sure?

"Sir!" the man protested. "I assure you—"

"You assure me? Are you questioning me, sir? Do you think I don't know my watches?" Bill pulled out his wallet and began pulling bills out one at a time, tossing them carefree onto the countertop. "You might as well rob me now!" he yelled into the ashen man's face. "Take it! You might as well! Trying to sell me an imitation!"

"No, sir, please, it is genuine," the man hastened to say. Another man, probably the owner, was rapidly approaching, his face a study in consternation at the disruption in his store.

Bill pulled out some more money and threw it in the face of the salesman. "Steal me blind will you? Then take it now! Take it all! I heard stories about places like this. Selling sham merchandise! I'm insulted!"

The owner finally arrived, shoving his speechless salesman out of the way. "Sir," he said, gathering up the bills and pushing them back towards Bill. "We are an honest business. Please take your money and leave."

"You're blasted right, I'll leave," Gardner muttered loudly. He snatched his money from the counter and stuffed it haphazardly into his wallet, which he thrust into his back pocket without any attempt to secure it safely. Turning on heel, he stormed out of the shop and shoved his way through the crowd as if irritated that they would not give way before him.

Now, where are you, my thieving friend, he thought to himself. Someone should have noticed that little display and prepared to make a move the moment he left that store. No thief could resist all that money he had flashed around and the seemingly easy location to get at his wallet. *Come on! Where are you?*

A young man, his hair dyed red like any number of the teenagers that roamed the mall, suddenly bumped into him. Up until that moment, Bill had been shoving people out of his way, leaving a trail of protests and curses around him. No doubt, this thief assumed to receive the same treatment, only he expected to have Bill's wallet firmly in hand when the lawyer shoved him. Instead, Bill grabbed the man's wrist and pulled him close.

The bulge where his wallet should be was gone. Bill had to hand it to the thief. He had nimble fingers.

Locking the man's wrist, he twisted, bringing the thief around and facing away from the Gardner. The hold was painful and the thief let out a startled cry as Bill brought him to his toes.

"Please, good sir! I give it back! I give it back!"

Surprised and pleased that the man spoke English, Bill bent over the smaller man and whispered into his ear. "Do exactly what I tell you, and I'll let you have the wallet and the money."

"I mean no harm!" the man insisted.

"But I might. You will come with me and make no fuss. Try to get away and I'll hunt you down and turn you over to those nice looking police men. I think they would love to find out about your chosen career path."

"No! Please! I do as you say. I come!"

"Glad to hear it. Now move." Keeping the thief's arm twisted behind his back, he shoved the man forward. He marched the terrified man out the door and down the street. For a quarter of a mile, he said nothing, just focused on keeping the man moving forward.

Eventually they came to the hotel where Hu spotted them and came up quickly. "He thief?" he asked with a nod to the prisoner.

"Yes, this is the one."

Hu then talked to the man rapidly in Chinese. The thief responded. After a time, Hu looked up at Bill. "He know where the plane is. He will show us best way to get there."

"Yes, I will," the thief agreed. He paused. "Do I keep wallet?"

Bill spun the man around and put his nose an inch in front of the smaller man's face. "Get us there and you can have the wallet."

"I get you there." He glanced around. "I take you tonight."

Chen Lee looked up as the young intelligence analyst burst into his office. "News, sir. I have news."

Lee grimaced in irritation and tossed the report he had been reading onto the desk. "It better be important, boy," he responded sternly. "Or you'll find yourself on some ship in the High Seas trolling for junk on the bottom of the sea floor."

The young man swallowed. Everyone knew that was exactly where Lee had been assigned before his promotion and subsequent duties to protect the new fighter plane, now housed in a warehouse next door. "I just got a hit on Bill Gardner's credit card."

It took Lee a moment to remember. "The American in the UAE?"

"The same sir."

"Well?" Lee said into the resulting silence.

"Oh! Sorry! Uh, I have a hit on the man's credit card."

The young analyst looked so sincere, but Lee didn't have time to coddle the young fool. "You said that already. Why is this important?"

"What? Oh! Because the credit card was used right here in Beijing."

Lee snapped to his feet. "Here?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Where? At a mall in the Chayoang District."

That made sense. The Chayoang District housed more than sixty percent of the foreign companies doing business in China. An entire industry had grown up around these companies to meet their usually lavish needs—lavish by Chinese standards anyway. "How did he get into the country? I thought I ordered his passport flagged."

"You did, sir. His passport hasn't been used."

"An alias then?"

The analyst shrugged. "If so, why use his real credit card?"

Maybe the man wasn't so foolish after all. Unwilling to give the analyst any credit for the thought, he snapped, "Shut up and let me think!"

A report a week ago about someone slipping across the border down near the Vietnam boarder came to mind. The report had been vague, although a death of a soldier had been reported in the same area. Lee's natural suspicion rose. He didn't think this American's presence in Beijing at the same time the new fighter plane would be demonstrated to the Iranians was a coincidence. He had no doubt that the man was an American spy.

"Double security around the plane," he ordered. "I don't want anyone who isn't a known Chinese man to get near that plane. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Get to it."

The man saluted and left, leaving Lee to his thoughts. He knew he should have taken the time to kill the American in the UAE. He regretted that mistake, but he didn't plan on making another. No, this time, he would kill the American. It had taken him nearly forty years to get this promotion and he would be hanged if he allowed some American spy to ruin it.

He grabbed the phone from off his desk. “I want to see Wong in my office immediately.” He hung up before the woman on the other side could acknowledge the order. Wong, like himself, worked for the Ministry of State Security (MSS). MSS had been tasked with seeing to the security of the new fighter plane and the safe transfer to the Iranians once they had paid for it. However, Wong, unlike himself, was a professional assassin. He would be perfect for this job of hunting down the American and killing him.

Lee smiled to himself. He relished hearing of the American’s death.

Chapter 16

Bill pulled his head back down and sighed. The small red-headed thief sat next to him behind the wall, munching on some unpronounceable snack. The wily little man hadn’t tried to run off yet, much to the American’s surprise. His name, amusingly enough, was Mouse. The significance of that was undoubtedly lost on Gardner for Chinese tended to view things differently. For all he knew, ‘mouse’ was a profound compliment.

Rubbing at his face and smearing the stuff he had used to darken his features—he really didn’t want to know what had gone into making the stuff—he hung his head between his hands and let out another sigh. The crisp night air felt good every time he took a breath, though the odors of the city were not that pleasant when the breeze shifted, bringing in the smell of some nearby slaughterhouses.

Hu, dressed in black fatigues similarly to Bill, crouched on the other side of the thief. He too sat back down, and even in the darkness, the lawyer could see the man’s fear. “No good,” he muttered. “No good.”

Bill quite agreed with that assessment. The rooftop they had found gave them a clear view of the warehouse Mouse claimed the prototype aircraft was being kept. Based on the amount of armed security that roamed the premises, Bill did not doubt the little man’s claim. Mouse, after he had found out how much money Bill was willing to pay, readily agreed to act as a guide. Much as Bill had expected, the underworld knew of the plane’s existence and where it was being kept. Bill figured that this knowledge was important to a thief, if nothing else to know where to stay away from.

Mouse, however, seemed to be cursed with an overly curious mind. While that might seem wonderful in a child, it often got a thief killed. Curiosity and greed rarely mixed well. Nevertheless, Bill counted it fortuitous to have found Mouse. The wily thief knew exactly where to go to observe the warehouse without being detected. Without that advantage and this rooftop, Bill felt he would have been caught for certain.

Security around the building would have done credit to Fort Knox. Armed guards, dogs, and a nifty surveillance system made trying to penetrate the perimeter a nightmare. And that was just the outer layer. No doubt inside the building would make the outside nightmare seem peaceful by comparison. “Maybe if I had two months to plan,” he said slowly. But even then, he doubted it. This job

couldn't be done by one man. He would need at least an assault team just to breach the perimeter. The fence that surrounded the warehouse compound looked deadly. Added to the razor wire both on top and at the base of the fence, Bill suspected the entire thing was electrified. Just touching the thing would be enough to incapacitate an adult man.

Hu glanced over and shook his head. "No do this. We die if try."

"I know, I know," Gardner responded holding up a hand. "I don't know what General Hynes was thinking!" He looked down at the small device in his hand. Roughly rectangular, it was made out of a black metal with but a single LED light in the middle. It was showing a steady green, indicating that the tracking beacon he had stashed on the Chinese fighter plane was within a mile of his current location. Well, at least he knew where the plane was.

Hu looked troubled. "You sent to die?"

That set the lawyer back a bit. "You think I was meant to fail? Why?"

Hu shrugged. "Job too hard. You only one man."

True, none of this made sense. Bill understood the need to keep the US government out of the equation, but what could a single man do. Surely Hynes would have known of the futility of this mission. What's going on?

"Air bomb?" Hu inquired.

"Air bomb? Oh, you mean an airstrike?"

"Yes."

"I don't have any means of calling one. I don't think there is a US carrier within striking distance in any case. Maybe the US bases in Japan, but an air strike would be an overt use of force. They would risk a war."

"War no good," Hu agreed.

"Come," Bill beckoned his companions. "We can't do any good up here. Let's go back to the motel." He stuffed the night scope into his bag, shouldered the backpack of explosives and crawled away from the roof's edge. Mouse moved lightly, filtering from shadow to shadow, hardly discernible in the darkness. Hu's size allowed him some freedom of movement, but Bill felt like he was crawling like a bloated slug. "I'm too short for this crap, man," he muttered.

An old metal staircase led down to street level on the side away from the warehouse. He didn't fear being heard from this distance for the warehouse was nearly three quarters of a mile from the building they now stood upon. They descended quickly into the gloom of an alley that stank of rotting food and other things impossible to imagine.

Once on the ground, Mouse took three steps away from the stairs and froze. So quickly did he stop moving that Bill almost ran the little man over. He pulled up in time though and backed off a step. Something was wrong. He could see it in the way Mouse stood, his face tight, his nose lifted, and eyes half closed. Bill looked around, but the deep shadows of the alley made seeing anything impossible. He tried to listen, but he heard nothing.

Suddenly, Mouse squeaked—a very mouse like sound—and started to run. Bill hesitated and that saved his life. A bullet struck the metal staircase near Bill's head and ricocheted away, leaving a flash of sparks in its wake. A second later, the gun report blasted the silence all to pieces.

Everything happened quickly. Hu yelled and darted after Mouse, the thief having dove into the shadows of the alley, disappearing so profoundly that it looked as if he had just vanished. Bill, however, dropped straight to the ground and rolled, knowing that the darkness could only serve him. He drew his own handgun, but he didn't have to wait long. A man, wearing a long black overcoat, materialized out of the darkness, and unloaded round after round in Bill's direction. The bullets whizzed and snapped around his head and body, ricocheting off of the brick walls of the building or the metal staircase. One bullet grazed his shoulder, leaving a bloody tear in his shirt.

Bill Gardner tried to return fire, but despite what the movies showed, it is not an easy thing to hit a moving target while trying to dodge bullets yourself. His shots went wide, splattering into concrete walls or chipping off chunks of nearby brick walls. Adrenalin finally overloaded fear, and he lurched to his feet just as the assassin bore down on him with an empty gun. Bill had a few more rounds left in his, but as he brought the gun up to bring it into line with the assassin, the Chinese man let loose with a kick that turned his wrist numb and sent the gun flying away into the darkness.

Bill threw a punch of his own that the assassin easily dodged before unloading a series of punches that drove Bill straight back into the wall behind him. At least three of the strikes landed on the lawyer's chest, causing him to lose his breath and sapping strength from his body at the same time. One caught him square in the mouth, snapping his head back into the wall. Pain and dizziness vied for his attention, and he nearly blacked out.

If the assassin thought the American would collapse under the punishing blows, he was disappointed only by the fact that the wall kept the lawyer up right. Bill struggled to make the man out in the gloom, fighting away his dizziness and the blood that began to fill in his mouth. Instinctively he knew that if he didn't react immediately, the man would kill him. But the Chinese man had Bill outmatched in pure skill. Bill had never seen someone so quick and deadly with his fists. It looked for all the world like one of those Kung Fu movies.

Finally, the assassin came into focus as the man stalked up to finish Bill off. The man's pock-marked face looked sadistic in the gloom, his leering grin frightening in the pure pleasure he took in the beating of his hapless victim. For one awful moment, Bill couldn't react. His arms and body refused to cooperate, he couldn't even lift his hands to defend himself. So he did the next best thing.

He spat a mouthful of blood straight into the assassin's eyes.

The man screeched in surprise, and reacted by unlimbering a powerful, but partially blinded punch to keep the big American away from him. Bill saw it coming straight at his face. He had no time to try to block or even dodge, so he jerked his head forward as hard as he could to take the punch square on his forehead.

Fortunately, his forehead was stronger than his assailant's hand. Bill heard bones snap as the smaller bones yielded to the harder, thicker one of Gardner's head. The assassin screamed in pain this time. Bill's eyes crossed from the blow and he almost fell. Shaking off the sensation he leapt forward, grabbed the assassin in a bear hug, twisted, and launched the smaller man into a wall head first.

Although Bill's head might be harder than the assassin's fist, the cruel murderer discovered that his own head wasn't nearly as hard as the brick wall of a large building. Head and wall collided with jarring impact. The assassin grunted once and then fell to the ground, either stunned or unconscious.

Staggering over to the inert form, Bill reached down took hold of the man's head and snapped his neck. He collapsed atop the body, his breathing coming raggedly, and his eyes going in and out of focus. He didn't know how long he lay there, but he was finally roused by someone shaking his shoulder.

"American? You okay?"

Bill looked up, blinking. In the darkness he struggled to make out the face that looked down upon him. Finally he recognized Hu's voice. "Yeah, I'm okay," he said, his pounding head disagreeing sharply with his words. "Just give me a minute."

Hu crouched down. "We go now. Soldiers come."

Ah yes. No doubt the gun battle had alerted the soldiers. "Help me to my feet."

Hu did as requested, but held on tightly as Bill swooned, nearly collapsing again. His entire body hurt. His lips had been shredded against his own teeth, his chest felt like someone had done a Russian dance upon it, and his entire head pounded like some blasted rock concert.

"Where is Mouse?"

"Gone."

No surprises there. "Smart lad. We got to get out of here."

"American's fight strangely," Hu said as they limped towards the alley entrance. "I never see man use head like that."

Bill chuckled. "Trust me. It's not something you want to do on a regular basis."

Suddenly the booted feet and clatter of equipment of approaching soldiers reached their ears. "Come!" Hu hissed. "We must flee! Hurry!"

They weren't going to make it, at least not in Bill's condition. He needed at least one night to recuperate enough to be anywhere near effective. He might have even suffered a concussion from the blows to his head. Right then, he knew he wouldn't escape.

"Get out of here Hu," he ordered, trying to dislodge himself from his companion. "I'm only going to slow you down."

"No! I no leave you."

"Do you want both of us to get caught? Get out of here!"

Hu took a long look into the American's eyes, and then turned them to the alley entrance, where the noise of the approaching soldiers echoed off the alley walls. He nodded once, then let go of Bill - who promptly staggered next to a wall for support. Hu ran back down the alley, abandoning the American to whatever fate was in store for him.

Bill slumped against the wall, sliding down it to a sitting position. He half hoped the soldiers would miss him in the darkness and simply run by him. But that was his foggy mind at work, for no sooner did the soldiers rush into the alley then he was surrounded by three of them, each pointing a lethal looking automatic weapon in his face.

A command in Chinese was issued and the soldiers stepped back a pace, but didn't lower their rifles. A fourth man, this one wearing an officer's uniform strode up and stood over the American.

“Bill Gardner,” the man said affably. “You still live.”

“You know my name?” Bill asked in confusion.

“Of course, Mr. Gardner. We met very recently at a military exhibition in the Middle East. You seemed quite curious about my plane.” He smiled sadistically. “I’ve been tracking your movements since you came across the Vietnamese border, but let me tell that with a guy like you, it wasn’t an easy task. You have managed to escape us quite often.”

Bill felt his heart sink.

“My name,” the man went on, “is Wong Lee, and you are my prisoner.” He grinned evilly. “Which is an improvement, Mr. Gardner. I intended to kill you, but now that I have you, I think there are some questions you can answer for me.” His grin grew even larger. “I’ll kill you after.”

Chapter 17

Bill could see nothing. And he hadn’t been able to see even a flicker of light for hours...days even—for all he knew. After being captured, Lee had not said another word to him, nor had anyone else for that matter. He knew they had taken him to the warehouse where the plane was being kept, but they had promptly thrown him into a room and slammed the door, extinguishing all the light.

Gardner staggered around until finding a wall and then slumped down, slipping into unconsciousness. When he had waken, he had no concept of how much time had passed. His head still throbbed and his chest felt sore in ways he never thought possible.

It took some effort to regain his feet, and then only the concrete wall kept him upright. Slowly, he began to explore the room. He inched along, sliding his feet parallel to the wall while remaining in contact with his hands. He hoped to find a bed, or at least something softer than the concrete floor. He found nothing. The room seemed to be no bigger than a large broom closet, perhaps three feet by five feet, hardly enough room to even stretch out in. And empty, completely empty.

Sighing, he sat down once more and put his head into his hands, trying to clear his mind and thoughts. He had been stripped of everything, wallet, backpack, even his shoes. He still wore his other clothing, at least they hadn’t shoved him in here stark naked. No doubt they were trying to find out if he had any connections to the US Government, or if he was acting alone. They suspected much, but they wanted to have as much information as possible before questioning him.

Very well, then I need to stick to the cover story. General Hynes had every trail begin and end with Wastend. He remained on their payroll and no doubt his efforts as their lawyer was well documented and easily assessable online. Fine. Stick to the cover story. He could do that.

Only one problem with it though, he thought bitterly. The moment they believe it, they’ll have no use for me and kill me.

He sighed. The only use the cover story had was to give the US Government plausible deniability. That worked well for the armchair politicians who never

found themselves on the front lines, but it was about to get him killed. He honestly didn't know how he felt about that. He had made peace with God a long time ago. He wasn't afraid to die, but he idly wondered if this was the best way to die. Even if he admitted his role with the US Government, the two nations would dance around it, point fingers, make speeches in the UN and do nothing. Neither nation wanted to go to war with each other—that would be tantamount to destruction on such a wide scale that only the US stood a chance of coming out of it with something intact, though barely, giving other nations something to drool over.

So, if he allowed himself to become a bargaining chip, they would be forced to keep him around. It wouldn't be much of a life though, since he would no doubt remain in a tiny cell, much like his present one, for the rest of it. Finally, he just gave up trying to figure what to do and decided to roll with the punch. He would just have to see which way the wind blew.

Some indeterminable time later, the door opened. Bill immediately shielded his eyes from the glaring light, squinting against it. Two figures rushed into the room and hauled him to his feet, twisting his arms down to his side. They dragged him forward to where the man Lee stood silhouetted in the doorway.

"Good evening, Mr. Gardner," he said, his Chinese accent reminding him of some movie he couldn't quite recall. "It's time for you to answer some questions."

Bill said nothing. Until he knew what they knew, he couldn't even begin to develop a strategy to keep himself alive. Not that anything he came up with would matter. Two deaths could be laid squarely at his feet and everyone here knew it.

"Bring him."

They dragged him out of the cell and down a dimly lit hallway. Guards were posted in strategic locations, all of whom eyed him with deadly intent. He intentionally slumped in their grip, trying to give the impression of weakness. The sleep, even as uncomfortable as it was, had improved his stamina greatly. Now, beside a dull ache, he felt hungry.

Eventually, they dragged him into the main hanger of the warehouse, spot lights shown on the fighter plane sitting like a bird of prey in the middle of the hanger. The sleek design, painted mostly black, gave him an ominous feeling.

The guards tossed him onto the floor in front of Lee, who turned to put a hand on the nose of the fighter jet. "Do you know how much money went into this project?" he asked.

Bill didn't know, and he really didn't care. He glanced at the two guards, both of whom had drawn handguns pointed in his direction. Feeling the need to keep the conversation going, he said, "Not really. I'm sure that all the stops were pulled out on this one though."

Lee cocked his head. "I'm unsure of the idiom." He turned to look at Bill more directly. "English is such a crude language. It is a wonder that you can communicate more than grunts with each other. What means this... 'stops were pulled out?'"

"It just means you used a lot of resources to make this particular aircraft flyable."

"True." Lee turned again to pat the plane. "In terms of dollars, the number is into the hundreds of millions. The part we found in Somalia surprised us. We couldn't crack it and we determined that trying would only destroy it. So we built

this, intending to give it to another country for a fraction of what it cost us to build it." He swung back around. "And do you know why, Mr. Gardner?"

"No."

"To prevent the US from doing something stupid." He gestured to Gardner. "Your presence here is stupid." He poked a finger into the lawyer's chest. "You would risk an international incident just to destroy this plane and the technology we recovered?" He said something in Chinese, and one of the guards came over to hand him Bill's pack. Lee reached in and pulled out some of the C4. "This will be looked upon as an attack on China by the US, you fool!"

Realizing that he had better start saying something, Bill shook his head. "I was hired by the CEO of Wastend to recover or at least destroy the technology." He shrugged. "I don't even know if the US Government is aware of the situation. Wastend wanted to keep this matter private. I was sent by them."

Lee seemed to ponder that for a time. "It is true that everything we can discover seems to lead back to Wastend, but I'm not convinced. Though..." he trailed off, looking at the backpack in his hands. "You are ill prepared for a task like this. Either they had a lot of faith in your abilities, or they didn't really know what they were doing."

Bill suspected the latter, but all he said was, "I don't know. All I know is the CEO of Wastend is fit to be tied. He is scared that the US Government will discover his incompetence and shut him down, throw him in jail even. Apparently, a pirate ship recovered the item from one of Wastend transport ships. We were looking for it when we discovered you had already found it."

"This is completely a waste," Lee muttered. "We're already seeking to reproduce the technology. Now that we know what it can do and that it is possible, we will eventually make one of our own."

Bill had his doubts on that score. Without a real starting point or the ability to reverse engineer the technology, it would take years if not decades to even get close. "We're not concerned about that. We just don't want the US Government to discover that we lost it to begin with. If you come up with your own technology, that's none of our business." He nodded to the plane. "What you have there is."

"Are you saying that this Wastend CEO will keep trying?"

"The man is desperate. No telling what he might try. Look, Mr. Lee, if you give me the part, or at least give me evidence that it is destroyed, we can call it even. That is all we want. We want to make sure it is destroyed."

Lee shook his head. "I'm not sure I believe you. It seems to me the US should be aware of the problem, unless they are totally inept. This is why they would never really believe that we destroyed it, and the Iranians are now involved."

"So what happens now?"

Lee's grin spread across his face like an oozing oil. "You get to die, Mr. Gardner. You are a murderer. You have killed Chinese nationals. If what you say is true, the US Government doesn't even know you exist. They don't know you're over here, and they won't miss you when you are gone. In fact, even if they do know, they'll pretend that they don't. Killing you will be a pleasure."

Bill licked his lips. "Are you sure that is your best move? I mean, Wastend doesn't have the political liabilities that the US Government has. If I disappear, they can raise a media storm that will hurt your country's image. Wastend has a

lot of money. They may not be able to make waves big enough to cause your government any problems, but they can make you a liability. What happens to you then?"

Lee's smile slipped away. Both knew exactly what would happen if Lee became a liability. The Chinese government wasn't exactly known for its tolerance. At a minimum, the man would be sent into the most remote part of the government to languish the rest of his days in obscurity. At most, he would be brutally tortured and executed.

Bill knew the entire thing to be nothing but a bluff. Knowing Frank Vellore, the man wouldn't so much as spend a dime on Bill. The man was about as tight fisted as they came. No, if Bill disappeared, Vellore wouldn't even notice. As it was, he was only using company resources because he had no choice. Wong Lee didn't need to know that.

Lee's eyes narrowed into slits as he regarded his prisoner. No doubt he was weighing the pros and cons of killing Bill right then. The lawyer allowed his eyes to roam around. He needed to escape, and escape quickly. Beside Lee, only the two guards stood near. A couple of unarmed workers tinkered with some equipment at the back of the hanger, but they looked harmless enough.

The fighter sat at an angle to the rest of the warehouse hanger, a small rollaway staircase nestled up against the nose to provide easy access to the cockpit. Bill briefly entertained the insane idea of trying to actually fly the fighter plane out himself. His surveillance of the warehouse had revealed a long stretch of road that probably doubled as a runway. Unfortunately, he had no idea how to fly that kind of plane, and even if he did, he doubted the Chinese had designed an aircraft with an American in mind. Fuel tanks sat off to one side and a fuel truck sat towards the back of the hanger, wreathed in shadows.

If he could take out the two guards and Lee, he could still set the charges and blow the plane. He wouldn't get out alive, and he doubted his ability to take out three armed and violent men, but it seemed a better plan than just standing still for a bullet.

Suddenly, Karen, his girlfriend, popped into his mind. He had purposely chosen not to think about the redheaded woman while on the mission. But now, his thoughts roamed to her full lips, her long, lush hair, and the gentle humor that kept him smiling from the moment he entered her presence. Since this entire matter with Wastend had come up, he had seriously neglected Karen. He regretted that now, and he silently berated himself. She would probably never know what happened to him. To her, he would be just another deadbeat boyfriend who had abandoned her.

He snarled at the idea and Lee's eyes widened, mistaking the look. He pulled his gun and brought it up. "Time to die, Mr. Gardner."

An explosion rocked the warehouse. Everyone stumbled, the two guards instinctively turning towards where the sound had come from. Bill didn't bother. This was his chance...his only chance. He moved with purpose and violence.

Lee's gun was off target when the ex-marine rushed him and his shot went wide, missing the lawyer by scant inches. The noise seemed excessively loud in the enclosed warehouse, deafening Gardner for a moment as he leapt upon his captor.

Bruised and battered he may be, Bill still possessed some of the most instinctive fighting skills the marines had ever had the privilege to train.

Smoothly, much like a ballet dancer's fluid movements, Bill shoved Lee's gun arm out wide and spun nearly into the man's arms. A crack followed the gun report as the lawyer's elbow connected with Lee's chin. The man's head snapped back from the blow, and the only thing that kept the Chinese intelligence agent from collapsing was the hold Bill retained on the man. Bill continued his spin, adding the befuddled Lee into the mix. Somehow, Lee ended up in front of Bill when the first Chinese soldier took a shot.

The bullet slammed into Lee's chest, hit a rib, and deflected out the side of the man's chest cavity in a mist of blood. Lee gasped, the shock bringing clarity back to his eyes in time to see his own gun, now in the hand of his American prisoner, spit death back towards the two guards. Gardner's first bullet took the right soldier high up in the shoulder, spinning him around and sending him face first to the floor. His second shot struck the other man in the forehead. He crumpled like a crushed paper cup.

For a long moment, Bill just stood there, his mind still trying to grasp what had just happened. The staccato sounds of automatic weapons, screams, and yells could be heard from outside. He had no idea what was going on. He glanced around and noticed that the two workers in the back had disappeared. He and the wounded soldier were the only ones left alive.

Or soon would be anyway.

He glanced down at Lee, whom he still clung too. The man still lived, if barely. A bloody froth seeped between clenched teeth and the man's breathing sounded liquid. He had only moments to live.

Gently, Bill put the man down on the cement floor where he groaned. "Sorry, Mr. Lee," Bill said sadly. "I suppose both of us were just in the wrong place at the wrong time." Thinking of the children the Chinese had murdered to acquire the part to begin with, he said, "And it seems both of us now have innocent blood on our hands. You're lucky, Mr. Lee. You get to pay for it now. I have to live with it."

Lee reached up and grasped Bill's shirt, leaving a huge red stain. He tried to say something, but nothing came out other than a gurgle and the man went limp, his eyes staring into nothing.

Standing up, he saw the wounded soldier grasping desperately for his rifle. Realizing he was still in much danger, Bill hastened over, kicked the rifle out of the man's reach, and added another kick to the side of the man's head, rendering him unconscious. Looking around, he spotted his backpack full of explosives. He retrieved it and looked inside. What luck! Everything was still there. Sticking Lee's gun into his waistband, he rummaged through the explosives, pulling out the largest charge.

Someone was attacking the warehouse. He had no idea who they could be—Americans, Iranians or dissident Chinese. He thought of Hu and wondered if the resourceful man was attempting to stage a rescue. Either way, he now had the opportunity to destroy the plane. He quickly and efficiently planted explosives around the cockpit, while the firefight raged outside. He thanked God for the attack since it gave him uninterrupted time to plant the charges.

He stood back and observed his handiwork. The detonator was a small device that fit into the palm of his hand. One push of the button and the entire explosives would take out the plane and the fuel tanks as well. No doubt the entire hanger would be disintegrated. He needed to get out, preferably in one piece, before setting off the charge.

With the sounds of the fight from outside, he suspected his chances were dwindling by the second.

Chapter 18

Bill spotted a regular sized door to one side of the hanger, near the larger bay-like doors. Hurrying over, he gently opened it and peeked out. Soldiers ran in every direction, some frantically, some with purpose. A truck carrying a squad of heavily armed men whizzed by, spitting gunfire at something outside Bill's range of sight. He hesitated, trying to see a clear path to safety. If he could get far enough away, the explosion should afford him an opportunity to escape unnoticed. But how to get through this mess... alive?

He couldn't chance this direction. It was too open and too much was happening. Turning around, he looked for another way out. He searched his memory, trying to determine the layout of the compound. The hanger was attached on the eastern side to a group of smaller buildings, probably offices or barracks for the soldiers. The fence there came no more than a dozen feet from the edge of those buildings. Taking a deep breath, he set out.

The attack on the compound had to involve taking down the electric fence. If he could get there, he could find his way through—hopefully.

Spotting another door along the eastern edge of the hanger, Bill ran over, passing the wounded soldier on his way. The man had regained consciousness and was trying to drag himself towards the same door as Gardner. "Hey buddy," he said in a friendly tone as he passed, "I recommend getting out of here, pronto." The man probably didn't understand a word of it.

Bill reached the door and opened it carefully. This was the way he had been brought. Seeing no one, he hastened through and made his way along the hall. Two thirds of the way along, a metal door burst open and three Chinese soldiers spilled inside amidst a hail of bullets. Two of the soldiers took hits and sprawled limply onto the hallway floor. The third managed to avoid anything more than a flesh wound to his upper arm. He twisted around, putting himself to one side of the door, his pale face a testimony to the fierce fire fight that raged outside. Whoever was attacking the compound had a lot of help.

He marched up to the third soldier who never so much as even glanced his way. "Sorry, buddy," he said just as he reached him. The man spun around, only to find Bill's gun descending in a brutal arc. The man fell to the floor, unconscious.

The outside door remained opened and the other two bodies littered the floor, making a run by the door problematic—considering an unknown number of automatics were trained on the doorway. He'd have to jump it. He backed off some

and realized that his head still hurt some, affecting his balance. Swearing to himself, he shook off the pain and sprinted hard towards the open doorway. He jumped, clearing the bodies, but landing badly on the other side. He went down, skidding uncontrollably down the hallway as a wave of bullets splattered against the doorway and hallway wall. Someone had noticed his passing.

He finally rolled to a stop, cursing. “Will everyone just stop shooting at me!” he yelled; irritation, fear, and exhaustion all vying for dominance. It had been a long time since he had been in a firefight of this scope. The snapping bullets, the men yelling, the men dying, all wore away at his nerves and emotions. He knew that outwardly he looked calm. Inwardly, he knew this to be the reason he had left a promising career in the military.

Innocents always seemed to die in fights like this. Children always seemed to die. Every snap of a bullet brought back memories, memories of children lying bloody in the streets. Children’s empty, vacant eyes staring accusingly at the American soldier standing over them.

He shook the thoughts away and regained his feet. “Blast it all to Hades anyway,” he muttered. “Fools and power-mongers ever mix.”

Sporting new bruises and scrapes, Bill continued on his way. He needed to find an exit and quickly. The garrison here had been surprised, no doubt, at the level of ferocity and organization of the attackers, but once reinforcements arrived, the tide would turn. He needed to be out before that happened.

He finally located an isolated office with a single small window that looked out at the eastern side of the compound fence. The razor wire would be a problem, but not as much a problem as the fence itself would be—if it was still electrified. Hunting around, he discovered no latch to open the window. Cursing again, he took his pistol and used it to bust the glass out. The continued sounds of the battle drowned out any noise he made.

He crawled through, adding to his scrapes. Once outside, he paused to look around. In the distance, he could see people running and the flashes of rifles marked the location of at least some of the combatants. He turned to regard the fence. He couldn’t tell if it was still electrified or not, but he did realize something immediately. He couldn’t get through here. He didn’t have the right tools to cut through both the wire and the fence.

Cursing again, he put both hands to his head, trying to drown out the noises of the combat and to think. Then he remembered the truck in the hanger. Maybe... if he could only.... Turning back to the window, he squeezed back through and made his way back towards the hanger. His leap back across the open doorway attracted no attention as the fight had moved elsewhere. He needed to hurry though. He had few illusions how this would end. Whoever was attacking the compound had not been able to make enough headway to actually get close to the hanger—assuming the hanger and the plane within were the targets.

He returned to the hanger to see that the wounded soldier almost to the door. He passed by with a weak salute. “Better move faster than that, buddy!” Bill ran over to the truck and peered in. The keys were in the ignition—thank God! He then went to look at the tank gage on the back and discovered the tank to be empty—thank God! He didn’t want to run a gauntlet of bullets driving a tank full of highly combustible jet fuel.

Now to get the hanger doors opened. He didn't have time to figure it out. The thin aluminum doors would just have to give way to the more compact and sturdier truck. Jumping into the driver's seat, he turned the ignition. The diesel engine started up quickly and began rumbling eagerly.

Bill smiled. This, at least, would be fun.

Putting the truck in reverse, Bill lined it up with the hanger doors and punched the gas pedal, popping the clutch. The big diesel truck lurched backwards like an angry bear and bore down on the doors with all the finesse of a runaway freight train.

The truck hit the door in spectacular fashion. The fuel tank buckled under the impact, but the hardier steel frame of the truck punched through the doors, collapsing metal panels and creating a huge dent in the doors that the truck slipped into. Metal panels rained down around him, one striking the front windshield, spraying glass in all directions, adding yet more cuts to his already lacerated body.

Gardner spun the wheel, setting the truck into a skidding turn that brought it about to face the main entrance. In the time it took for him to ram the gear shifter into first gear and start an inexorable charge at the gate, Bill noticed several things.

First, the gate had already been partially destroyed. Secondly, a group of men had taken up position there and were firing at another group of soldiers who had taken refuge behind some steel girders piled off to one side. Thirdly, both groups took notice of the truck and began to open fire on him.

"Stop shooting at me!" he yelled again, jamming down on the gas pedal. "Just stop shooting at me!"

The truck lumbered forward, picking up speed as bullets pinged all around him. He ducked down as low as he could and tried to keep the truck in line with the gate. A bullet struck one of the wheels and the truck suddenly lurched a bit to the left, creating a drag. Another bullet struck the engine and steam started to pour out in billowing clouds. Cursing, Bill realized he wasn't going to make it.

He had only once chance.

He wrapped his arms through the seatbelt, flung his body onto the seat and depressed the detonator for all the explosives still in the hanger not forty yards behind him.

For a second—one that seemed to stretch forever—nothing happened. He wondered if he had wired things wrong or if the detonator had been damaged somewhere along the way, but then something picked the truck up like a ragged doll and flung it at the gate with terrific force.

Bill screamed as he and the truck hurtled forward. He screamed as the truck hit the concrete road sideways to skid like some sort of medieval battle ram towards the gate. Only the seatbelt kept his body from being flung out the cab, but even then his body seemed to slam into the seat like a racquetball. He screamed as a wall of fire washed over the sliding truck, singeing his hair and burning his lungs. He screamed when the truck smashed into the gate, metal groaning and twisting, poles and wire jabbing through the empty windshield to poke at him with deadly intent.

Then he screamed again, but this time in joy. He was still alive!

He just lay there, his body slumped up against the driver's side door that lay against the ground. Suddenly a hand reached in and grabbed him by his shirt and began hauling him out. He yelped, struggling to free himself, but his strength was gone. He couldn't resist the insistent pull. When his head cleared the wreckage, a tough looking Chinese man dressed in black fatigues and sporting a wicked looking P90 automatic rifle, started jabbering over his shoulder. Another Chinese man came running up. This one was dressed more casually and his features seemed more subdued.

"Are you Mr. Gardner?" he asked in excellent English.

Bill nodded. "Yeah, that's me."

The man raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Was that your work?" He nodded towards the destroyed hanger. The lawyer peeked around the overturned truck. The entire hanger and much of the buildings next to it had been leveled. Fire and debris were spread in a huge arc around where the plane had been. He blinked, shocked. He hadn't thought the explosion would have been that large. "Yeah, I guess I did."

"The plane," the man said, his eyes turning insistent. "Did you destroy the aircraft?"

"It's in a million pieces," Bill affirmed.

The man turned and whistled. Instantly about a score of heavily armed men began to extricate themselves from cover and dashed back down the streets. The man turned to Bill. "Mr. Gardner, my name is John Cho."

"John?" Gardner asked incredulously.

"Yep, born in Arizona. My parents wanted me to have an American name. Come, we must go now. My men have reported reinforcements on their way."

"That's a good idea," Bill agreed. "Only I don't think I have much strength to run on my own."

John said something to the other man and together they draped Bill's arms over their shoulders and began trotting from the scene of battle.

Sometime later, John gently lowered Bill onto a cot within a small apartment about two miles from the warehouse. John flopped into a wooden chair and wiped his brow with the back of his hand. "Well, Mr. Gardner, you're supposed to be dead," he said without preamble. He folded his arms, kicked his feet out in a relaxed manner, and gave a half smile. No one else had come into the room, so it was just the two of them.

"What do you mean, *supposed to be dead*?" Bill asked.

"Well, when we found you had been taken captive, we all just naturally assumed you had been killed by that pig Lee."

"Who is *we*?"

John held up a hand. "Let me get to that. We thought you were dead, which I must tell you was part of the plan. I say that so you don't confuse our actions as a rescue attempt. We were after the plane, just as you were. Our mission was to blow the plane up." He cocked his head slightly and frowned. "You were supposed to be the diversion, something to keep Chinese intelligence from noticing my team. Once we destroyed the plane, you and that rat Frank Vellore would be pinned as the saboteurs. And it worked, except we couldn't get near the plane. Our attack failed. We were pinned down and on the verge of being trapped by

reinforcements...until you blew up the plane.” He leaned forward. “Do you understand what I am saying?”

Bill nodded. “Yes. I was sent on a suicide mission, one meant to give your team the freedom to do the actual dirty work. I was to take the blame as was Wastend.” Bill felt his heart sink. “You work for General Hynes.”

“Yes. I am actually Colonel John Cho, Special Forces. So we have two problems now. One is that you are still alive, making it difficult to pin this on you. A problem that we can easily resolve by throwing you back to the Chinese. However, and here is the second problem, you saved our lives and completed the mission where we could not.”

“That’s a problem?”

“In a way. We owe you, Mr. Gardner. My entire team does. This is not something we take lightly. To kill you or to hand you back to the Chinese is a lousy way to repay such a debt. But at the same time, if we don’t blame someone, we run the risk of an international incident that could jeopardize the lives of millions of people.”

“I’m going to kill him!” Bill hissed.

“The general?”

“Yes.”

Cho smiled. “I would feel the same way in your shoes. But I would put that aside for right now. He was put in an untenable situation. He had to make a choice between a single evil and an even greater wicked one.”

Bill frowned as he watched the other man pull some chewing tobacco out of a vest pocket and put a small piece into his mouth. The man regarded his fingers while waiting for Bill to reply.

“He either had to pin it on me and Wastend, or face international backlash.”

Cho nodded, his jaw working furiously at his tobacco. “They said you were smart, Captain. We couldn’t use just anyone. The person we used—”

“Sacrificed,” Bill inserted, bitterly.

Cho shrugged. “Sacrificed, then. The person we sacrificed needed to have military experience as well as a connection to Wastend. All roads had to lead back there. You were the only one with both the experience, expertise, and connections to pull it off.”

“Thanks.”

“It’s nothing personal, Captain. Trust me, it wasn’t an easy decision to make either. General Hynes argued against the plan, but he was overruled by the Joint Chiefs.” Cho leaned over and spat into a bucket next to his chair. The wet, rust looking blob of spit missed, striking the edge and half ran the outside edge. Cho grunted. “So that brings us back to my problem.”

“The fact that I saved your team and destroyed the plane anyway?” Bill shifted around on the cot, uncomfortable with the direction the conversation was going.

“Exactly. We still need to have a scapegoat, Captain. We need someone to take the blame...or at least shift the blame from the US Government. I’m to go to ground now. The Chinese will never know that I am even here and my dual citizenship helps to mask the fact.”

“Can you contact General Hynes?”

“No. My unit is dark, Captain. We are to make no contact for the next month. All of my soldiers are either Chinese natives or American Chinese. They have dispersed into the city life, either resuming jobs, rejoining family, or just disappearing.” He leaned forward, his jaw working like a piston on his chewing tobacco. “That doesn’t negate my responsibility. You were to either die or be captured. We would raise a stink about an American being held, they would show proof that you committed an act of sabotage, we would demur, they would insist, we would give in, you would either die or go to prison, and the whole thing dropped. Now what do I do?”

Bill sighed. He couldn’t quite bring himself to feel any sympathy for John or General Hynes—not when the scapegoat happened to be him! Nevertheless, he could see what Cho was building up to. “You still want me to be that guy, don’t you?”

Cho shook his head. “No. You saved our collective fannies, Bill. We owe you. I’m just trying to figure a way out of this.”

“Why not let me try to make my way back myself? If I get caught, your plans go forward as normal. If I get away, well, I get away. Everything still points back to me or Wastend, and this way I at least get a chance to make it out alive.”

Cho spat into the bucket and sat back again. “It’s a good suggestion. The only concern is about what you may say once you are free and back home. You’re a lawyer, Mr. Gardner—though I don’t understand how any soldier would ever make that a career choice.”

“I still like a good fight, Colonel.”

The man laughed. “Anyway, what is to prevent you from suing the US? That would create quite the pickle for all of us.”

“One thing.” Bill held up a finger. “Retribution. Do you think the Chinese will forgive this slight to their country? Not only was a secret military aircraft destroyed, but men died. If I start making waves about this incident, what do you think they will do?”

Cho’s eyes glittered. “They would send their best assassins.”

“Exactly. It would be in my best interest to keep my big mouth shut.”

John stood up. “Well then, Captain. It seems we have a deal. I’ll cut you loose in the morning and you can make your way back as best you can.”

“What about the man I came with, Hu?”

“Don’t know who you are talking about. We did catch someone lurking around the perimeter on our way in. If this was your guy, I’m sorry, we had to take him out. We didn’t know who he was and we couldn’t take a chance.”

Bill sighed, profoundly troubled. Hu may have very well been trying to find a way to help while Gardner had been a captive of the Chinese. The man had died at the hands of the people he was trying to help. Life wasn’t fair. Not one bit.

John saw the look. “I’m sorry,” he said again. “We were under orders.”

“Colonel, how many good men have died for so little reason?”

“Undoubtedly more than either of us would care to contemplate. Ask yourself this, Captain, how many more would have died if we had not followed those orders?”

“The end justifies the means?”

“Or the greater good.”

Bill sighed. "The age old 'soldier's dilemma.' I hate it."

"Me too. Get some sleep. I will help you get out of the city, but after that, you are on your own. I'll spread a rumor that an American was killed during the attack. That should give you enough of a chance to slip out of the country unnoticed."

"I appreciate the chance, Colonel."

Cho grinned. "Make it back Captain. I would like to see those staff Generals eat their smug smiles."

"That," Bill said, echoing the man's grin, "would be my pleasure."

Chapter 19

A combination of incredible luck and some skills had gotten Bill to a point near the Vietnam-Chinese border—still alive, and still kicking. He studied the checkpoint, wondering if it wouldn't be best to just simply try to find another crossing. He had made it this far due to the theft of an American tourist's wallet. No doubt the man had reported it stolen, but few Chinese agencies would even care about some American who lost his credit cards. Identity theft wasn't quite the deal it was in the US.

To most Chinese, one American looked much like another. Bill had cut and dyed his hair to match that of the man on the driver's license he had stolen. To anyone that took a close look it would be obvious that the men were different, but most had only given a cursory glance and then waved him on. He dared not risk an international flight, but he did book a small plane that had flown him from Beijing to Kunming. From there, he had taken a train to Honghe in the province of Yunnan near the border. Now he had to just get across somehow.

Pretending to be an American tourist helped and few in Honghe had actually ever seen an American up close. Children followed him around, pointing and giggling. He made a point of wandering around aimlessly, looking at buildings, going into shops, and doing whatever else a tourist would do. So far, other than curiosity, he had been ignored. The local police never even gave him a second glance.

Eventually he had found a friendly native that spoke passing English and had prevailed upon the young woman, and her even younger brother to act as tour guides to the area. Now they sat about two hundred yards from the border checkpoint. A river marked the boundary between the two nations and only a few bridges spanned it. Looking at the murky water, Gardner decided that swimming it would not be a good idea. He had no clue as to how dangerous the current might be.

The crossing they stood near was the closest one and even this one had taken a good four hours to reach by car. Bill stood at the edge of the road, looking down the bank to the slow moving waters. He held a camera in one hand which he would occasionally make a fuss over, taking pictures of the area and of his companions—just like any good tourist would do.

“See it?” the young woman, Ye Shiwen, asked, pointing across the river. “Vietnam just there.”

Bill nodded. “I see it. Wow, this is really neat. I’ve never been to Vietnam before,” he lied. “Do you think we could visit?”

Her eyes widened. “Oh no! My brother and me no have passport. We no go.”

Bill expected as much, but he looked profoundly disappointed. “Are you sure there is no way for me to visit?”

“You have passport?”

“Yes.”

She grinned. “You pay money. Show passport. You visit.”

“Can you help me?”

“Right on!” she exclaimed gleefully. Gardner idly wondered what American movie she had watched to pick up that phrase.

Her little brother, a teenager around fifteen, grinned and echoed, “Right on!”

“Right on!” Bill added. It seemed appropriate somehow.

Ye’s small red car—Bill suspected she had borrowed it from her parents—moved towards the checkpoint.

“You’ll have to translate for me,” he said. “I don’t speak Chinese too well.”

“No problem!” she said, grinning. Her teenage brother echoed the grin, although he didn’t understand a word of English as far as the lawyer could tell.

“What about transportation on the other side? How will I get around?”

“Cars...how do you say...for sale, but not for sale?”

“For rent?”

“Yes. That is it! For rent. On other side.”

Leaving the car, they walked along the bank of the river until they reached the checkpoint. Two bored looking guards idled in a booth like structure that allowed them to operate the gate arm that blocked the bridge. They glance up to see the trio approaching. The older one’s eyes narrowed when he saw the American, while the younger one had eyes only for the girl walking at Bill’s side.

Ye smiled at the soldiers and said something in Chinese, pointing to Bill, then herself, and then back to Bill. The younger soldier nodded, smiling, but the other one just stared at the American, a frown tugging at his lips. He said something to Ye, who looked at Bill. “He want see passport.”

Bill had intentionally run the document under some water several days back and rubbed some dirt over the picture, obscuring it. It had a passing resemblance to him, and he hoped it would be enough to allow him through. He figured he could take both guards out, but the commotion wouldn’t go unnoticed from the Vietnam side, and he doubted that they would grant political asylum to an American.

The guard took the passport and began examining it. He said something else to Ye. “He ask why you want to go across.”

“I’ve never been to Vietnam. I just want to spend a day or two there.” Bill pulled out a wad of cash he had kept for just this moment. “Tell him I can pay the bridge fee.”

The man’s eyes lit up at the sight of the money. He spoke rapidly to Ye, naming a ‘bridge fee’ to get across. It took a large portion of his money, but the bribe worked. The guard waved him through.

Promising to come back in a few days to meet Ye and her brother—another lie, but a necessary one—he walked across the bridge towards the Vietnamese side. He gave money to the guards that awaited him there and still more to the sour-faced owner of a rickety old car to rent it. Gardner suspected that he paid in rent more than the car was worth, but then the owner clearly didn't expect to ever see his car again—a very astute man.

Two days later, he boarded a flight for the Philippines, and from there, home.

Only one thing caused him some alarm. A Chinese man had boarded the plane in Hanoi with Bill and the same man had gotten on the plane to San Francisco, via Hawaii. He was there again when Bill transferred planes to New York.

There could very well have been a logical explanation for the man to have taken the same route as Bill had. New York was a major hub of trade and commerce, many Chinese made the exact same trip. But it was the fact that he had followed Bill from Hanoi that bothered him so much.

When they got off the plane in New York, he intentionally waited around for the man to see where he would go. The Chinese man, dressed in a business suit and carrying only a briefcase, did not even look around. He went straight to a taxi and left in a cloud of fumes.

“Stop it, Bill!” he whispered to himself. “You are jumping at shadows.”

He turned to walk to the domestic parking lot where his girlfriend Karen would be waiting to give him a ride back to his apartment. Now that he was home safely, he was a bit bewildered as to what to do next. He dare not contact General Hynes...not yet, anyway. No doubt the man already knew that Bill had returned and a call would most likely come at some point in the future. He had been out of touch with his law firm for so long, he half wondered if they had rented out his old offices to someone else.

He sighed, trying to figure out his next steps. At least Karen seemed happy to see him. She squealed when she caught sight of him as he stepped out of the elevator. He had to drop his small tote bag to collect her in his arms lest she bowl him over. She hugged him tightly. “I've missed you so much, Bill.”

He reveled in the feel of her, the smell of her brown hair, nestled just under his chin, and the warm sensations of coming home. He pulled back to look her in the eyes. “I'm so sorry Karen. I wish I could give you more of an explanation of where I was or what I did. I hope you can trust me and believe me when I say it is best put behind us.” He grinned. “It is so good to see you!”

She allowed a frown to touch her lips. “I was really frightened, Bill. I had no idea where you were or what was going on.”

He sighed and pulled her close again. “I know. I wish I could have called or something, but I couldn't. I just couldn't.”

“I wish I understood why,” she replied plaintively.

“Me too,” he whispered. “Me too.”

They walked to her new Ford Edge, enjoying each other's presence. “Are you back for good,” she asked, unlocking the car door.

“I better be,” he grumbled loudly. He needed to change the subject. “How's the telecommunication business treating you?”

Karen made a face as she swung into the driver's seat. Bill tossed his bag into the back seat and then joined her in the front. She rolled her eyes. “You remember

Jerry? The idiot tried to make a pass at me the other day. I nearly had to kick him in the balls to get him to leave me alone.”

A surge of jealousy caused Bill’s blood to boil, but he stomped it down. “Well, you are a most gorgeous girl I’ve ever met. He’d be a fool not to try. How did you get him to leave you alone?”

“I told him that my boyfriend was a trained assassin for the government.”

Bill went cold, his face settling into a mask. Karen noticed.

“I’m kidding, Bill! Don’t freak out on me. I just told him that I would slap a sexual harassment suit on his empty head if he didn’t back off. He did. Apparently he is more interested in keeping his job than in pursuing me.” She shook her head at the futility of it all, and Bill relaxed. Her comment had struck too close to home.

“Good for you,” he said glibly.

They talked about mundane things for the rest of the trip home. Karen only had a few hours off of work, so she dropped him off at his apartment and then dashed away. Bill watched her go, feeling slightly out of his depth. He ran a hand through his hair, idly realizing he needed a haircut.

He turned to go inside when a taxi drove by. Something about it caught his eye, and he swung back around to look. He couldn’t be certain, but the face in the passenger seat looked to be Asian. He frowned and watched it disappear down the road. Shaking his head at his own paranoia, he went up to his apartment.

He studied the door and from what he could tell, nothing had been disturbed. Opening it, he heard something being pushed across the floor.

Freezing, with his heart pounding in his chest, he waiting for something to explode.

Chapter 20

Nothing happened.

Taking a deep breath, Gardner poked his head around the door to see a package lying on the other side. He glanced quickly up and down the hall, and seeing no one, he closed his door, locked it, and picked the package up gingerly. It felt too light to be a bomb, and too thin to be much more than paper.

He turned it over and saw no markings or writing. Going into the kitchen, he set it down on his plain dining room table and got out a knife and a pair of latex gloves he used for cleaning. There may not be a bomb inside, but a poisonous powder, such as anthrax, could have been stuffed inside. He wasn’t about to take any chances. Holding his breath, he slit it open and poured out its contents.

Two pieces of paper slid out onto the table. Nothing else. One was obviously a check. He looked at the amount and blinked in astonishment. He looked at the sender on the check and his jaw nearly fell open. *Wastend? What the...* Bill picked up the other note and read:

Bill,

I feel the need to apologize for the rough treatment you received at the hands of my company. It was unfair to send you on such a hazardous assignment with no support from those who hired you. I wouldn't blame you for your anger, and I don't intend this letter to be one of reconciliation.

You served this company with distinction, and for that you have our gratitude. I grieve for everything we lost over there, and hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me the wrong I did to you. I know that nothing can compensate for the feelings of betrayal you are no doubt harboring, but I have included a small token of our appreciation.

I don't know if we will ever call on each other again, and as things turned out, it might be best we go our separate ways. There doesn't seem to be any point in bringing this up in any legal capacity. That would simply make the lives of a great many people miserable.

Again, I am thankful.

Sincerely Yours,

Frank Vellore

CEO, Wastend, Inc.

Bill stared at the note. The letter had been printed on official company letterhead and the signature looked genuinely Frank's, but Bill knew Frank never wrote the letter, though he probably issued the check—under duress, no doubt. No, the letter had come from General Hynes. He was sure of it.

The situation in China—particularly his survival—had created some problems for General Hynes. Bill didn't doubt that the man really was sorry for the situation he had put Gardner in, but the letter was also a warning, saying, "Here is some money. Don't try to contact us again, and we won't try to contact you."

No doubt China was frantically trying to discover the truth of what had happened that night at the secret facility in Beijing, and no doubt they would look for proof that the US Government was complicit in the attack that had cost the lives of Chinese soldiers. Everything needed to point to Wastend... everything. "Even this letter," Bill said aloud, chuckling at the absurdity of it all.

He put the letter down and picked up the check. He whistled in appreciation. "Poor Frank, he must be fit to be tied!" No doubt the CEO was fuming at having to pay out money to help with the cover-up. Bill shrugged. It couldn't have happened to a nicer guy.

He burned the letter and put the check in his wallet.

The next day, Bill went to his work. Cassie wasn't there, but then he hadn't expected her to be there either. Until he went to his office computer, he had no way of contacting her. He looked around at the empty office and sighed. Cassie had left everything in perfect order—as usual. But it all looked too clean. Nothing sat in the 'in' box, and he had no prospective clients. He could live comfortably off the check Hynes had sent him for a good couple of years, but that seemed routinely unsatisfying. He needed to be working. He needed to do something. He needed to forget.

Picking up the phone, he called Cassie's house.

"Cassie, Bill here."

"Mr. Gardner! You're back!"

“Yeah, it looks like it. Look, Cassie, I wanted to apologize for my absence. I wish I could have kept you better informed but the client was a real jerk about it. Anyway, I want you to come back to work. I’ll compensate you for the time away as well as a bonus. How does that sound?”

“A bonus?” she asked.

“Sure, my last client paid well.”

“Thanks, Mr. Gardner. I’ll be right in.”

“Take your time. Tomorrow is okay. Today, I need to readjust. I’ll see you in the morning.”

She hesitated slightly. “Very good, sir. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He hung up and sat back in his chair. *Now what?* He looked at the phone, willing it to ring, willing a client to be on the other side. The phone remained quiet. He checked his messages, but nothing was there. All his former cases had been handed over to other lawyers in the firm. He would have to rebuild a caseload.

His stomach growled. “Well, that can wait until tomorrow,” he muttered, standing up. “Right now, I want to get something to eat.”

Back outside, he started walking towards a Chinese restaurant. He stopped abruptly, shaking his head. *What am I doing. That’s the last place I want to be.* He changed direction, deciding to go instead to the nearest McDonalds. *Good ol’ American grease. That’s what I need.*

As he walked, something began to tug at the corner of his awareness. Something was not quite right. He glanced around and saw nothing. Going a little further, it dawned on him that he was being followed. He looked furtively around, but saw no one. Whoever was tailing him was good—very good. He didn’t know who it might be, but he suspected that General Hynes was having him tailed in an effort to make sure he kept quiet about the entire China affair.

Still, he resented it. Why couldn’t everyone just leave him alone?

Deciding to confront his tail, he turned into an alley that cut across to another major street. He ducked quickly behind a dumpster and waited. Sure enough, not a minute later a Chinese man peeked around the corner.

Bill went cold. The Chinese. He swore to himself, wondering how they had found out. He had hoped they thought he was dead. He had hoped to get out of China without getting on the top of their most wanted list.

Clearly, his hope had been in vain.

Not seeing him, the spy moved cautiously into the alley. When he was but five feet away, Bill stepped out. He wanted the man close enough to grapple with in case his pursuer produced a weapon—like a gun.

The man stopped, seemingly unsurprised at Bill’s appearance. He waited, saying nothing.

“Who are you and what do you want?” Bill demanded, growing tired of the faceoff.

The Chinese man studied Bill. Finally he said, “We want vengeance, Bill Gardner.”

“For what?”

“For murder, and for many other things”

“Let’s say, we kill you now, nobody would know. Your mission was kept secret and so your death will be.”

A sound from behind Bill alerted him to a second assailant. Cursing his complacency, he lunged forward driving his fist into the man's face. Only the man wasn't there. The wily man slipped to one side and delivered a punishing kick to the back of Bill's knee. His left leg collapsed, causing him to lose his balance. He fell heavily into a dumpster, which scooted back a few inches upon the impact.

He managed to keep his feet somehow, but when he twisted around, the Chinese attacker stood right there. Three punches in quick succession hit Bill, two in the face and one in the chest. The chest punch practically knocked all the air out of his lungs, and the ones to his face, undoubtedly broke his nose. Blood poured down his face, running into his mouth and dripping off his chin.

A second man had appeared from the other end of the alley and was calmly watching the lopsided battle. "Take your time, Ming. Make him feel it," he said to his partner. He held a gun in one hand, but at the moment he held it idly by his side. His attitude and demeanor shouted boredom. "Make him feel every punch, every kick."

That infuriated Bill. He would not be a spectacle for anyone. He grunted and shoved himself forward, taking another kick in the process. But this time he was able to turn his body and take the blow on the side of his meaty thigh instead of the knee where the blow had been aimed. The kick stung, but the lawyer was able to shunt the pain aside. He hit the assassin a glancing blow to the side of the face, rocking the man back on his heels.

Bill tried a kick of his own, but his acrobatic assailant suddenly dropped to the alley floor and swiped Bill's legs out from under him. Bill fell heavily, landing on his back, and striking his head. He gasped for breath, and tried to blink tears out of his eyes. A punch to his left eye closed it in a burst of pain that shot all along Bill's body. He tried to move, but some weight atop him prevented it. Two more punches to the face nearly sent Bill into unconsciousness.

A voice, deep and sonorous, brought him back to reality. He blinked, and realized he could only see out of one eye. His attacker's faces swam into view dizzily. He shook his head, trying to clear away the cobwebs.

"Mr. Gardner, can you understand me?" the second man with the gun asked. He wore a business suit and had the face of a statue. Not a single expression seemed to cross the man's features.

Bill nodded.

"Good. You are about to die, but before you do, I need you to tell me something, Mr. Gardner. You are a murderer, Mr. Gardner. You attacked my homeland, killed my countryman, and subverted others. Here is what I want to know. Who sent you?"

Through a split lip, the battered lawyer, whispered, "Wastend."

Another blow to his head had the world bursting into an incredible display of radiant stars.

"That is a lie. We know the US Government sent you. So tell me the truth."

For a split second, he almost did. He almost told them the whole story. He was going to die anyway, and the people who had sent him to his death would hardly care. Why not make them pay too. He opened his mouth to confess, when a nugget of loyalty settled into his heart.

He couldn't do it. No matter the justifications, right or wrong, he couldn't betray his country. The fact that he almost did, infuriated him more than anything else that had happened to him. In betraying his country, he would be betraying everything he believed in. It didn't matter if his nation held the same values or not. It mattered if he did. And no matter what the official reports said in Washington, he was fighting for those values.

A burst of strength infused Bill at that moment. The man straddling him with his fist cocked to deliver another punch was only half watching Bill. Most of his attention was on his superior, waiting for instructions to either continue the beating or simply finish the American. Bill's mind needed something more concrete than abstract stereotypes to focus his rage on. So named him this one Toast and the other Deadmeat. He then willed it to happen.

He twisted his body violently, taking Toast by surprise and knocking him to the ground. Continuing his swing, he cut Deadmeat's legs out from under him in a similar move as Toast had done to Bill just moments earlier. Deadmeat let out a cry of shock and fell backwards.

Scrambling, Bill pulled Deadmeat close and laid into the man with furious punches. Somewhere in that, the man lost his grip on his gun and it skittered out of reach. Bill hardly noticed, but his attention was firmly acquired by Toast who tackled him from the side.

They rolled around on the alley floor, biting, kicking, punching, and doing anything else they could do to each other. Bill's hand suddenly found a beer bottle sitting next to one of the dumpsters. With a cry of rage, he smashed it over the head of Toast, who rolled away from the shattering glass with a grunt of pain. The lawyer wasn't going to give him the change to flee. He scrambled after the man and still holding the jagged remains of the bottle, he stabbed the man in the neck with it.

Blood squirted all over Bill. He fell away as Toast went into violent convulsions, clawing futilely at the glass shards in his neck. The man was a dead man, so Gardner ignored him and spun about to find Deadmeat. But the only thing he saw was the man's back as he ran out the far end of the alley, having abandoned the fight.

Cursing, and still on his hands and knees, Bill finally found the gun that had slid under one of the dumpsters. Armed, he climbed to his feet, thinking to pursue Deadmeat and make him in fact what he had so frivolously named him. A death gurgle from Toast arrested his attention. He looked on as the man took his last breath, bubbles of blood forming on his lips. Bill felt a giddy elation at having survived the attack. He quipped, "You're toast!"

It suddenly dawned on him how much trouble he was really in. He started to walk out of the alley, but staggered against the wall as he almost blacked out. *That demon sure beat the fire out of me*, he said to himself. He took several moments to regain his composure before limping out of the alleyway.

Fortunately for him, few pedestrians walked the sidewalks at this time of day. The few he did see, hardly took notice of him—a skill of blindness that most city folk developed. After all, best not to get involved in something you may regret later. Staggering down the street, he made for the car garage where he had parked his

car, a Scion tC that he used occasionally. He needed to get out of here. He couldn't return home, that would be suicide. He needed somewhere else to go.

Digging his cellphone out of his pocket, he called Karen.

"Bill? You okay? You never call me at this time of day."

"Karen? Can you meet me at your place?"

His tone of voice must have tipped her off. "What's wrong?"

He swallowed and looked around. No one seemed to be following him. "I can't explain it over the phone right now. I just need you to meet me. I'll explain then."

"Bill, you're scaring me."

"I know. Can you do it?"

"Yes. Where are you right now?"

"Downtown, near my office. I'll see you in a bit."

"Okay."

Days flowed by. Bill tried to get back to his normal life, but remained always vigilant.

Spanning an athlete jump the few steps to the entrance of the building, Bill felt full fitness. After his adventure, he appreciated all details of life and never complained. He took the elevator and when he arrived at the eleventh floor, he passed through the empty hall and the office of Cassie. The assistant greeted him quickly and smiled. He was apparently concerned about the customer who could be waiting. Cassie always got to the office first. She had prepared coffee and arranged some documents. Of his arrival in the office, Bill noticed that the expected client wasn't there yet. He served himself a cup of black coffee and took a few minutes to talk to Cassie, before releasing his first file and study the case.

Bill was not quite at ease to keep working in the same office. He couldn't concentrate. He was walking around and from time to time, he stopped to scan the walls. His assistant Cassie was watching him closely without saying a word. Bill approached the wall and asked Cassie to take a look "Is what you see, what I see?"

"You worry too much, Mr. Gardner, I see nothing."

Bill asked Cassie to step back and with his elbow he hit the wall hard, leaving a large hole "I knew it!"

Cassie was still stunned by what she saw. Bill pulled out a tinny microphone attached to a set of wires. "Damn it! I knew it, we've been bugged."

He rushed immediately to his phone and dismantled it. Another microphone was placed inside the device. He went around all the office and whenever he saw a suspicious spot, he left a hole. There were wires everywhere. "They will never let you go off" said Cassie with concern.

Two officers were assigned to protect him. Bill never knew who sent the agents, and was not sure of their true purpose. In his mind, the agents were there to monitor his movements rather than to protect him. They followed him wherever he went. Anytime he returned home, they would head up first and made sure he was safe.

It all quickly grew tiring. Finally he had enough. One day, as soon as he got in his apartment, he slipped out, using the stairs and the emergency exit without being noticed. He walked to 5th Avenue and ducked into a liquor store to get a bottle of wine. Before returning home, Bill called Karen and invited her for dinner at a busy restaurant for the next day.

Once at the table with Karen, Bill couldn't keep himself from looking around from time to time. He felt on edge, jumpy. Except for one person who ate alone on the next table, everything looked normal. The man coughed from time to time and whenever he did, he would glance towards the couple. Suspicious, Bill asked Karen in an undertone voice, "Do you know that guy over there?" He nodded in the man's direction.

"I don't think so" replied Karen.

"He keeps staring at us in a strange way."

"So what?"

"He looks familiar."

"Do you remember from where?"

"It could be anywhere, China, Dubai, Hawaii, I don't know, I really don't know..."

"Try to remember!" asked Karen.

"Forget it! It could be my paranoia rearing my head. Just forget it!"

The man got up to go out for a while, probably for a cigarette. The couple continued to talk, but Bill listened only halfheartedly to what Karen was saying. The presence of the stranger still bothered him. He was not an Arab...he was a Farsi, Bill thought, he was almost sure. Most people couldn't tell the difference, but Bill definitely could. He had seen Iranians in Dubai. He had seen Wong Lee speaking to this tall Iranian in the exhibition. The man in the restaurant looked like him, but he wasn't him, that's what really bothered him.

As with the Chinese he had battled in the alley, the man on the table had a face with no name, so his battle mind automatically applied one. Given his size and way of walking, he wanted to call him Scissors, then he settled on Caesar and decided to call him by this name in case the entire thing was nothing more than a mistake.

Finally, he managed to get his mind off the man and was back to Karen. They both continued to eat, drink and talk like nothing had happened. For Karen, it was the time to talk about their relationship, a difficult one to secure.

The evening was quite pleasant. Sometime later, Bill and Karen decided to leave, making plans to see each other soon. Bill accompanied Karen up to her car in the parking lot. He held her between his arms and kissed her twice. He opened the car door for Karen to let her in and left to find his own car.

Taking another look around, he scurried as quickly as he could towards the parking lot. He never saw Caesar standing in the shadows, watching a block back.

Chapter 21

Bill reached his car without incident. He fumbled around with his keys only to drop them. He cursed and bent over to pick them up. That's when he saw Caesar standing at the entrance of the restaurant with a cellphone in hand. For one long terrible moment, they just stared at each other.

With a burst of speed born of desperation, Bill bolted away from his car as fast as he could possibly go. At nearly the same time, Caesar pushed a button on his phone, and Bill's car exploded.

The force picked the lawyer up like a kitten and slammed him forward into another car. Something broke—or more appropriately, several things broke—upon impact. Glass, shrapnel and fire rained over Bill. He had a fleeting look as Caesar disappeared in a swirl of black smoke, and then darkness claimed him.

Sound returned to Bill first. He heard voices in the room. He couldn't understand what they were speaking about, but the fact that he could hear them brought some comfort to mind. He groaned and tried to open his eyes. When he did, a stab of light caused him to wince. He tried to bring his hand up to shade them, but he couldn't move either.

"Steady, cowboy," a rumbling voice ordered. "You've been battered about like a flower in a tornado."

"General Hynes?" he whispered. Bill licked his lips and tried to blink. A blurry blob slowly resolved into the General. "What happened?"

"You got blown up," he chuckled. "If you must know, you look like it too."

"You really look in bad shape." Hynes noticed.

Bill groaned, in no mood for frivolity. "Where's Karen?"

"She's outside. The hospital staff are giving her the run around. In a moment, you'll be dead."

The lawyer didn't even feel anything in reaction to that statement. "Is it that bad, or do you intend to finish what you started?"

Hynes grinned. "Oh, I intend to finish it." He pulled over a chair and sat down. "Just not in the way you suppose. This little explosion has offered us an opportunity and granted me a way to actually help you."

"How's that?"

"As I said, you are going to die—not in a literal sense, though your injuries are still touch and go. No, we're going to give you a new name and a new life."

Realization dawned on him. "You're going to put me into witness protection."

"More or less. The Chinese will think you are dead, which only helps us both. They will stop coming after you and have no proof of our involvement in China. It works for both of us."

"What about if I like my life?"

"You'll just have to learn to like a new one. Look Bill, I know this isn't easy. You're going to have to pick a new career, a new name, and a new place to live. We'll set you up right. Karen can go with you, but if we tell her, she will have to go too—same thing. She won't have a choice to decide or not. You make that choice for her, right here and right now."

"That hardly seems fair."

"Then let her think you died. She can go on with her life and you with your new one."

"I don't think that's fair either."

"Perhaps not, but it is your only choice. The Chinese or Iranians won't give up until you are dead. So we intend to kill you—or rather make it look like they did a good enough job to kill you."

Bill already knew what he had to do. He couldn't imagine living without Karen, and he thought he knew her heart well enough to know that she would rather live with him in a new life than keep her old one without him. He thought back to when this whole thing had begun.

"You know what I wish?"

"What's that?" Hynes asked.

"I wish I would have shot Frank Vellore the moment I laid eyes on him."

Hynes nodded sagely. "Aye, that would have saved both of us a lot of grief."

"How about TACAIR?"

"We will have a new president and we will also have our plane ready, that's for sure. No more double-crossing."

Grinning, Bill looked at the door. "Well, go get my girlfriend. Looks like I need to propose to her."

"Figured you would say that." Hynes pulled a small velvet covered box out of his pocket. "I took the liberty of buying the ring for you."

Stunned, Bill opened the box to see a beautiful diamond ring. He looked up at Hynes, a tear forming in the corner of one eye. "You know. This makes up for a lot."

"I hoped it would."

"You're still a no account croc, General."

"Aye. So my wife tells me."

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