



AMERICA'S GUTS

A novel by Charles G. Brooks, Jr.

Dedicated to Terry Anderson, and to all persons wrongfully imprisoned.

PROLOGUE

By the Associated Press – Continued rioting in the West Bank claimed the lives of two more Arabs today, as Israeli troops fired into a crowd of rock-throwing youths. An elderly woman was overcome by tear gas.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, gunmen sprayed bullets at a bus carrying Israeli school children in Jerusalem, and a Lebanese businessman was dragged from his car in Beirut and beaten by unidentified attackers.

In a related incident, three American soldiers in a bar in Germany were killed a bomb blast. The shadowy Beloved of God terrorist group is suspected in that incident, although no group has claimed responsibility.

AMERICA'S GUTS

CHAPTER ONE

The Boeing 727's engines whined and howled as the plane banked to land in Rome. Specialist 4 Fred Balfleur gripped the arm rests of his seat. His stomach churned. ["My God, it seems like this thing is about to shake itself apart,"] he thought. The plane gave out a metallic growling and groaning as the wing flaps lowered. It shuddered and shook like a dog after a bath. Fred Balfleur thought the thing was going to fall right out of the sky. It seemed to stop in midair.

For an agonizing moment it hung there. Balfleur's stomach floated upwards towards his throat.

Then, with a surge, the plane regained downward momentum and began falling. A glance out the window told Balfleur the ground was rushing up. He stared at the brown blur in morbid fascination. "We're going to land short of the runway, flip over and burn," he assured himself.

Fred Balfleur was no hero.

BARRUMBLE. The tires bumped hard on the concrete. The plane shuddered and wiggled. Then it was rolling smoothly towards the airport terminal. Balfleur let out a long breath and eased back in his seat. The shortest leg of his flight home was over.

His buddy in headquarters had arranged for the circuitous route back to *the world*, instead of the usual direct flight from Frankfurt. "It'll be great, Balfleur," his buddy had said. "You'll get to see some sights before going home."

Balfleur hadn't been too keen on the idea. He just wanted to get home. "Heck, I haven't even seen that much of Radland," he told his buddy. *Radland* was American soldier idiom for Germany.

In fact, Balfleur had rarely been off the base – except for a few short bicycle trips – and then only because his buddies cajoled and prodded him into it. He figured if all Germans were as ornery as the ones on the base, he didn't much relish seeing any more of them than he had to. And although he wouldn't admit it, Balfleur was afraid.

This American fighting man, trained to kill, was intimidated by German train schedules. The tiny print with its confusing symbols might as well have been Sumerian clay tablets or Nordic runes.

But his buddy had brushed aside all objections. "Don't be crazy," he chided. "A trip like this comes along once in a lifetime. Take it while you can get it."

So here was Balfleur in Rome, and didn't want to be. He suddenly felt queasy, as he always did when he had a major decision to make.

"Should I or shouldn't I?" – the awful gaping question. Every decision was as gut-wrenching for Balfleur as Ham-

let's cosmic *To be or not to be*? And this was one of the biggest decisions he'd ever been called on to make all by himself.

As the jet taxied to a stop, his mind tried desperately to sort it out. He could get off the plane as scheduled, or he could just keep his seat, fly to Madrid, and transfer to his transatlantic flight. He could be home in Calcasieu, Louisiana, eating crawfish in two days.

"Do I want to see Rome? Not really. Can I do it? Can I just go home? But what about the guys? They went to extra trouble to get me on this flight. I should get up and get off the plane."

The plane rolled to a stop. Decision time.

He started shuffling in his seat. Three times he started to get up, and each time he let himself fall back into the seat. Passengers shuffling by eyed him suspiciously out of the corner of their eyes as they inched down the crowded aisle. Balfleur was in misery.

Dark-haired, brown-eyed stewardess Martha Sampson leaned over the back of his seat and asked, "Will you be deplaning in Rome, sir, or continuing with us to Madrid?"

Balfleur panicked. He really panicked. He couldn't breathe. He felt an uncontrollable urge to flee. He felt hemmed in, trapped. Passengers clogged the narrow aisle of the plane. He wanted to crawl over the tops of the seats, get out of the plane, just get out of that cylindrical aluminum coffin, just get out.

He emitted some kind of guttural noise between a squawk and a croak. He shrugged his shoulders, and his eyes stared wildly and helplessly at his pretty, neatly-dressed inquisitor, who was unaware of her passenger's anguish. She asked again, "Sir, will you be stopping in Rome, or continuing on to Madrid?"

"I – er – uh – staying," he finally stammered " – with you." A wave of relief was followed immediately by a deep, sinking feeling. "Should I?" he asked himself for the eighteenth time. But stewardess Martha Sampson was already gone, checking her passenger list.

"There is still time to change my mind," Balfleur told himself. He continued to squirm. "I could run up there and tell her I've changed my mind. I could. I could."

He couldn't. It would be too embarrassing. He was stuck with his non-decision – one of the most important ones he had ever made.

CHAPTER TWO

Finally, he resigned himself and settled back. The plane was almost empty. He could see the backs of a couple of heads and shoulders in business suits, some nuns, and a man and woman sitting together. Just across the aisle was a youth of undetermined sex sitting next to its backpack. Apparently the young person was so attached to his/her pack that he/she refused to let it be checked with the other baggage. "When you hitchhike all by yourself all over Europe, you take companionship where you find it, I guess," Balfleur mused.

The baggage handlers were jabbering in Italian and tossing the items into a long train of baggage cars. The fuel truck finished its job, and retired. Slowly, new passengers began arriving for the Rome-Madrid flight.

Balfleur casually observed them as they boarded. First came a few more business suits, followed by some dark-skinned Mediterranean types. Then came a few off-duty GI's like Balfleur himself. They were immediately recognizable by their blue jeans, short hair, moustaches and checked shirts. No wonder Rads could pinpoint GIs at a thousand yards.

Balfleur grew tired watching the straggling procession of passengers who slowly filled the jetliner. He slumped down in his seat and closed his eyes. He didn't fall asleep right away, but hung suspended between sleep and wakefulness.

His semiconscious state was part dream, part daydream; part real, part imagination.

A slide show in Balfleur's brain: a line of bicycles pedalling past verdant, rolling meadows bordered by straight, tall, frigid, heavenward-pointing evergreens – a hint of winter, cool clean and crisp; mist in the peaks of the evergreens; the air so clean it fizzed like champagne going down; cool, not cold – [just enough to keep the sweat down as we pedaled along the narrow, winding road. Few cars came that way.

[Erskin was out in front, as always – way out in front by himself. Nobody could keep up. Next was Bates and then me or me and then Bates, depending on who was more tired at the moment. We stayed close together; close enough to talk. Sometimes, the talk came between ragged gasps of air pulling up a hill. Then, way back, far back and fading, came Turner. Often he was out of sight around a corner or over a hill. How could anybody get through basic training and still be so out of shape?

[When we stopped for a beer, as we did at every village, we were usually on our second before Turner came straggling in, pedalling and puffing, or walking and pushing and puffing. We jokingly blamed him for turning us into drunks.

The cool, bitter, yellow liquid tasted like the air, somehow – clean and crisp, with just a hint of winter. We sat at an outdoors table next to the road, surrounded on all sides by the towering conifers; the inn hugging a hillside. We asked the locals hanging around the inn how to get to a place; I forget the name. They made a joke out of it. It must've been vulgar, the way the laughter gargled in their throats, and they elbowed each other in the side.

[Often, we left camp and walked to an inn on the outskirts of town. There was always a game of cards going on ... a game going on. Even after...after that...that other time ... that other time when...when...and then later... A red ball of fire ended Balfleur's side show.]

Balfleur, in a cold sweat, was brought fully awake by a sudden rush of air from the jetliner's cooling system. The pilot was revving the big engines. The high-pitched whine increased, and with a stuttering squeak, the plane began to creep forward.

He dozed off again, as the plane taxied interminably down a long runway, behind many other jets. One by one, they rushed past into the air.

Balfleur awoke with a start when the pilot poured on full power. The jet accelerated rapidly, gunning down the runway, jolting and thumping and banging. Then it lurched into the air, and Balfleur was thrust down into his seat.

The plane leveled off and headed out toward the Mediterranean Sea.

She came down the aisle, offering pillows and magazines. This time he was able to look at her, really see her. Martha Sampson was no porcelain doll. Her skin was almost olive in color, but her facial features were not Mediterranean. There was something mysteriously beautiful about her dark eyes. Her high cheekbones had a hint of the Orient.

She moved so elegantly she seemed to be dancing a minuet. She leaned her long body across passengers near the aisle to adjust pillows for passengers near the windows. Balfleur licked his lips. "If this were a movie, she'd come over here and ask me what I want to drink. We'd talk, and find out we had a lot in common. We'd wind up spending the night together. But noooooo – nothing like that ever happens in real life – not to me, anyway."

Balfleur liked to use the subjunctive *were*. That was the way he spoke. Although his father was Cajun, his mother was a Yankee, and taught him to speak *proper* English. He could not even understand the thick Cajun French tongue of some members of his father's family.

Fred Balfleur was not every woman's tall, dark, handsome dream. He was a little on the short side, although

Army training had disguised the roly-poly figure that had made him an easy target for school bullies. He had intelligent eyes, but they were set in a very ordinary face covered with dark, swarthy skin. Altogether he presented a not unattractive picture, if you took the time to look twice. The trouble was, most women didn't take the time.

She did come and ask him what he wanted to drink. A Coke. She handed it to him. End of discussion.

Balfleur was concentrating on nothing, just day-dreaming. Suddenly, something caught his eye.

Bobbing.

Weaving.

Black dots, bobbing, weaving and racing.

-- A stuttering stream of black. Black figures moving. Now Balfleur's brain had time to record it. Three dark figures were up and running. Balfleur was startled. They ran down the aisle towards the front of the plane. Some of the other passengers looked around quickly. The three disappeared into the cockpit.

There was silence for several minutes.

Then, a voice was heard on the intercom.

"This is the captain speaking. We have been hijacked. We have been ordered to proceed to Beirut airport. Please remain calm."

Gasps whistled out up and down the length of the plane. Several people started moaning. Some cried. Some prayed.

Balfleur watched the proceedings with a kind of detached interest. "I wonder what happens next," he thought. He was excited, rather than terrified.

Some passengers were swiveling their heads left and right; others craned their necks and propped themselves on elbows, trying to see. There was nothing to see. There was no sign of the hijackers.

"Excuse me," a voice next to Balfleur said. "I've got to get off now."

The middle-aged man's eyes were wild and staring. He got up from his seat and started trying to crawl over Balfleur. "I've got to get off now!" he repeated. The man didn't explain how he was going to exit a jetliner flying at hundreds of miles per hour, thousands of feet above the Mediterranean Sea.

Martha rushed over and urged the man to sit back down.

"Please remain in your seats," the captain's voice said. "Don't create any disturbances." His voice was calm and confident, full of fatherly authority.

"This thing ain't for real," a scrawny, pimply-faced youth said. "Where're the guns? Where're the bombs? You can't hijack a plane without guns 'n bombs! Where're the hijackers? Nobody's told us nothin'."

"Yeah, nobody's got a gun on us. Let's go up there and straighten this thing out," another voice chimed in. "Where's our guts? Let's go!"

A tall man in a gray business suit leaped out of his seat, charged forward, and waved for others to follow him. Two more got up and cautiously approached the forward cabin.

The noise level in the plane rose abruptly – sighs and groans, murmurings and muted shrieks came from violently swiveling heads. Eyes stared wildly.

"My God, my God, my God," someone wailed.

"Do you mean Allah, Jehovah, or the Three-in-One?" an irreverent tongue wagged. The question was more to the point than the wag realized.

All over the plane, people were popping up and down, craning their necks to see. Indecision was thick in the air. Somebody would start to get up, think better of it, then sit back down.

Balfleur knew exactly what to do. He sat still and stared straight ahead. He retreated into himself. He saw the sleepy bayou, drowsy in heat, where he and his older brother Jaime caught catfish. He saw the shrimp boats chugging toward open waters, their nets slung like great spider webs. He heard his grandmother humming hymns on

the front porch while shelling butter beans.

While panic flooded the plane like a tidal wave, Balfleur floated in memories that resembled clichés of a fading Southern existence.

The man who had led the charge took a deep breath and yanked the door open. It was hard to tell who was more startled – the tall American, or the short, bearded, swarthy Arab directly behind the door.

The hijacker yelled something in an unknown tongue, and slammed the door shut in the American's amazed face. They heard the door latch slide shut, and behind it, muffled, enraged voices.

Then there was a scream of pain and the sounds of fists slamming into flesh. After a few minutes there was silence again.

"Please return to your seats and do nothing." The pilot's voice was shaky, pleading. His confident, fatherly, authoritative tone was gone. Was he the one they were beating? Nobody knew. Nobody knew anything.

"They have a bomb," the pilot's voice squeaked. "If there's another disturbance, they'll blow us up. Please return to your seats."

"What are you trying to do – get us all killed?" an angry voice berated the rash passenger who had led the charge. "We're 45,000 feet in the air and you're playing John Wayne? Go sit down, before we're all nothing but one big poof in the sky."

Sheepishly, the would-be hero returned to his seat. There was nothing to do but wait.

And wait.

And wait.

"Interesting," Balfleur thought to himself. His calmness amazed him. Someone who had been panicked in Rome airport over the necessity of making a simple decision whether to stay on the plane or get off, could be calm in the face of death. At any moment, his atoms could fly apart, and rain down on the Mediterranean Sea, 45,000 feet below. And all he could think of to say was, "Interesting."

Balfleur was no hero. He had already established that fact to his own satisfaction. Maybe he was like the gent next to him; maybe deep down he really wasn't convinced this was happening. It is the kind of thing that happens to other people. You read about it every day. You see it on the six o'clock news.

Or maybe Balfleur's strong Catholic upbringing was making itself felt. Way down in the middle of his stomach, he was aware of inner calm. It didn't matter. Nothing that happens down here matters. ["DOWN here? at 45,000 feet?" Balfleur teased himself] – "I'm going home to Jesus."

CHAPTER THREE

The deep blue of the Mediterranean Sea was flecked with wisps of white. Puffy white clouds streamed smoothly-quickly past the window, revealing a whole phalanx of towering white giants and blue sky above. Martha Sampson didn't notice. After a hundred flights she had stopped looking out the window, just as early-morning commuters cease to marvel at breathtaking gold-orange sunrises.

Since she wasn't looking out the window, she couldn't have realized that it was a perfectly beautiful place to die. Instead, she was thinking of her ex-husband and two children.

They had been divorced for two years. He had gotten tired of trying to catch her between flights, and she hadn't been ready to settle down in one place. She was from a small farm in the Midwest, and wanted to see the world. After flying thousands of miles, she had never been cured of her wanderlust. Staying in one place more than a week made her claustrophobic.

Untypically, the judge had awarded custody of the children to her husband. It must have been because of the

unstable home atmosphere, as he put it. It certainly couldn't have been the drinking, although her husband had tried to stress the point during the trial. She didn't drink that much; only a couple of cocktails between flights in the V.I.P. waiting rooms.

After the ill-fated charge of the light-headed brigade, the beating and the plea from the captain, the passengers had fallen silent; Martha could rest. Then murmuring began again. More whispering and buzzing. "What are they doing in there? What's going on? Where are the hijackers? Why don't they show themselves?" Nobody was really anxious for the hijackers to appear, but the lack of activity was unsettling. The unknown, the waiting seemed almost worse than actual violence.

The rumor mill began. "I heard they're going to hold us until Israel gives the Palestinians their land back."

"No, that's not it. They just want to embarrass the President. They'll hold us for a few days, then let us go – it's a power play, that's all."

"Hey! I just heard there's a U.S. senator on board! They're going to hold him for ransom! They want guns, bullets, missiles, and \$15 million in cash!"

A red-faced fat man spoke up. "Nobody's holding a gun on us – why don't we just rush 'em?"

"What's the matter – are you stupid? Didn't you just see somebody try that? They've got the captain. If anything happens to the captain and crew, we're all going down – unless you think you can land this thing?"

"Aw bull – they wouldn't do that; they'd die too."

"Don't you read the news? Haven't you heard about these Moslem extremists? To them, the only thing better than killing infidels (that's us) is getting killed. If they die for Allah, they go straight to heaven. If they crash with this plane, they become martyrs – famous. So just sit still and shut up."

The plane droned on. Finally, without warning, the pitch of the engines changed. They were headed down.

CHAPTER FOUR

Washington, D.C. – The President was not awakened with the news. It was not the kind of thing you woke the President of the United States for. Hijackings in the Middle East are like sunny days in July; not exactly stunning news.

Still, the matter gave White House aides some uneasy moments. There was still no indication who the hijackers were, what they wanted, or where they were going. Maybe it was just some nut trying to get rich quick, or a homesick expatriate without the price of a ticket home. Maybe it would all be over soon. "Lord, just don't let it be the Hezbollah again," was the unspoken prayer.

The wire services had already picked up the story and were beaming it around the world via satellite. Wire editors all over the world were reading the same message:

BULLETIN: ROME (AP) – An unknown hijacker or hijackers reportedly commandeered flight 809 from Rome about 1:30 a.m. Sunday, EDT. Airline officials confirmed earlier reports of the hijacking. It was not immediately known if the hijackers were armed, or what their demands were. The intended destination of the flight was Madrid.
EDS: ADDITIONAL INFORMATION WILL BE EXPEDITED AS IT BECOMES KNOWN.

One of those wire editors, sitting before a computer terminal in the newsroom of a small daily newspaper near Salina, Kansas, was Jeremy Sampson. ["Flight 809 from Rome. Oh my God – that's Martha's run!"]

CHAPTER FIVE

It was growing dark as the jetliner approached Beirut airport

and asked permission to land.

Airport officials demurred at first. It was necessary to keep up appearances, if their side had any hope of winning the battle for public opinion. "We don't cotton to hijackers around here," was more or less the message they wanted to get across. The Beirut airport officials were pros at the media game. Only one or two reporters had got wind of the hijacking so far, thanks to those careful, unofficial leaks. The reporters had rushed right over to get the scoop before the hordes of television crews descended like a modern day plague on the ancient land.

The airport officials gave a dedicated performance, even though they were playing to such a small audience. After first refusing the plane permission to land, then delaying, the ground finally *gave in* to the pilot's pleadings (it would later be described in the press as a humanitarian gesture, considering the potential loss of innocent life aboard the craft). The plane had been running dangerously low on fuel after circling the airport for several hours.

Few passengers on the plane were sleeping; most had lapsed into a state of deep shock. Some still refused to believe that what was happening was really happening. "I'll wake up tomorrow, and this will all be over."

The fat man nudged Balfleur. "What's happening? Where are we?" There was no one to tell him. It had grown dark. They were headed down into blackness. Into the unknown. Into suspense and wondering. Slowly, the plane settled lower, as if drawn into an inky whirlpool. Eyes strained into the undivided blackness. There was nothing to tell where black sky ended and black earth began.

It was a relief to hear the captain announce, "We'll be landing soon at Beirut airport." The prospect of dying on the ground was somehow less frightening than dying thousands of feet in the air. – You don't have so far to fall.

Finally, a tiny dot of light down there on the earth appeared like a lone star in the night sky. Then another. And another.

A runway appeared as the plane made its final approach. It was dimly lit; just enough light for the pilot to see where to land. Most of the houses were dark – a wartime blackout. They were entering a war zone.

The plane bumped hard, bounced, bumped again. The tires shuddered and squealed. The whole fuselage shook. The captain must be nervous. "Well, he ought to be," Balfleur thought.

As the jet zoomed down the runway, a military truck sped out to intercept it. The plane rolled to a stop and the truck screeched alongside. A boarding ladder was brought up and the plane door opened.

Dark figures bounded up the ladder and went inside. The newcomers were heavily armed. Each carried an automatic rifle and hand grenades.

"Now we're really hijacked," somebody said. "Satisfied now?"

The red-faced fat man snarled angrily, "Now we've missed our chance. Why didn't you let me take 'em before?"

"Shut up," his neighbor replied. "We never had a chance. Shut up or you'll get us all killed."

One tall figure with bushy black eyebrows and pockmarked face yelled "Silence!" in English. Then he rattled off some orders to his colleagues. Some of them went into the cockpit, where the first hijackers were waiting.

When they returned, the leader gave some more orders. Two of the hijackers started down the aisle, taking up passports. One passenger was reluctant to relinquish the precious document, and received a sharp blow to the head with a machine pistol. Nobody else objected.

When the Soldier of God snatched Martha Sampson's passport, she felt a sharp twinge of pain, like a string snapping inside her. She felt alone – naked – as if the small rectangular piece of paper were a shield protecting her.

Ever since she had left that small Midwestern farm she had unconsciously been moving farther and farther away from home. She prided herself on being continental; worldly. Now she suddenly had an inkling that she had been taking some things for granted.

Specialist 4 Fred Balfleur handed over his military identification card without a word. But the evil-looking man who took it gave him a glare that terrified him. It was a look of pure hatred. "What have I done to that guy?" Balfleur thought. He felt uneasy. "Americans are the good guys; everybody's supposed to like us."

The leader gathered up all the passports and poured them on a table. Two others began sorting them into piles.

Balfleur looked out the window and saw that the plane was being re-fueled.

CHAPTER SIX

Washington, D.C. – Timothy Bartholomew was an upscale, ivy-clad hustler from a wealthy eastern family. He had graduated with top marks in corporate law, but his aims had always been firmly fixed on politics. He was ambitious. Soon after landing the obscure White House staff job, he managed to irritate and unsettle his superiors with his hard-driving, brash manner. He assumed duties that he didn't have, and gave advice where it was not asked. He made enemies. But he got away with it because he was a genius, and everybody recognized it. Even his rivals who would have loved to squash him, felt intimidated by his intellect.

So far, the upper echelon of White House advisers had been able to keep Bartholomew from entering the inner ring closest to the President. Bartholomew did not give up, however. He was relentless, and enjoyed sticking pins in his superiors, whom he regarded (privately, of course) as *bubble-headed, sycophantic power-mongers*. He smiled to himself whenever he had that thought. ["The only difference between me and them is, they've got the power to monger. If I had it, I'd be right in there mongering with the best of them."]

This latest crisis gave him another chance to sharpen his fangs. He had wanted to waken the President immediately. "No," Leonard Bramshaw told him. "That's old stuff. No need to wake the Boss. There's nothing we can do right now, anyway."

"I'm tired of us looking like the Keystone Cops' dumb relatives," Bartholomew shot back. "Do you want to read in the papers tomorrow that subtle little line the reporters love to use, 'The President was not awakened?'"

Bartholomew had touched a nerve. On several previous occasions, real nail-biting crises, the President had not been awakened, and the newspapers had had a field day.

"Just go back to bed and do as you're told," Bramshaw told him. "You're not running the White House – yet."

Bartholomew turned to go, allowing himself a smile after his back was turned. He just loved to get under Bramshaw's skin.

That had been five hours ago. Now it was close to six o'clock – the time the President usually woke up. Like most successful men, the President had a rigid schedule that almost never varied; it is the only way to pack everything into a busy day.

Bramshaw brought him the bad news before breakfast. "Those damned Arabs," the President muttered. Then he sighed deeply. "I get so tired of the never-ending cycle of violence. An Arab kills a Jew to avenge an Arab killed by a Jew to avenge another Jew. It's like a large-scale version of the Hatfields and McCoys – and not nearly as quaint."

"It's brother against brother, Mr. President," Bramshaw agreed quietly. "It's been going on since they started writing the Bible, and it'll continue long after we're dead." His tone was resigned and matter-of-fact, not pedantic.

"Stop trying to cheer me up, Bramshaw," the President

grimaced with friendly sarcasm. Then more seriously, he added, "Brother against brother – yeah. – But dammit, why do we have to get sucked into their family quarrel?"

It was a rhetorical question. They had been over this same ground in Cabinet meetings time and again. "If the Russians did this, we would have to that ... if our Mideast oil were cut off, what would be our options?..." The eternal chess game of global politics.

There was a brief pause as both men reflected on the hopelessness of resolving a conflict that had outlasted the centuries.

"Enough philosophizing," the President said finally. "I want some facts. I want to know who we're dealing with. I want to know everything about them. I want to know what they ate for lunch yesterday, and what pet names their mommas called them when they were two years old. What kind of men are they? How will they react to what kinds of pressure?"

"I want to explore all the kinds of pressure we can bring to bear on them, plus any help we can get from anybody else. I don't want this one dragging on forever. The American people are sick and tired of that kind of abuse."

"Yes sir, Mr. President," Bramshaw said.

"Round up the usual suspects, then." The President affectionately tapped a portrait of actor Claude Rains, dressed in his role of the French inspector in *Casablanca*. The President was a movie buff, and *Casablanca* was his all-time favorite. And his favorite line from that movie classic was, "Round up the usual suspects," spoken by Rains. Even though he had witnessed with his own eyes the killing of the Nazi Major Strasse by Rick (Humphrey Bogart), he ordered his men to "round up the usual suspects" to investigate the killing. It was a sign that he was ready to join Rick in fighting the Nazis. There was a kind of snobbery in choosing this line as favorite, because it put the President in with the elite of *Casablanca* fans. More plebeian fans clung to Bogie's famous line, "If she can take it, so can I. Play it." Only the totally uninformed still held the popular, erroneous belief that Bogie had said, "Play it again, Sam."

When the President said, "Round up the usual suspects," it meant simply to call a meeting of his most trusted advisors – the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the Attorney General, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the heads of the CIA, DIA, and NSA, and his chief political advisor.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Beirut – It seemed to Balfleur that they had been sitting there on the tarmac for days. It seemed he had spent his whole life in a plane. His entire existence was framed by that long cylindrical tube.

The plane had inexplicably left Beirut, flown to Cairo, then Cyprus, then back to Beirut. Now it was back, sitting on the sweltering tarmac in the same exact position where it sat in a previous lifetime. Balfleur had lost all track of time.

The terror was beginning to wear off, and boredom was setting in. Some of the passengers were starting to worry more about their comfort than their lives. They were tired and hungry. Their limbs ached from the cramped quarters and lack of exercise. They were unshaven and thirsty. They had forgotten what it was like to not be on a plane.

Two terrorists were still guarding the hostages with automatic rifles. The others had disappeared after gathering up all the passengers' passports.

"How long are we going to sit here?" Balfleur wondered. The plane had been refueled again, hours ago. Anyway, it didn't much matter where they went, if they went hopping around the Mediterranean again, or if they stayed put – as long as those bearded faces were staring at them over loaded guns.

"We're hungry and thirsty," one passenger up front complained to one of the gunmen. "Let us at least wash up or go to the bathroom," another whined.

The bearded soldier gave no sign he understood, even when the passengers made eating, drinking and washing gestures. It looked as if they were playing a bizarre game of charades – but their burly guardian wasn't playing along.

At last, three of the terrorists returned. "Arnold Kaufmann," one of them called out. A young man with close-cropped hair, a checkered shirt and blue jeans looked up, startled.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Washington, D.C. – "We've received their demands," the Secretary of State said. "They want the immediate release of eleven terrorists convicted in bombings and assassinations. Most of these are being held in Israel, a few in Germany."

"That's out of the question. They should know that. We would never agree to that, even if we could influence those countries – which we can't. We can't ask them to do that for us," the President answered. "We'll have to string them out on that one."

"How are the hostages being treated?" the President wanted to know. The *usual suspects* were seated around a table in the situation room.

The head of the Central Intelligence Agency answered. "We have unconfirmed reports, sir, that they've badly beaten a U.S. serviceman. He may be injured or dead – we don't know."

"Who is it?" the President pressed.

"Kaufman, sir. Arnold Kaufman."

"Just like those damned pirates who hijacked that ocean liner," the President nodded. "A military man, and what's more, one with a Jewish-sounding name. An obvious target." There was a long pause as the President scanned the room, looking directly into each man's eyes. Only a few were able to return his intent gaze without dropping their own.

"OK then," the President said at last, after he had visually skewered each man at the table – "what do we do about it?"

"We go and get 'em out of there, dammit," snorted General Sam Taylor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"That's great," Attorney General Fred Lowenstein responded. "We have 192 hostages and eight terrorists, and General Taylor wants to simplify matters by giving us 200 corpses."

"You damned little wimpy pipsqueak!" General Taylor fairly shouted. "A few more like you, and we'd all be speaking German now."

To say that General Taylor and Lowenstein did not get along would be like saying a thermonuclear warhead goes *boom*.

The President ignored the outburst. He was familiar with his advisers' short fuses and touchy nerves. "If they're this touchy already, I wonder what they'll be like after a couple hours of brainstorming," he thought. Still, he liked an adversarial atmosphere where everybody spoke their minds openly; it made the options clearer.

"What do you suggest, Lowenstein?" he asked.

"Nothing, sir. It's still early. Let things develop. Maybe the local authorities will be able to get the situation under control."

"And maybe the Tooth Fairy is going to fly through that window, smack each one of us on the cheek, and dump a million bucks in our lap," said Williams, head of the DIA.

General Taylor pretended to stifle a derisive guffaw. He made a choking sound that drew attention from around the table, then recovered himself.

He was not a stupid man, despite the boorishness of his quick-trigger outburst. He was a tactician. Survey the situation, form a plan of attack, and execute swiftly. Select the

terrain and fight the battle on your own terms. Never, never do what the enemy expects you to do.

General Taylor had just exploded in a ferocious, surprise frontal attack. Hopefully, the enemy was off balance. Now to follow up with sniping from the trenches. Fire and maneuver. Fire and maneuver.

"Nothing." He spoke into the silence. His voice was clear and crisp, filled with cold scorn.

"Nothing," he repeated for dramatic effect. "Nothing is what the previous administration would have done. Nothing. Just sit still and let the enemy keep making all the moves. Don't try and pressure them, make them feel the heat, make them commit the first error. – Just nothing.

"Well, let me tell you something, Mr. Lowenstein." Taylor slowed his cadence, prolonging each syllable and building intensity. "Wars are not won by doing NOTHING! They are won by swift, decisive, intelligent ACTION! They are won by GUTS!"

Lowenstein tried to break in, but Taylor ignored him. He was attacking now, and nothing was going to keep him from demolishing his objective.

"And make no mistake about it, gentlemen. We are in a war. Not your usual type of war, no. It's a back-stabbing, gut-spilling war fought by cowardly bastards against unarmed men, women and children. U.S. civilians are on the front lines, fighting this one with their naked bodies. Now, what are we going to do about it? Are we gonna sit back and do nothing, as Mr. Lowenstein suggests, or are we gonna develop a strategy and fight back?"

Taylor glared fiercely around the table. He could tell he had hit his target. The enemy looked crestfallen, defeated. The others looked like they might swing his way.

But Lowenstein wasn't ready to give up.

"A nice speech, General," he remarked drily. (Lowenstein always referred to General Taylor as *General*, a breach of military etiquette, whenever he wanted to irritate him. And he usually did.) "-- But I'm not ready to go charging in, spraying bullets all over the place. Not yet, anyway. We've got to assess the situation, see whom we're dealing with, what they want, how they can be reached, and what they'll settle for."

"A good point, Mr. Lowenstein," the President said. Up to now, he had been an interested observer, watching his advisors fight it out, without giving a hint which way he was leaning.

"Let me say, General Taylor, that I was touched by your eloquence." In grave circumstances, the President sometimes slipped unconsciously into a more formal speaking style. "And I heartily agree with the sentiments you expressed. But we want to consider our options."

Taylor resisted the urge to make an impatient gesture.

"Mr. Gordon," the President now addressed the head of the Central Intelligence Agency. "Just who are we dealing with here?"

"We're not exactly sure, sir." Gordon chafed at not being able to give precise information. "But we believe they're one of the splinter groups of the Hezbollah – the so-called *Beloved of God*, named for its leader.

"It's a fringe group – a cult. This Beloved is almost like a god. He is their spiritual leader as well as military commander. They're well organized, smart and tough. We suspect they may be the same group that bombed those two GI nightclubs in Germany. They apparently got around the metal detectors at the airport by bringing plastic explosives aboard in handbags. They used the explosives to make their threat, and then landed in Beirut, where they got reinforcements. We can't prove it, but the whole thing has rolled so smoothly for them, that we suspect the Beirut airport officials may be secretly working with the terrorists."

"And what do they want?" the President interrupted. "Have they made any demands known?"

"No, sir. We have had no direct communication from

them. We do know something about their situation, though." Gordon racked his brains, trying to remember all the memos he had seen on the obscure terrorist group. "They are being pressured by other Moslem militias, like the Druse and the Amal."

"Mr. President," the Secretary of State broke in, "it may well be that they want nothing at all, except to carry out an attack against us, and gain glory for themselves."

"Like those damned bombings of GI nightclubs! Some glory – murdering unarmed soldiers and civilians," General Taylor grunted. He was still miffed at being turned aside by the President.

"I couldn't agree with you more, General," the Secretary continued. He leaned back and puffed complacently on his pipe. "Their system of values is totally alien to ours. That is the bitter truth of life in the Middle East. But you have to understand your enemy before you can defeat him."

"Precisely," Bramshaw chipped in.

All heads turned immediately. In the normal pecking order, Bramshaw did not speak in high-level meetings like these. He was supposed to be an observer, to take notes and gather his thoughts, and possibly write down some proposals for his superior to present to the President.

"The key to this whole affair," Bramshaw continued, "-- and I mean the whole Arab-Israeli thing – is to find a solution for the Palestinian problem."

An audible groan filled the chamber.

"You know the Israelis will never go for an independent Palestinian state, or even for talks with the PLO, for that matter," the Secretary admonished the out-of-turn Bramshaw. Was Bramshaw digging his political grave, the Secretary wondered.

"If we come out for anything that smells of giving in to terrorism, we'll look like fools to the whole world," General Taylor added. "And if we try to force the Israelis into an unacceptable agreement, we'll be stabbing a trusted ally in the back."

"And face the charge of anti-Semitism," Lowenstein added.

Lowenstein, a non-Jew, was especially sensitive to this topic because of his Jewish-sounding name.

Having gone this far, Bramshaw wasn't about to be smothered so easily.

"Wait a minute, gentlemen," he broke in. "Let me finish. We all know the obstacles. But I repeat – we will NEVER see peace in the Middle East until some settlement is reached with the Palestinians. You've got to realize that the flood of Jewish immigrants from all over post-war Europe came in and pushed people off their land that they had been occupying for a thousand years."

"But before that, the land belonged to the Hebrews – they were just taking it back," Lowenstein said.

"Yeah, and before that, it belonged to the Canaanites," Bramshaw retorted. "Look at it this way. We took America away from the Indians only a couple of hundred years ago. How would we feel, if the Indians came and took it back? The point is, that the establishment of modern-day Israel disrupted a very old, stable geopolitical situation. Now we've got chaos, and we need to do something about it."

"Thank you for the history lesson, gentlemen," the President broke in. "-- But we're straying a bit far from the subject – which is how to get our citizens back home safely from the hands of their kidnappers."

CHAPTER NINE

Beirut – The skies above Beirut were buzzing, humming. Great metal insects descended like locusts – "Let my people go."

The electronic media was coming home to roost.

They were stacked in the sky, jockeying for position. One by one they settled and disgorged their ant-like crews,

dragging miles of black TV cable, cameras, lights, microphones; “Lights, camera, action – let the hijacking begin; let the tale of drama unfold in this exclusive WRK-something live action footage, filmed this morning at Beirut airport.”

Still the stars were not visible. The ants swarmed around, stringing out their wires, setting up their cameras, opening their boxes, following directions of the taskmasters. “Give me a close-in shot of that plane. Set up as close to the police cordon as you can get!”

More hustling, more bustling. Delays, shouts, arguments. “How many times have I told you? Just do it my way!”

Finally, he would be there. The star. Flashing a grin at the little people who make it all possible, or trying out that serious crisis-face.

“This is Frankly Boring, reporting to you live from Beirut airport (How do I sound), where American hostages are being held in that plane, just a few hundred yards across the tarmac”. Nod toward plane, pause for effect, camera closeup.

“This is Merry Chase, reporting live from Beirut (a little more mike). Early this morning, Arab terrorists seized a jetliner bound from Rome to Madrid...”

The Beloved of God watched the show. He made a clucking noise with his tongue.

“It is amusing. We take their citizens, and they repay the kindness by giving us free publicity to the world with their expensive toys.”

“Shall I turn it off, O Beloved One?” a faithful servant asked.

“No, not yet. It is pleasing in my sight. You may leave Us now.”

When the door closed behind the obedient servant, Beloved of God turned to his second in command. “You have done well, Fawaz. Beloved is pleased.”

“You are too kind, Beloved,” the tall, turbaned General of God replied to his master.

Beloved was garbed all in white, from turban to slippers. He sat on a low divan, with his feet folded inward. His ancient face was lined with wrinkles. A slow, wry wrinkle was forming at one corner of his mouth.

“What do you think the Americans will do, Fawaz?”

“Beloved flatters me by asking my humble opinion. I believe, Beloved, they will bluster and threaten – at first. But when we show that we are not frightened by their threats, the weak-hearted cowards will force their leaders to listen to our demands.”

“Let it be so, if Allah wills it,” Beloved breathed. He was snoring when his general left the room, bowing backwards. Someone on the TV set was selling motorcycles.

CHAPTER TEN

Beirut – Balfleur was scared. The hijackers had taken Kaufmann. He tightly shut his eyes and clenched his hands over his ears, but he could still hear Kaufman.

The hijackers had dragged him outside. There had been the sounds of a struggle – blows, and anguished cries cut short by a single sharp report that sounded like a pistol shot. Then silence.

Balfleur hadn’t done anything. [“What could I do? They had all the guns”] That wasn’t it. Not what he did or did not do.

What he thought. Thoughts are terrible. They betray who you are. You can’t hide. Not even from yourself. No matter how you try. Hear, then, Balfleur’s thoughts while they were dragging poor Kaufman away: [“Why doesn’t somebody help him? Why doesn’t somebody stop them? Not me. I can’t do it. The guns. I just can’t. I must do it. I can’t.”] In the end, he sat there paralyzed and watched them drag away a comrade in arms; a fellow U.S. soldier.

They had singled out an American serviceman for death. “And I’m an American serviceman,” Balfleur thought.

The hijackers who had killed Kaufman were coming back onto the plane. Balfleur’s stomach contracted.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Washington, D.C. – “I want a quick solution to the problem,” the President said. “I don’t want a hostage situation dragging on for weeks and months.” The special meeting was turning into a marathon. They had gone straight through lunch, and finally sandwiches had been brought in.

“But Mr. President,” Lowenstein broke in, “waiting might be to our advantage. Wait for the hostage-kidnapper bonding. It can work to our advantage. In a few days, hostages and kidnappers will have more in common with each other than with anyone else. It’ll make it harder for the terrorists to turn on them and kill them. It’s a point in our favor. I know you’re anxious to get this over with, sir, as we all are – but waiting might be our wisest course.”

“Waiting is one option,” the President agreed reluctantly. “But I’d like to hear some suggestions on things we can do.”

“We need to attack the problem on several different levels at the same time,” said James Brookline, the thin, mustachioed, dapper head of the FBI. “We can’t be everywhere at the same time. Sky marshals didn’t work out; it proved too expensive to have marshals on every flight. Instead, we ought to be training the crews of airliners in anti-terrorist tactics and self-defense. They should be armed and ready to cope with hijackers.

“Also, we need to push for much tighter security at airports – boycott those airports that don’t comply. And we could conduct air strikes against terrorist training camps.”

“Whoa, slow down,” the Secretary of State broke in. “What a laundry list! Let’s take things one at a time. Asking airline pilots and crews to be commandos would require not only a massive training program, but a basic re-evaluation of the roles and duties of those personnel.”

“Let’s not get into any of that right now, gentlemen,” the President said wearily. “Those are all ideas on how to combat the problem of hijacking in general, but have damn little to do with our present situation. What I want to know is, what can we do – right now – for those people on Flight 809?”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Beirut – “Where are the Marines?” one passenger whispered to a comrade.

“What do you want – to get us all killed?” another hissed back. “If they come charging in here with guns and grenades, what do you suppose is going to happen to us?”

“Silence!” commanded one of the hijackers.

The executioners of Pvt. Arnold Kaufman were stalking down the aisle.

“Frederick Balfleur!”

Balfleur looked up, startled at hearing his name pronounced in a foreign accent. Then, as if he didn’t hear, he dropped his head again. His eyes were vacant.

Freddie Balfleur had always been a loner. He had never been popular, had never been one of the gang. Gradually, he developed a place within himself that took the place of the gang. He went there whenever he felt threatened, or sometimes just to relax and float. It was a comfortable place with wispy tendrils of grass, dry-smelling stalks of goldenrod and fluffy white clouds. Finally he began spending more time there than in the *real* world. His mother called him a daydreamer, but it was more than that. He was a sojourner; he wandered far in the realms of his mind, going places and doing things that the average day-dreamer scarcely – dreams of.

“Freddie,” his mama called. “Freddie, where have you been? I’ve been calling you for the past hour!”

Freddie had been to China and back. He had sailed

aboard a pirate ship and fought cannibals in the South Seas. And it was so real he could still feel the salt spray on his cheek and the arrow wounds in his back.

That's where Balfleur was now – lost somewhere deep within himself. It was not a conscious attempt to escape, to separate himself from the others, to be an unhijacked passenger in an otherwise unanimously hijacked plane. It was his natural state.

The hijacker called his name again. "Frederick Balfleur!"

Crimson flashed briefly, painfully in Balfleur's head. He awoke from his reverie. It was no use pretending he wasn't there. Hesitantly, he looked up.

The gunmen marched forward menacingly, weapons looming large in Balfleur's view.

"You – come with us!"

One of them reached out to grab Balfleur's collar.

Stewardess Martha Sampson was astonished to find herself between Balfleur and the gunmen. "Nooah," she yelled. It was more of an animal growl than a word. The bearded soldier of God tried to brush her aside, but found her surprisingly strong. She held her ground, and gripped the back of a seat for support as she pushed against the attacker.

With a roar, he exerted all of his strength to tear loose her grasp. Martha Sampson flew across the aisle and landed in a passenger's lap. But before the hijacker could grab Balfleur, she charged again.

The gunman was off balance. Before he could raise his machine gun, she was on him, pummeling him with her fists. He was too surprised to be angry. Was it against his code of ethics to fight a woman, or was he just embarrassed? For whatever reason, he was so taken aback that he momentarily forgot his intention to kill Balfleur.

He stumbled backwards, laughing.

The gunman's companions pulled him away, laughing and teasing, while he struggled half-heartedly in their grasp.

When they were gone, Balfleur turned to look at Martha in wonder. He couldn't say Thanks." His first reaction was embarrassment at being saved by a woman. His second reaction was embarrassment at being embarrassed.

Martha didn't say anything. Ripples and waves were surging through her body. Her lips would not keep still.

Balfleur steadied her. She was quivering all over. "Come over here," he said. "Sit down."

Finally, she stopped shaking.

"You're the bravest person I've ever met," he told her.

"I'm not brave. I--I don't know what happened – what made me do it. I didn't think. It wasn't me. I was just there."

Balfleur became aware of his arm around Martha's shoulder, and was embarrassed again. But he left his arm there. He began to feel like a kid on his first date. Sitting in the next-to-the-last row in the Blue Bayou Theatre, Freddie Balfleur's arm had long since lost its feeling, and he feared it would fall off at any moment; once he had summoned up enough nerve to put it around Chantelle's neck, he would never have the courage to move it or even twitch it.

"Are you married?" he suddenly blurted out, and immediately felt foolish. They might be riddled with machine gun bullets at any moment, and he was making small talk with a pretty girl.

Martha smiled. "Divorced," she answered.

Balfleur's face got even redder. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right."

They sat for a long time without speaking. They thought it was hours, eons. They were in a special kind of time – not the kind where office workers sit nervously eyeing a clock, waiting for the minute hand to make a final tick. They were suspended; floating ... floating....

Freddie Balfleur was drifting, drifting. He lay flat on his back on the flat bottom of a swamp boat, and the July sun beat down into his face. He was bored and tired of fishing. He just lay there and made shapes out of the white, fluffy

clouds that were drifting by on a course opposed to his. He was floating southward, towards the Gulf of Mexico. The fluffy fleet of clouds was drifting in a northeasterly direction. His mama would be mad when he came back without any fish, but he didn't care. He just lay there and dreamed about the famous pirate Jean Lafitte, and his daring escapades sailing swift pirate vessels in the open Gulf. A man who took Fate by the throat and shook it.

Living the free life of the rolling, rolling wave; the slosh and foam-streaked lip and curl; the rolling emergence of a dolphin's dorsal fin; the flat slap of a leaping stingray; the ancient waves' washing motion always cleansing, refreshing, renewing; the roll and dip and surge and splash of the ship's bow plowing into the belly of each wave. Freddie dreamed about floating on down the bayou, past the marsh islands covered with tall grass, all the way to the shining expanse of the Gulf of Mexico. Leave the land forever and never look back.

"I never had much luck on land," Balfleur confided. "I was never popular with girls. The other guys made fun of me, bullies bullied me. I was fat. The sea is freedom. It's free. I want to sail out there – just me and the waves."

She was so easy to talk to. His mouth was moving, and words came out, flowed out, easy and smooth. He wasn't embarrassed.

"Why did you join the Army, if you like the water so much? Why didn't you join the Navy?" She wasn't mocking him. She was really interested.

Balfleur shook his head. "It's not right, if you have to go. I want to be my own boss. Go wherever I want, when I want." He pulled out a creased, worn boating magazine ad for a cruising sloop.

"Is that your boat?" Martha asked.

"I saved up my Army pay. When – if I get back home, yeah. Cruise to the Bahamas, the Virgin Islands, Mexico."

"How about your parents?"

Balfleur swallowed. "Mom won't like it. She'll try to talk me out of it, I know. Dad won't be a problem." Balfleur suddenly felt selfish.

"What about you?" he asked. "What's your story? What's your family like?"

Little Martha was sitting on the back steps of her family's farmhouse in Kansas, playing with her doll, and waiting for Daddy to come in from the fields. It was hot and muggy. The crops needed rain, but all she could think about was the heat. She wanted to be cool. She wanted to have nice clothes. She wanted to leave; go far away and not look back. The wide, flat, empty space hemmed her in like the close walls of a prison. "One day," her father always said, "one day you will, Martha. I promise. You will have all those things and more. – More than you can imagine. Daddy is going to make you proud."

Daddy. It seemed he was always away. Long, hot, muggy nights Martha had spent alone with Mom, waiting for Dad to come home. Often, she had to go to bed before he got back. She couldn't go into the fields to be with him during the day, and at night, it was always, "Sorry, Pumpkin, Daddy's got to go to another meeting."

Martha had never taken an interest in his meetings. It was a farmers' co-op, and Daddy was the main organizer of a district-wide program to pool funds to help individual farmers facing foreclosure. The co-op was a natural stepping stone to local politics, and later...

Later, little Martha grew up. She grew up fast, as all little girls do. She left home, but quickly realized that the big city of Salina was not an easy place for a young woman on her own. That led to her hasty marriage to Jeremy.

Jeremy was a reporter for a small newspaper in one of the suburbs. She thought that he was an exciting man with an exciting career, and convinced herself that she was in love with the tall, lanky ex-farm boy who looked like a gaunt Gary Cooper.

It wasn't, he wasn't, and she wasn't. Jeremy was not anxious to go to a bigger newspaper, or to go jetting off to the world's hot spots, and getting shot at by revolutionaries. All he wanted was a comfortable house, a screened patio with overhead fan, and a cool beer. He wanted to measure the passing of the seasons by the World Series and the Super Bowl. He wasn't dull or stupid, he just had limited ambitions. He was blessed by knowing exactly what he wanted from life, and being able to achieve it. He was promoted to wire editor, and they were able to buy the house he wanted.

It drove her crazy to see him content with so little, when she wanted so much, and couldn't get it. Wanted what? She didn't know.

Finally, Martha was able to stand it no longer. After a long string of violent shouting matches, she went through with her plan to become an airline stewardess. "I've got to see if there's a world outside of Kansas before I die!" Slam.

That was the beginning of their end. Somehow, two children managed to come in between flights around the world and quick, stormy lovemaking on weekends. Jeremy got fed up with life on the installment plan. He demanded that she quit her job. She refused. Gradually, his demands increased, and so did her drinking. End of story.

Meanwhile, back on the farm, things weren't going much better. Martha's mother never forgave Daddy. She blamed him for Martha's leaving home. As Mom withdrew, Daddy became more involved in politics. Was it coincidence that his ambition and success in politics also kept him away from home, scene of so many unpleasant quarrels? Divorce was not far behind, and Daddy soon remarried.

Too late, Daddy fulfilled his promise made to the little girl on those wooden steps on a hot, muggy afternoon. After winning a few minor local elections, he made it to the Senate.

And now, Martha's Daddy, the President of the United States, was probably sitting down with his Cabinet, trying to find a way to get his little girl back.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Washington, D.C. – Martha was the *forgotten* President's daughter. Being from the *other* family, she was a second-class celebrity, far below the rank of the children from the President's second marriage.

Her name was rarely mentioned in *background* news stories about the President. Still, it did not take long for the White House staff to learn that the President's *forgotten* daughter was one of the hostages on flight 809. They put a delaying action in place to try to keep the news out of the hands of the media.

But somebody had to tell the President. Nobody wanted to be the sacrificial messenger bearing bad tidings. The task got bumped down the totem pole to Bramshaw.

"Mr. President, I'm afraid I have bad news," Bramshaw told him in the Oval Office.

"Yes?"

"Your daughter, Martha Sampson, was on that hijacked plane. I'm sorry, sir."

Blackness clouded the President's eyes. ["Martha, Daddy's going to make you so proud...so proud. Sorry, Pumpkin, Daddy's got to go to another meeting. Sorry, Pumpkin, I can't think about you now, I've got to go to another meeting. And this one is really important. For both of us."]

The President noticed that Bramshaw was still standing there. "Well, round up the usual suspects," he said. "And Bramshaw --"

"Yes, sir?"

"Don't tell them about my daughter – yet."

The recessed meeting was back in session, and going nowhere. None of the President's advisers was anxious to stick his neck out and suggest a plan that might prove a

total failure.

The President cleared his throat. "At the close of our last session, gentlemen, I asked you for a concrete plan on an immediate course of action. Now you've had time to think about it. I am ready to hear your recommendations."

For a long time, no one stirred.

Finally, General Taylor was compelled to speak. He had been the one urging instant action. To keep silent now was tantamount to retreat – cowardice in the face of a challenge.

"I think we should strike hard and fast, sir. Hit 'em before they have a chance to react."

Lowenstein emitted a snort of disbelief. "The general wants a bloodbath, sir. Don't listen to this madness."

Taylor continued calmly, "Surprise is a powerful weapon. A good, experienced team can be on 'em and take 'em while they're immobilized with indecision. It's do-able, sir."

"Thank you for your suggestion, general," the President answered. "But I don't think we're ready to go into such a risky venture – yet."

General Taylor's countenance remained calm. Inwardly, his guts were raging and seething against the hated Lowenstein. "In the long run, striking now and striking fast might prove cheaper in terms of lives, sir." Taylor's voice was muted, and he stared straight ahead. "The bastards may have already killed one of our boys. Are we going to let them be killed one at a time, while we try to reason with this scum?" He stood up abruptly and left the room.

"A well-executed strategic withdrawal," an aide whispered in Lowenstein's ear. "Taylor just hit you with a mortar barrage to cover his retreat."

Lowenstein watched the President's face, trying to read the effect of Taylor's bombast. No luck. The President had his poker face on.

Behind the poker face, scorpions rustled around in the President's brain, probing areas that were better left unprobed. Mad schemes hatched and died. Waves of hope rose up and dashed on unforgiving, sharp boulders of reality. He had to do something. It was up to him to decide; only up to him. He had to save Pumpkin. No. He had to save 192 people. Pumpkin, Pumpkin. He was glad that General Taylor had left the room. He couldn't bear to look at that hard, hawk face. The President shivered. That face looked like Death. That face could look through him. It could discover the reason behind his indecisiveness, his hesitation, his procrastination. Oh, something!

The President must do SOMETHING!

But what, Pumpkin? But what? He looked gratefully at non-comprehending Lowenstein, who could not know that he was the President's ally in a time of need. It was good that he did not know; he was a shrewd politician who knew how to turn an advantage.

Just a little time. The President needed time to think. How much time? He sensed his advisors were growing restless, suspicious. A decision had to be reached. But how? How could he send bullets and bombs flying in Pumpkin's direction? How could he?

It was growing late.

"We've been at it a long time," the President spoke at last. "Let's break it up, gentlemen. I want to think this over. Please make yourselves available at a moment's notice."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Beirut – Balfleur and Martha Sampson were huddled against each other, holding hands; frozen in a stale, heavy chunk of time. Time was suspended for them. Nights were punctuated with nightmarish shouts and moans. Periods of fitful, shallow sleep were interrupted by maddening hours of restlessness, where sleep was impossible. Days were hot and stifling, and faded from memory through long staring at nothing, and brief naps. How long had it been? Fred and Martha didn't want to think about it; they couldn't remem-

ber if they tried. They could remember no existence outside that plane.

Airport officials provided food and drink at regular intervals, but nobody really felt like eating, although they were growing weak from undernourishment.

The plane stank of human sweat. Going to the toilet was a chore that had to be supervised by a guard. Civilization was slipping away from hijackers and hostages.

Martha snuggled under Balfleur's arm. He liked her damp, hot, sweaty scent. There was nothing fake about it. It was real.

It pulled at Balfleur, drawing him out of his daydreams.

"I never had much luck on land," he repeated. Then he laughed a short, choppy laugh. "And now this."

A sudden commotion brought life into the plane. Three camouflage-clad soldiers appeared, waving their guns and jabbering. Something was obviously happening. There was a great hubbub. The hijackers went down the aisle, pointing. Behind them, others came. They motioned for everybody to stand up. Everybody was standing up. Everybody filed down the aisle and out of the plane, urged on by figures in combat uniforms waving machine pistols.

Fred Balfleur felt an absurd exhilaration. At this stage, change for change's sake seemed welcome. Getting shot was an exciting prospect compared with being cooped up in the stale air of that plane.

Outside, there was more milling around and confusion. The Soldiers of God divided their prisoners into groups. Balfleur suddenly felt steel-hard hands painfully grip his biceps. He was shoved to one side. He looked up, and saw Martha being wrestled to another area. She didn't look at him.

Balfleur and his group were hustled aboard an open truck. They sat. They waited an interminable time. "Hurry up and wait." Balfleur couldn't resist a grim chuckle. "Armies all over the world are the same." The driver was jabbering something to a bearded soldier with cartridge belts slung over his shoulders.

One of the soldiers came and blindfolded the hostages. More waiting.

Finally, with a deafening, muffler-less roar, the ancient truck came to life. The driver jammed the pedal to the floor, and the bulky vehicle sped away across the tarmac, through an open airport gate, and down dirty, bumpy, potholed, debris-laden streets at a bone-jarring pace.

In the darkness of his blindfold, Fred Balfleur's body counted the times he was thrown painfully against the sides of the truck. Every bump brought fresh pain.

At last the torturous ride was over. Hands grabbed Balfleur and threw him off the truck. He felt the hot sun go cool, and knew he was inside.

A metal door clanged ponderously shut. Booted footsteps pounded away down the hall. Fred Balfleur was a hostage.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Washington, D.C. – "It seems they've moved the hostages from the plane, sir," Bramshaw told the President.

The whole world would know it soon. Armies of television crews had descended on the Beirut airport since the news of the hijacking had first gone out. Fuzzy, jerky, camera sequences had documented the boarding of the plane, and later, the group of men who left the plane; the apparent beating, the sharp report very much like a gunshot; the apparent removal of someone or something from the plane.

Later, the cameras had recorded a flurry of activity as trucks arrived, and the hostages were transferred to trucks and driven away. They reported that airport and government officials were "powerless to intervene out of consideration for the safety of the hostages." A police cordon kept the media at a safe distance from the plane the whole time.

"Mr. President," Bramshaw said. "It is vital that the kidnappers don't find out that your daughter is among the hostages. It would give them an important playing card. There's no way to keep it a secret from the media forever. We've got to go to them and convince them not to break the story."

The President's eye and jaw went hard. He had reached his decision. "No," he said. "We're going to treat this hijacking like any other. Let the media print what they want. Let the kidnappers think what they want; they'll find it makes no difference."

"But --"

"Call in and brief the *suspects*" the President said. In less than an hour, his advisers were assembled in the conference room.

When they were all seated, the President said, "Gentlemen, there is something you must know; something of a highly personal nature...but something that can have no impact on your conduct of these deliberations."

"My daughter is one of the hostages."

Stunned silence.

"... It makes no difference. It CAN make no difference. Those hostages are all American citizens, and all of their lives are valuable. You will not place one above the other. If any man feels he cannot do that, let me know now, and you will be excused from these meetings."

There was a long, pained silence. No one moved. No one spoke. It was like silent meditation in a church.

"Very well," the President continued at last. "Thank you for your candor. You all know the basic situation; the hostages have been removed from the plane. Now we must consider how this move changes things. How have our options changed, and what can we do about it? The first question is, where are they now?"

His question was not directed to any one of the advisers individually, but head of CIA felt compelled to speak. "As far as we know, Mr. President, they have been scattered throughout the areas of the city controlled by the terrorists – in groups varying from two or three to five or six. They are being held in strongholds of the various factions. I would have to say, sir, that this makes our task a hundred times harder. Instead of having all the hostages in one central location, we now have them scattered about in mostly unknown locations."

"Sometimes, an enemy's strength can become his weakness," General Taylor said. "Like the Maginot Line. If they get overconfident, it could work to our advantage." He tried to put the best face on it, but it rang hollow. Taylor was whistling in the dark.

"OK," the President said. "So what do we do now?"

"How about a little sleight of hand," FBI chief Brookline said. "Send in the Sixth Fleet as a show of force, and while they're distracted, we infiltrate a platoon of commandos to gather information. Then we could plan a rescue mission."

"I suggest we try the diplomatic route, Mr. President," the Secretary of State said. "Enlist the aid of the moderate Arab states. Make them see that it is in their best interests. Encourage our allies to use their good offices to secure the release of the hostages."

"Why don't we throw a scare into them?" suggested Gordon of the CIA.

"How's that?" asked the President.

"Throw a scare into them. – S.C.A.R.E. – *Secret Cadre for Action and REvenge*," Gordon explained. "It's a group of highly trained, highly motivated private citizens, pledged to defend United States' interests at home and abroad – without involving the government. They will do the things we would like to do, but can't do openly."

"Just who are these men?" the President asked roughly. "How long have they been organized, and why haven't I been informed about them before now?"

Gordon went on the defensive. "I don't know their iden-

titles myself, sir. I only know they are dedicated American patriots, funded by wealthy individuals. They operate outside the government, but in accordance with our wishes.”

“At another time, you and I WILL discuss this matter in more detail,” the President said. “For now, just let me say that I intend to be fully informed about all matters of interest to the United States. – Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.” Gordon swallowed hard.

“Now, then. What did you have in mind?”

Gordon plucked up his courage. “Sir, the Soviets know how to handle thugs. When some of their agents were kidnapped, the Soviets kidnapped the brother of one of the terrorists. They sent back some of his fingers, both ears and his nose. The Soviet hostages were released.”

“Out of the question,” the President interrupted. “The United States government will never conduct or condone terrorism. The United States must maintain the moral high ground. If we stoop to terrorist methods, we are no better than they are.”

Gordon tried to speak, but the President cut him off. “I repeat – out of the question, Mr. Gordon.”

At that moment, an orderly slipped into the room and handed General Taylor a note. Taylor read it swiftly and folded it again. He looked at the President. “We have just had confirmation,” Taylor said, “that Specialist 4 Arnold Kaufman has been killed by his abductors.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

BULLETIN: WASHINGTON, D.C. (AP) – Government sources revealed today that elements of the U.S. Sixth fleet, including the aircraft carrier Nimitz and escort ships, were steaming towards the southeastern Mediterranean region, and taking up stations just offshore Beirut, Lebanon. The Secretary of the Navy refused to confirm or deny the reports. Secretary of State John Wiesenthal denied that naval movements were connected with the hostage situation in Beirut.

The Soviet Union reacted sharply to the reports, calling the action *provocative* and *dangerous*. Soviet surface vessels were reportedly shadowing the U.S. ships.

–+–

The President wadded up the Associated Press bulletin and threw it in a wastebasket. “Well, what do you think, Anderson?” he asked.

Jacob Anderson, the President’s political adviser was heavysset and balding. His open, almost childish face belied a shrewd wit. “The public doesn’t understand or care about foreign relations, Mr. President. The average guy out there driving a pickup truck doesn’t know Afghanistan from Africa. All he knows about foreign relations is that imported beer costs more than domestic.

“It doesn’t matter what you do as long as it’s a success, and doesn’t make America look weak. The only thing that makes the guy in the pickup truck mad is to think that a bunch of camel jockeys, who eat with one hand and wipe their asses with the other, are thumbing their noses at Uncle Sam. He wants to be tough. If America looks tough, it’s worth a million votes.”

“I can’t afford to think about votes, Jake,” the President replied. “I’ve got to think about those hostages and the interests of the United States.”

“Sure, Mr. President,” Anderson said. “But that line won’t buy you a single endorsement, if your plan falls on its face.” He grinned and gave the President an impish wink.

The President ignored the impudence. “Thanks, Jake. You always help me put things in perspective – to keep in touch with what the average citizen thinks about what we’re doing up here.”

After Jake left, the head of CIA was ushered into the President’s office. His hands were steady and his manner

was calm, but his insides were fidgeting.

“Now, what’s this about the United States of America using S.C.A.R.E. tactics?” the President asked.

Gordon became more nervous. “Really, sir – I”

The President cut him off. “For heaven’s sake – this is not an inquisition, man. I’m not interested in how you came to be involved with this clandestine, possibly illegal organization. I want to use them.”

“But you said --”

“I said the United States will never stoop to barbarism. And we won’t. But I see no reason why we can’t enlist their aid to carry out a legitimate operation. I think Brookline’s plan has merit. Do you think S.C.A.R.E. has any operatives who could slip into Lebanon unnoticed and discover the whereabouts of the hostages?”

Gordon tried not to look too relieved. He cleared his throat and shuffled his feet. “I don’t know, sir. It would have to be Mediterranean-types, of course. I’ll ask.”

“Let me know within 24 hours if it’s possible.”

“Yes, sir.”

When Gordon turned to go, the President stopped him. “This still doesn’t get you off the hook with me. I don’t like being kept in the dark about matters of interest to the United States – is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

It was one of those dog and pony show days for the President. Next on his list of appointments was a meeting with the relatives of some of the hostages. He dreaded it.

It turned out as bad as he expected: teary-eyed women and stoic, broken men trying to appear brave. One lady who did most of the talking for the group, had the hard edge that comes from being at the center of a national controversy. Her lines were well rehearsed. “Mr. President,” she orated in a shrill voice, “it is not enough to repeat phrases like *national interests* and *never negotiate with terrorists*. That may be fine as a theory, but we are talking about real people here – real lives at stake. One has been killed already. How many more must die? Surely, negotiations could help resolve this situation without further bloodshed.”

Assurances didn’t help. The President trotted out all the standbys: “I assure you ma’am, we are doing everything we can. These are very delicate negotiations, and we are leaving no avenue untried.”

She interrupted him before he was halfway through: “Mr. President, it isn’t enough. You’ve got to do more. Think how you would feel, if it were one of your own children being held over there. What would you do then? What would you do then? Well, what WOULD you do then?”

[“What WOULD I do then? What would I do then? What will I do, Pumpkin?”]

“I assure you, ma’am, we are very concerned for all the hostages, and are doing everything in our power to obtain their release.”

“It’s not enough! It’s not enough! You can’t feel what a mother feels. That’s my child over there!”

It seemed to drag on forever. Like the drilling in the dentist’s chair, and similar tortures. The President’s aides fumed and fussed in the background, but didn’t dare speak. At last it was over. The President retired to his room and collapsed on a sofa.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Beirut – Darkness was all Balfleur knew. Even without the blindfold, it would have been impossible to tell whether it was day or night. The brilliant, white-hot Mediterranean sun never penetrated his window-less cell with its massive steel door. The heat pressed all around in suffocating folds. But it pressed around someone else’s body; Balfleur wasn’t there.

–+–

He was lying in his narrow iron bed, deep asleep, waiting or the touch of his grandfather's hand. "Time to wake up, mon cher." The instant his grandfather's hand touched his foot, little Freddie was wide awake. He fairly sprang out of bed, bare feet slapping the cool, smooth wooden floor.

Grandpere's thin, hunched, bony form was already ambling slowly into the kitchen, while Freddie jerked on his jeans and shirt. The wonderful sounds and smells of breakfast filled the house. Coffee floated deliciously in the air. Bacon crackled and sizzled in the black, cast-iron frying pan. Soon Freddie would hear the hollow crunch of eggs breaking, followed by popping and snapping. Freddie would wolf it down, and the hot coffee would scald his mouth.

Then he and Grandpere would put on their boots and go outside into the cool morning air. A mist was hanging low over the bayou, moving softly like ghosts' breath. Grandpere reached for the bamboo fishing poles and the rusty coffee can full of earth and worms. "We gone' mess wi' dat finny tribe, mon cher, ya." They tramped down to the water's edge, leaving boot prints that slowly filled with water. The dew still hung heavy on the rough plank where they sat, and Freddie's bottom became uncomfortably wet. "You wasn't git too comf'table, if'n you wanna catch fish, no," Grandpere said. Grandpere baited Freddie's hook, and the cork made perfect rings on the black surface of the water. It was still dark, still long before sunup.

Freddie didn't hear booted footsteps marching down the hall. He didn't even hear the heavy door to his cell swing open. An explosion of pain awoke him at last, and brought light to the insides of his eyes. Somewhere above him, a voice was screaming. The only word Balfleur understood, "America," was yelled like an obscenity. The obscene yells were punctuated by the thudding of boots into Balfleur's flesh. Now Balfleur's screams competed with his attacker's. His groin exploded in pain. Balfleur gasped. His screams stuck in his throat. Water poured out of his sweat glands and out of his eyes. It was growing dark again when the door slammed and the footsteps faded away down the hall.

"America," he whispered before the darkness claimed him. He caressed the word like a lover.

A day later, or was it a few hours or only minutes? awareness returned, but the darkness was still with Balfleur.

—+—

Shadowy shapes in front of Balfleur shuffled toward a waiting truck. "Step right this way, gentlemen," a mock-polite voice called out of the darkness. "Let's show a little motivation." The long bus ride with other army draftees had ended in the interior of the state well after midnight. They were being taken to a processing center. After what seemed an interminable ride, they jolted to a stop in front of a white, two-story wooden box. "Welcome home, draftees," the sardonic voice rang out.

Bone-tired, the stragglng mob of young men had to file upstairs to be issued bedding. Each received Two brown woolen blankets, two sheets and a pillow case. Downstairs, they found a large open room with four rows of beds, two on each side, divided by a central walking area. The paper-thin mattresses were neatly rolled back, exposing the springs.

Bates took the cot next to Erskin, on the other side of the aisle and a little down from Balfleur. Turner was by himself way down near the door.

Gratefully, Balfleur unrolled his mattress, threw the sheets over it, and collapsed on the squeaky springs. He was instantly asleep. His dreams were of Grandpere and the sleepy bayou.

A half hour later, a rough hand was shaking Balfleur's shoulder. "Get up and come with me, draftee." Balfleur was never one to question authority. He rolled out of bed immediately and began getting dressed. Some of the others were not so cooperative. "I'm not going," Bates said. "We

just got to sleep. Go away. Pick somebody else."

They all got picked. Erskin, Bates, Turner and Balfleur staggered out the side door into the darkest night Balfleur had ever seen – darker than a starless night in the swamp. They were marched down a gravel road past other low wooden structures. They entered the back door of one of the buildings and were met by a tired, balding middle-aged man wearing white slacks, a dirty t-shirt and cook's hat.

"OK, let's get this over with," he said. "The sooner you get through, the sooner we can all go to bed." He led them to a mountain of greasy pots and pans, many of which were big enough to serve as a small boat. "Don't fuck around. And do it right the first time, or you'll get a chance to do it all again."

"C'mon, let's get this done and get out of here," Bates said. He was still sleepy.

But Erskin took over. "No," he said firmly. "Let's make the pots shine. Do a better job than he expects us to. As long as we're doing it, let's do it right."

The tired, bored Army cook grunted with surprise at the spic and span kitchen. Then, the four friends straggled back to their new home in pitch black darkness before the first gray of morning, and collapsed into their creaky bunks.

—+—

It was still dark inside Balfleur's blindfold when he heard steps coming down the hall again. His pulse beat faster. His bruises ached. The door began to open. His stomach felt sick, and his bowels loosened.

He felt his blindfold being taken off. "My comrade, he is a little too zealous," a voice said in English. "Your navy is patrolling our coastlines, threatening to send their great bombs. Everyone is afraid and nervous. There are riots in the streets. Mohammed took out his frustration on you."

Balfleur blinked, and stared into a tanned, bearded face. He didn't speak.

"I don't wonder that you are reluctant to speak," the Soldier of God said. "I'm afraid we have given a very bad first impression of ourselves. We are not all like Mohammed, I assure you. He takes the Jihad literally. He thinks it is his duty to torture and kill unbelievers. Most of us do not agree with that radical position."

"I'm sure you're a swell bunch of guys. You don't really enjoy kidnapping and killing innocent civilians, you do it because you have to."

"I understand your bitterness. You are being sarcastic, but you are right. We do it because we have to. We have to win justice for our people."

"Even if it means doing injustice to other innocent people?" Balfleur asked.

Ahmed answered with a shrug. "It is war. In war, innocent people sometimes get hurt. Let me tell you a story. My father was the keeper of the tomb of your Jesus Christ. His father and his father and his father before him lived on that land. When the Zionists came, they forced my father from our land. Many people were killed, including my young sister. I was sent to the United States to be educated. It would have been easy to turn my back on the unjust sufferings of my people and live a comfortable life in the United States. But I could not do it. I returned to fight for justice – for freedom and independence."

"Why are you telling me all this?" Balfleur asked.

"I want you to understand why we do these things. Maybe you will not agree. I cannot ask for that. But I hope you will understand."

"Why does it matter if I understand? I couldn't help you if I wanted to – and I'm not at all sure I want to."

"We want the American people to understand our cause," Ahmed said. "The American people are fair and just. They are honest, and they support freedom and independence for the world. That is what we want, too."

"It doesn't seem to me that you're going about it the right way," Balfleur said. "How can you expect the American

people to understand and support your cause while you are kidnapping and killing American civilians? It doesn't make any sense."

"We do it to attract attention. We want the world to notice and understand the injustice that we suffer."

"I think you'd have better luck with peaceful means – nonviolent protest – like the way blacks in my country gained their rights. They suffered injustice, too. – But they didn't kill people to prove their point."

"I don't want peace," Ahmed said fiercely. He had a dangerous look in his eye. "I want to drive the Zionists from my land."

"If the Zionists are your enemy, then why don't you attack them, and leave us alone?" Balfleur retorted.

"The United States is the strongest ally of the Zionist state," Ahmed snapped. "All the world knows that. If it weren't for the United States, Israel would be blown away like the desert sand."

"We're just trying to bring peace to this area," Balfleur said. "I think the real reason you don't attack Israelis is, you are afraid. They defend themselves too well."

Ahmed's face turned from olive to a deeper shade of purple. "There will NEVER be peace until the Palestinians are free," Ahmed shouted. He left abruptly, slamming the heavy door with a thunderous clang.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Somewhere in the U.S. – A hairy arm reached over the guard's left shoulder and firmly grasped his mouth, while another arm quickly and silently drew a knife across his throat. A little sawdust trickled out and the *sentry* fell dead.

"Clumsy, 22!" a voice barked. "Slow and clumsy! My grandmother would have ripped your balls off and served 'em up for dinner! Next!"

Candidate Number 22 trotted off, and the next trainee tried his skill at stealth and murder.

The current batch of trainees at S.C.A.R.E. had been at it for eight hellish weeks already. Most, but not all of them were ex-military men. Some were soldiers of fortune, some fancied themselves American patriots, and some were just misfits. They had done pushups until their arms ached and bellies dragged the dirt. They had run cross-country and up murderous hills with heavy packs, until they thought their hearts would burst. They had attended classes during the day and run back to the barracks at night, to collapse half-dead into bunks. – Only to get up before dawn and start all over again.

The day was wearing on. It had started as usual, with calisthenics, followed by a 4 a.m., four-mile run before breakfast. Then they ran to classes – advanced map reading, demolitions, hand-to-hand combat and booby-traps. After the last man had slit the last throat on the last dummy, the drill instructor assembled his troops.

"You're all gonna DIE!" he yelled. "Fourteen – a deaf man could have heard you before you got within ten feet. Eleven – a cripple could have broken your arm before you slit his throat! Eighteen – with your technique, your only chance is if the goddam enemy laughs himself to death! You think you're gonna S.C.A.R.E. somebody? Haw! You bunch of pansies couldn't S.C.A.R.E. a kindergarten class. You gotta be tough! You gotta be mean. What do you gotta be?"

"Silent! Careful! Aggressive! Revengeful! Evil!" his pupils screamed.

"Awright! Right, HACE! Fohwuud, HARCH! Double time, HAARCH!"

Candidate Number 22's bones ached, and his M-16 rifle banged painfully into his side, as their pace quickened to a run. But a warm feeling, almost of well-being, flooded through him. He could make it through another day. They were headed back. Soon he could eat supper and fall into his bunk. Just keep those feet pounding, pounding. Just a

little farther up ahead was the *clubhouse turn*. Jones (their instructor) would order *column left*, and they would head home to their one-story, whitewashed barracks.

Slowly, the tall pine trees marched past, while Number 22's feet pounded up and down on the hard-packed clay road. Shafts of light broke through in broad beams between the tree trunks. The trees opened out into a clearing.

The turn was coming up. Out of the corner of his eye, Number 22 could see the dusty dirt road that intersected the one he and his comrades were now pounding. Far off to the left, over two low hills, around a bend and over the bridge, he could imagine the low white barracks, with a bunk waiting for him.

No sign from Jones. Number 22 didn't dare glance at him. Could Jones forget? They were passing the turn! They were going straight! Paradise was slipping by, out of sight, pulling at him.

Ugly murmuring drifted through the ranks of huffing, heaving, sweating men. If Jones heard it, he gave no outward sign. Number 22's body rebelled. It was a physical barrier of unwillingness – unwilling to take another step. With a huge effort, 22 crashed through the barrier. He made his feet keep pounding the hard ground.

They continued on for miles, deeper into the woods. They crossed a rickety steel and wooden bridge over a narrow gorge, high over a chocolate-colored stream. Ragged, sharp sandstone boulders lay in a gorge leading downhill to the stream. On the other side, the trees grew thicker. The brush became impenetrable, hastening the end of day.

Jones, a tall, gaunt, lanky form in a black baseball cap, seemed ready to run forever. His long legs whacked the ground regularly, tirelessly, easily. The motion seemed to cost him no effort, as if the legs did their own running, and Jones were merely perched atop them, serene and relaxed. His face was not red, and he didn't even appear to be sweating. He was all sinew and tendon and bone hard. After a full day of training, marching, yelling and running, he was fresh and energetic.

Number 22 hated him suddenly, fiercely. He was near despair. Daggers of pain slashed his lungs.

Finally came the order, "Quick time, HARCH!" As Number 22's body jolted from a run to a walk, he almost fell. And still they marched. And marched. And marched.

They marched for dusty miles, through low, swampy land, then back up a sandy grade. Number 22 was about to fall asleep. Then, through a hazy red fog, he barely heard, "Column, HALT! Left, HACE."

The column of exhausted men jolted to a halt. Zombie-like bodies bumped into each other, tripping over their own feet. They had no idea how far they had come, or where they were. And they did not care.

Jones strode vigorously, heel and toe, from end of the ranks to the other. His men gazed at him with dazed, stupid eyes. "You're the sorriest excuse for men I've ever seen," he shouted. "A little run and you think you're tired. Are you tired?"

The answer was a weak, "No, sir."

"I said, ARE YOU TIRED?" Jones' face was red and bulging.

"NO, SIR!"

"Well, that's fine. Mighty fine." His eyes leapt brightly. His narrow jaw jutted. His straight mouth was severe. But inside, an evil smile slowly spread. "If you was tired, I'd have taken you home in a nice truck. But since you're not, we'll run home."

The long way back was a death and a rebirth. there were stragglers. Number 22 couldn't believe he had made it. He was one of the finishers. His body was fuzzy and numb. He was asleep instantly.

There were more weeks of training ahead – specialized training in hostage extraction – how to enter a room and kill

everybody in it except the one you want to save.

On graduation day, Number 22 stood proudly beside the men he would trust with his life. A huge banner above them read, "S.ic 'em, C.adets; A.venge, R.evenge, E.xterminate!" Soon he would trade his number for a name, a passport, and an airline ticket.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Beirut – BULLETIN: BEIRUT, Lebanon (AP) – Crowds rioted in the streets for the third straight day, protesting United States Naval presence in the eastern Mediterranean, while radical Islamic religious leaders vowed that the United States would be *struck down by the invisible hand of God*, if the forces were not withdrawn. Pentagon officials, meanwhile, continued to deny that the naval maneuvers were connected with the hostage situation in Beirut.

—+—

The plane from Cyprus landed in Beirut, and the passengers went through customs without incident. A dark-skinned, mustachioed man picked up his battered suitcase and made his way through the terminal. His Lebanese passport was made out in the name of Abdul-Mohammed, architect, returning from a vacation in Greece.

He looked straight ahead. His step was unhurried, but deliberate as he headed toward the exit. At first he did not see the small man in the full-length garment, keeping pace with him about 30 yards behind. He walked past the waiting taxis and headed down a small side street. Now it was impossible not to notice the frantic arm waving as the little man signaled to an invisible person or persons.

There was a shuffling of feet. The big man whose passport read Abdul-Mohammed quickened his pace, then turned left in the direction of crowd noises. He found a large open square with a throng of people. A turbaned speaker stood on a raised platform, his arms gesticulating wildly.

"Allah akbar (God is great)," he chanted. The crowd roared in response. The square was a sea of arms flailing madly above bared, gaping, sometimes rotting and missing teeth. The eyes were fixed and staring, with an eerie inner fire.

"Death to the Great Satan America," the speaker screamed.

A huge banner hung from one of the buildings on the far side of the square. It showed the President of the United States as an evil puppet, stomping on the heads of Arab children. The strings attached to his arms and legs led to a huge blue Star of David.

Before the demonstration began to break up, Abdul-Mohammed squeezed his way across the square and entered a side street. He walked quickly for a block and a half, then ducked into an alley.

After trying a few locked doors, he finally found a low doorway that opened onto a courtyard.

He waited.

Ten minutes. Fifteen minutes. When no one came, he waited another ten minutes, then quietly slipped around the side of the courtyard instead of walking across out in the open. He entered a narrow, dirty hallway, filled with a mixture of laundry and kitchen smells.

A worn screen door hung loose on its hinges. He stepped out onto another street at the side of the house. It was too late to retreat. Four strong arms grabbed him and shoved him into a waiting car.

A few blocks later, his bullet-riddled corpse was dumped on the street, with a note attached. The sedan sped away and disappeared into the traffic.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Washington, D.C. – "All of them?"

"All six, sir. Four missing, presumed kidnapped. Two killed outright. Not one lasted more than two hours in country. They were set up, sir – betrayed. There must have been a leak somewhere. They didn't have a chance."

"Call in the others," the President said sharply. "I want a meeting right now."

Most of the President's advisers had not been informed about the S.C.A.R.E. mission. Now that it had failed so utterly, the President was not anxious to have the details spread around. Briefing would be on a need-to-know basis. "All they need to know is, we tried something and it didn't work," the President told his CIA chief. "We don't need to go into the gory details. Just lay it out crisp and concise."

—+—

Timothy Bartholomew was getting on Bramshaw's nerves again. Naturally, he had found out the details of the Beirut fiasco, almost before the CIA itself knew.

"Well, I see the boss bought another rotten fish," Bartholomew remarked with a smirk.

"I suppose you knew it would fail, all along." Bramshaw said bitterly.

"A child could have seen it. Trying to slip six men into Beirut unnoticed? When every outsider is put under a magnifying glass? When there are enough leaks in Congress to sink every ship in the U.S. Navy? It never had a chance."

Bramshaw bit his lip to keep from shouting. He would have loved to punch Bartholomew right in the middle of his smirking face. But White House officials do not punch subordinates in the face – especially if the damned twit was a college boxing champion.

Bramshaw retaliated the only way he knew. "I've got to go now," he said. "I've got a meeting with the President."

It was a private party, and Bartholomew was not invited. Bramshaw spun on his heel and headed for the conference room. Bartholomew went back to his hole in the White House basement – in reality, a well-appointed, fully equipped receiving station for sensitive information from around the world. It was the nerve center of the President's own private information-gathering office.

—+—

The conference room was so quiet that Bramshaw could hear the Secretary of State's strained breathing. He was a heavy smoker. The attorney general rattled some papers, and drew the attention of the entire room. Most of the others shuffled and stirred, and made little grunting, sighing noises. Only General Taylor sat soundlessly, back straight, staring straight ahead.

All heads turned when the President entered the room. "Have you all been briefed, gentlemen?" All heads dropped, feeling shame for their Commander-in-Chief. "Very well. Where do we go from here?"

There was a great deal of clearing of throats and shuffling of papers. The President was not in the habit of repeating himself. He just sat and waited. The Secretary of state felt warm. He would have blushed if he had not been in the state department for 15 years. "Well, sir," he began, "we have a number of options. We can continue to press our allies for support in solving the matter. We could enter a petition with Amnesty International. We could institute an economic boycott of Lebanon, and ask our allies to join in."

"If you ask me, sir," General Taylor said, "the direct approach is still the best. "Send in a wave of bombers, or a barrage from the *New Jersey*. That ought to give them the message loud and clear."

"Typical." Attorney General Lowenstein prepared his thoughts like a legal brief. "General Taylor's answer to everything is to spill blood – open up somebody's guts. We need a sound, logical approach to the problem, not emotionalism. We need to negotiate – find out what they want, and what they're willing to accept. Decide what we can offer, and go from there."

Down in the basement, Timothy Bartholomew's hands

shook just a little as he read the message off the fax machine. He tore it off the machine and almost ran out the door. He went up the stairs and down the corridor.

He tried to look nonchalant as he strode past the Marine guards and yanked open the door to the conference room. Immediately, this low White House functionary became the center of attention for a handful of the most powerful men in the world.

Bramshaw glared at his subordinate. According to protocol, Bartholomew was never to enter the conference room when a high-level discussion was in progress – unless it was a grave emergency. “I’ll get him for this,” Bramshaw thought grimly. “This had better be good – damned good.”

It was damned good.

Bartholomew did not try to creep in the obsequious manner proscribed for lower staff members. He strode, shoulders back and head erect, up to his superior. He handed Bramshaw the note and stepped back a pace.

Bramshaw flushed as he felt all eyes turn on him. He fumbled with the paper, and took a longer time reading it than he would have needed without an audience. Still, none of the men wanted to betray his impatience. Nobody urged him to *hurry up and read us the damned note*.

“Mr. President,” Bramshaw began at last. “Our sources indicate that the kidnappers will soon issue a statement saying they will kill all the hostages, if our ships are not withdrawn from the area. And they repeat their demand for the release of the ‘revolutionary heroes’.”

The release of pent-up air sounded around the table in snorts, sighs and hisses. “They’re bluffing, sir.” General Taylor offered his advice without being asked. “They’re just trying to test our nerve.”

“And what if they’re not?” Attorney General Lowenstein demanded. “What if they massacre all those people, and we could have prevented it merely by sending our Navy on a mission elsewhere?”

“Don’t be naive,” CIA chief Gordon said. “Giving in to hijackers just makes them bolder. It’s like feeding sharks. They go into a frenzy, and pretty soon you wind up losing a hand, an arm, or your life.”

“These young folks,” remarked the Secretary of State, “don’t remember Neville Chamberlain. They think it’s possible to appease fanatics.”

“Don’t be condescending with me,” Lowenstein snapped. “I think I know the difference between Adolf Hitler and the Beloved of God.”

“And what might that be?” asked his nemesis, General Taylor. “Are you trying to say that the Beloved of God is any nicer? That they can be trusted and reasoned with like the Prince of Wales? You’re going to sit down at a negotiating table with people who roll their eyeballs, scream and shake their fists in the air?”

“Why not? We sat down to a table with Khrushchev, didn’t we?” Lowenstein parried. That witticism was rewarded by a sage chuckle from the assembled advisers.

But Taylor was a bulldog. “My point exactly. See where it got us – an indefinite extension of distrust – of the Cold War, and the arms race. We shouldn’t have talked with Khrushchev, either.”

The meeting was beginning to take a familiar shape, with Lowenstein and Taylor going at each other, neither giving an inch. The President was content to let the argument run its course. Lowenstein picked up a pencil and twirled it, looking thoughtful.

“I suppose,” he said, “if you had been president instead of John Kennedy, you would have simply pushed the button, and we wouldn’t have all these problems now. Instead, our only problems would be finding drinking water and food uncontaminated by radioactive fallout!”

Gordon joined the fray. “We had to talk with Khrushchev. He was the head of the second most powerful nation on earth. We don’t have to talk to two-bit Arab thugs.”

Some of the edge went out of General Taylor’s voice, and he turned to Gordon. “Don’t you see, John? Sure, we had to talk to Khrushchev. You know why? ‘Cause we didn’t press our advantage when we had it, that’s why. We let them get the bomb. At the end of World War II, we were the most powerful nation on earth – with no rivals anywhere near us. We were the only ones who had the bomb. We could have remade the world in our own image – just as we pleased, without asking anybody. We could have blackmailed the world into laying down its arms, for its own good.”

“Patton was right.

“If we had listened to him, we would have marched right through to Moscow – or at least arranged a peace exactly to suit us – with the threat of the bomb for anybody who didn’t see it our way. THINK of it, for God’s sake. Instead of this constant chaos and penny-ante bloodshed, we could have had a United States of the World, with its capital in Geneva. We would have world peace, because every nation would be fairly represented. Then, if the Arabs or the Jews, or the IRA raised a ruckus, we’d just send in the National Guard. Patton. – He might not have been fit company for the cocktail party-parlor set of sophisticated, sentimental, slobs, but – God – the guy had GUTS! Where’s America’s guts now? Where’s America’s GUTS?”

It was a breathtaking speech, the kind the general rarely gave, and almost never within earshot of such sophisticated listeners. He had laid his soul bare. The room was hushed for an instant.

And into that hushed silence, a sardonic voice rang out, “In Chicago, that’s where – HOG BUTCHER OF THE WORLD!”

Lowenstein’s hearty laughter was cut short when he realized nobody was joining in. General Taylor looked up quickly, his face the color of boiled lobster. His eyes, shark-like, sought out the source of the impudent outburst. All eyes around the room followed his, back to the corner behind Bramshaw’s chair, where the White House rookie, Timothy Bartholomew stood, brazen and unrepentant.

“What do you mean by that remark, young man?” Taylor demanded. With effort he kept his voice under control. He was livid. Everybody, even the President, scrunched down the tiniest bit in their chairs. The general’s rage, matched by his military bearing, was a thing to be feared.

Bartholomew was not cowed. “Just what I said, general. We’ve got a lot of pig guts over at the Chicago stockyards – maybe we could put them to good use, if we’re short in the guts department.”

Now Taylor was about to pop. In the military, a subordinate does not call a general “General.” You call him either by his full name and rank, “General Taylor,” or simply, “sir.” Anything less is a breach of military etiquette. Bartholomew, a civilian, could be forgiven such a faux pas. But Taylor was not in a forgiving mood just now. Then there was the subtle hint that the armed forces needed a “gut check.”

“You’d better explain yourself, young man – are you questioning the courage of the American soldier?”

“Not at all, general.” (“General” again. Taylor bit his lip). “You asked *Where is America’s guts?* I’m telling you. We’ve got a lot of unused guts over at the slaughterhouse – or at least, guts that could maybe be put to better use. We’re getting so conservation conscious these days, I suppose they’ve found a use for pig guts – feeding alligators in Mississippi, or something.”

“Get to the point, man,” Taylor said. He was near exasperation, but he was beginning to like Bartholomew’s style, despite himself.

“You’ve got to know your enemy’s weaknesses if you want to defeat him. You should know that better than anyone else in this room, general. The people holding our hostages are a fringe group of fanatic rebels. How much do you know about their beliefs?”

With some impatience, Taylor admitted ignorance on the

subject. "What has that got to do with it?" he asked. But the significance of the question was beginning to dawn on him.

"Do you know the meaning of the word 'jihad'?" It means 'holy war.' That's what they're doing every time they bomb a school bus, every time they hijack a plane.

"How about military history? That's more in your line. Do you know the cause of the mutiny of the Bengal army against the British in 1857? The soldiers were given cartridges greased with beef and pork. The cartridges had to be bitten off before putting in the rifles. Pork is anathema to Hindus and Moslems."

"Well, what of it?" Taylor demanded.

"Beloved of God has taken pork paranoia to new heights. They view it with fear and loathing. Even to touch it is strictly forbidden. Pork *contamination* would be worse for them than death. If they die in the service of their Beloved commander, they go directly into grace. But if they touch pork, it could mean the death of their soul."

A light was beginning to come on inside Taylor's brain.

"Are you seriously proposing that we bomb the terrorists with pig guts?" the Secretary of State asked. A dignified smirk encircled his mouth.

"That's exactly what I'm proposing sir," Bartholomew answered. – although we probably wouldn't have to actually do it. I think the threat of it would be enough to make them let the hostages go."

Lowenstein released his pent-up laughter, and this time he was joined by several voices around the table.

Not by General Taylor's. "I think the boy's got something there." The mirth stopped.

"General Taylor, surely you're not going along with this lunatic plot?" Lowenstein asked.

"What's the matter, Lowenstein? You're the one who's always trying to avoid violence. Here's a way to put pressure on the thugs without bloodshed, or even the threat of bloodshed," Taylor said. "I think we ought to take a look at it."

"Think for a minute what you're suggesting," the Secretary of State said. "We'd be exposing the United States of America to ridicule. It's preposterous. You can't be serious."

"Serious as a hog at feedin' time, Marlin," Taylor said. "It's unorthodox, sure. But if you want to win, you've got to take chances sometimes. If we fail, what do we lose? A little dignity, maybe? We're not Chinese. The way we let down our allies and mollycoddle our enemies, the rest of the world thinks we're clowns, anyway. We've got precious little face to lose."

"I'll tell you what we've got to lose," the Secretary responded – our Arab friends, and the respect of Israel (the Old Testament has the same injunctions against pork, you know)."

"You've got a point," said James Brookline, head of the FBI. "We don't want to upset our Arab allies."

"Of course," General Taylor agreed. "We've got to make it clear that this is not an attack on Moslem beliefs. It's an attack on one small group of terrorist gangsters. We'd have make pinpoint bombing attacks – hit only the stronghold of the Beloved of God. We want to make them a pariah."

"I still say it's beneath the dignity of the United States," the Secretary of State said stubbornly.

"But if it works?" General Taylor asked.

"And what if doesn't?" Gordon wanted to know. "We don't know what their *gut reaction* will be. – What if it just infuriates them, and they decide to kill the hostages for revenge?"

"Nobody's giving any guarantees," General Taylor admitted. "Sure, we can't predict what their reaction will be. I still say it's better than doing nothing."

The President had been silent a long time, listening to the debate. "It just might work," he said. "It might be just crazy enough to work."

Bartholomew was getting caught up with enthusiasm for his own idea. "Sure, why not! If the threat doesn't work, go ahead and drop the guts on them! They'd have to ritually cleanse themselves before they could do anything else. We could send in helicopters, and scoop up the hostages while they're scraping off pig fat!"

General Taylor glanced at Bartholomew with renewed respect. "The kid's got a good head for tactics and strategy," Taylor said. "I think he's got something."

A ray of sunshine broke out on the suave, calm face of James Brookline, head of the FBI. "Yeah! ... Dump the guts and pick up the hostages, while they're wailing and gnashing their teeth!"

There was excited murmuring around the table. Hope replaced anxiety. Optimism overtook caution. A tidal wave of enthusiasm swept through the ranks of the President's highest advisors. Everybody was caught up in it. – Everybody, that is, except Leonard Bramshaw. A smile was plastered on his face, but he was fuming.

The air was bubbling; corks popping and champagne flowing. Everybody was getting drunk with enthusiasm. It was catching, like some merry social disease. Grins popped out on Harvard and Yale faces. Grown men in dark suits were slapping each other on the back and telling jokes. Bartholomew was still standing quietly, savoring his coup. Bramshaw was stewing.

"They think they can take our citizens hostage and get away with it? They think we don't have any guts? We'll show 'em we've got plenty of guts!"

"Haw, haw. That's a GUT one, mein Herr!"

Even General Taylor couldn't resist the mirth. His craggy face and heavy eyebrows scanned the room. With a defiant grin, he said, "Gentlemen, when General McAuliffe was surrounded by an overwhelming force at Bastogne, the German commander demanded his surrender. You all know his one-word answer – 'NUTS!' Let our answer to those terrorists be, 'GUTS!'"

They were school kids again, counting unhatched chickens; telling each other how it would be – the looks on those thugs' faces when the guts came raining down. How they'd beg the U.S. to take their hostages back; how they'd promise to be nice and never bother us again. Tears of laughter were rolling down the cheeks of dignified men.

For once, the President did not urge caution. He did not try to dampen their enthusiasm. He did not even try to channel the discussion into constructive consideration of details of the plan. He just sat back and watched the festivities – watched as his sage advisers turned into a boisterous, raucous class of first-graders.

"I hope they're right," he thought. "God, I hope they're right."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Beirut – "At the top of the news tonight, it has been learned that the President's daughter, Martha Sampson, is among the hostages in Beirut. Moreover, the kidnappers have said they will kill all the hostages, if the U.S. Sixth Fleet is not withdrawn from the area. Ms. Sampson is the President's oldest daughter, from his first marriage. What this means for the further development of the hostage drama remains to be seen. State Department officials had no comment on the new development..."

–+–

Timothy Bartholomew flipped off the TV set and scribbled a note: "We may have a leak."

–+–

Martha Sampson wasn't thinking about her ex-husband and ex-kids. She wasn't thinking about her own predicament. She was thinking about Fred Balfleur. For hours (days, weeks?) she had held onto Balfleur, and he had held onto her, not knowing if one or both of them would be

dead in a few minutes. Sometimes she had cried, and he had held her tighter. When he was drained and empty, she had placed his head on her shoulder and lightly stroked his temples. When the blackness closed in around her, he always found a light to turn on; when his light burned weaker, she supplied the juice.

How could she not think of him? Prisoners of war had developed close bonds without ever seeing each other – just by tapping on their prison cell walls. Martha and Fred had been much closer than that – close enough to smell each other's sweat. (We sweat; therefore we live).

He is coming home after a long, hot day in the fields. His body heat radiates outward in a kind of aura; it touches her before she touches him. His face is flushed – with the heat of work, or from the joy of seeing her? She won't ask. She'll smell his sweat and revel in it. He'll clasp her close, soaking her fresh, clean summer dress, so bright and light, low-cut and appealing. She won't mind.

She doesn't know if she's in love yet.

When they were separated, she avoided looking at him. Better for him to think she didn't see him than for him to see the despair in her eyes. They had kept each other's courage up. Now they'd have to do it alone.

Balfleur is not Hollywood's idea of a romantic leading man. He is not tall, dark and handsome. He is short and bulky, with the hint of fat, temporarily banished by order of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, waiting to return. His skin has a grayish tint, like the color of bayou mud. His black hair falls in long shocks over his eyes when he forgets to comb it. But his eyes radiate intelligence and compassion. It's a friendly, broad open face. It makes Martha feel right at home.

She knows she looks a mess. Instinctively her hand goes to her long brown hair, matted and darkened with sweat. She is no sex goddess, but she can look quite attractive when she wants to. She's just slightly taller than Balfleur, and trim. She has an airline stewardess's figure – long, shapely legs with a nicely rounded but not too-broad bottom, narrow waist, and well-formed breasts. Her friendly smile and brown eyes have nothing of the unapproachable aloofness that really gorgeous women sometimes have.

She wishes she had a mirror and a comb. Then she laughs at that thought. ("Let's get our priorities straight, Martha. First, let's get out of here alive.") She hasn't been hurt yet – outside of a couple of bruises from the bumpy truck ride. She refuses to think of rape and torture.

Something will happen. Something will have to happen. The kidnappers have nothing to gain, and everything to lose by killing or mistreating her. Martha Sampson talks a good game to herself.

Still, she shrinks together every time she hears footsteps in the hall. Her heart stops for just a second when they stop in front of her cell door, and starts again when they leave.

One pair of footsteps stops and doesn't leave. The door opens.

The tall, bearded Soldier of God does not appear threatening, although his eyes are dark and serious. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Sampson," he said politely. "Are you well? Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Ahmed."

He stood there a long time, shifting slightly from one foot to another. Martha began to grow apprehensive. What did this tall, olive-skinned, rather good-looking young man want from her? Since he didn't speak, she finally broke the silence.

"What do you want?"

"I, uh..." he began.

Suddenly, Martha realized that her towering captor was embarrassed. She laughed out loud, then caught her breath when his face changed color. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's just that I never heard of a kidnapper being embarrassed. It's like a Perry Mason title: 'The Case of the Embarrassed Kidnapper.'"

The Embarrassed Kidnapper laughed, and Martha felt

more at ease. "Very funny, Mrs. Sampson. You have a quick wit. And you are quite right. – I am embarrassed. I do not agree with some of the measures that my brothers take. I do not approve of kidnapping women."

"What about kidnapping and killing innocent, unarmed men?" she challenged. She was feeling bolder now.

"That is quite different. And if you are referring to the man from the plane who was executed, he was a soldier in the service of the enemy. He was merely out of uniform at the time."

"That's a pretty weak excuse, if you ask me. Even in war, you don't kidnap and then murder an unarmed enemy. You face him in combat."

This was not the conversation Ahmed wanted. His hand jerked sideways. "How can we go up against your mighty tanks, ships and planes with only a few rifles and bullets? It would be suicide."

"Well, isn't that what you want, to die a martyr?" Martha needed.

Ahmed smiled shyly. "Not all of us are so eager to die for Allah."

"What I can't understand is, you take these religious-sounding names for yourselves, like 'Beloved of God,' and then you do the most ungodly things in His name. Aren't you ashamed? If you truly love God, why don't you try to make peace?"

For a moment, Martha thought she had gone too far. Ahmed's face clouded over. But he didn't say anything for a long time. Finally, he said, "I want you to understand. That is why I came to you."

"My family lived in Palestine for hundreds of years. It was our home. My own father was the caretaker of the tomb of Jesus of Nazareth. He respected all religions. He hated no one. He was a good man. Then the Zionists came. They killed my father and my sister. They forced us from our land. My people have no rights in the land of their birth. That is why I do not fight for peace. I fight for justice."

"But where will it all end? The Israelis have the same sense of justice – an eye for an eye. Who's to say when all the eyes even up? And why do you care if I understand? What do you want me to do about it?" Martha asked.

"Tell other people," Ahmed pleaded. "Tell them we are not monsters. We want only justice for our people."

"But who would I tell? Who would listen to me? Who would care?"

"Just tell whoever you can. The truth about us will get out."

"Maybe you have a good reason for fighting – I don't know. But your actions show you to be criminals before the whole world. How can you expect the world to understand you, when you go around killing innocent people?"

"But we WERE silent. For years. No one listened. Finally, we spoke so everyone would hear," Ahmed retorted fiercely.

For a long time, neither Ahmed nor Martha said anything. Then he left. The door to Martha's tiny prison slammed shut.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Beirut – Ahmed stepped out from the close, dark, stifling heat of the row house into the open, sun-blasted street. Instantly sweat pricked beneath his shirt. He walked for a long time without thinking where he was going. He had made a terrible decision. But how to carry it out?

Now Ahmed could understand the code of honor of the Far East. If you have compromised your honor, and the whole world knows of it, the only way out is to die for the glory of Allah. His brothers had caused this difficult and dangerous situation by kidnapping the Americans. Now, the American Navy was threatening to hurl its huge steel arrows of death, each one weighing as much as a small car, and capable of destroying a city block filled with Ahmed's

nieces, nephews, cousins, aunts, uncles and friends.

But if he could somehow cause the Americans to be released, perhaps the situation could be resolved – or perhaps, he would stand disgraced before his superiors. If he did nothing, disaster loomed – personal and collective. If, on the other hand, he attempted a risky rescue for the hostages, disaster also loomed, with the personal risk even greater. If he failed with his brothers, at least he would have company. But if he failed acting against his brothers' wishes, he would be utterly alone.

Ahmed's mind raced around the walls of its perceived options like a hamster in a cage. ["Shall I dare it?"] Back and forth, back and forth – ["oh, I've already been there before. I've already thought that before, and discarded that. Try it again from another angle. Consider it again – no, that's the same."]]

After several hours, he looked up. He had come full circle. He was back where he started. He waited outside the door that held Martha captive.

It was a faded green door to a whitewashed, run-down stone building. It looked no different from any other in the slums of south Beirut. It gave no outward evidence of the frightened, quivering, lovely woman inside. At least she was lovely to Ahmed – even with her hair stringy and sweaty; even with, or perhaps because of, the lines of worry around her eyes and forehead. He could see her form clearly, the sweat-dampened clothes clinging closely to her body.

Suddenly, Ahmed was surprised that everybody was not staring; that somebody was not pounding on the door, trying to free the damsel in distress.

"God is great," a voice behind him rang obtrusively. Ahmed whirled around, awakened from his daydream. Mahmoud Salim stood there, all 300 pounds of him.

"God is great," Ahmed answered, and turned away.

He was revolted by Mahmoud. Mahmoud was huge man. But his bulk was not made up of friendly, roly-poly fat. His edges were hard and lumpy, and jutted out in obscene postures. His shoulder, broken by falling debris from a rocket-torn apartment building, hung to one side like Quasimoto's hunchback. His face was lumpy and filled with holes. His teeth were yellow, gaping and stinking.

Mahmoud went right on talking, oblivious to Ahmed's disgust. "Brother," he said. "Are you ready for target practice?" He mimed shooting a gun, and made a vulgar noise.

"What do you mean, brother?" Ahmed asked, overcoming his revulsion and turning back to face the huge Arab.

"Have you not heard, Ahmed? The Americans will be killed, all of them, if their navy is not withdrawn within two days. What a fine time we shall have, shooting the defenders of Zion, the great Satan's minions, eh?"

Mahmoud was a brave soldier and vicious killer, totally without fear, totally without pity. He was a perfect Soldier of God. He could kill infidels – men, women and children as casually as one might brush dust from one's trousers.

Ahmed knew the cause of Mahmoud's implacable hatred. A 16-inch shell from one of the Great Satan's warships, the battleship *New Jersey*, had squashed Mahmoud's home like a giant steel fist. Later, he had found bits and pieces of his mother and father; the bodies of his two nephews and three nieces were never found.

"What's the matter, my friend? You look as if you'd seen the devil himself!"

Something cold was draining through a hole in Ahmed's stomach. "You are sure of this, my brother?"

"I just heard it on the radio. I have not heard it officially from our leader. Why – does the news upset you, Ahmed?"

"Why should the news upset me?" Ahmed answered Mahmoud's question with a question, then turned abruptly to go.

"Just so, comrade, just so," the hulking man-mountain replied.

Ahmed strode quickly away. This time he did not wander

aimlessly. Gone was his indecision.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Beirut – Ahmed's steps took him into an even grimmer section of the city. He did not like to come here. The narrow, squalid alleys were littered with derelicts, beggars, murderers and thieves. He turned down one of the side alleys. With each step the stench of the slums grew. It was a miasma of rotting vegetables, animals, urine and human filth. A small goat ran between Ahmed's legs, and chickens squawked as they flapped and flew from the cobblestones to nearby crates of putrid cabbage. A foul yellow liquid oozed in a narrow, disgusting stream down the center of the alleyway.

He dodged an abandoned cart of reeking fish and stepped to a low, inconspicuous archway. Immediately, two unassuming beggars, who until a moment before had been lounging on either side of the archway, stepped to block his path.

"What business do you have here?" the taller one demanded sharply. His one green eye stared evilly out from under a shock of greasy black hair. A patch covered the spot where his other eye would have been.

"God is great," Ahmed replied. "I must see the Great One. Let me pass, brothers."

The one-eyed man and his stout companion both took a step backward, but did not clear a path. They looked wary, and crouched slightly. The one-eyed beggar made a quick movement, and silver flashed in his hand.

Ahmed cursed himself silently. "Pardon me, brothers. I stupidly forgot to give the password – 'I love New Jersey.'"

The password was obviously somebody's idea of a bad joke. The U.S. battleship with the same name had rained death and destruction on families and friends. It was odious to have to speak the hated name, much less speak of love for it. ("Come to think of it,") Ahmed mused, ("maybe there is a deeper purpose to it. It recalls and strengthens our hatred for the Americans whenever we speak it. And, of course, it would never occur to a spy. It is perhaps a good password after all.")

The sullen pair stepped aside, and the tall one let his knife disappear in the folds of his garment. "Take care you don't forget next time, if you value your skinny throat – brother," he rasped.

Ahmed walked down a dark hallway and climbed the stairs at the end of it. After two or three winding turns he arrived at a landing, where an armed Soldier of God sat in a chair leaned against the wall, the front two legs of the chair in the air. A board creaked under Ahmed's foot, and the guard awoke with a start. The legs of the chair slammed down on the wooden floor.

Ahmed waved his hand. "I love New Jersey," he said.

"God is great," the sleepy guard replied. "Pass, brother."

Ahmed had to give the password three more times before he was ushered into a small waiting room. It was lighter up here. Sunlight poured in through windows. The walls were painted a bright yellow.

Ahmed sat. He thought about the things he would say. Could he convince his leader of the wisdom of his suggestion? He went over the words again and again.

He waited so long, he almost fell asleep himself before a servant finally came to fetch him. "His Greatness will see you now."

Ahmed was led down another series of corridors. The door opened, and he stepped onto a lush carpet. In the middle of a huge divan, surrounded by plush pillows and drapes and oriental finery, sat a mountain of flesh, swathed all in dazzling white.

Ahmed knelt and bowed low until his forehead touched the carpet. He rolled his eyes upward, and saw a slight, lazy motion that bade him rise. Another faint wave of

the hand and hint of a smile encouraged him to speak.

“Beloved of God,” he began. “May Allah bless you many times over for the grace you bring us. May he give you many children; as many as are the stars in heaven.” Ahmed rattled on and on, heaping blessings on the fat man. Then he began to talk about his family’s health and the excellent intelligence of his children.

The fat man absorbed it all in silence. If he heard anything, he gave no sign.

Finally, Ahmed paused. He took a deep breath. “Beloved of God – may I speak?” (As if he hadn’t already been speaking for a full fifteen minutes).

Another faint wave of a dimpled hand.

“Beloved – I have heard of your command that the hostages be killed, if the Americans do not withdraw their navy. That is a most worthy command, your Greatness. But if I may make a suggestion – I know the Americans. I lived with them for many years while I was studying at one of their universities. They are weak and sentimental. They often let their hearts overrule their minds.”

Ahmed paused, waiting for his leader to speak. When no sound was forthcoming, he continued: “Perhaps a better way to approach them would be through their own inventions – namely, the television networks. Let us invite them to film one of the hostages making a statement we have prepared. It would show our magnanimity at letting the hostage meet his fellow countrymen, and at the same time allow us to broadcast our message to the entire world.

“Of course, if they still refuse to move their navy and give in to our demands, we would still have the option of killing the hostages. Then it would be evident that we had been reasonable, but only the Americans are stubborn and warlike.”

Ahmed fell silent. Still the fat man said nothing. At last, he raised his eyes and looked directly at Ahmed for the first time. Then he closed them again and nodded faintly. His hand waved abruptly in form of a dismissal.

Beloved of God had not uttered a sound the whole time. Ahmed had no idea whether his ideas were welcomed, or if Beloved thought he was a fool. He wound his long way back to the prison compound.

“Fawaz!”

“Yes, Beloved?” General Fawaz emerged from his concealment behind a tapestry.

“You have heard everything?”

“Yes, Beloved.”

“I think our eager friend’s suggestion meshes well with our plans. It is timely, coming with the knowledge that the Great Satan’s whelp is among the American hostages. It is a good omen. We will select her to appear on the television. The networks will fight for the privilege of broadcasting the appearance. When the American public sees their leader’s child in our power, they will surely weaken.

“It disturbs me that your spy in the Great Satan’s White House did not pass this most valuable information to us sooner; instead, we had to receive the news from the television broadcast.”

“Perhaps, Beloved, he knew that we would soon find out, and chose not to risk discovery by conveying the information to us,” Fawaz said. He twitched nervously.

“Perhaps. There is another thing. Our young brother seems a bit too zealous. I do not trust him. Watch him closely.”

“Of course, Beloved.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Washington, D.C. – “I don’t mind telling you, Sam, I don’t feel entirely comfortable with this plan. It’ll look foolish enough, even if it succeeds. But what if it fails? We’d be the laughingstock. I mean – bombing somebody with pig guts? It’s ludicrous. And would it really make them give up the

hostages? Or would it make them so angry that they kill them?” [“And kill HER?”]

The kidnappers had upped the ante, of course. As a pretext, they used the failed infiltration attempt by S.C.A.R.E. But it was clear their real leverage came from knowing they had the President’s daughter. In addition to their previous demands, they now wanted several hundred hand-held missiles, and assorted other weapons. Otherwise, they darkly hinted, the President’s daughter would be the next hostage to be executed.

The President was having second thoughts. After the euphoria of the “gut meeting” had subsided, serious planning had been undertaken. The idea of only threatening at first had been scrapped. General Taylor led the fight on that one. “The shock value would be lost,” Taylor had argued. “If we make an open, clear threat, it gives them the opportunity to counter with something else. No. Hit ‘em first, threaten later.”

The President had agreed, realizing that such a silly-sounding threat might find world-wide ridicule and cost the U.S. the backing of her allies. But now he was getting cold feet, and needed his general to warm them up again.

“It’s unorthodox, I’ll grant you that, sir,” General Taylor answered his commander-in-chief. “But it’s also bold. It’s unexpected. It’s just the kind of stroke to take an enemy by surprise. The doves will love it, because there’s no bloodshed involved. Some of the hawks will love it, because it’s action – it hits ‘em where it really hurts. Some may think it’s a wimpy response, sure – but they’ll be won over, if it works.”

“And if it fails?” the President demanded.

“If it fails, sir, nobody will admit they ever thought it was a good idea. Even the doves will say it was wimpy and foolish from the start – give them a cheap chance to look tough.”

“It’s a big risk – I don’t mean just politically. It could damage the prestige of the United States in the eyes of our allies, and cause us to lose the respectful fear of our adversaries.”

There was a long pause.

“I would prefer that this mission be undertaken by someone else--“

“Someone like S.C.A.R.E., for instance?” Taylor blurted out. Then quickly, when he saw the hurt, angry expression on his President’s face, “Sorry, Mr. President. That just slipped out. But since it’s out, I have to tell you, as a professional soldier, I don’t think much of these amateurs – well, maybe that’s not the right word. They’re professionals – some of them – but they lack discipline. I just don’t trust ‘em, sir. This is one for the United States Armed Forces.”

“Maybe,” the President said doggedly. “But one thing I’ve definitely decided against. There will be no use of ground forces.”

“But sir,” Taylor protested vigorously. “– without a helicopter drop, we’re wasting our time. It’s a useless gesture.”

The President waved off Taylor’s protest. “I won’t risk losing men’s lives in an operation that could turn out to be a wild goose chase. We’re still not sure exactly where the hostages are.”

Taylor started to protest again, but the President stopped him. “I’m sorry, Sam. My mind’s made up on this one. No ground troops.”

“I’m sorry too, sir,” Taylor said, resigned. “I don’t believe in easy victories, or miracles. I believe in infantry.”

“See you later, Sam.”

Bramshaw passed the word to Bartholomew. “OK. We’ve got the go-ahead. It’s your baby,” Bramshaw told him. “You coordinate with the Air Force, ride herd on the whole operation, make sure there are no loose ends. If this thing works, it could make your career. If it doesn’t,” he grinned wickedly, “you’re through.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Beirut – Martha Sampson was lying on the wooden bench in her cell, asleep. Her head was nestled in the crook of her arm, and her left knee was pulled up over her right, exposing her nicely shaped legs from the knees down. Her clothes were dirty and disheveled, and her hair was stringy and filled with sweat. There were dark rings around her eyes. She looked dirty and bedraggled. She looked like a hostage.

Ahmed opened the door without knocking. She was gorgeous. The sight of her sleeping, with legs drawn up and bare, drained the air from his lungs. He leaned against the door to catch his balance. He felt silly.

He waited a long time, just looking at her. He became embarrassed. What if someone should walk in and catch him there, staring?

He struggled for air. “Miss Sampson,” he said finally. “Miss Sampson, wake up.” The Embarrassed Kidnapper was back.

She didn’t stir.

Ahmed cleared his throat.

“Miss Sampson, please,” he said a little louder.

The Soldier of God, who was on a first-name basis with death, who had seen it stare out at him from the glazed eyes of fallen comrades, was on the verge of being overcome by fear. He shuffled two steps forward, reached down and tapped his prisoner on her bare knee.

She straightened out her leg. The reflex action brought her leg in contact with his. For a second, warm tremblings invaded Ahmed’s thighs, stomach, chest. The voltage kicked him backwards.

And still she slept, unaware.

“Miss Sampson, PLEASE!” he pleaded. He leaned over, touched her again lightly, and stepped back quickly.

Finally, she stirred, moaned, twisted on her back, raised one arm high in the air, stretched. Each profile she presented sucked the breath out of him.

She was coming around.

“Miss Sampson,” he said for the fourth time. This time, she heard him from a great distance. With an effort, she opened her eyes.

“Miss Sampson, It is most urgent that I speak with you.”

Her stomach knotted. “What is it?” she asked. Her eyes were wide. She remembered where she was.

Ahmed paused for a second. He couldn’t tell her. His lips wouldn’t make those sounds. “Listen – it may be possible to arrange an interview with the American television. If you cooperate, it may be possible to free you.”

Warm hope surged through Martha. Home – free, free and safe.

“When?” she asked.

“I don’t know. It is not certain, yet. I have only suggested the matter to my superiors. They have not agreed to it yet. But if they agree, you must be ready to cooperate.”

“What must I do?”

“Just be ready to do and say whatever my superiors ask you to do and say. Will you promise?”

“I – I’ll try.”

“Good. I must go now. I will return when I have news.”

Martha wanted to say *thank you*, but didn’t.

When Ahmed returned he felt a little dizzy. He hadn’t imagined it could be so easy. It was like a dream; unreal. Hurry up and make it happen, before you wake up.

Ahmed rushed to her cell like a groom to his bride. Martha was sitting in a chair in the corner. She stood up when he came in.

“Miss Sampson, good news. My superiors have agreed to the television interview. YOU will be the one to go before the cameras.”

“Why me?” she asked.

Ahmed cleared his throat. “I do not question the

decisions of my superiors,” he said.

Martha tilted her head slightly and looked at him out of the corner of her eye.

“Thank you.”

Ahmed blushed. The Blushing Kidnapper. The sight of her almost made him forget.

“Remember,” he said, trying to make his voice firm. “You promised to cooperate.” She hadn’t, really, but Ahmed pressured her. “All you have to do is read this.” He handed her a folded sheet of paper, smudged with the dust of Beirut slums and grimy fingerprints. “And say nothing that is not on this paper. Do you understand?”

Martha took the note. “I understand,” she said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Chicago – “They want what?”

Leo Hershfield couldn’t believe his ears.

Charlie Bergstrom showed him a copy of the order. “Look, boss – It says right here – they want all the ‘porcine by-product materials’ we can deliver.”

“Pig guts? The United States Air Force wants to buy all the pig guts it can get its hands on?” Hershfield, sales director for the Chicago stockyards, was incredulous. “It’s got to be some kind of practical joke – call and confirm it.”

“That was the first thing I did,” Bergstrom said. “I spent two solid hours on the phone, being shuffled from one department to another. I finally found the guy who signed the order. He talked as if it was the most common thing in the world to order up a shitload of pig guts – all in the highest secrecy – government security, and all that shit.”

“OK, Charlie. See what you can do. How soon can you start collecting the stuff and shipping it out?”

“It’ll take a while to find the transportation and get the thing set up, boss – next week, at the earliest.”

“Fine. I’ll call this Air Force nut who’s crazy about pig guts and tell him it’s on the way.”

After Bergstrom left his office, Leo Hershfield sat for a long time, shaking his head.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Washington, D.C. – Things were moving fast. Timothy Bartholomew had his own office; nothing large and ornate, but functional. It was a windowless room in the White House basement with an unassuming desk, a plush chair for the wearer of the desk, one straight-backed chair in front of the desk for visitors, and another against the wall.

A sign behind Bartholomew’s head read, “This job takes guts.” He was enjoying himself. It was his big chance. One of the many office jokes was, “Know what that funny smell is? No, it’s not the Potomac – it’s Bartholomew throwing himself into his work!”

He didn’t have his own secretary, but shared one with the Office of Planning and Procurement.

There were a lot of things to coordinate. First, he had to line up the planes that would deliver the payload.

Bartholomew reached for the phone. It took several minutes to reach the right office in the Pentagon.

“That’s what I said, Colonel,” Bartholomew told the suspicious Air Force officer, “porcine byproducts. I need three C-5-A’s, ASAP.” There was silence on the other end, while Colonel Ames shook his head, trying to reconcile what he had just heard with his perception of reality and military expediency. He couldn’t do it.

Bartholomew was getting fed up. “What do you mean, ‘impossible?’” he demanded. “I didn’t think that word was in your vocabulary – or maybe I was thinking of the Marines. You want me to tell the Commander in Chief of the U.S. Armed Forces, that the Air Force is unable to fly a simple

transport mission?" (pause) "Good. Fine. Work on it."

Bartholomew hung up and buzzed his secretary. "June, are those shipment orders in from the slaughterhouse yet?"

"Not yet, Mr. Bartholomew."

"Damn. Don't tell me Chicago has suddenly got a shortage of pig guts. OK, thanks, June."

June buzzed him back on another line, and Bartholomew picked up his phone again. General Abernathy... Yes, general. How about those fighters?" (pause) "What's the holdup? Do you plan to send transport planes into a combat zone without protection? All right, then – get those fighters!"

Bartholomew slammed the phone down. Then he whisked out of the office, telling his secretary: "I'm just spinning my tires here. I'm going to be out of the office for a few hours, June."

He left the White House and hailed a cab.

He gave the driver his address, then settled back, thinking about the operational planning he would need to take care of tomorrow.

Dmitri Illanovitch, posing as a taxicab driver, pulled a gas mask over his face, turned around, and squirted a canister of something in Bartholomew's face. His passenger slumped against the door.

Dmitri was proud of himself. He was a whiz kid in his own mind. His parents were diplomats, and he had grown up in New York. Having attended Columbia University, his English was flawless; better, in fact, than his Russian. His outlook was a curious mixture. He was ambitious and optimistic like his American yuppie friends, but his politics were hard-line Kremlin.

"Let those hotshots at the Kremlin bark at me now," he crowed. Dmitri Illanovitch will show himself to be a hero of the revolution."

Dmitri was an unbalanced, hopeless failure. He had no grasp of international espionage, no judgement, no tact, – and no luck.

He had obtained this post in Washington only because his uncle was an important man in the KGB, and thought it would be a post where Dmitri could do little harm. "All you have to do is monitor what goes on at the White House, and report directly to me," his uncle had told him. "Do NOT take any action, is that clear?"

"They think I am incompetent," Dmitri fumed. "But now they'll have to admit they were wrong. When this American wakes up and tells us what he knows, I will become famous and powerful – perhaps even supplant uncle Kassily."

Dmitri pulled into an alley, removed the top light, stripped the decals, and transformed his *taxicab* back into a regular passenger sedan. Then he drove to a luxury apartment building, not far from the Watergate. Dmitri was a big man – tall and broad-shouldered. He had no difficulty walking with Bartholomew up to his apartment. If anyone saw them, they thought it was a pair of friends, one of whom had been making a bit too happy too early in happy hour.

When Bartholomew woke up, he found he could not move. He could scarcely breathe. He was on the verge of choking. He tried to put his hand to his throat, but his hands were bound behind him. His feet were tied to the legs of a chair. A tall, broad man was standing over him, holding a pistol. Slowly, terror began to seep into his brain.

When Dmitri saw that Bartholomew was coming around, he walked up to him and raised his pistol. He pointed it right at Bartholomew's nose, about five inches away. The silencer loomed huge in Bartholomew's vision.

"Listen very carefully," Dmitri told his captive. "I assure you, your life depends on it. I am going to ask you some questions, and then I will remove your gag. If you make any sound except to answer the questions, I will kill you. It's as simple as that. Do you understand?"

Bartholomew nodded slowly, carefully.

"Good. We will begin. First, I want to know what you are

planning with the three cargo planes and the squadron of fighters – some kind of imperialist aggression? And then, you will kindly tell me what you have in mind with all those tons of pork entrails you are collecting."

Dmitri did not know if his captive was sobbing or screaming. He was shaking violently. Water began running down his face.

"Tears will not help you, imperialist dog! You are in the hands of the revolution! Stop it, or I will kill you now."

When Bartholomew was still, Dmitri warned him again: "I am going to take off your gag now. If you try to cry out for help, you will die instantly. Do you understand?" Again, Bartholomew nodded.

Dmitri loosened the wrapping. Then he repeated his question. "Now, what are you planning with all those – pork entrails?"

Bartholomew tried desperately to answer, but air exploded with a great bang out of his mouth. He couldn't help himself. He shook. He trembled. He roared. He had to laugh, even if it meant death. Dmitri pointed the pistol. Bartholomew went into greater gales of laughter, greater seizures. His tears were running again. His sides ached. He struggled for breath, but breath wouldn't come – only renewed dry, noiseless spasms.

"Pretending to be insane will not help you. Now, tell me what I want to know." Dmitri had to shout above a fresh peal of laughter as breath rushed into Bartholomew's body at last, and returned in a tidal wave of guffaws.

At last Bartholomew composed himself. "It – it's a – secret weapon HAAAAAAAAA hh...HHAAAAAAAAAAAA! We ... we're going... we're going to ... BOMB BEIRUT! ... AAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

"Bomb Beirut? Why? With what? How? Missiles, jet bombers?" Dmitri still did not get the joke.

"With pig guts, you fool! HAHAHAHAHA!"

Dmitri felt a sudden queasiness in his stomach. He was gripped by awful uncertainty. Then he hardened. "Don't try to fool me, you bastard!" He slapped Bartholomew's grinning face, hard.

"You'll stay here until you tell me the truth."

Bartholomew started to protest, but was warned by the wild look in Dmitri's eye. He fell silent. Now it was Bartholomew's turn to feel sick.

–+–

Dmitri's uncle was screaming. His face was as red as the flag with the hammer and sickle on the wall behind him.

"YOU IDIOT! KIDNAPPING AN AMERICAN OFFICIAL BECAUSE OF PIG GUTS?! YOU IMBECILE!!" Fyodor Kassily felt as if his heart would pound out of his chest. He continued to roar into the phone in a monotone scream: "HAVE YOU LEARNED NOTHING? INTELLIGENCE FIRST! INTELLIGENCE FIRST! KIDNAPPING AND KILLING ONLY AS LAST RESORT – AND EVEN THEN, NEVER A GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL!"

"YOU'RE THROUGH! FINISHED! DEAD! SIBERIA WILL SEEM LIKE HEAVEN WHEN WE ARE THROUGH WITH YOU!"

Dmitri, a hulking man who outweighed his uncle by a hundred pounds, trembled on the other side of the ocean. He waited for his uncle to catch his breath, then said quickly, "But uncle, he is obviously lying. I am sure it is something big – just wait until I have had time to find out what it is."

"HE IS OBVIOUSLY TELLING THE TRUTH, YOU NINCOMPOOP! HE IS LAUGHING AT YOU RIGHT NOW! I CAN HEAR HIM!"

"What am I to do, uncle? Return him?"

"RETURN HIM?? RETURN HIM??!!!" His uncle's voice went up an octave. "OF COURSE NOT, YOU FOOL! YOU MUST KILL HIM – NOW. MAKE IT LOOK LIKE A MUGGING – ANOTHER VICTIM OF CRIME IN DECADENT AMERICAN SOCIETY. IT IS ONE THING TO HAVE THE WORLD

THINK WE ARE KILLERS AND KIDNAPPERS – IT IS QUITE ANOTHER TO HAVE THEM KNOW WE ARE FOOLS!!”

Fyodor Kassily’s vocal chords failed him after that last word. Unable to go on, he slammed the receiver down as hard as he could.

Thousands of miles away, Dmitri Illanovitch’s ear hurt. He felt sad.

He went back into the living room, where Bartholomew was still tied to the chair.

“It is true, then?” he asked. “Your pork entrails are nothing more than entrails, and you only plan to drop them on Beirut?”

“It is true.” All chuckles were gone from Bartholomew’s voice.

Dmitri pointed his pistol and fired.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Beirut – Beloved had not overestimated the ferocity, with which the television broadcasters would fight for the privilege of telecasting an interview with the *beautiful* President’s daughter (as the kidnappers called her in their press release). Only one TV crew would be allowed in the room. The hostage would make a prepared statement. If the reporter wished to ask any questions, they must be submitted and approved in advance. (Many broadcasters had balked at that condition, and some had actually withdrawn themselves from consideration.) Still, there were many eager to broadcast the event. “We felt, despite the restrictions, that it was a newsworthy event,” a spokesman would say later. “It was something the world needed to hear, and it was a humanitarian gesture to assure the relatives of the hostages that their loved ones were still alive and well.”

—+—

Martha Sampson’s kidnappers were not Hollywood puff people. Their understanding of public relations was almost endearing in its naivete. She was allowed to bathe, wash and comb her hair, but that was about it. There were no fresh clothes for her to put on, no chic coiffure for her hair, no makeup. Calling her a *beautiful American hostage* was a bit of hype that was perhaps their only link with their California counterparts.

Ahmed led Martha down a long bare hallway. They stopped at a door. He turned to face her, and held both of her arms in his hands. “Remember, Miss Sampson – read exactly what is on the paper. You know what questions to expect from the interviewer. Answer as you have been instructed. Do you have any questions?”

“No,” she said.

Ahmed opened the door, and both of them blinked at brighter-than-sunlight glare of the TV lights. Slowly, carefully, they penetrated the glare, avoiding the thick black cables that ran across the floor at all kinds of angles.

They sat down at a table in the middle of the painfully bright lights, both of them blinking their eyes madly like ships’ semaphores. Beyond the brilliant fire of the lights, dark threatening figures could be sensed rather than seen. Just in front of the table where Martha and Ahmed sat, a television reporter stood holding a microphone.

Martha thought his face looked familiar, but she couldn’t remember if she knew his name. Still, it was the only familiar thing she had seen in weeks (months, years?). It was something from home. It gave her heart.

A little behind and to the right of the *star*, stood a lone cameraman, pointing and shooting. Beyond him was the ring of lights, turning the semicircle into seething white cauldron – world stage. From this dirty corner of the slums of Beirut, she could talk to the entire world – at least to the part of the world with television sets.

Beyond that – beyond the rim of electric fire, lurked unseen, the Soldiers of God, armed with automatic weapons.

Sitting in the glare, Martha felt flushed. Her face was hot. Her armpits were wet. She almost giggled when she realized she had stage fright. She was shivering, quivering – hot on the outside, cold inside. She was the greenest of rookies – sitting there with a cue card in her hands, still afraid she’d muff her lines.

Ahmed was talking, saying something, Martha suddenly realized. “...but before taking any questions, Miss Sampson would like to read a prepared statement.”

It was embarrassing. Martha read the statement word for word, with all the grammatical, spelling and typographical errors put in by some lower functionary, semi-literate in English:

“We Amrican hostages call to the Amrican government to move its ships away from the shores of our land so that they do no longer put us in jeopardy with their silly shows of violence and threats, which the revolutionary peoples will never give in to. We have been treated fairly and well, but there is a limit to the patients of our guardians. They wish only to be left in peas, and to achieve freedom and justice for their peoples. I call on the Amrican government to stop serving the Zionist oppressors, and help the Palestinian peoples gain their freedom and justice, who were wrongfully driven from their land by the Zionists. Amrican peoples love freedom and justice – why don’t they help the Palestinian peoples to be free and independent? It is wrong before God to stand in the side of injustice and oppression, and we therefore call on the Amrican government to give up this foolish action, which must surely be punished by invisible hands of martyrs.”

She hadn’t left in all the mistakes by design, or for spite. It was the first time she had ever looked at the piece of paper Ahmed had given her. Now Martha flushed even redder. A hard knot formed in her throat. It was well that she did not have to speak, because she couldn’t.

Then she froze, horrified. The *star* was asking her a question.

“Miss Sampson, do you make this statement free of duress? Are these your true sentiments?” That question wasn’t on the list approved by Martha’s kidnappers.

Martha’s face was moving, twitching. Something between a sob and a cough escaped her twisted, rock-hard throat.

Ahmed looked at her sharply. She stiffened, shook her head, sat up straight and grabbed the microphone. She leaned over and tried to clear her swollen throat. She tried to speak. She couldn’t. Her throat felt tight, like a dishrag twisted and wrung out to dry.

Suddenly, darkness. The electric fire quenched by a dash of cool water. Dead silence. Then shouts, protests.

“What’s going on here?”

A lot of milling around, confusion, bumping, noise. Finally, the lights come back on. Martha is gone. Ahmed is apologetic.

“The press conference is over. I am very sorry. There was a malfunction of the power. The interview cannot be continued. Miss Sampson has been removed for her own safety. I must ask you to leave.”

Ahmed didn’t explain what supposed danger threatened Martha. The TV people tried to protest, but stern looks from dangerous-looking men with automatic weapons convinced them that the interview was, indeed, over. Muttering and grumbling, they left, and rushed their film to the network.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Washington, D.C. – It didn’t take long to discover that Timothy Bartholomew was missing. The fact that he hadn’t returned his phone calls would have triggered a search, probably even before he failed to show up for work promptly at 5 a.m. the following morning. He worked six days a week, and sometimes on Sunday. He never let messages stack up on his answering machine.

As it turned out, though, his absence was first noticed by his girlfriend Regina, a Vassar girl. When Timothy failed to pick her up at the appointed time, she called, then went by his apartment. Regina was a bright girl, with the instincts of a detective. She could smell something wrong. So she didn't just go home, thinking Timothy had stood her up, gone out with some other girl, or stayed late at the office (although she did call the office, just in case).

When she found out that Bartholomew had left his office, she called Bramshaw.

"Yes, Miss," Bramshaw sighed. "I'm sure he just stepped out of the office for a while. He's been working hard. Yes, yes, we'll send a man to check on him, anyway. We'll find him, never fear."

Then he hung up and turned to an aide. "Paul," Bramshaw said, "Bartholomew's girl is worried about him. She's sure he's been kidnapped or something. Yeah, you might as well go by his apartment and wait for him to turn up – anything to keep her out of my hair. I've got work to do here."

–+–

Paul let himself into Bartholomew's apartment (the office had an extra key to all employees' dwellings, in case of just such an emergency) and propped his feet up to relax. He waited a long time. There was a knock at the door. Paul opened it and smiled. Two bullets entered his heart. He was dead before he hit the floor.

Mrs. Inge Kowatzky was sixtyish, with streaks of gray and a slight limp. She walked hunched over, wearing a loose-fitting gray sweater and slacks. She knocked on the door of *that foreign fellow's* apartment. He was parked in the wrong space again. No answer. He must be ignoring her. She banged louder. "Hey, mistah," she shouted. She didn't try to pronounce his name – some foreign-sounding name.

Finally, she opened the door with her master key, and screamed. Her tenant was lying on the floor, with the top half of his head gone. Another man, whom she didn't recognize, was sitting tied to a chair, with his back to her. He was wiggling and apparently trying to get her attention. "Call the police," he croaked.

Sergeant Willie Flegel was used to finding unusual scenes. "Looks like you got yourself in a mess," he said, looking at the trussed up Bartholomew and at the inert, enormous carcass at his feet. A dark brown, wet puddle saturated the carpet beneath Dmitri's head. "Who are you?" Flegel asked.

"My name is Timothy Bartholomew. I was kidnapped by this man. He shot himself."

"Oh, yeah?" Flegel asked suspiciously. "And why would he do that? Go to all the trouble to tie you up and then kill himself? Are you sure maybe he didn't have some help shooting himself? What was it – was he trying to sell you some stuff, and you didn't like the price?"

"You think I shot him, then tied myself?" Bartholomew said.

"Hmmm." Flegel couldn't refute that logic. "I think you'd better come down and answer a few questions."

"Sergeant, I work for the government. I have to get back to my office right away. Now untie me."

"Who doesn't work for the government in this town?" Flegel scoffed. "I think you'd better come with me."

"And I think you'd better let me make a phone call," Bartholomew demanded.

–+–

"Now what do we do?" the President asked. He was meeting privately with James Brookline, head of the FBI.

"Stick with the plan, sir. Nothing's changed, as far as I can see," Brookline answered.

"What do you mean, nothing's changed? The Soviets know what we're up to."

"So what, sir? They haven't said anything so far. I'm

inclined to think they're not opposed to this operation. They don't like terrorists any more than we do. They'd probably be glad to see them taken down a notch.

"Hmmm. But I'm still wondering about the curious circumstances surrounding Bartholomew's kidnapping. – Why the devil did that Soviet agent commit suicide, do you think? maybe a third party came in and eliminated him."

"I don't know, sir. Bartholomew says the big man went into the other room, and was apparently talking on the telephone. He didn't hear what was said. Then the guy came out, put the gun to his head and pulled the trigger."

Brookline cleared his throat importantly. "There's been a major new development, sir. An aide from Bartholomew's office was found dead in Bartholomew's apartment with two bullets in his heart..." he waited for a reaction.

The President sucked in his breath, duly impressed with Brookline's bombshell. "And?" he asked. "What do you make of it?"

"Well, we're still trying to unravel it, sir. But there were top secret "Guts" papers on his body. It seems pretty clear that he was the source of our leaks, and may have had a hand in Bartholomew's kidnapping. He was probably the one who burned the S.C.A.R.E. team, too."

"But whoever killed him is still out there operating," the President protested.

"Shouldn't be a problem, sir," Brookline said, gently shaking his head. "I believe the Soviets got to him to keep from being embarrassed. That's why I think they're silently rooting for us."

"I still feel uneasy, knowing that they know." The President drummed his fingers on his desk. He stared at the ceiling for a long time. Just as Brookline was beginning to suspect that the President had forgotten him, the President spoke again.

"OK. Let's go."

CHAPTER THIRTY

Beirut – Fred Balfleur was feeling old. His clothes hung on him like a shroud. He was languishing. His dreams were filled with prisoners of the Inquisition, growing old in gray uniforms on Devil's Island, *The Rock* – Alcatraz seeming like home.

He spent more and more of his time drifting, floating down the bayous of his memories. Little Freddie and Grandpere, getting up early before dawn, easing out into the cool darkness, slipping into icy clothes, shivering; finding their rifles leaning in the corner; tiptoeing out the screen door to keep from waking the rest of the house, easing it shut to keep it from banging; finding the spots on the steps that didn't squeak; getting the dogs and joining the other dark shapes mumbling in the cold; loading the dogs in the rickety, ancient pickup truck; driving down the sandy roads with deep ruts, turning into the field of ruined, brown, broken cornstalks; assembling the dogs, letting them loose; hearing the far-off howls; wondering at the hunters' ability to tell one howl from another ("That's Old Blue – sounds like he's on to somethin'"); at a signal, tramping off for the trees at the far end of the field; making a way through tangles, across creeks, around trees, thick undergrowth; all the while howls getting louder ("Sound like they've got him treed"); finally crashing through a dense thicket, finding a tall tree in a small clearing ("There it is!"); beams of light flickering out, searching, waving back and forth, finding nothing; finally coming together ("There he is! By damn! it's two of them!); in a circle of light at the top of the tree, two yellow orange coals gleam back – blackness all around; ("Knock him out of there!"); shotguns in Balfleur's ear – WHAM WHAM!! a thump as something furry and snarling hits the ground; ("Watch out! He's not dead! Let the dogs finish him! Careful – My Sadie lost an ear to one last winter – those coons has got sharp teeth and claws!"); the dogs

move in, cautiously at first, then it's awful; Freddie turns away; once more WHAM WHAM!! of the shotguns, one more raccoon falls with a thump; again the dogs move in, barking, ripping, tearing.

Barking...ripping...tearing... Balfleur woke up screaming, remembered where he was, and screamed some more, quietly. He pounded his head with the flat of his palm viciously, again and again. Got to get out... go home ... find Martha ... but how?

The dark flight across pitch black water was terrifying. To be lost in nothingness. If the plane went down – and the plane would surely go down – nobody would ever find the bodies. They knew about the damned Berlin bombing! They even talked about it going over. “I hear they’ve stopped all leaves because of that Berlin thing.” “Yeah. One minute they were a bunch of Berliners, the next minute Hamburgers!” Don’t bunch up – wasn’t that the first rule of combat? The enemy knows how much GI’s like to hang out together. Goddamned idiots! Walked right in there!

Crimson exploded inside Balfleur’s head. He woke up screaming again. Again.

He thought of all the tales he had heard about prisoners – American soldiers in Vietnam, and political prisoners in Russia. One man had committed the entire Bible to memory, and recited all day long. Another imagined his wife and children so vividly, that he could cast their image on his prison wall – a hologram of home. Another took apart and rebuilt an intricate watch, all in his head.

Freedom in the brain. Wander freely in the spacious regions of the cerebellum. They could do it.

Balfleur couldn’t do that. He was not a mental giant. He had never been able to concentrate that well.

But he knew what freedom was – and what it wasn’t. He had been to the Wall during leave in Berlin. He had climbed the observation platform, and watched the East Berliners like animals in the zoo.

The Old Wall started near the base of the platform – portions of brick walls – remnants of buildings torn down in haste to stem the receding tide of humanity leaving the East. On top were nails and bits of broken glass cemented in – brutal, crude and clumsy. The real Wall was some 50 feet farther – tall, straight, gleaming and white, with a rounded, freely rolling, cylindrical top – hard to get a grip on that. Beyond the wall were the smooth, mined *death strips* several yards wide, exposed to fire from the guard towers. Then came the *devil’s teeth* tank traps. A street dead-ended into the tank traps. Just before the dead-end was a red and white-striped pole blocking the road.

The street was neat and clean.

Children played by the side of the street, not far from a sign warning them to stay away. People came and went from the doors. Some looked. Others marched resolutely, determined to ignore the stares of their audience. A young man came out. He looked once, twice over his shoulder at the West. At freedom. So near. Impossibly far. Then, he went on. Some glanced fearfully, surreptitiously, afraid to be seen. An old, bent woman in a babushka didn’t look at all; the old people never look.

Balfleur couldn’t build a watch in his brain. But he knew what freedom was. And he did have his bayou. And Grandpere. And Martha.

Did he love her? He didn’t know. But he missed her, that much was for sure. – Missed her head leaning against his shoulder. Missed the tangy scent of her sweat; his arm around her shoulder, hand hanging down, squeezing her upper arm; he, then she offering life as an alternative.

“Where are the Marines? the Army? Why doesn’t somebody come and get us out, like they do in the movies? Black and khaki-clad soldiers equipped to the teeth, each with a certain specialty, each an expert in his field of demolitions, hand-to-hand combat, marksmanship or tactics. That’s the trouble with so much TV, movies. They seem so real, and

then it’s not fair when real life doesn’t work out that way.”

Balfleur tried everything – counting the cockroaches, making designs out of the cracks in the walls, listening intently for the slightest sound. It was no use. He lacked the self will, the imagination, the brain power. He gave up and went back to his bayou dreams.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Washington, D.C. – “You nearly screwed up the whole works, getting yourself kidnapped,” Bramshaw berated Bartholomew. “The Boss nearly cancelled the whole project.”

“Then everything is still on track?” Bartholomew was being briefed and debriefed.

“Yes, the mission is still *go*. You’d better shape up, get your feet back on the ground, and get back in the lineup.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Bartholomew answered.

Bramshaw grunted. A part of him secretly admired the little twerp. Bartholomew was psychologically tough. Many people would have been shaken by what he’d been through.

“What about the TV clip,” Bartholomew asked. “What did the President say about that?”

“Obviously propaganda. Doesn’t change anything.”

“So we’re not moving the fleet?”

“The ships stay where they are. Everything goes as planned. That’s why you’ve got to get off your duff and get things moving.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Beirut – After disengaging himself from the TV crew, Ahmed hurried out of the building. Not looking where he was, he bumped into something solid.

“God is great, brother,” the something said.

Ahmed stared up into the ugly face of Mahmoud.

“Do not think your television tricks will save the Americans, little brother,” Mahmoud said. “No matter what happens, Beloved will soon be turning them over to me.”

Ahmed mumbled something to the ugly giant, then continued on his way. Suddenly he stopped, indecisive. He turned, took a few steps, then turned back on his original track, stopped again, thought again. Finally, he whirled a second time and set off in the new direction, down the dismal alleys choked with vendors, crying children, prostitutes and robbers.

The foul miasma assaulted his nostrils, invading his throat and down into his stomach. He felt sick. He wanted to vomit. He held his breath, then when he could hold it no longer, breathed in short, quick, nauseated gasps. He quickened his pace to pass through the stench.

He turned into the low archway, to find his way blocked by the same mismatched pair of Arabian Nights thieves. “Where are you going, brother?” the tall one asked.

“God is great, brother,” Ahmed answered. “I love New Jersey.”

“God is great,” the sentry agreed. “You may not pass.”

Ahmed was stunned. “I love New Jersey, brother – let me pass. I have business with Beloved.”

“I don’t care if New Jersey is your mother, brother. You may not pass.”

“But I tell you, I have urgent business with Beloved!” Ahmed was getting angry.

“You seem to be very stupid, brother. We have our orders. Beloved does not want to see you. Now, get lost.”

Bewildered, Ahmed retreated. He stumbled, and almost fell. He had to get out. Out from under that palpable heavy stench. He hurried. Faster and faster. He had to think. The stench was close. Hard to breathe. Got to get out. Got to get out.

He didn't know how long he had been walking. When he looked up, though, he wasn't surprised to see where he was. He knocked on the door, gave the password, and went in.

Martha was sitting in the corner of her cell.

For a long time, they stared at each other, saying nothing. Finally, the Embarrassed Kidnapper broke the silence.

"Miss Sampson ... Martha ..." Another pause. "I would like to explain what happened."

"What happened where?" she asked innocently.

"At the television interview. I am sure you know that the 'blackout' was no accident." Without waiting for her affirming nod, Ahmed continued. "I was afraid you were about to say something dangerous. Believe me – my superiors are serious men, dedicated to the Islamic revolution. They would not hesitate to kill you, if you disobey them."

"And you?" Martha asked. "Aren't you disobeying them by telling me this? Why did you come? Aren't you taking a chance?"

"You are very perceptive, Miss Sampson. I fear that there is another danger. There is something I do not know – something in the air. I can feel it. My superiors do not understand Americans. They have threatened to kill you, if your country does not move its ships."

Martha's brown, harried eyes widened with fear. She felt a powerful hand closing around her throat. She didn't say a word.

"Miss Sampson – I am not a cruel man. I fight for freedom and justice for my people. I am willing to die for my cause. – But I am no longer willing to inflict pain and suffering and death on innocent people. I want to help you if I can."

Ahmed saw he wasn't going to get any encouragement. "I will come back tonight. I will tell the guard I am taking you to my superiors for further discussion of the television interview. I will have a vehicle ready. I will bring you to the American Embassy."

Freedom. So close. It all sounded so easy. Just hop in the car and go home. Funny things were going on inside Martha; a swirl of emotions, hopes, sudden fears, doubt – what if? – Ahmed waited for her to speak.

"What about the others?" she said at last.

"What others?"

"The other hostages – how will we get them all together?"

Ahmed was stunned into silence for a moment. Then he said, "Miss Sampson, I am afraid you overestimate my powers. I do not even know where all the others are. And if I did, it would be too difficult – too dangerous to try to get them all out."

"I can't leave my passengers," she said.

"Miss Sampson, don't be absurd. They are no longer your *passengers* – no longer your responsibility. You must think of yourself."

"I can't. I just can't go and leave them behind." Martha was surprised to hear the things her mouth was saying. She had never considered herself to be very brave, self-sacrificing or particularly conscientious. But here she was, sounding like some noble heroine in a B-grade movie. Molly Brown in spades – ["No, take the others first – I'll wait for another lifeboat."]

"I tell you it's impossible, Miss Sampson. Let me try to save you. You must come with me tonight."

She wavered, but held firm in the end, again surprised at her own resolve, tenacity. ["Who is this person saying these things, anyway? Where has she been all my life? Where was she when I left home O, home; wheat fields, clean-smelling mornings, wide wide horizons, bright sunshine, Mama's pies O Mama, I'm sorry, I didn't mean those awful things I said – got married too young, too dumb both of us – had kids O kids, Janie and Robert, I love you so much – left home again I can admit I now – started drinking, got divorced? Where was she when I needed her? Now she shows up at the wrong time!"]

Martha didn't know how long Ahmed had been gone. She lay down on her rude bunk, turned to the wall and sobbed.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Beirut – Ahmed knew what he had to do now. He had to hurry. He left the house where Martha was being held prisoner, striding long and straight; almost running in his haste. He was in such a hurry, he didn't notice something was wrong. It wasn't something there that shouldn't have been; rather, there wasn't something that should have been. The streets were strangely vacant and silent.

There were no merchants arguing on the street corners, no women beating rugs from upstairs windows, no children playing in the streets. Ahmed should have recognized the signs. He had seen them enough during his days on the front lines, on the barricades.

The first mortar round landed with a kachunk – somewhere in the next block. Before Ahmed had time to register the sound, a Russian rocket exploded near him with a deafening roar.

Ahmed was blown off his feet. His nose and ears were bleeding, but everything seemed to be intact. Through the pain, he made a quick inventory. All the body parts checked in, some more vividly than others. At least the pain let him know the parts were still there.

Dust and brick shards were everywhere. Ahmed was up and running. The old street fighter instincts were taking over. He was running in a tunnel of sound. Explosions were going off all around. The street was a corridor of dust and smoke. He didn't worry about who was shooting at him; Christian or Moslem ordnance both kill you just as dead, praise Allah.

Another, heavier, even louder explosion knocked him off his feet again. Somebody was kicking in with heavy artillery – maybe the Syrians? Something whined past his ear. Snipers were getting in on the act.

["What is this – a one-man war? Everybody against me? Hey, let's call a truce."]

Ahmed was dodging and running, ducking behind cover wherever he could find it. Persistent rifle fire kicked up puffs of concrete dust near him, ricocheting off walls and street poles. One very accurate burst pinned him down momentarily behind a row of crates – not very substantial, but at least they hid him from view and gave him the illusion of safety.

He made a dash for doorway, and made it. With bullets zinging around his feet, he frantically beat on the door. Locked. Nobody home. Ahmed cursed in fluent Arabic. Pressing himself against the building's facade as if he were on a ledge twenty stories high, Ahmed tried to find shelter.

He still hadn't seen a single enemy, a single weapon. And still the bullets flew, accompanied by occasional mortar rounds, rockets, and artillery shells. How long had he been under fire? It couldn't have been more than two minutes, but it seemed like a lifetime.

He felt totally naked. The firing seemed to come from all sides. It was pointless to shoot back. In his days on the barricade, he had always carried an automatic assault rifle – American or Russian, whatever was available. Now that he had moved up in the ranks of the party, however, he carried only a sidearm – a U.S. Army .45 caliber automatic pistol. "Might as well throw a rock at a swarm of mosquitoes," Ahmed muttered.

He had reached a corner, and was trying to muster the courage to look around it, not knowing what he might find on the other side. A bullet landed squarely between his feet, deciding the matter for him. He leaped around the corner, and threw himself down flat into a gutter, half expecting to feel a hot flash of pain from a bullet through his head. Nothing.

He looked up, slithered down the sidewalk, scraping his knees, hands and elbows. He rolled over rapidly into another doorway. This one, praise Allah, was not locked. He dashed inside, into the cool, safe darkness.

Trembling, Ahmed crawled into a corner behind a staircase. He pushed a lock of black hair out of his eyes. With the terror of imminent death slowly subsiding ["We are not so eager to be martyrs for Allah after all, are we, Brother?"], he had time to think. ["Who the hell is shooting?"] The bitter Arab versus Arab rivalries had cooled in past months, and the city had enjoyed a period of what passes for peace in the Mideast. Were the Christians gunning again?

Unwanted, a bitter smile crossed Ahmed's handsome face ["You won't eat pork? Then eat lead for Allah!" "Jesus died for you, now you die for Jesus!"] – the ironies of a holy war; Jew against Christian, Christian against Moslem, Catholic against Protestant; the Crusades; the Inquisition; the 100 Years War; the persecutions, torture, murders – all in the name of a loving God. ["That's the curse of a Western education – you can see the irony in insanities like this. My unschooled brothers are more fortunate. In such madness, it is much better not to think."]

["Philosophers make poor soldiers."]

This new outbreak in hostilities increased his present problems a hundredfold. Getting Martha out from under the watchful eyes of his comrades would be difficult enough. Getting her out safely in the middle of a firefight would be next to impossible.

A tinkle of glass and a dull thud close by brought a swift end to his strategy session. He dove out the back door into an alleyway seconds before the grenade went off. Outside, the shooting was still going on.

At least there was no hot action in this alley. Ahmed made his way down the alley to the next street, staying close to the buildings. He paused at the dangerous light at the end of his safe tunnel. A machine gun rattled somewhere to his left, out of sight. Ahmed dashed across the street into the next alleyway.

He quickly covered the next block and turned right. The firing was getting farther away now. He breathed easier. His gait slowed. His pumping heart began to smooth out. Still, he continued walking in the shadows until he could no longer hear the bullets at all – only the occasional distant thump thump of mortar shells.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Beirut – Ahmed's mind raced as he walked. Something didn't feel right. He opened Balfleur's cell door. What he saw shocked him.

Fred Balfleur looked old. His gray face had become a shade paler. The lines around his mouth turned down. The lines around his mouth and eyes were deeper, sadder. Was there a hint of gray in the young soldier's hair? It was probably just dust. Balfleur sat hunched over in the corner, eyes unseeing, staring.

"Balfleur," Ahmed said. "I have something urgent to tell you."

Balfleur looked up, surprised.

Ahmed saw recognition come into Balfleur's eyes. He was relieved.

"My superiors have threatened to have you killed, if your government does not move its ships away from our shores," Ahmed said. "Your government has not moved the ships."

"Moreover, it seems that fighting has broken out again in the city. Your position here is becoming quite delicate."

Balfleur looked at Ahmed without comprehension.

Did he have to spell it out? "It is not safe here. You must go," Ahmed said.

Balfleur looked up suddenly. A glimmer of understanding: "Go? Go where?"

"I will arrange to have the door unlocked at a certain

time, and the guards removed. You must act swiftly, if you are to save yourself and ..." Ahmed hesitated, embarrassed. He did not know how to say it.

Balfleur looked up, waiting for Ahmed to complete his sentence.

"And?" he asked.

"Do – do you know another one of the hostages? A woman? The stewardess Martha Sampson?"

Balfleur's heart went kathump. He felt hot.

BALFLEUR: "Yes, I know her."

AHMED: "You can take her with you when you go. I will arrange it."

BALFLEUR: "How will you do it? Where will I go? How do we get out? Where do we go once we get out?"

AHMED: "Patience. I will tell you the plans in detail. There may be one problem, however."

BALFLEUR: "ONE problem? We're kidnapped in the middle of a war zone, our kidnappers want to kill us, the Sixth Fleet might open up at any time without knowing where we are,..."

AHMED: "Patience, Balfleur. Let me finish." Ahmed did not like this man. Something about him was unstable. Could he be trusted? "The problem is this: Miss Sampson does not want to go."

BALFLEUR: "Doesn't want to go?! You're kidding! Does she like it here?"

AHMED: "She does not want to leave the others behind. That is a problem. I do not know where all the others are, and it would complicate matters extremely to try to take them along. You must convince her to go."

BALFLEUR: "Great. While your buddies are looking for us with automatic rifles, we'll just stand there in the hallway arguing about whether she's going or not." Balfleur looked askance at the Arab. ["Is he trying to get me killed? Can I trust him? What kind of a crazy plan is this, anyway?"]

BALFLEUR: "You seem to care a lot whether Martha goes or not." He looked closely at Ahmed.

The Embarrassed Kidnapper flushed, but looked straight into Balfleur's eyes.

AHMED: "Do you want to get out of here, or not?"

BALFLEUR: "OK, OK. What's the plan?"

AHMED: "I will give you the details later. I must make certain that everything is ready. I will let you know when it is time."

Ahmed didn't want to talk to this unbalanced American any longer than he had to. He turned quickly and left.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Chicago – Running down a long, narrow hallway, with barely enough room; bumping into the slick, hard, walls now and again – the footing is slippery and treacherous. Above is darkness. Ahead is dusk dark. Thump thump thump reverberates in the air. Drive onward toward the regular clanging, thumping. Before and behind, before and behind – all around close, shuffling. A dull, heavy hollow ringing. Sound without borders.

There is a smell of something in the air – something fresh, yet foul – stifling and clean. It's the smell of something foreign. It's getting stronger. Too late. The explosion is white, turning everything black.

["It's the first time for all of them. How could it be otherwise? So they don't recognize the smell of death until it's too late – a split second before the hydraulic sledge crushes their skulls and hammers out their brains. Their brains don't know it – but their bodies are still alive, and their bodies know they are being jerked away (headless already) from the hammer and suspended from a hook on the conveyor, where their bellies are opened with one quick slash. The guts fall out, and they're taken care of. It's time for the hose to come along and hose down the inside, cleaning it out. Fresh and clean and obscenely pink, with

flecks of red on the outside, the rest of the red stuff streaming down the little gutters into the vats. We don't waste a thing.”]

Malcolm Hebert was a philosopher. Philosophers make poor slaughterers. It's not that he felt sorry for his 'clients.' – It didn't go that far. He wasn't a vegetarian. But he did think about them, wonder what – or if – they were thinking. He didn't suppose they felt pain or fear. There wasn't time for that. The smell of death would be new to them. They wouldn't know what it was; what to expect. It's not as if some of their comrades in the slaughter pens could tell them about it. No animal had been through there and back to tell about it.

It was Hebert's duty to fill a most unusual order. The United States government wanted all the pig guts it could get its hands on. Well, he had his hands on a lot of pig guts every day. They certainly had come to the right man. “Throw in a couple of heads and tails and feet, so they can be sure what they're getting – kind of a bonus, for a good customer,” the boss had said. So Hebert did. He was a Cajun from bayou country in Louisiana, and he knew the importance of lagniappe – a little something extra to please the customer.

He slit open the headless pig carcass – his 50th of the day – spilling the guts into a stainless steel cart, with handles on both ends and high sides to keep stuff from slopping over. This cart was about half full of porcine gore.

Hebert's world glistened in stainless steel. The stainless steel carts were shoved up against a four-foot high stainless steel retaining wall, waiting to be loaded like coal cars on a siding. Atop the wall was a heavy stainless steel railing supported by stainless steel posts. The railing bordered the edge of the top of the retaining wall. On the other side of the railing was a walkway, wide enough for observers or tour groups to walk four or five abreast. The walkway ran up to a tiled wall.

Everything was scrubbed as clean as an operating room every day, several times a day. [“Prep the patient, nurse. Make sure everything is scrubbed and clean. Thank you. Are the instruments ready? Scalpel! We will make the first incision about here... See here, nurse, I have found this patient's problem – he doesn't have any guts. Go and get this patient some guts, nurse – right away. Next patient... Yes, nurse, it's true. These skilled hands have never lost a patient. Nope, not a one survived.

“Circle the wagons, pilgrim, the savages are comin!”

Slit, slosh, slit slosh went Hebert's day. He was piling up the guts. Stainless steel carts were brimming. His little train would soon be ready to leave the station. [“All abooooooooord”]

Hebert was the engineer, and soon it would be time to blow the whistle. When he was a little boy he used to dream of being a railroad engineer. [“And then, I won't haul anything but blackeyed peas and gravy to your house, grandma.”]

[“It's too late to call in the artillery, sergeant! Pull yourself together! Tell your men to fix bayonets – they're coming over the top!”] Slit, slosh. Another one bites the dust. He didn't like that game so much. He made fun of himself whenever he played it. [“Sure, Hebert. You didn't go to Vietnam, so now you play games in your mind, while you slit open pig carcasses.”]

He wasn't brave enough to go to Canada. The thought never entered his mind. He wasn't anti-war, anyway. He was just anti-Hebert-getting-killed. But even that didn't matter. He would have gone, if he had been ordered to.

As it turned out, he was just one of the lucky ones. He spent his Army time in Germany, drinking beer and getting insulted by snooty frauleins.

[“One of the lucky ones? What do you mean 'lucky?' Are any of this generation 'lucky?' The ones that went and came back are different people – sadder – scarred. And the ones

who didn't go will always wonder – question their manhood, their courage: ‘Could I have handled it?’ And the ones who survived, and the ones who never went, all have guilt hanging over them like some kind of vague mist; like original sin – you've got it, and you're somehow guilty, even though you don't remember doing anything bad.”]

Hebert's own personal, unconscious, self-imposed penance, was to garner every tidbit about the Vietnam war he could get his hands on – books, newspaper articles – anything. He read glossy, slick productions and paperback novels, and everything in between: political analyses, semi-learned diatribes about post-war trauma, and letters from Vietnam veterans. He watched every documentary, every TV series about the war.

Talking with a Vietnam veteran was like going to confession with a sinful father confessor. Hebert sought salvation by listening to their war stories. They sought salvation in the retelling. Far away, a shadowy, devilish Hebert knew they were bullshitters. But the devout Hebert listened in rapt attention.

He was Coleridge's ancient mariner in reverse. Instead of being forced to tell his own story of guilt over and over again, Hebert was compelled to hear the story from the lips of others – over and over and over and over. An unending litany of guilt. Mea culpa. Mea culpa. Mea culpa. Forgive me, father, for I have sinned.

Slit, slosh.

The red tears dripped down.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Beirut – His legs folded beneath massive buttocks, layered with ever-smaller tiers of fat, and capped with his rather smallish, turbaned head, Beloved of God formed a pyramid of white upon the broad plain of the divan. He sat. Ponderous, immovable. General Fawaz stood at the foot of his mountainous leader, his head permanently inclined in a deferential bow.

“So the Druse have attacked us again,” Beloved clucked. “And no one thought to warn our brother Ahmed? How sad. He will be missed. But his fate was glorious. He has given his life for Allah.”

The mighty General Fawaz tried to hide his trembling. “Beloved, I must tell you: Ahmed's body was not found. It is not certain he was killed in the attack. My men are looking for him now.”

A cloud crossed over the face of Mount Beloved. “You are an honorable man, and a trustworthy one, Fawaz. No matter. We will proceed as planned. Let me know if you find him.”

“Of course, Beloved.” Fawaz bowed, and prepared to retreat, keeping his face to his leader, when he was halted by a gesture – a tiny wave of Beloved's pink hand. He did not speak, but stopped where he was, his body inclined forward.

“Fawaz.”

“Yes, Beloved.”

“The accursed Druse are pressing us hard. They are trying to seduce the hearts of our faithful. We must stop them. We need to make an example with the Americans – beginning with the woman – the accursed daughter of the Great Satan.”

“Yes, Beloved.”

Fawaz continued his retreat, and was again brought up short by a wave of his leader's finger.

“Fawaz.”

“Yes, Beloved.”

“Do not fail me.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Beirut – Balfleur was pacing up and down in his cell like a

caged tiger. ["Caged, yes. But a tiger?"] The room was getting smaller and smaller. The dull gray walls with cracked plaster and water stains loomed large and much too close. It was getting hard for Balfleur to breathe. His chest was tight, and it hurt.

It was time to go. But Balfleur was still undecided. There was a flutter in his stomach, and brambles in his brain. He couldn't think. Whenever he tried to go this way, his mind went back the other way.

For the thirtieth time, he felt the large, old-fashioned skeleton key in his pocket. It burned his hand. ["I'm supposed to just walk out of here, meet Ahmed, go pick up Martha, and head for the U.S. Embassy. Simple as that.

["Sure. The streets are crawling with armed guards. What if there are guards in the hall? What if Ahmed didn't get rid of them? What if it's a trap? He wants to kill us while making a break. No, that doesn't make sense, Balfleur. His bosses want to kill you. – Or is he just saying that? Why would he want to kill us? To make himself look good?"]

Balfleur stared at the door. The door. Suddenly, he thought of his freshman English class. What is behind the door – the lady, or the tiger? Only one way to find out. One way.

It was late already, and Balfleur was still staring at the door, frozen with indecision. He touched the door, and drew back his hand as if his fingers were burned. Come on, Balfleur, make up your mind.

["To be, or not to be? Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles... I always knew Shakespeare would come in handy one day. Let's see. If I stay, they kill me. If I go, they kill me. If I stay, at least they have to do the killing. I don't run any risks. I don't expose myself. Let it come. Better to die like a rat than like a man, is that it, Balfleur? What a coward you are! Sure, easy for you to say.]

["Yeah. Just like the other time. What other time? Don't play dumb. That time that you don't want to think about. That time when they went and you stayed. They died and you lived. They died and you lived. They shouldn't have gone – they knew it was dumb! Yeah – blame them. You were their buddy. But you let them go alone. They went, and they died. You stayed, and you lived. You coward."]

In the end, he sat down on his bunk and stared at the door. Given the choice between the lady and the tiger, Balfleur chose his bunk. The door. Finally, he lay down, and turned his head to the wall. He was sick of himself.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Beirut – Ahmed was feeling just a little smug. The escape plan was simple, but ingenious. It would be so easy. Almost too easy.

The guards had grown complacent and lax. They did not see Balfleur as a threat.

There was only one watching Balfleur's cell at any time, and none when the duty guard went to supper. It had been a simple matter to find out what time the guard ate. Ahmed's position in Beloved of God put him in possession of a key. This he had given to Balfleur. All Balfleur had to do was to walk out the unlocked door, to where Ahmed was waiting with a jeep.

They would drive to where Martha was being held. There he would use his status to gain her release, saying he wanted the prisoners for interrogation. Martha would not persist in her mad demand to remain unless all the hostages were freed. She must not. She would not dare to resist, and if she did, the unwitting guards would force her to escape. Ahmed smiled at his cleverness.

The rest would be easy. Ahmed would be able to bluff his way through any patrols they might encounter. They would drive to the U.S. Embassy, and that would be it. That

would be the end of it for Ahmed, too. He was betraying the Islamic revolution. He could not go back.

What had finally made up his mind?

He didn't know. He had fought at the barricades for the Islamic revolution. He had gone abroad to study at American universities, to learn the oppressor's weaknesses, to better serve his people in their struggle for freedom. Now he was turning his back on all that.

Was it the girl?

["Don't be ridiculous. Do you think I am controlled by my lust? No! I am master of my own emotions. Give up the revolution for a woman? As if there are not women enough in Beirut!"]

Ah, but none so fair.

["I attended their universities. I was surrounded by their blonde women then. They were intrigued by the dark stranger in their midst. I could have had my pick. I was not interested. I thought only of the cause. And now? Am I so desperate for a female that I could betray my comrades? Betray justice? Betray freedom?

["Am I such an ugly, despicable wretch that I must capture a maiden by force of arms? Besides, I'm not even sure she is inclined toward me."]

So the girl is part of it, at least. But there was more. – deeper reasons, that he didn't understand himself. Was he bored with the revolution? Tired of fighting? Had he reached his limit? Maybe his education had undermined his revolutionary fervor. Everything is relative. Values don't matter.

["But no. The Americans, above all people, should understand revolution. Did they not fight a war of independence? Have they grown so old and dead that they no longer remember what it is like to be slaves? Freedom – that is all we want. Give us liberty or give us death!"]

What then, Ahmed? Why do you turn away now? Have you grown tired of brutality – of the death of innocents? Was it not you, armed and deadly, who, with three compatriots, crawled beneath the wire, slipped past the listening posts, and found your prey? You took careful aim, as you were taught in the training camp. For a moving vehicle, lead it so much for each hundred meters range. Your rocket flamed and flew straight. An orange flash was your reward. How many children died, Ahmed?

But you were brave that day. You set fire to the bus, and the little ones, they were terrified. They were afraid to come out and face the bullets. So they remained on the burning bus. Their screams.

And yet, you were brave that day. Many others, before and since, had tried and failed. Shot to pieces by the Israeli border troops. Stretched out on the ground like hunting trophies for the TV and newspapers. You were brave, Ahmed. Brave, compared to many of your brothers. Much easier to pack a bomb on a plane, sending hundreds to their deaths. Others, avoiding the prickly sting of the Israelis, sought their victims in the capitals of Europe – easy pickings, there, to kill children with machine guns and bombs.

Ahmed looked at his watch and cursed. Ten minutes late! An eternity. What is keeping the stupid American? Soon, the guard will be returning from supper. ["Will I have to go in there and bring him out myself?"]

Ahmed put his hand on the door of the jeep, and his hand was instantly covered by another one twice as large. His guts shrank and ran cold. Startled, he looked up into a huge, ugly, gap-toothed face.

"God is great, brother," Mahmoud rumbled. "You are under arrest for crimes against the revolution."

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Washington, D.C. – Timothy Bartholomew was up to his neck in pig guts. Somehow, a senator from some other hog

state had got wind of the project, (“How could he fail to?” – the joke made the rounds within the White House – “with all those aging entrails piling up!”) and had put pressure on the President to use guts from his state. Then the word leaked out to more, and it snowballed. Now, guts were pouring in from all over the U.S.

Worse, with so many senators privy to at least parts of the plan, Bartholomew was sure it was just a matter of time before the secret was out. He didn’t know how much time he had. He was nervous and tense. He took his concerns to his boss, Bramshaw.

“We’ve got to step up the timing on this thing,” Bartholomew told him. “More and more congressmen are hearing about it every day. Pretty soon, this whole thing is going to blow up. We’ve got to get the President to move quickly. Everything’s in place – we’ve just got to load it up and get the show on the road.”

Bartholomew was talking too much, too fast. It was uncharacteristic. Bramshaw knew the signs of tension. He tilted his head to one side and smiled ever so slightly.

“What’s the matter, my boy? Losing your GUTS? Are you afraid success might SLIP out of your grasp?” For the first time since this gut business started, Bramshaw was thoroughly enjoying himself. He just loved to see the little twerp squirm.

“Welcome to the big leagues, my lad. It doesn’t always go as smoothly in practice as it does on paper. Anytime you get more than one person involved in a project, you have automatic, built-in leaks. That’s Washington.”

“Well, if you’re through gloating, maybe you can do something constructive. I know you’d love to see me fail, but the project is in your department. You’re connected with it, whether you like it or not. If we lose the hostages, there’ll be enough blame to go around for everybody.”

“OK. I’ll see what I can do about speeding up the timetable. But these things are hard to rush, you know. Are you sure everything’s ready from your end?”

“Everything’s ready,” Bartholomew snapped impatiently. “The guts are there, the planes are there. We just need to get moving.”

“Fine. I’ll be in touch,” Bramshaw said.

–+–

WASHINGTON – Reliable sources have confirmed that large quantities of pig intestines and byproducts from the nation’s slaughterhouses have been diverted to central holding areas in the eastern U.S. The administration denies having any knowledge of the diversions.

–+–

Bramshaw charged into the President’s office with unaccustomed zeal, waving the newspaper clipping. “Mr. President, have you seen this? The damned leaks are killing us again! That snoop Smithson has picked up the story, and the other columnists are bound to be sniffing around. We’ve got to do something fast – now!”

“At ease, Bramshaw,” the President said. “This isn’t the first leak we’ve ever had. I don’t think one more is going to sink the ship.”

“But sir,” Bramshaw protested, “if this thing gets out too soon, we’ll lose the element of surprise. We’ve got to act now!”

“Calm yourself, Bramshaw,” the chief executive said. “I gave the order a half hour ago. An unforeseen difficulty necessitated the regrettable delay, but the operation is going forward now. They’re getting the loading instructions at this time. Your young charge – Bartholomew, I believe is his name? – has organized everything very well. According to the timetable we set up, the guts are on their way to loading at this very moment. For all practical purposes, your job is over now. It’s up to the military to carry out the operation. You are to be congratulated. However this thing turns out, I believe you and your young protege have performed admirably. He seems to be quite a brilliant young man. I

expect big things from him in the future. I’m sure you are proud to have had a part in developing his career in the State Department.”

It was the President’s stock “pat-on-the-back” speech. That Dale Carnegie course he took hadn’t been for nothing. He never hesitated to congratulate and encourage the people under him. They were so grateful for his recognition, that they went right out and worked twice as hard the next time – and of course, the President got the credit in the eyes of the public, once everything worked out [“Yes, but I get all the blame, too, if everything goes down the toilet, so it evens out.”]

“Yes, he’s a fine young boy,” Bramshaw said through gritted teeth. [“It seems no matter what, that young asshole comes through smelling like roses!”] Thank you for the briefing, Mr. President.”

Bramshaw turned and left, before the President could see his chagrin.

CHAPTER FORTY

U.S. Air Force Base : Somewhere in Florida – Staff Sgt. Joseph Prima was about to load the strangest cargo of his 10-year, 9-month career.

“In the Marines, they don’t question orders – maybe even in the Army – they’re dumb enough, too. But in the Air Force? Me load 300 tons of pig guts without asking why? Not on your sweet retirement check, sir.”

“What you see is what you get, Joe,” Col. R. F. Rightglove answered. “You know everything I know. We load 300 tons of pig guts on two C-5-A’s, and get ‘em ready for trans-Atlantic flight. A top-secret mission. This one has all the earmarks of a biggie. It comes from the top.”

“But what does it mean, sir? I mean, it’s ridiculous – isn’t it?” Prima was a fiery native-born American citizen from El Paso, Texas, whose parents were Mexican. Growing up on the poor side of town, he had had to be a fighter. He still was. His eyes were almost as black as his hair, and now they flashed with fire. He scowled at his commanding officer.

Rightglove nervously stroked his right, slightly graying temple with his fingertips. “Your guess is as good as mine, sergeant. Give me a break. They didn’t tell me anything, either. Just get your men moving, and try to keep the gag factor to a minimum. I don’t want this post to become the laughing stock of the nation – do you read me?”

“Yes, sir.” Prima stiffened. Rightglove was getting tense. He couldn’t afford to offend his savvy, efficient NCO. “Will that be all, sir?”

“There’s one more thing. You’re going with them – overseas. Pick three men to go with you.” Rightglove was sorry for snapping at Prima. But commanding officers do not apologize to their subordinates – unless you screw up as bad as Patton did. He tried to modify his voice, to make it milder. “I know it’s highly unorthodox. Do the best you can, Joe. I know I can count on you.”

Sgt. Prima saluted and left.

“Jack – is that front-end loader back from maintenance?”

“Came back this morning, Joe.” Corporal Jack Slater was Prima’s right-hand man.

“Good. We’ll need it, plus the other two. We’ve got 48 hours to load 300 tons of pig guts onto two C-5-A’s.”

There was silence. Jack Slater tilted his head and looked at his sergeant – a man he knew was not accustomed to telling jokes. Prima was not smiling. “Excuse me, sergeant – did you say pig guts?”

“Pig guts. That’s what I said. You got a problem with that, corporal?”

“Uh – no, sergeant. Pig guts. We’ll load pig guts. Sure, why not?”

“Something funny, mister?” Prima demanded. He almost never pulled rank on his subordinates. He had supreme self-confidence that comes from hard work and ability. The

man knew his job. That is how he earned the respect of his men. But now he was on edge – on the edge of his knowledge and experience, and it unsettled him.

Slater, with difficulty, got his beginning snicker under control. “No, sergeant. Pig guts it is.”

“Call a formation at 0600 tomorrow morning. But before that, you’ve got some work to do. Have the planes rolled out and prepped. Have the front-end loaders gassed up and ready, with oil changes and fluid checks. I don’t want any foul-ups, once this operation gets underway.”

“Sure, sarge.” Slater felt better, now that there was something to do. He and Prima worked well together, like a machine. Once the gears were in motion, they could organize the world.

“One more thing.”

“Yes, sarge?”

“I don’t want to hear too much talk, understand? Keep it down.”

Slater swallowed. “Yeah, sarge. Sure.”

There was no military bullshit in Prima’s small unit. They loaded planes and kept them flying. That’s what they did, and they did it well.

Morning formation was usually an informal affair. Jones, the top mechanic, was chronically late. He was scarcely out of his teens, and looked even younger. But two divorces and long hours in off-base bars had put a lot of hours on him. Inside, he was a middle-aged man. Curry, Jones’ apprentice, was even younger, but he was learning fast. He was a capable mechanic, and he was far more conscientious about falling out for morning formation.

Simmons was a young black man from *L.A. – Luuvvly Atlanta*. He was lean, brash, smart and militant. He wasn’t about to take any bullshit from any honky, civilian or military. He did his job, and expected people to leave him alone. They did. He regarded the unit’s other black, Sgt. Marble *Hank* Aaron, with an odd mixture of respect and contempt.

In military jargon, the older man was “highly proficient in performing all tasks required of his unit, in a manner to expedite the successful completion of that unit’s mission.” – At least, that’s what it said on Aaron’s citation for individual accomplishment. Aaron was non-confrontational; he ignored or overlooked racial slights. His easygoing manner could also explain why, as the unit’s senior member both in age and length of service, he was just a maintenance sergeant, instead of unit leader in Prima’s place. The perception in the upper echelons was that Aaron lacked the drive and leadership qualities to get the job done. But whenever Prima came across something that stumped him, he sought out the older man first, and Aaron usually solved the problem.

Simmons never called Aaron an *Uncle Tom*, although he had come close a few times. Aaron’s dignified bearing, and the authority of his graying temples – *salt and pepper sidewalls* shut Simmons’ brash mouth every time.

Aaron was a sailor from Mobile, Alabama, who had grown tired of the merchant marine and joined the Air Force. He had lived through the turmoil of the 60’s, and remembered what the *Old Air Force* had been like. He had been rejected for pilot training, for reasons that were never made clear. No matter. He knew the real reason. [“The skies are pearly white. To Whitey, they represent something pure, chaste, virtuous. No niggers allowed. There are brothers flying now, sure. But so few. They’re tokens.”]

The half-dozen or so remaining members of Prima’s unit were unremarkable in character, origin, or appearance. They were the forgettable type who make up the bulk of most organizations. They were not loud or rowdy, and never attracted attention to themselves. It was hard to imagine them having homes, families, or friends. They were just there to fill out Prima’s quota of men.

There was no bugle, no rush and hurry into fatigues, no

boots pounding the wooden floor, no early morning roll call on the cool, soon to be sizzling, tarmac. *Formation* in Prima’s unit consisted of the men assembling at 0600 in their work area of one of the hangars. Then, Corporal Jack Slater would briefly scan the men, note who was missing (Jones, as usual), give the men their work assignment for the day, and report to Prima.

“OK, listen up, guys,” Slater told the milling, yawning gaggle of t-shirted airmen. “We’ve got a special job to do – an unusual job.” Slater was having a hard time trying not to smirk. “We’ve got to fill up two C-5-A’s with pig guts.”

That got their attention. The yawning, stretching and milling around came to a stop.

“Say whuut?”

“Awww, c’mon!”

“You’re bullshittin’ us, man!”

“No bullshit,” Slater replied. He was almost grinning now, despite everything he could do. Suddenly he thought of the task ahead, and the dirty, hot, smelly job it would be. This was real. This was no joke.

“No bullshit,” he repeated. “Curry, you’ve got to keep things running until Mr. Jones decides to pay us a visit. The backhoe is ready, right?”

“It’s ready. Hey – you mean you’re not kidding?”

“For the third time, this is real. We’ve got a caravan of 18-wheelers coming in here today, chock full of pig guts. They’re supposed to be brought over here by 1000 hours. We’re gonna need that backhoe and the two front-end loaders to stuff that shit into the C-5-A’s.”

“I ain’t loadin’ no pig shit into no planes,” Simmons declared.

Slater was ready for that. “Look, Simmons,” he said. “Do you think the sarge and me are anxious for this job? To me, it rates right up there with pissing in a hurricane. But I tell ya again – it’s no joke. It’s a real assignment, and we’ve all got to pull our share of the load.”

“You and Prima can belly up in that shit if you want to. I ain’t goin’. My share of that load ain’t shit. I’m tellin’ you, man, I don’t want no part of this shit detail. Ain’t nobody goin’ to fuck me over.” The tight skin on Simmons’ cheeks gleamed, his fists were clenched, and his eyes were dangerous.

Slater decided not to try and pull rank. He ignored the mutiny. Let Prima handle it. He finished giving out the assignments and headed back for the *bead shack* – Prima’s office. As he left, he glanced back over his shoulder at the still-smoldering Simmons.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

“Don’t worry about Simmons,” Prima told Slater. “He likes to shoot off his mouth, but he’s a good man. He’ll come around. But that goddam Jones – if he doesn’t show up soon, I’m going to throw his ass in jail.”

The phone rang. It was the gate guard. “They’s twelve 18-wheelers out here say they’ve got a delivery for you, Sgt. Prima.”

Prima sighed. “Let ‘em in.” He got up and went out to meet the trucks.

The base was big, and all the buildings looked alike. The trucks got lost, of course. After taking several wrong turns, they finally showed up in front of Prima’s office. Prima strolled over to the lead truck and took the bill of lading from the driver. The sandy-haired young driver with a bushy, blonde-reddish mustache pushed back his dirty yellow baseball cap, and his long brown hair curled out from underneath it. “We got yer twenty tons of pig guts. What is this – some kind of new diet they’re trying out on you winged warriors? Y’all sho must love yo hog jowls and chittlin’s, I do declare.”

Prima ignored the grimy, grinning driver. He scrawled a quick signature and pointed the way across the tarmac

where the C-5-A's were waiting. The trucks rolled again, and Prima followed in his jeep. When they reached the planes, he went around back and opened up the doors of the lead truck.

They were in luck. The pig guts were neatly packed in large, stainless steel containers. "At least we won't have to shovel that shit," Prima said. "Let's go, guys. Get that gear moving."

Simmons grumbled, but went to work. In the absence of Jones, he had to operate one of the front-end loaders. Even shorthanded, Prima's unit worked smoothly. The planes were loaded well before the assigned time.

Prima should have been in a good mood, but he wasn't. "Mission accomplished, sir," he reported to Col. Rightglove.

"Congratulations, Joe. In half the time, as usual. And shorthanded, too, I'll bet. Jones still pulling his tricks?" Rightglove was trying to smooth his sergeant's ruffled feelings, without crossing over the officer-NCO dividing line. Prima wasn't buying.

"I'm going to fry his ass one of these days, sir," he said. "In the meantime, he gets a bonus. He's gonna get to go with us to babysit these pig guts." Prima turned and looked out the window of the metal building. The two C-5-A's were taxiing out onto the runway.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Beirut – To his surprise, Balfleur found that his threshold of pain was quite high.

They were working him over good now. A big, powerfully built Arab loomed over him, sweating. Balfleur was flat on his back, his arms stretched out, tied to posts. His feet, puffed and red like ripe tomatoes, were rigidly clamped in stocks. He was naked from the waist up.

Whooo WHAP. The stout stick in the big Arab's huge arms whistled through the air and whacked the soles of Balfleur's jerking, quivering feet again. Again. Again. Again.

Most of the time, Balfleur ignored it. How, he didn't know. It just didn't seem to matter. He wasn't brave – he knew that. He had established that fact many years ago, when he was just a boy in school. Many years ago...

–+–

Little Freddie Balfleur was standing in line at the school cafeteria. It was hot. There was that smell; a smell that always made him sick. He didn't know what it was; maybe a mixture of many things; steam rising in oily wisps from the steam table, the odor of some squishy-looking vegetables he particularly hated (squash – again – ugh), the cleaning liquid – ammonia or something – they used to scrub the stainless steel fixtures and the tile floors. Whatever it was, he hated it.

And fear. Fear was mixed up in that disgusting atmosphere. Even before he hit the bar to open the wide, heavy metal cafeteria door, his stomach knotted. HE would be there – Raoul Lefevre. Why did every school have to have a bully? Why did Raoul appoint himself? Why did he choose Freddie Balfleur as his favorite victim?

Freddie did not look left or right. He kept his head down, and scrunched his shoulders a little bit to keep behind the person in front of him. People were milling around on both sides, and that gave some more cover. He looked for Raoul out of the corners of his eyes, hoping to not find him. Maybe he was sick today. Maybe his parents had moved away. [Naw, just my luck, they'd leave him behind, even if they did move.]

But he was always there, and he was there today. And he spotted Freddie Balfleur instantly, even scrunched down. Even before Freddie saw him. He walked softly up behind Freddie, and pinched him cruelly on the arm.

"Ow!"

"Hey, Freddie, did you watch that John Wayne movie last

night, like I told you to?"

"Yeah," Freddie lied.

"Yeah? Well tell me about it."

"What for? You saw it didn't you?"

"Yeah. But I want to see if you did. C'mon, tell me all about it."

Freddie thought hard. "Well, I don't remember all the details. There were these bad guys, and they were trying to do somthin' bad to this guy, and John Wayne, well he shot 'em all up."

"Yeah?" Raoul's stupid face twisted and he closed one eye as he thought. "Well, maybe. Tell me some more."

Freddie squirmed, and his stomach felt weak. "That's really all I remember..."

Raoul raised his stubby thumb and forefinger, making a twisted, arched claw. "Tell me more, or else..."

"Well, let's see. Hmm... Uhh... OW!" The claw struck. "OW, OW! Stop it, stop it."

"Stop it, stop it," Raoul mimicked in a whining voice. Freddie hated Raoul. And he hated himself.

"Move along, children, you're holding up the line," Miss Maichaux said.

Saved by the bell. For once, even the squash looked good as Freddie hurried forward.

Raoul was right behind, whispering in his ear. "Get the liver today, Freddie."

"But I don't like liver."

"Take the liver, or I'll be waiting for you after school. I'll beat you up," the voice hissed.

That day, gagging and on the edge of puking, Freddie ate liver. The awful taste and smell mixed with the odious smell of the lunchroom.

"Don't forget your tomatoes, Freddie." Raoul was standing behind Freddie. He made a fist, and two of his knuckles jutted out. He grabbed Freddie's head with one hand, and rubbed his knuckles fast and hard on the top of Freddie's scalp.

"OW! OW! Now stop that, Raoul, or I'll tell."

"Stop or I'll tell. Stop or I'll tell," Freddie's tormentor mocked. "And if you tell, I'll beat you up. I'll break your nose. I'll make you a new face so ugly your own mother won't recognize you."

Freddie's fork pushed into the tomato, and it burst, splattering juice on the table...

Balfleur looked around. His tormenters were gone.

–+–

Balfleur, who couldn't feel or see his feet, couldn't help laughing. ["These guys have no imagination whatsoever. Here we are in the twentieth century, almost in the twenty-first, and they're over here still using medieval torture. Ha ha. I feel like I'm in some kind of B-grade movie. Haven't they heard of sodium pentothal?"]. He laughed again. ["They don't even have indoor plumbing, and you think they're gonna have sophisticated stuff like truth serum? Haa."]

Explosions, red and bleeding, went off in Balfleur's brain like Fourth of July fireworks. Then Freddie was gone again, this time wandering through the swamp, looking for lighter wood knots.

–+–

Ahmed was faring even worse. Mahmoud, that ugly, gap-toothed man-mountain, had a long, sharp knife inserted into Ahmed's skin just below his Adam's apple, and was slowly moving the blade in a downward motion, shoving the point further and further transversely across his chest.

Ahmed was screaming.

Mahmoud's grin was more like a grimace. "We shall see, brother camel dung, just what treachery you were planning against Beloved of God."

Ahmed could not catch his breath long enough to talk. The screams kept wracking his throat.

Mahmoud's knife slipped further under Ahmed's skin, making a horrible bulge as it went, lifting the skin from the

tissue beneath.

"We're going to skin you alive, brother dung heap, unless you tell us what treachery you were plotting against our Beloved."

Again there was no room in Ahmed's throat for talk. The pain choked out everything.

"Dear dung heap – what a coward you are! No wonder you were planning to run away and leave us. Did he promise you the protection of the U.S. government? Now be a good dung heap and tell uncle Mahmoud everything. I promise to kill you quickly, if you do. Why don't you admit it? We know everything."

When the knife reached a point beneath Ahmed's right nipple, he fainted.

For a savage moment, Mahmoud felt the animal urge to twist his knife, and plunge it deep into the traitor's breast. Instead, he slipped it out of the gory red pocket he had created in Ahmed's chest, and smoothed down the flap of protruding skin.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Beirut – Beloved of God was in one of his rare rages.

Instead of sitting on his divan like some unattainable snow-capped summit, he was pacing his tremendous bulk up and down the room, shaking the floor. His headquarters staff knew they were in for bad weather. Each ponderous footstep fell like a thunderclap over their heads.

General Fawaz was as pale as death. The courageous soldier, who had fought and won many battles against the enemies of God, was petrified with terror. Beloved of God, this holy man, this awesome white bulk pacing the floor before his downcast eyes, held not only his followers' lives, but their eternal souls in his pudgy hands. With a word, Beloved of God could condemn Fawaz to an eternity of nothingness. Fawaz quaked inwardly.

Suddenly, Beloved stopped pacing. His general's guts shrank to a pinpoint. "Fawaz!" Beloved said sharply. The kneeling general bowed his head even lower, until it touched the floor.

"Yes, Beloved." Muffled on the floor, his voice was barely audible.

"Fawaz. I do not like to be opposed. My will must not be resisted. Why is this dog Ahmed opposing me? Why won't the stubborn American tell us what they were planning?"

Fawaz remained silent, forehead touching the floor.

"We are certain," Beloved continued, "that Ahmed was planning some kind of treachery. He was arrested outside the building where the American was being held. It was undoubtedly he who gave the American the key. BUT I WANT PROOF! What else was Ahmed planning? Was he alone? Was he assisted by others? Have we killed the head of the snake, or is this only the tail? Is some plot even now going forward, threatening us?"

"Tell me, Fawaz – what do you think?"

Fawaz raised himself to a kneeling position, eyes still downcast. "I believe the traitor Ahmed was acting alone, Beloved."

Beloved was silent. "I am not so sure. I feel there is something in the air. My soul is not at rest. I want assurances!"

Why has your spy proven worthless at this critical time?"

"Tell that oaf of yours, Mahmoud, if he does not get the truth from Ahmed, he will join him under the knife."

"Yes, Beloved."

"Fawaz."

"Beloved?"

"I have warned you once already. I am not accustomed to failure from you. Do not fail me now."

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Somewhere over the eastern U.S. – Major Harvey "Bomb Squad" Miller was in a foul mood.

["Another Air Force shit detail. Playing airborne truck driver – this time loaded down with 150 tons of pig guts, bound for God knows where. Somebody up there doesn't like me, that's for sure. Jacking me around. Playing cloak and dagger with a cargo of pig guts. Sealed orders and the whole schmeer, for God's sake. Who do they think they're kidding? I'll bet some desktop pilot in the Pentagon is laughing his ass off right now."]

Co-pilot Captain Andrew McCarthy knew better than to try to talk to his pilot when he was in one of those moods. And who could blame him? Of all the shit details, this was undoubtedly the shittiest.

Bomb Squad Miller got his nickname back in flight school. His dream had been the dream of all young pilots – to fly the hottest thing the Air Force had to offer – to scream in at treetop level and drop a load of bombs on Charlie; to corkscrew in behind a Soviet MiG and shove a heat-seeking rocket up his butt.

The nickname was partly due to the sophomoric pranks he used to play on his fellow classmates and instructors – like the time he dropped paint-filled balloons on two flight officers. That one nearly got him bounced out of the academy.

Somehow, somewhere along the line, *Bomb Squad* Miller had lost out. It just drifted away, off his fingertips. He was found to be lacking in the *right stuff*. He wasn't washed completely out of flight school, but he would never fly the Air Force's hot rods. He was assigned to *cattle truck* duty – flying the slow, safe, boring transport planes. So *Bomb Squad* Miller was in a sour mood.

His navigator, Henry Thoreau Jameson, was a bright young black man from Ann Arbor, Michigan. His parents chose the name in hopes that their son would grow up to appreciate literature, philosophy, and the finer things in life – and as a reaction to the trend among some blacks to give their offspring outrageous-sounding African or Moslem names. "No son of mine is going to be named Elijah Muhammad, Nashallah Tamburah, or any such foreign crap as that," his father James Jameson said. He was a burly, non-nonsense stevedore. "We're not Africans. We're Americans, and proud of it. We've been here for 300 years, Henry – don't forget that. In comparison, some of our pale-faced neighbors are fresh off the boat!"

Henry did not disappoint his parents. He was a straight-A student. He had read not only *Walden*, but the complete works of his namesake, as well as the writings of that other New England philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson. His main interest was electronics, but he continued to read classical literature. He joined the Air Force to take advantage of the college plan. He completed the Air Force courses in navigation and electronics, and was guaranteed funds to complete college after leaving the service.

It was Henry's job to tell the pilot when he could open his sealed orders.

They had been given a course and a set of coordinates. When they reached a certain point, they could open the packet marked "secret." ["Oh, joy."]

"Five more minutes, sir," Jameson told Miller over his headset.

"Check," Miller responded. He wasn't exactly on the edge of his seat. How thrilling could the destination be, with a load of pig shit?

They flew on in silence. Miller stared into the black void. There were no clouds, but the atmosphere was just thick enough to blot out all the stars. It matched Miller's mood perfectly.

Finally, Jameson broke the silence. "It's time, Major."

Unhurriedly, Miller took the packet of instructions out from under his seat, broke the seal and opened it. "Hmph," he said. "We're going to exotic New Jersey." He reported

the news laconically to Clyde Sturruth, pilot of the C-5-A behind him. Then he read the course to Jameson, and banked over to his left. Clyde followed.

"Bomb Squad" turned to his co-pilot, Andrew McCarthy. "New Jersey," he said with disgust. "Five years I've been flying these cattle trucks, and haven't even been out of country once. I swear, I think some asshole in the Pentagon has a personal grudge against me. If I ever find out who it is, I'm gonna wax his ax."

McCarthy kept silent. He had seen Miller like this before. The best thing to do was just ignore him. Eventually, his gloomy mood would pass.

But Miller wouldn't let McCarthy keep silent. "Andy," he said at last, "how old are you?"

"Twenty-four, sir," McCarthy answered.

"Twenty-four." Miller sighed the word as if it meant *Shangri-la*. "You've still got your whole career ahead of you. Sure, they've got you stuck on these flying assholes for now, (Miller's description of his aircraft derived from the huge door in the rear end, through which cargo was loaded and unloaded) but you're still young. You can still transfer out into the big leagues – fly something hot – something with a little spunk. – Wouldn't you rather be doing that?"

"I'm satisfied here, sir." McCarthy couldn't tell *Bomb Squad* that he had expressly requested transport duty. He was in no hurry to end his life as a black, burning hole in the ground. Those *hot* planes that Miller loved to dream about were flying coffins, as far as McCarthy was concerned. He just wanted to settle down, get married, maybe travel a bit on Uncle Sam, retire young and live the good life. The gung-ho, egotistical fighter-jock scene was for teen-agers and crazies.

"Yeah, sure," Miller said. "You don't need to con me, Andy. Don't give me that model soldier routine. I know you hate these crates as much as I do. It's about as exciting as driving a trolley car –" Miller's headset crackled.

"We're drifting, sir," Jameson reported.

"I know it, Jameson," Miller snapped. He made the proper course correction with a nonchalant flick of his wrist, then turned back to McCarthy. "Jeesh – that's another thing. – Takin' orders from a jungle bunny. Well, that's today's Air Force for ya. I just hope that boogey doesn't get us lost."

"Sir..." McCarthy's voice was low and pained. "Your mike is still open, sir."

"What? Oh, hell. What the hell," Miller said.

Jameson was surprised, but not shocked. ["You don't hear racial slurs as often as you used to. But the thoughts are still there. Sometimes they surface, like smelly sulfur out of a brooding blow hole."]

"Blacks are supposed to be slow, lazy and dumb, Henry," his father had said. "So you be fast, energetic and smart. Be faster, smarter, and work harder than any white man. They'll be so amazed it'll jar them – maybe hard enough to shock some truth into them. They've held us down too long, son. No more. We've got the law on our side now. Use every advantage you can get – we've earned it through 300 years of blood, sweat and tears. Don't let anybody tell you we haven't earned it. Make us all proud, son. Do it for yourself, do it for all your brothers and sisters."

Jameson was doing it.

Bomb Squad, Henry and Andy flew on in dark, black silence.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Miller had not noticed when it first started getting gray. Starting over the ocean, it quickly spread westward, leaving just a dark one-third of domed sky, with a few pinpricks of stars winking out one by one.

It would still be a while before the earth below would

become visible. ["Dawn came slowly, as if reluctant to shed light on yet another day of death and destruction. But come it must, and come it did. And so did death from the air. Boldly, *Bomb Squad* Miller led his formation deep into enemy territory. He knew many of them would not be returning.

"Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, the commander spotted a thin silver streak rushing down from the black vaulted dome.

"Bogies! he yelled. Hawk, break left! Eagle break right! Only when he saw the rest of his formation maneuvering to safety, did the skilled pilot bank his plane into a sharp turn. He handled the unwieldy bomber like a fighter plane. Surprised, the attacking jet streaked past, headed downward. Miller put his plane into a stable position, and the belly gunner did the rest. It was all over in a matter of seconds.

"They pressed on through heavy flak. Evil tracers of light tried to find Miller's plane, but he skillfully dodged them. Finally, they were there – over the target. *Bomb Squad* Miller lived up to his name. His bombs rained death and destruction on the enemy....--"]

—+—

"Uh – what's that, Andy?"

"I said, skipper, Jameson says we're getting close – time for pre-landing checks."

"Oh – sure." Miller and McCarthy went through their routine. By the time they were finished, the dark shadows had flown. Their destination lay just ahead in the gray morning.

"Time to begin descent, sir," Jameson said. There was no trace of resentment in his voice.

Then it was there – crazy lines running off in all directions, with no symmetrical pattern or obvious function. Future archaeologists might look at it and conclude it had some religious significance. Miller let his big plane settle gently into the glide path. After the long hours of darkness, it all moved swiftly now. Before they realized it, they were on the ground and motionless.

"OK, let's see what this great big secret mission is all about," Miller said. He unstrapped himself and climbed down the ladder to the tarmac.

Miller, McCarthy, Clyde Sturruth and his co-pilot Frank Smith were all met on the tarmac by a crisply dressed master sergeant in Air Force blue. "If you'll follow me, gentlemen."

They entered a briefing room to find another crew already there. Miller sat down next to the ranking officer, who was obviously pilot and commander of his plane.

"What is this big, secret mission we're supposed to carry out?" he asked. "I guess, you're in on this thing too?"

"Yes," Major Ted Blankenship answered. "Are you loaded with pig guts too?"

Miller almost choked. He nodded. "I didn't know there was more," he said. "What are we gonna do – make up a mess of chittlins for a welfare banquet?"

"It's no joke," Blankenship said. "We've been sitting here a day and a half waiting for you, and we've heard enough to know there's something big in the wind."

"Of course there's something big in the wind – our stench – they can smell us three states away from here," Miller retorted. He was about to say more, but a door opened, and his mouth closed.

A blue and gold figure strode quickly through the door, up to a podium in the center of the room.

"Good morning, gentlemen," General Spud McDermott said briskly. He stood up straight, his arms by his side. No part of him touched the podium. He breathed in sharply, making a hissing noise. For a brief moment he surveyed his small audience, mentally sizing up each officer.

McDermott was a short man, but he stood straight as an arrow. His military bearing made him seem taller. He was

not stuffy. He was a soldier's general. There was no pretense about him. He knew his job, and expected his men to know theirs. He had enlisted in the Air Force as a scruffy kid from New Bern, North Carolina, not far from where the Wright brothers flew their first flying machine.

He became obsessed with flying as a youngster. Still a teen-ager, he became an ace in Korea, with seven kills to his credit. He had no notion that he could ever die. His hair and Scottish ancestry earned him the nickname *The Red Bairn*. But in Vietnam, a heat-seeking missile nearly skewered him, which served to tame his wild spirit a little.

Now he stood there in his clean but undazzling uniform, red hair cropped in a close crewcut, in defiance of his receding hairline.

"I know you're wondering just what the hell you're doing here at 4 a.m., babysitting hundreds of tons of pig guts.

"Right off the top I want to make one thing clear. This mission, gentlemen, is a real one – not some joke dreamed up by the State Department. I know there's been a lot of gags going around the unit, but this is serious. You're going into a hot zone. There could be enemy response.

"This mission --" he paused for effect – "may become known as either the most brilliant, innovative piece of psychological warfare ever devised, or the biggest embarrassment the United States Air Force has ever suffered. – It depends on you.

"You will take off at eleven-thirty – in about five hours. You will fly across the Atlantic, be refueled in the air, and rendezvous with fighter escort off Gibraltar. From there you will proceed up the Mediterranean to Beirut, where you will drop your ordnance. The exact location of the target is marked by the photographs behind me on the wall. Study them carefully." He pointed to fuzzy pictures of a slum section in the eastern part of the city.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Then coughing, clearing of throats, shuffling of feet. The men were moving their heads slightly, trying to look at each other, trying not to look at each other. Finally, *Bomb Squad* Miller raised his hand. "Excuse me, sir," he said. "What do you mean, 'Drop our cargo?' Do you mean we're going to jettison the stuff in mid-air?"

"You don't understand, Major," McDermott said. "Let me rephrase myself. You are not going to merely *jettison* your cargo – you are going to drop it. You are going to bomb hell out of the enemy!"

That pronouncement was met by further silence. A real big silence. A silence that hung like a pregnant blimp. All of a sudden there was bouncing and heaving; air bubbles trying to break the surface; something between unborn hiccoughs and sneezes. There was motion in that silent room; pent-up sound just beneath the surface of terrified faces; watery eyes; quivering bellies. The whole room shook. It couldn't last. One more second.

Bomb Squad Miller broke first. He exploded. His puffed cheeks burst open, emitting a great rush of air and sound – the belly laugh.

The way they explained nuclear fission. Throw a ping pong ball into a room full of mouse traps, each one loaded with another ping pong ball. First one, then two, then sixteen – bang.

They roared. They shouted. They screamed. They fought for breath, but only laughter came out and in. Gales of it, sheets of it; long thundering fusillades of it, never ending. Then silent laughter when all breath was gone; dry heaves with wet, tear-glistening faces. – Awful, terrified faces. Their mouths were gay and bellies were merry, but the fear of death was in their eyes – the general was not laughing.

They tried to stop – oh, how they tried. It made matters worse. They saw his open, honest, unmalicious face, and broke into new gales, new shrieks. The storm had to run its course. Brief lulls met with new gusts, howling. It seemed to go on forever.

Imperceptibly, the voices stilled, one by one. A few rumblings, quiet heaves, and it was over, followed by another silence.

Heads hung low. No one wanted to look at the *Red Bairn*. He was not humorless, just businesslike; that made it worse. They liked him.

The general's calm face had never changed. There was no hint of a smile or a frown. "Now that that's over," Spud McDermott said, "I trust you gentlemen will be kind enough to listen to the rest of the briefing.

"As I said, you are on a bombing mission – with unorthodox ordnance, to be sure," (McDermott ignored a renewed scattering of muffled whoops) "but a bombing mission nevertheless – with all the hazards and risks of a bombing mission. You must hit the target squarely to be effective. We don't want to go around spraying guts (another *Hab* from the back of the room) all over the Middle East. Some of those Arabs are our friends and allies. We just want to dump on the bad guys.

"And you must be prepared to receive anti-aircraft fire. The enemy is known to be equipped with conventional anti-aircraft weapons, as well as a few surface to air missiles. You will be provided with escort to suppress any ground fire.

"Now for the details. The fighter escort will be on the target ten minutes ahead of you, to draw their fire and neutralize any anti-aircraft positions. You will follow, and be over the target about O-900 local time. Due to the unorthodox nature of your ordnance, each plane will be equipped with a forklift, to bring the containers to the rear of the plane. You will open the doors, and dump the contents of the containers. The empty containers will be dragged aside to make room for the next containers, and so on.

"This will take some time. It will be necessary to make at least two, maybe three or four passes to drop all the ordnance. All that time, you will be exposed to enemy fire.

"Upon completion of the mission, you will return by the same route, refuelling in mid-Atlantic, finally returning here. Any questions?"

It was slowly beginning to dawn on them that their commander wasn't kidding. They had been silent, shifting uneasily in their seats, waiting for him to drop the other shoe. The snickers had died down at last, and they waited. But old Spud McDermott had kept his poker face, and had kept going on and on about this *mission*. Now they were sitting up straight. Here and there, you could see the light of realization coming into their eyes. This really was for real.

There was another long silence following Spud's speech. Again, it was *Bomb Squad* Miller who broke it. This time, there was a new look on his face; a look of fragile, quivering hope.

But he was still uncertain.

"Excuse me, sir. – Do you mean this is really on the level? This is a real mission?"

"Dammit, major, what have I been talking about for the last ten minutes?" Spud McDermott was finally losing his patience. "Have you been asleep, or are you just thick? Hell, yes, it's a real mission – and you'll be real dead if you're not real careful – is that real clear?"

A fire came in *Bomb Squad* Miller's eyes. "Yes SIR!" But he was still confused. "Just one more thing, sir."

"Yes?"

"Why, sir?"

"Why?"

"Why are we going to drop pig guts on Beirut, sir?"

"That's a fair question, major. I'm sure you're all aware of the hostage situation there. Well, it seems that some hot shot in Washington figured out that these kidnappers hate pig guts – it's against their religion or something like that. Anyway, dropping pig guts on them is the worst thing we can do to them, according to this wise guy in Washington – worse than napalm. So, we drop pig guts on them, then

threaten more of the same unless they release our prisoners.”

McDermott paused. “I know it sounds crazy. That’s why I told you at the outset that it would either be a great success, or make the United States Air Force the laughing stock of the entire world. Much of that is beyond your control – how the enemy will react to this attack.

“But it is your job to press the attack, and be certain that it succeeds. If the attack fails, our shame is certain. If it succeeds, ... well, history will decide. You just do your part, and let history take care of itself. And remember the danger – you’ll be over the target a long time. Good luck, men.”

The fire in *Bomb Squad* Miller’s eyes had grown into a forest fire; a conflagration; the Great Chicago Fire, San Francisco, Nero fiddling at Rome, Dresden firebombing; fire and death from the sky.

Bomb Squad Miller was going into combat at last.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Beirut – There was a noise outside, and then a knock on the door. It opened, and a tall man in a floor-length, grayish blue robe entered. On his head was an immaculate white turban.

“Martha Sampson!”

“Yes?”

The turbaned gentleman continued in fluent, accent-free English: “I have been sent to inform you that tomorrow you will be tried for the crimes of terrorism, oppression and murder. If you wish, the court will appoint a representative for you.”

“B...B...B...b...b...b...” Martha was making a sound somewhere between stuttering and blubbing. “What?!” She finally managed to articulate. “What are you saying? I’m to be tried for WHAT? For WHAT?”

“For terrorism, oppression and murder.”

“Terrorism?... oppression?... and MURDER? That’s ridiculous! I’ve never done any of those things. There must be some mistake. You have the wrong person. I have never done anything. I’m just a stewardess. I serve people on airplanes – that’s all I do.”

“Come, come, Mrs. Sampson. Do not try to fool me. Are you not Martha Sampson, oldest daughter of the President of the United States?”

Martha was taken aback.

“I see you hesitate. That might be taken as an indication of guilt. You are that Martha Sampson, are you not?”

“Y-yes.”

“Very good. Then there is no mistake. You will be tried tomorrow. That is all.” He turned to go, but Martha said, “Wait! There must be some mistake! I haven’t done anything. – And my father hasn’t done anything like that either!” she said hotly. Her face was flushed now, and her eyes were blazing.

“Mrs. Sampson, the crimes of your father are manifold and obvious, and you will answer for them. But I will not deal with the case now. That will be for tomorrow.”

He swirled, grayish-blue, out the door.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Washington, D.C. – WASHINGTON (AP) – Kidnappers of Martha Sampson, the President’s oldest daughter, have threatened to put her on trial. “We hold the kidnappers responsible for the lives of my daughter, and all of the hostages,” the President said. “If they go through with this sham trial, there will be very serious consequences.” The President seemed shaken, but did not elaborate. When asked if a response is being planned by the United States armed forces, he said, “All options are being considered.”

–+–

[“All options are being considered. Sure. In other words, we haven’t got the slightest idea what we’re doing.”] The President of the United States was feeling low.

[“Supposed to be the most powerful man on earth – hah! Leader of the Free World, and I can’t even protect my own daughter. Pumpkin, Pumpkin! What should I do?”]

Hot and sweaty, dusty and scratchy, Daddy returns from the fields. The first person he sees is little Martha, sitting on the back steps. He’s still far away, and she’s just a speck, sitting there behind the house. Tartuffe, the family’s brown and white, mixed breed hound, lies in the dust at her feet. When she spies his head bouncing along above the wheat, she springs to her feet and runs as fast as she can.

Tartuffe is running too, and barking. The dog gets to Daddy first, and begins jumping up and down. Then Martha is there in Daddy’s arms. She smells fresh and clean and girlish. Tartuffe is going crazy. He’s bounding and running in circles around the two of them, baying out his joy.

“Daddy, Daddy, can we go to the picture show tonight? Can we?” “Sorry, Pumpkin, Daddy has to go to a meeting.” “But Daddy! It’s Friday! You promised!” “I will, honey, I will. I’ll take you one day. But not tonight, I have to go to the meeting.” “But Daaaddy!” Martha’s tears are hot and salty on Daddy’s cheek.

It was a good thing the President’s constituents could not see him now. [“McGovern cried, and it cost him the election. Can they impeach a president for crying?”]

[“Got to snap out of it. We’re doing all we can. We really are, you know. Do the best you can, then trust in God for the rest. Forget the self-pity. Got to cheer up. Moping won’t help. Shake yourself. Let’s go.”]

[“But, oh, Pumpkin! Who can comfort a president? Everybody looks to him for strength and leadership. Where can he turn?]. The President was riding a black roller coaster, from self-pity and despair to hope.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Beirut – Beloved of God was losing patience.

“Fawaz!”

“Yes, Beloved.” The trembling General of God approached his heavenly and earthly commander in a dreadful state. His eyes were riveted on the floor, his head bowed beneath the weight of doom.

“Still they resist! Still they do not tell me what I want to know! Time is fleeting, Fawaz! The enemies of heaven are closing in! I am tired of waiting. We cannot wait any longer.”

Beloved paused to think. He did not grant his general the favor of a glance. He had not delivered success.

“The Great Satan’s offspring must be executed immediately. Then the others. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Beloved.”

“Go, then.”

“Beloved?”

“What is it?”

“What of Ahmed? Is he to be executed with the Americans?”

“Of course.”

–+–

Fred Balfleur’s feet stank. They looked like awful, red, blue and yellow, overripe fruit. Yellow pus oozed out of the open wounds. Bluish bruises overlapped angry red welts and dried blood. Balfleur’s body was caked with salt, and he stank of sweat. His hair was matted, and his face was darkened by the beginnings of a beard. It was a lined, old, tired, hostage-face. Only his synthetic-fiber clothes still appeared in good shape. They looked out of place on his hunched, crippled body – an obscene, cheery contrast to the dismal appearance of their owner.

Balfleur was lying on his hardwood bunk, waiting for them to come again. A high-pitched, idiotic laugh came out.

["It's true; that old saying the school bullies used to say: 'I'll beat yer butt 'till yer nose bleeds.]" After each beating session, the guards made him get up and walk up the stairs, leaving bloody footprints as he climbed. At first, the pain was only in his feet. Then, with each beating and each climbing of the stairs, the pain moved up his legs, through his guts, all the way up to his brain, where it pounded and pounded.

It built and built. An explosion was coming. A huge ball of crimson flashed in Balfleur's head, followed by a deep stillness; a stillness so deep, he knew something was different; something was missing. Something was gone that had been there before.

—+—

Ahmed was near death.

He floated in and out of consciousness. Sometimes his unconscious periods were peopled with wild dreams; sometimes they were a great black void that his soul disappeared into.

Mahmoud's relentless knife had cut cleanly; savagely parting skin from tissue. The blade was so keen it deftly divided soul from body. It severed his knowing from his understanding, his desires from his motives. It laid bare his pretense. Ahmed was lost. A lot of blood had been spilled. Ahmed's skin lay on him loosely, like thinly-rolled dough on a floured chopping block. He wasn't much good to his inquisitors any more. He was scarcely awake long enough to be asked questions, much less give a coherent answer.

—+—

Martha did not sleep. She rolled and tossed in a fitful, sleepless darkness. Time had no meaning. The minutes dragged on like summer shadows across the porch, but the hours flew by like swallows in afternoon shadows. Hurry up, slow down. She didn't know if she wanted the day to come quickly, or the night to last forever.

[Little Martha sat on the front porch swing, watching the shadows crawl across the hot, white planks. "Won't Daddy ever come back?" He was away for the weekend, at a political meeting in Salina. He was always away...far, far away. Each time, he promised to come back early, and take Martha to the picture show. He never did.

But this time it was more important. Daddy just had to come back. He had to. Tartuffe was gone. Tartuffe, Martha's only playmate on that wide, that claustrophobically wide plain, was gone. The dog had disappeared soon after Daddy had left for Salina. Probably he was looking for his master. Where was he now? "Come back, Daddy, and find him. I need you."

Without Tartuffe she would be alone. The plains would stretch to the horizon in every direction, shutting her in. No matter how far you walked, the plains would still be there; the horizons unchanging...so wide, they closed in upon Martha's heart. For shelter, she ran inside the protecting, comforting close walls.

But there was no relief there. Mommy was too busy, as usual. She was cooking biscuits; rolling the flour out on the counter top; flour up to her elbows; the whole kitchen looking like a winter landscape. "Martha, either make yourself useful, or go outside – I won't have you underfoot. I have too much to do."

So there was nowhere for Martha. She couldn't go forward or back; the porch was her only island – an oasis in the desert. "Daddy, come back."

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Over the Atlantic – Andy McCarthy couldn't believe his ears. His skipper, *Bomb Squad* Miller, was whistling. He was whistling the old Army Air Corps song, dating from the time that the Air Force was a part of the Army. "Off we go, into the wild blue yonder..."

McCarthy had never seen Miller like this. He was actually

cheerful. He was in a grinning, back-slapping mood. – And that despite having to take on two civilians as extra baggage, just before takeoff. Miller had a generally low regard for civilians. ["They just get in the way, and keep us from doing our job"], and he hated last-minute additions to his crew, even the four loaders they had picked up in Florida.

Having to take on two unknown civilians at the last minute was especially galling. But General Spud McDermott had said, "Major, these individuals have top-secret clearance. Their presence on this mission has been cleared at the highest levels." So Miller was resigned. Nothing was going to spoil his good mood, now that his whole career was coming into focus.

Miller had even joked and kidded with the two mysterious civilians out on the tarmac, on the way to the plane. "The general says this is gonna be a tough mission – you guys sure you got the guts to come along with us? Don't worry – we got enough guts for everybody!"

Miller was bubbling over. He was flying high. His infectious high spirits spilled over to the other crews. During takeoff, a large insect splattered into the windshield. "I'll bet he doesn't have the guts to do that again," a voice on the intercom said. "But we sure do! Who's got guts? We got guts! Yaaaahooooo!"

This was it. The big chance. The big mission. *Bomb Squad* would show all his former classmates, the fighter jocks who thought they were hot stuff. They thought he didn't have what it takes; thought they were the sole custodians of the *right stuff*; thought Thomas Wolfe was their personal biographer. Well, he'd show 'em. Let 'em try to laugh. After this mission, they'll be laughing out of the other side of their mouths. ["Off we go..."]

["... into the wild blue yonder."] How he loved that phrase. It fit so perfectly. It made him feel alive, to be shooting, spinning, drifting through the blue – the bluest blue any one could imagine; laced with puffy white clouds. It was like poetry without words – a quiet, lilting poetry of motion and color. A poem written especially for him, and he was the only one to understand it. Every foot he flew took him into new space... ["To boldly go, where no man has gone before."]

The wild blue yonder was living up to its name today. Sometimes, it turned white, gray, or black. Sometimes, the fluffy white clouds became black on bottom, and crackled with fire. But today, it was wildly beautiful, and it was blue. Far below, sunlight glanced off the sparkling sea; so far below, no waves could be seen; just specks of white.

"It's days like these, Andy, that make it all worthwhile...all the shit details, all the jacking around by civilians and the big brass, all the insults from an ungrateful public, the long hours, the short pay, the problem with keeping and holding a woman (Miller's wife had grown tired of the constant change of station, and had left him) ... While we're on the ground, they can jack us around pretty good, but when we get airborne, and we're on our way into enemy action, they have to leave us alone.

"Check it out, Andy." Miller gestured with his hand. The deep blue, white-flecked sea competed with the lighter blue, white-flecked sky. "There ain't words for it. You can just lose yourself in it. Susan's eyes were that shade of blue. Swallow you up.

"Drowning's not a bad way to go, you know, Andy? Just relax and drift on down into the blue. Like falling asleep. Don't fight it. We're connected to water, Andy. They say all life started there. We spent the first nine months of our lives floating in it; our bodies are ninety percent saltwater.

"It's blue, Andy. God, it's blue."

Miller was out of words. They flew along in silence, riding into battle on the wings of poetry.

Several hours later, Miller's earphones crackled. It was his navigator, Henry Jameson. "It should be just a few more

minutes before we rendezvous with the fighter escort, sir.”

“OK, Jameson... Hey, Jameson.”

“Yes sir?”

“‘Ah have a DREAM!’ You know what that dream is?”

“No, sir.”

“Mah dream is to drown some Aay-rabs in pig guts, chile! Chittlin’s an’ succotash! Hog jowls and gravy! Hooooeee! ...Jameson!”

“Yes, sir?”

“How do you feel about going to war with Moslems? I mean, ain’t they kinda your soul brothers, or something? Muhammad Ali, and all that stuff?”

“I’m an American, sir. I’m not anxious to go to war with anybody. But I’ll carry out any lawful order I receive from my commanding officer.”

“Mighty fine, Jameson. MIIIGHTEEEE FINE! See that you do. Good man. Right on. Tighten up. Hot shit.”

Bomb Squad Miller was quite drunk, and yet he had not taken so much as a whiff of alcohol. He was high on combat – his first mission.

The two civilians rode along in silence, wedged in between some boxes in the cargo bay of the huge aircraft.

CHAPTER FIFTY

Beirut – The door swung open roughly. Two bearded soldiers walked in and took Martha by the arms. A primal jolt of fear flashed hotly through her body. Her hair prickled. She was too startled to scream. They lifted her off her bunk, then half pushed, half carried her out of the cell.

The three of them went down the hall, turned right down two flights of stairs, then out a back door onto a cobblestone courtyard.

The early morning air was still cool. A clattering and banging made Martha look up. A large woman was dumping something in a pan out of a second story window. Later in the day, the women would be hanging clothes and beating rugs on lines strung on high across the courtyard.

Her two escorts hustled Martha across the courtyard. They entered a dark doorway, and walked down a long dark corridor. At the end of the corridor they turned left and entered a small room. The soldiers of God pushed Martha down onto a wooden bench. They sat down next to her, uncomfortably close. They were sitting thigh to thigh and shoulder touching shoulder.

They waited.

Martha wanted to ask. She didn’t want to ask. She knew. She didn’t want to know.

After an interminable time, a door on the other side of the small room opened, and a turbaned figure stuck his head through the opening. He said something in Arabic to the two guards. Suddenly, Martha was up and moving toward the door.

The doorway opened out into a larger room. At one side were two large double windows, followed by an open space, then several rows of chairs divided by an aisle. At the front of the room was a long table, behind which sat half a dozen or so more turbaned men. One of them was the man who had come to her cell the previous day.

The small room was apparently a kind of ante-room. There was no question now where Martha was. She was in a courtroom – the seat of justice for Beloved of God.

The seat of justice. But what is justice? There are all kinds of laws; tribal law, Roman law, English law. What kind of law was in force here? Was the accused innocent until proven guilty? Or guilty until proven innocent? Or guilty and then proven guilty?

There was a long delay, while Martha waited, uncomfortably shifting on a hard wooden chair in front of a table. The bearded, turbaned men in front of her did not look at her. They murmured among themselves. Finally, the man who had come to Martha’s room said something in Arabic.

Martha was able to recognize her own name in his speech, but nothing else.

After he finished speaking, another man at the table spoke up. He had a high-pitched, grating voice, and he talked for some time. As he talked, he became more and more agitated. He began waving his arms and turning his head sharply from side to side as he addressed the other men sitting at the table. He turned his face toward Martha and shouted angry words of accusation. He raised his eyes toward the ceiling, invoking the help of heaven. He finished with a flourish, lifting both hands in a shrug; an expression that could have meant “so there!” “like I said,” “so help me Allah,” or “what do you think?”

Martha was becoming impatient. If this was a trial, when were they going to let her speak? When was she going to be able to understand? She looked around wildly, and wanted to speak. But her guards elbowed her sharply and enforced silence with terrible faces.

One after another, each of the other men at the table, save the one in the center and the one at the far right, spoke. Each seemed to try to outdo the other in histrionics and accusing looks.

If this was a trial, it seemed to have only one side; justice speaking with one consistent, unconfusing, unequivocal voice. No searching after truth here, just a detailed, endlessly repeated explanation of the obvious. Finally, mercifully, the litany of accusation against her ceased. After a brief, respectful silence, the man at the far right end of the table began to speak. With head bowed, he spoke in deferential, quiet tones. Once he raised his eyes pleadingly. He seemed to be appealing to the mercy of the court. [“Go on,”] Martha wanted to say. [“Tell it like it is!”] An intelligent light came into his eyes for a brief moment, and he riveted his glance on the old man in the center of the table, who had not yet spoken. Martha’s defender, for so he seemed, addressed this central figure in a brief moment of passion. Then he let his gaze and voice level drop once more. Finally, he was finished.

The room erupted with a chorus of voices, all speaking at once. This lasted for some time, before the old man at the center of the table raised his hand to invoke silence.

Then the old white-haired patriarch spoke for the first time. His voice was quiet and weak, but full of authority. He droned on without changing his inflection.

Finally, it was over. Then he stood up, and the turbaned gentlemen followed him through a door in the far side of the room.

The man who had come into her cell the previous day came over to where Martha sat. “What is going on?” she asked.

“Your lawyer made a clever and effective plea for your life. Now the court is adjourning to reach its decision.”

“BBBbbbut --“ Martha spluttered. “When do I get a chance to say something?”

“Miss Sampson, really. You are a woman. It would do no good for you to speak; how could you deny what is self-evident? You would only inflame the sensibilities of the court with such a lie. Even your attorney was clever enough to avoid that fault. He freely admitted your guilt, but pleaded for the court to spare you, because of your sex and beauty, and to please Allah with the gift of mercy. He really did his best to help you. You would only damage yourself by speaking now. Unless --“ his eyes narrowed shrewdly – “unless you can tell us what you know about the escape attempt, and further mischief being planned against our Beloved leader.” The Arab eyed Martha closely.

Martha was struck speechless. “Admitted my guilt?! ...What plot? ...I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she stammered.

Beloved’s minister frowned. “Very well.”

“Really – really – I don’t know what you’re talking about. If I did, I would tell you,” Martha pleaded.

"Your fate is in the hands of the court now – and in the hands of Allah."

Martha started to protest again, then fell silent. She thought she saw a slight smile of satisfaction and triumph as he turned away.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

Somewhere over the Atlantic – "Here they come, sir," Jameson said. His radar screen was filling up with blips.

The fighters homed in fast.

Soon they were within hailing distance. Miller sent the challenge and was answered with the proper coded message. After a few more minutes, the radio crackled.

"Pegasus One, this is Mighty Mouse One, over."

"This is PIGasus One. Welcome aboard, Mighty MOUTH!" Miller answered. Miller's awful puns were greeted by a guffaw and a groan.

"That you, *Bomb Squad*?"

"You expected, maybe, Mary Poppins?"

"How are ya, ole shitface? C'mon, pops, get that truck out of low gear, and let's boogey!"

"At ease, buzzard breath. I'm leading this mission. You fall in and watch my wing."

"Yes, SIR!"

The disrespectful voice on the other end of the radio belonged to Major Chuck *Peewee* Kelly. Kelly had been one of Miller's classmates in flight school. The two had competed against each other in every aspect of training from flight theory classes to PT. It had been a bitter pill for Miller when he had to leave the hot jets, and Kelly had graduated. Eventually, Kelly had been given command over a flight of F-16's.

Now it was Miller's turn to gloat. He was leading the mission, and Kelly had to tag along to protect him, and make sure he got through. Kelly and his flight of fighter jets had left their bases in Britain to rendezvous with Miller just west of Gibraltar. Now they continued on eastward toward the Mediterranean and another rendezvous with a tanker plane. Miller's three cargo planes needed refueling on the long non-stop flight to Beirut.

As they neared the Strait of Gibraltar, Miller felt goose bumps. He was like a kid waiting to go on his first hunting trip.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

Beirut – Martha felt herself suspended from the ceiling; floating, airy, empty, stomachless. She felt sick. Her head wanted to detach itself from her body and float still higher. Her body was turning gently, lightly from side to side; she couldn't stop it. You know the expression, *twisting slowly in the wind*? That's it.

Her heart fluffed and fluttered against her rib cage. She counted the strokes. A drop of sweat collected in the dense tangle of her hair, moved slowly down her neck, blotted on her blouse, then oozed with other drops on down her back. There was no sound; not in the room, and not outside the room. A fly hung motionless on the wall. The two guards sat like stone statues on both sides of Martha. Outside, unseen, the sun wouldn't budge. Martha closed her eyes.

["Hurry up. Don't hurry up. When will they come? Why won't they ever come? God, please don't let them come!"]

What is the nature of waiting? How do you describe it – waiting to hear whether you will live another day, or die soon? The usual metaphors. Watching grass grow. Watching paint dry. No. A filibuster in Congress over a bill to issue a stamp commemorating air conditioning. The tale from 1001 Nights: an ant picks up one grain of sand from a mountain, struggles over rocks and twigs, tugs it through grasslands and swamp, fords streams, and finally reaches his goal. Then he goes back for another grain of sand.

No, that's not it – maybe this: You've just finished the most important test of your life, the passing or failing of which will decide your fate utterly. The teacher takes up the papers, and says the grades will be announced AFTER Christmas vacation. No, that's not it, either. Try this: You're watching a wobbly tightrope walker wend his way across Niagara Falls. He has a safety rope around his waist. The other end of the rope ties your hands together, behind your back. You are standing on the tightrope too. That's getting closer. Or none of the above?

Martha was waiting. Waiting.

There was movement in the room. A stirring in the air. Martha's eyes flew to the door, which opened. She hit rock bottom. Winter and shivering inside. The turbaned men filed in. Oh, so slowly. They sat down. The graybeard patriarch at the center spoke. He continued to speak for some minutes.

Then shouts. Loud, sharp and raucous, they hit her like a physical blow.

She jumped. The shouts did not stop. They grew louder. They spilled out onto the street.

The turbaned tribunal stood up and made its way back out of the room. Martha watched them, bewildered. One figure detached itself from the rest. He approached her table.

"Martha Sampson, you have been found guilty of crimes against the oppressed peoples of the earth. Sentence is death, to be carried out immediately."

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

America's Guts – Harvey Bomb Squad" Miller's three huge planes plodded on across the Mediterranean. The frisky, speedy fighter escort planes strained at the leash like greyhounds.

"C'mon, Grandma, shake a leg. I'd like to get back home before my pension starts." Kelly, the leader of the fighter squadron, vented his impatience.

"Don't wet your pants, Major," Miller crackled back. "You're just tagging along for the ride – to make sure the bogey man don't get me. For now, just settle back and take it easy."

Boredom was beginning to bother Miller, too. He was anxious to find his target. Since leaving New Jersey they had been racing toward the night; it was now somewhere in the wee hours of the morning, local time. The darkness hung heavy all around, cloaking the mission in mystery.

Miller had lost all sense of time. There was something wrong with his inner clock. Throughout his career of flying planes, he suffered chronic jet lag. But he didn't mind. He had long since learned to live with it. He even enjoyed it, the feeling of being suspended in time. But the darkness was heavy.

["For this was no ordinary mission, but a flight into ...The Twilight Zone ... – Shape up, Miller, you're getting punchy. Better catch a few winks before the sun gets up... Gotta be fresh when the sun gets up..."]

McCarthy had been dozing, so Miller woke him up to stand watch. Miller was asleep in seconds. Instantly, he was dreaming his favorite dream.

["*Bomb Squad* Miller wore a leather flying helmet, white silk scarf, jacket, goggles, oxygen mask, and a look of grim determination. His squadron had attacked the Nazi munitions plant many times already, but had not made a dent in it. And he had lost many good men. The plant they were attacking was no ordinary plant. It manufactured the Nazis' *secret* weapon – the dreaded V-1 *buzz bomb*.

["It was more than duty. It was more than courage. *Bomb Squad* had a personal score to settle with the Hun. While stationed in London, he had met a slim, blue-eyed blonde girl – Betty – the sweetest girl in the world. She had already lost her parents in the war. They were old, and tired of

going to the air raid shelter. *If it's coming, let it come*, they said. It came. The experience made Betty think of all the other orphans the war had made. She volunteered for service, and was soon running an orphanage in a London row house. Miller visited the row house every time he got leave.

["One Saturday he arrived and found black, smoking ruins where the row house had stood. Three of the dirty-faced orphans stared emotionlessly at Miller when he walked up. They were the only survivors.

["So *Bomb Squad* was grim. He was determined. He flew straight. He was on tracks. He was a locomotive. Anything that stood in his path would be annihilated. The Hun stood in his path, and the Hun would pay.

["Out of the night, a squadron of Messerschmidts screamed down from above, guns blazing. *Bomb Squad* shrugged them off like a swarm of mosquitoes. Nothing would stop him tonight. Tracers filled the air as the gunners duelled with the attacking Messerschmidts. The squadron was out of range of their own fighters. They were on their own. Two bombers were lost to the Messerschmidts, but *Bomb Squad* rolled on.

["Light split the darkness around *Bomb Squad's* ship. Fingers of white from the searchlights below were followed by orange tracers and the brilliant, exploding, pock-pock fire of ack-ack. *Bomb Squad* sailed on through the rain of fire as if it were only a summer drizzle. He never altered course. His hand rested rock-solid on the stick.

["They were approaching the target. The anti-aircraft fire increased. The plane lost an engine. A close burst sent shrapnel into the belly bubble, blinding the gunner. The bombardier's voice quivered as he gave directions to his skipper. 'If you miss, I'm gonna come back there and kick your ass,' Miller told the nervous bombardier. He had to bring that guy around, make him more afraid of his commanding officer than he was of death. The whole mission now depended on the bombardier.

["Bombs away! This one's for Betty!' They tumbled out and down, wobbling in the wind like a stream of water. The first small explosion was answered instantly by a tremendous roar and flash of light. 'How do you like being on the other end of a bomb, you bastards?!' The ground was ablaze. The blast lifted 'Bomb Squad's' plane and shook it like a leaf in an autumn breeze. A direct hit! Behind them, the buzz bomb factory continued to explode with new ferocity, as wave after wave of bombers flew over. Their bombs fell true. Their bombs fell straight. It was total victory."]

When *Bomb Squad* Miller cracked opened his eyes, a thin crescent of orange penetrated the slit of his eyelids. Time was speeding up, as the airborne task force flew eastward, against the westward-rushing sun. The first thing Miller did was glance over at his co-pilot. McCarthy was still awake. He was a conscientious flyer. Many another co-pilot might have taken the opportunity to put the ship on auto, and catch a few winks himself. The temptation was there, in the heavy, all-surrounding, quiet rushing blackness. But not McCarthy. He wouldn't consider it. He was sitting there, staring straight ahead.

Miller stretched, and McCarthy looked over at him. "Good morning, skipper," he said. "Looks like it's going to be a good one."

The thin orange line on the horizon broadened into a sheet of orange, fading to white, whitish gray, on up into the black. Like the retractable dome of an observatory, the black hemisphere of sky rotated backwards, exposing ever more light. Finally, it was there in person – the hard orange roundness that emerged with perceptible speed from the depths of the ocean. Let there be light.

At first, you could look at it with the naked eye. But as it pulled itself up from the water, leaving parts of itself on the shimmering surface, it grew in strength, god-like. Let no

man look upon my face.

It was becoming day.

The day of *Bomb Squad* Miller's first combat mission.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

America's Guts – There had been no sound from the two civilians. They had found places between crates and boxes to curl up and go to sleep.

Bramshaw was the first to wake up. He nudged Bartholomew. "Wake up, kid. This is your big day. You don't want to miss it."

Bartholomew was accustomed to soft beds. This was definitely not for him. His muscles ached.

"Ahhhhhhggggggg," he said.

Bramshaw stretched, stood up, and leaned against a crate. He stared at Bartholomew, slightly amused. Bramshaw had been selected to go on the mission because of his intimate knowledge of Beirut. He was to make sure the guts landed in the right sector.

He reached in his pocket and pulled out a slightly yellowed, tightly folded square of newsprint. He unfolded the creases and read the headline: "Israeli troops kill woman." The newspaper was folded over a picture of a young Arab woman. A handsome face with dark eyes stared out at him. At the bottom were the words, "From Fatima, with love."

Bartholomew had finagled his way onto the plane, over Bramshaw's objections. Bramshaw marveled at Bartholomew's ability to get his way. Sometimes it seemed as if the younger man had a magic fairy watching over him. ["It won't matter, not this time. This time he's on my turf. I'm in control."]

["You keep right on sleeping, Prince Charming."]

Now the other crew members were stirring. There was bustling. The big plane was waking up. Bramshaw made his way to the galley to fix some coffee. He made three cups. He dropped a small white tablet into two of them, and marked a circle on the plastic lids he used to cover the styrofoam cups. He put the three on a tray, and brought it to Jameson's work station.

"Good morning, soldier," Bramshaw said cheerily. "How about something to get the eyelids open?" He extended the tray to Jameson, turning it so the cup nearest Jameson was one of the marked ones.

"Thanks," Jameson said. He took the proffered cup, removed the lid, and took a sip. Bramshaw took the unmarked cup and did likewise. He set the remaining cup on the table.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Henry Thoreau Jameson."

"Leonard Bramshaw. Where you from?"

"Ann Arbor."

"Nice place. An aunt of mine used to live there," Bramshaw lied. How'djou get started in this business, Jameson?"

"I enlisted on the college plan. I want to study electronics later."

Bramshaw leaned over the table. "Could I see your maps and aerials? I'm tagging along to sort of help identify the target – it's not that they don't trust your ability – it's just very difficult to pinpoint. A couple of blocks off either way, and this whole mission is for nothing."

"Sure. The skipper said you'd be helping us. No problem." Jameson dug around in his desk and brought out his maps of Beirut and aerial photographs of the target area.

"I see you're well prepared," Bramshaw said. "Yep, you're right on it. I think I'm kind of a fifth wheel here. You know the armed forces, though. They go by one word – *redundancy*. I knew a guy once – in 'Nam, in the Corps of Engineers. They study formulas night and day in training, to figure out just exactly how much dynamite it takes to blow

a bridge, or whatever. But when he got to 'Nam, he threw all that learning out the window. He used what he called the *plenty 'nuff* formula. He just estimated how much dynamite he needed, then doubled it.

"Here's a problem point, however – " Bramshaw appeared to notice something. He bent over the aerial photographs and showed Jameson the approach to the neighborhood where the hostages were being held. They carried on in their camaraderie, sharing secrets of the trade like members of a private club.

"Well, looks like you've got things well in hand. Let me finish making my deliveries." Bramshaw held up the two coffee cups; his, and the one he had picked up from the table, and grinned. Jameson grinned back.

By the time Bramshaw got back, Bartholomew was awake. "I brought you some coffee," Bramshaw said, extending the unopened cup. "No thanks," Bartholomew answered. "I'm trying to quit."

"One cup won't hurt. You need something to get you going. Today's the big day."

Bartholomew was strong-willed. "No, thanks just the same." His tone of voice left no room for cajoling.

Bramshaw tried to look unruffled. He just shrugged his shoulders and put the cup down.

"Where are we?" Bartholomew asked.

"We're over the eastern Mediterranean, just a few hours away from Beirut," Bramshaw reported. Soon, it would be time to prepare for battle stations.

The time passed slowly. After months of planning, it was all coming to a head. Bartholomew strummed with his fingers on top of one of the rectangular stainless steel containers.

The sun glinted off the tops of the waves, which marched eastward in parallel rows. Miller eased the big plane into a shallow glide, and radioed the others to follow. Then he called the escort leader: "OK, hotshot, you've been chafing at the bit. Now it's time to hit the beach. Send in your clowns."

"Roger."

Major Chuck *Peewee* Kelly gave the word. He led half of his squadron of 20 F-16's as they streaked away toward shore. The rest would stay behind to protect the cargo planes.

Then Miller called the four loaders. "Check out your equipment, make sure everything's ready."

After a few minutes they answered back, "Roger, skipper, everything checks out."

"OK, Jameson, where are we? How many more minutes until we're over the target?"

Nothing.

"Jameson?"

Still nothing.

"Jameson! ARE YOU ASLEEP BACK THERE? Wake up! Give me a fix!"

"Ohhhhhhhhhh. I'm feelin' bad, skipper."

"WHAT!?"

"I'm feelin' real ba--" Jameson's voice broke off in a harsh rattling sound.

"Go back and check him out, Andy," Miller said. There was no doctor aboard, but McCarthy was the next best thing. He had taken extensive first aid and medic training.

When McCarthy found Jameson, he was sprawled on the floor, retching his guts out. McCarthy checked his vital signs quickly, and reported to Miller: "I think he's OK, skipper. It looks like he has some kind of virus or something. I'm not sure. His pulse is OK, and he's breathing. He's just vomiting all over the place."

"Can he put us on the target?"

"Negative, skipper. Jameson's too sick to sit up, much less try to read a map."

"Damn!" Miller shouted into the headset. "Tell that civilian he'll have to do it on his own."

"Right."

McCarthy did what he could to make Jameson comfortable, which wasn't much. Then he went to find Bramshaw.

"Mr. Bramshaw, we have something of an emergency here. Our navigator seems to have come down with some kind of virus. We need you to put us on the target. Can you do it?"

Bramshaw looked surprised. "Well, ah – sure. I'm sorry to hear about Mr. Jameson. I met him a just few minutes ago. He showed me his maps and aerial photos. I'm sure I can get us over the right spot. I lived in Beirut for seven years, you know."

"Great. Then, if you don't mind, go on in and get yourself oriented. But give us a little time to clean it up, first. I'm afraid he had to throw up in there."

"Poor lad."

McCarthy briefed Prima. Prima got Simmons to go clean up the mess. Of course, Simmons said, "Me clean up somebody's stinking puke? No way, José!" But he went.

Miller was still worried. "Everything OK, Mr. Bramshaw? Have you got your bearings?"

"All set, Major," Bramshaw called back.

The feeling of excitement was growing. Things were humming, moving, stirring in that huge airplane. Prima's crew was checking and rechecking their equipment, positioning the containers in front of the wide doors. Miller and McCarthy were checking the circuits to open the doors, and straining their eyes for a glimpse of the coastline.

Jameson was in his cot, straining his guts, trying to puke. But he was already dry.

Bartholomew was the only person on the plane who had nothing to do. He was thinking.

There was a sharp, ecstatic crackling in Miller's headset. Several voices were talking at once.

"Break left, Mighty Mouse Three! There's one coming up behind you."

"I see the flashes, Mighty Mouse One – they're coming from that hill to your right!"

"Got 'em, Mighty Mouse Seven. I'm going in."

"There's another one in that field beside the road, straight ahead."

"Roger, I'll take it."

The Air Force plan was working fine, so far. Some of the advance group of fighters flew low, drawing the fire of the anti-aircraft batteries. Others stayed high, watching to see where the fire came from. Then, they would streak down like avenging hawks, and pluck the emplacements from the earth with fiery claws.

"Nice work, Mighty Mouse Four – you got 'em!"

"This one's out of commission, too."

"OK, let's form up, and move out. That was mighty nice, Mighty Mice – form on me."

The fighters had accounted for one surface-to-air missile battery, and three conventional anti-aircraft sites, without losing a single plane. Now they were headed back.

For the crew of Miller's big cargo plane, it had been like listening to a radio play. Soon it would be their turn – they would be the main characters in the drama. Miller and McCarthy strained their eyes even harder toward the horizon.

There it was! A thickening gray line on the edge of the sea. And an instant later, they saw the tiny black dots, high above the horizon, coming to meet them, growing quickly. *Peewee* Kelly and his boys were heading home after a job well done.

"Thanks a lot, *Peewee*. You're all right," Miller said.

"That's affirmative, Pegasus," Kelly answered. "I just hope you've got guts enough to follow through."

Miller chuckled into the microphone. "Don't worry, *Peewee*. – Those flea-bitten camel jockeys will be swimming in hog jowls for a week!"

With a laugh and roar, *Peewee* Kelly's group loomed up large, then flashed past, vanishing in Miller's rear. They didn't have enough fuel left to linger around for the second act.

The coastline was rapidly coming nearer now. Buildings appeared. Miller's blood was pounding and throbbing. He could feel it racing around in there.

"Mr. Bramshaw," Miller called. "How are we doing?"

"You're fine, Major. It's too early to see just exactly where we are on the coastline yet. I'll be able to tell more when we get closer in."

Bramshaw felt a presence. He looked over his shoulder to see Bartholomew behind him, watching him. Bramshaw grunted and turned back to his work.

They could see breakers below. The coastline rushed up underneath. Miller couldn't restrain himself. "Yahoooo!" he let out a whoop. Bartholomew saw what looked to be Beirut airport just a little to the right.

"Turn left, forty-five degrees," Bramshaw told Miller.

"You got it," Miller called back, yanking on the stick. Behind him, the rest of the task force followed suit.

Bartholomew felt a growing sense of uneasiness.

"Time to open the doors and get ready," Bramshaw told Miller.

"Roger. Open the doors, Prima." Miller relayed the order. A humming filled the airplane, and the huge doors cracked. Light began flooding the loading bay, as the doors slowly opened.

As the huge plane banked left, Bartholomew looked out his window and saw, off to the right, several columns of smoke rising into the air. His uneasiness began to take shape and form.

The humming ended with a solid metallic sound. "Doors open," Prima reported.

"Move up the first canister," Miller said.

Prima motioned, and Jones jumped up on the forklift. There were two rows of the shiny metal containers filling the length of the cargo bay. He nudged the first metal container in the right hand row closer to the yawning opening. Simmons and Slater released the safety catches on the front flap of the canister.

"How come there's no anti-aircraft fire?" Bartholomew asked. He was getting nervous.

Bramshaw shrugged. "Are you complaining? Those fighters must have done their job."

Bartholomew persisted. "How come that smoke is behind us? Aren't those the anti-aircraft batteries they knocked out?"

"I don't have time to play twenty questions with you," Bramshaw said irritably. "Maybe they hit the wrong sector. They didn't have anybody along who knows the city. Now who are you gonna trust – them or me?"

For an answer, Bartholomew snatched the aerial photographs off the desk, and turned back to the window. He compared the views for an instant, then whirled back to Bramshaw.

"You traitorous bastard," Bartholomew hissed. "You're not the only one who knows how to read an aerial photo." He started to dash out of the navigator's cubicle, when Bramshaw's fist caught him on the temple. He went down.

"Bombs away," Bramshaw yelled into the microphone.

Simmons and Slater popped open the latches, and the hinged, stainless steel metal door fell open.

A warm, suffocating stench reached out and put its hand over the men's mouths, making them gag. There was an awful, sucking sound like a galosh popping out of gooey mud, or like dog food plopping out of a huge can. Oily, greasy, sticky pig guts tumbled out and down the ramp, disappearing into the opening.

Prima signalled Jones, who raised up the canister with the forklift. Jones expertly yanked on the controls, shaking and emptying the canister. The forklift and the canister banged together with a metallic din. Then he backed away with it,

and pushed another one forward, while Simmons and Slater worked quickly to open the next one.

"Stop!" Bartholomew croaked. It wasn't loud enough to be heard over the clatter. Bartholomew rolled away in time to avoid a kick aimed at his stomach. Bramshaw was more powerful than he looked, but he was slow.

More guts were sliding down the ramp. Behind them, the other two planes were beginning to drop their load of pig entrails.

Bartholomew jumped to his feet. There wasn't room to fight in the tiny space. He shoved Bramshaw back against a bulkhead and dashed out. Bramshaw cursed and went after him.

Bartholomew ran the length of the cargo bay, yelling at the top of his lungs. Nobody heard him. Bramshaw had a late start, and was fading fast. His arms and legs were flailing. He was not a smooth runner. Bartholomew got there first. He grabbed Simmons' arm and shouted in his ear: "Stop! Stop! We're not on the target! We're over the Christian sector!"

Surprised, Simmons turned around. Prima came over to see what the ruckus was about.

"What's going on back there?" Miller wanted to know.

Bramshaw arrived, puffing and panting. He shoved Bartholomew to one side, and aimed a punch at Simmons. Simmons staggered back. One foot stepped onto the gut-slickened slope. For an instant he spun, arms outstretched, clutching for something, finding nothing. For an awful, frozen, floating, grasping, groping moment he faced the others; suspended in mid-air, eyes big, desperate.

"Oh, shit," he said.

Then he was gone. Arms flailing and twisting, he disappeared below.

While the others watched, paralyzed with horror, Bramshaw jumped up onto the forklift, kicking Jones off on the other side. He started pushing a canister toward the opening – and toward Bartholomew and Prima.

Just before the unopened canister thundered down the ramp, Prima pulled Bartholomew out of the way. Slater backed away on the other side.

They saw Bramshaw. He seemed to be struggling frantically with the gear shift. The forklift was still going forward. The tires skidded on the slippery floor. Wide-eyed, Bramshaw looked back over his shoulder; terror and pleading in his eyes. He said nothing.

With a bounce and a rumble, the forklift followed the canister down the ramp. Then Bramshaw screamed. But his screams soon faded.

"What IS going on back there!?" Miller still wanted to know.

Bartholomew was the first to snap out of the trance they were all in – watching human beings disappear down that slippery, treacherous, gut-slick ramp. He grabbed Prima's headset.

"Simmons is gone – fell out the door. Bramshaw followed him down. We're over the wrong sector."

Miller passed the word to the rest of the squadron, and they stopped spilling their guts.

Following Bartholomew's directions, Miller banked his craft. The others followed. In a few more minutes, they were over the right target, flying between two pillars of smoke rising from the ruins of the anti-aircraft batteries.

"OK, men, let's get busy." Prima was taking charge now. As a master loader, he had been faced with difficult situations before. He knew how to improvise.

"Slater, grab that bar." Prima and Jones grunted and heaved. They managed to lift the front end of the next canister, while Slater rolled a steel bar underneath. Using the steel bar as a roller, they strained and pushed the unwieldy thing inch by inch to the edge of the ramp.

"Watch out! Don't get too close!" Prima yelled. He didn't have to yell the warning twice.

was everywhere.

Prima and his men worked swiftly. The last canister was emptied as the “Winged Pig” struggled past the target area. Tracers chased them. Exhausted, Bartholomew and Prima’s men collapsed on the floor of the loading bay, while smoke poured over their inert bodies. They were too tired to be scared.

“C’mon, c’mon, c’mon!” Miller gritted his teeth as he urged the *Winged Pig* on. He changed her name again. “C’mon, Miss Piggy, you beautiful porker! Fly us out of here!”

A glint of light caught Miller’s eye. The far-off sea beckoned. *Miss Piggy* settled lower. The throttle was at full, but they were losing altitude. [“At least let us make it to the sea; maybe our ships can pick us up, what’s left of us. Just let us make it to the sea!”]

Something made Miller look to the left. Fuel was pouring out of the port inboard engine. A fire now would be disaster. A few flames still flickered sporadically on the starboard outboard engine. Miller hesitated, then cut the fuel to the port inboard engine. *Miss Piggy* sank faster.

The band of light that was the sea was growing wider. [“We might make it.”]

A loud crash, louder than the rest, shook *Miss Piggy* from stem to stern. One last surface-to-air missile had found its target. *Miss Piggy* went into a steep dive.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

America’s Guts – Martha didn’t have to wait long. It doesn’t take long to assemble a firing squad in the Middle East. Her two guards came in. Each one grabbed an arm. They led her out of the room and into the bright morning sun; the last light she expected to see.

It was hot and dusty. The sun beat down on her hair, warming her head. Her stale, sweaty clothes hung uncomfortably close; damp. Broken pavement and pieces of buildings made her stumble and hurt her feet. She was supported by her guards.

They marched down the bright, sun-lit street, then turned right into a small, dark alley-way. The alley-way opened out again into a courtyard. Low, bleached-white buildings boxed the square on three sides.

The fourth side was a low, white cobblestone wall. Beyond the wall, sparse, dusty hills appeared in the distance. In between were broken fields of rubble where nothing grew. It was a wasteland of war.

The wall was long, low and white, made of rough cobblestones. Although the predominant impression was white, a closer inspection revealed cobblestones of varying shades of pink, light brown and grey.

But the center of the wall. Martha tried not to look at the center of the wall. Her eyes were riveted there. There, in the very center of the wall were dark splotches. Some of the splotches were very dark; almost black. Other, newer splotches were deep red. A few hideous, runny long dripping splotches were bright, bright red. Finally, Martha could look away.

Seven men stood in a straight line shoulder to shoulder. They all had rifles at their sides.

Martha’s guards positioned her in front of the splotches. Bloody bits and pieces of her would soon join the splotches. She began to breathe quickly. She was afraid she would hyperventilate and faint.

They tied her hands behind her back with a rough fiber cord. They put a dark hood over her head. The darkness was total and hot and close. Now she was nearly fainting. Her knees wobbled. There was nothing to support her. [“Aren’t they supposed to tie you to a post, so you don’t fall down?”]

Someone gave a sharp command. The soldiers rattled their rifles. There was a lot of metallic clicking. Martha took

a deep breath and held it.

A loud noise, somewhat muffled by Martha’s hood, startled the soldiers. There seemed to be confusion. Martha heard shouts and more rattling. She braced herself.

There was another, louder, closer noise – an explosion. More running, more yelling. More firing. Now the air was filled with shouts and firing.

Martha let go her breath. She was still alive.

The firing and yelling and running continued for some minutes. Martha’s hot black silence lasted forever.

Finally, it was over – the firing. There were still some shouts and running. Silence, a voice, then loud cursing.

Then deadly silence. Martha held her breath again. But she no longer felt the presence of the firing squad.

Then something seemed to change. There was a subtle difference in the air. It was a little hotter, a little closer – damp. She had the feeling there was a smell attached to what was happening.

The shouting and cursing and running and firing had stopped. In its place a stunned silence.

Martha heard gentle plop plop sounds, like wet laundry on a concrete floor. Something hit her hood and stuck there.

The stunned silence was broken here and there, by cries of surprise. The murmuring increased, then broke into a yell, a wailing, a weeping, a long, loud crescendo of human agony. There was a shrieking and a ripping and tearing. Volley after volley of automatic rifle fire rent the air.

But Martha was still alive.

–+–

Beloved of God was awakened by a loud noise outside his window. He knew the sound well. It was the sound of war.

He heaved a massive, bored sigh and, with great effort, rolled his bulk to the edge of the bed. He struggled to his feet and plodded over to the window. He peered cautiously out, before stepping out onto the small balcony. The explosions were closer now. He could see jets streaking in, and the smoky trails of their rockets. Beloved’s own gunners were answering their fire, but he saw no sign of success. He frowned.

Who was it this time – the Israelis? – the Syrians? No matter – God’s battle must go on.

It was over in a few minutes. But an uneasy silence filled the void. Beloved remained on the balcony to taste the air.

He sensed something evil.

The air seemed heavy; damp. Beloved looked up and sniffed. He screwed up his face in disgust. Unholy miasma entered his nostrils, searing the mucous membrane. He coughed and gagged.

He reached out his short arms with their pudgy, soft hands to test the atmosphere. It felt greasy. The air was foul. Drops of moisture collected on Beloved’s fingers. He rubbed them, feeling an oily, loathsome substance. Beloved was entering new territory. A landscape of unknown horror.

He looked down. In the street, his people were silent and staring; unmoving.

The moisture thickened into visible drops. It did not look like rain.

Beloved heard a sound. He lifted up his face and saw, far, far above, a fiendish flying device of the Great Satan. His heart shrank. [“What blasphemy are the devils up to now?”]

Something wet and gooey splatted on Beloved’s face. He touched his nose, wiped his eyes, and recoiled in horror. But as yet he did not know the name of the horror; nameless horror. Beloved’s legs were stone.

Long, stringy splatterings rained down in the streets. People were dancing and leaping to avoid it. An odious, sweet, rotting stench filled the air, overpowering even the breath of the street sewer.

The streets were oozing with flowing puddles of horror. Five men in flowing robes went flying, sailing down the

narrow alleyway, like a fleet of sailboats. The one in front slipped on a patch of the slick, gooey mess. He became airborne. A sailboat in flight. The sailboat became a windmill. His arms and legs roared wildly. His robes described fluttering arcs in the air. His comrades got caught up with him in the miracle of flight; soaring, floating, flying like a flock of ungainly pelicans. *Plock, plock, plock*. Dark wet spots appeared on their white robes, pinning them to their bodies, bringing them down, down, rolling, tumbling, falling. They landed, arms and legs and robes tangled together, in a soggy, gooey, smelly heap. Their shouts of rage called on Beloved for help.

WhirrrrrrSPAAT! Something smacked with a wet thud on the cobblestones directly below Beloved's balcony. It landed at the feet of an old woman with a black shawl covering her head and shoulders. She stared at it, unbelieving.

The abomination.

The fiend of hell.

The unspeakable.

With an open mouth, the old woman stared into an obscenely grinning pink snout of death. The jowls were scraped clean of bristles. A red tongue protruded sideways through its teeth. The horror grinned back at her with one eye and one red gory socket. She shrieked and fell to the ground.

The air now filled; thick with horror. But now the horror had a name. An unspeakable, an unclean name. A low moan rose from the street. Beloved's mind struggled vainly to blot out the enormity; to deny the undeniable. A spasm jerked his head backwards. A long, quavering, yodeling howl escaped his throat. He beat his mountainous chest with both hands. His hands compulsively clutched folds of cloth. He struggled, but could not tear his robes. He staggered back into his room, tripped, and fell backwards onto his bed, sobbing.

Outside, his people mourned. They wailed and shrieked, cried and screamed. They beat their bloody heads and fists against unforgiving bricks. They slashed themselves with knives. Their blood flowed freely from ugly gashes, soaking their cloaks in red rivulets.

A youth was unarmed. He picked up a bottle and broke it on the curb. With a sob of despair, he plunged his face into the sharp, jagged glass.

A Soldier of God stood in the middle of the street, screaming defiance at the sky. He loosed clip after clip from his automatic rifle into the air, then threw himself down on his knees, flinging his weapon clattering across the street. His voice uttered an animal growl that was half sob, half curse. He clenched his fists and raised his arms, shaking.

A graybeard comrade in robes and turban leaned on an ancient flintlock, whose muzzle rested against his forehead. With his toe, the old warrior touched off the fatal explosion, catapulting an ounce of lead into his brain.

An old woman threw off her clothes and raced through the streets naked, slashing long red gouging wounds in her breasts. Pig blood mingled with her own.

And still the work of the Great Satan went on.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

America's Guts – A strange person woke up in Fred Balfleur's prison cell. It looked like the same body – bluish green purple and red, stinking, pus-filled feet and all, but it was a different spirit; a different soul. Balfleur didn't recognize himself when his brain signed on. ["This is Fred Balfleur's brain checking in – how's everything going." "What do you mean, 'How's everything going?' Everything's going putrid, and you know it. The feet are all bummed up, no good. The stomach and head feel like they've been drug through Hades backwards, and beat in the face with buzzard guts, and the rest of us don't feel any too chipper,

either. Anyway, who are you? You don't sound like Fred Balfleur's brain to us."]

Had the beating changed him somehow, or was it something that had been coming on for some time? Balfleur felt something missing; something that had been his companion ever since he could remember; something that woke up ten minutes before he did, and never really fell asleep, making its presence felt, even in Balfleur's dreams. It was gone now – banished like the morning mist on the bayou – burned away by the heat of the sun.

His great, overwhelming fear was gone. Had they beaten it out of him? ["Thanks – I needed that!"]

Outside, there was a great commotion. Balfleur heard screaming, yelling, and running of feet. ["What the hell is going on?"]

Suddenly, he found himself screaming too.

Some of the running feet in the hallway outside stopped. Keys rattled, and the door to Balfleur's cell swung open. A young jailer dashed in to see what the screaming was about. There was screaming outside, and screaming inside. The boy was confused. He rushed over to Balfleur's cot. Balfleur unconfused him. When the boy bent over, Balfleur cupped his hands and clapped them together over the boy's ears, as hard as he could. The boy staggered back, and Balfleur finished him off with a series of vicious blows. They were the first blows he had ever struck in anger, and they carried all the pent-up force of an earthquake.

Balfleur's hot blood was pounding, rushing around in his veins. His feet munched in bloody footprints, but he did not feel the pain. He lumbered through the open door.

He was free.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

America's Gut – Balfleur tumbled through corridor after corridor. People rushed past him, without seeing.

Finally, he stopped one of the rushing figures.

"Ahmed," Balfleur said, gesturing with his hands and eyes, letting them ask the question, "Where?"

The Soldier of God did not comprehend. His eyes were wild, and spittle hung from his lip.

He rushed off when Balfleur let him go. Balfleur grabbed another fleeting figure, and repeated the question. This time, a wildly-flung arm seemed to point in a general direction. The bearded soldier rushed off. With so much commotion and madness going on in the street, he did not find it unusual to be accosted by an American with bloody feet.

Balfleur did not concern himself with what was going on outside. He had a mission. He walked in the direction last indicated, knocking on doors, and opening some.

A door at the end of the hall was ajar. Balfleur walked in. A bloody form lay stretched out on a table. It looked more like a bloody jigsaw puzzle than a human being.

It was Ahmed.

He seemed to be unconscious. Without a word, Balfleur rolled him over and slid underneath him, the way he had been taught in basic training to carry wounded comrades. It worked.

He found Ahmed surprisingly light. ["What a great idea. 'Lose weight guaranteed on the torture diet!"] Still, the extra weight pressed his bloody feet harder against the floor, leaving thick, red tracks. Balfleur's body was numb. He felt no pain. The blood from Ahmed's wounds oozed warmly down his back.

Balfleur and his burden presented a ghastly sight.

Balfleur turned around gingerly and left the way he came in. People were still rushing madly around, but they were totally preoccupied by whatever was happening. Balfleur and Ahmed seemed to be protected by a cloak of invisibility.

Balfleur carried Ahmed down the hall and down a flight

of stairs. He avoided the front door, where the commotion raged unabated. He went out the back way, into a dusty courtyard surrounded by row houses on three sides. On the fourth side was a low wall, with an open gate in the center. A one-lane roadway encircled the courtyard, exiting through the gate.

In front of Balfleur stood a miracle – an unattended jeep. He eased Ahmed into the front seat, and leaned him over to keep him from falling out. There was no ignition key, just a button. Balfleur pushed it, and the engine started [“Just like in the movies!”]

His feet had no feeling. He couldn't feel the pedals, so he made a jerky start. Balfleur drove out of the courtyard through the gate and turned right. He had no idea where he was going. He decided he would head toward the sea – if he could find the sea – because he thought he knew that the Christian sector was there, along with the U.S. Embassy. His heart was as numb as his feet. He had no idea where Martha was being held. Ahmed was unconscious; there was no getting anything out of him. He had no choice.

He drove along with the low wall at his right. The roadway turned abruptly to the left, then right again through an entry port in the row houses, into another courtyard.

Balfleur jammed on the brakes. There were soldiers running around like madmen, screaming. Some had their rifles, some did not. None of them paid any attention to Balfleur, who still wondered if the whole city was going mad.

Suddenly, Balfleur saw another figure, in the distance across the courtyard. The figure was standing with its back to the low wall. Its hands were tied behind its back. There was a hood covering her face. ... Yes, HER face! Something about her stance, something about her clothes, made Balfleur's heart pound.

He touched the gas and drove over.

It was Martha.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

America's Guts – BULLETIN: By the Associated Press – In what may well be considered the most bizarre military operation the United States armed forces have ever fought, Air Force planes bombed a section of Beirut yesterday – with pig guts. Air Force officials refused to comment on the attack, saying only that it was a *success*. Two planes were lost in the action, shot down by ground fire. An F-16 fighter jet crashed in Beirut, but the crew parachuted to safety. A cargo plane was also shot down, and crashed in the Mediterranean Sea. Six crew members and one civilian were rescued, but two others were reported missing. Elsewhere in Beirut, two American hostages held by Arab terrorists escaped in the company of a wounded Arab. Unconfirmed reports indicated one of the hostages was the President's daughter, Martha Sampson.

–+–

“Great news, sir – better than we could have dreamed!” The Secretary of State loved bringing good news to the President. And, regarding the personal nature of the news he was bringing, he showed tact doing it by phone. “Not only was the mission a total success, but in the ensuing confusion and disarray of the terrorists, one of the hostages managed to escape – and bring Martha with him!”

[“Thank you, God.”] “Thank God, Bob.” The President paused to let the news sink in. “Where is she? How is she?”

“She's in the Beirut Embassy. She's fine – physically and emotionally exhausted, but fine. They'll be flying her out as soon as a doctor checks her over and she has a chance to clean up and rest.”

“What about the losses?”

“I'm afraid I have bad news, sir. One of the men we lost was Bramshaw. It was terrible. He and an airman fell out of the plane. More on that later. We lost an F-16 and a C-5-A. The F-16 crew parachuted safely in the Christian zone, and the C-5-A crew, except for Bramshaw and one other, were picked up by a destroyer after they ditched in the sea.”

The Secretary of State paused. “Mr. President --”

“Yes, Bob?” His tone of voice sent a dagger of ice stabbing the President's stomach.

“She was rescued just in the nick of time. The report I got was that she was standing before the firing squad when the young soldier found her.”

“Oh my God.”

“She may be traumatized. I don't want to worry you, sir, but I felt you had to know. I'm sure she'll be fine.”

“Sure, sure.” The President took a little more time to absorb all the news. It was coming too fast. When he had regained his composure, he said, “What of the others, Bob? You don't know how big I can dream. I want to get them all back.”

“Of course. It's too early to tell what the reaction will be. I understand there were a lot of upset Arabs when those pig guts came oozing down.” The Secretary of State couldn't hold back a chuckle. “In fact, that's how the soldier was able to bring Martha out right under their noses. They were so busy running around screaming at the sky, that they forgot all about her.”

“Ok, Bob. Thanks again for calling.” The President put just a slight emphasis on his last word. On the other end of the line, the Secretary of State nodded.

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

Beirut – If Beloved of God had been enraged before, he was catatonic now.

He could not keep still. His mountain of flesh shook and quivered like Mount Etna. He stormed and raged. His eyes rolled madly.

Before Beloved, on his knees, was General Fawaz. He held his head so tightly to the floor that he looked like he was trying to burrow through.

“Crush the head of the Great Satan!” Beloved stormed. “Tread him under your foot as you would a snake, an abomination, a running dog! Rip children away from their mothers, and dash out their brains against the stones! Kill the children before their eyes! Curse the children, the grandchildren, the great-grandchildren, every generation of the infidels until the end of time! Bring death and misery upon their heads!”

Tears streamed down Beloved's cheeks, staining his immaculate white robes.

He ranted and raved for many minutes, as he paced to and fro, eyes rolling, head lolling from side to side, arms periodically stretched heavenward, invoking curses on the Great Satan.

Abruptly, he stopped.

“Fawaz!”

“Yes, Beloved.”

“The Great Satan has defiled us. He has blasphemed the holy name of Beloved. He has dishonored us. We must have revenge. We must regain our honor. The hostages must die. Now.

“But ... Beloved?” Fawaz kept his face tightly to the floor.

“What is it?” Beloved snapped, impatiently.

“What are we to do, Beloved? How shall we save our souls?”

“You must kill the hostages.”

Fawaz sat back on his heels and raised his head from the floor. His eyes were still downcast. “But Beloved – we are sullied. We must cleanse ourselves.”

“You will cleanse yourselves by killing the hostages. All of them. Now!” Beloved was growing more furious. His

pallid face was turning red.

"We cannot kill before we have done penance, is it not so? Help us, Beloved, we beg you."

Sparks flashed from Beloved's eyes. He stood still and rained a terrible visage down on his servant. "Your incompetence has brought this disaster upon us, and now you would presume to beg me for help? Why did your informant not warn us of the Great Satan's plans? This disgrace is your fault. You must correct it. KILL THE HOSTAGES!"

Fawaz was not a coward. He sat on his heels and returned Beloved's glare without flinching. "We are sullied, Beloved. We must be cleansed. You must cleanse us, lead us."

Beloved of God allowed his voice to become milder. "My son. You have done nothing to displease God. The Great Satan has brought this blasphemy, and the Great Satan must pay for this blasphemy." After a pause, he repeated softly, "Kill the hostages."

"No."

Beloved of God flinched. He was not accustomed to the slightest delay in carrying out his orders, much less open defiance. He was taken aback. For several seconds he was completely speechless, breathless. Then he managed to stammer: "WWW..WHAT!!"

Unbidden, Fawaz slowly got to his feet. It was flagrant disrespect, punishable by death, if Beloved so ordered.

"We have sinned, Beloved. Yes, the Great Satan was the agent who delivered this abomination – but perhaps we have brought it upon ourselves. We must search ourselves, cleanse ourselves, seek forgiveness. God would not allow this blasphemy if we were not in some way guilty. Perhaps we have acted against his will. Perhaps this is the punishment of Allah."

"Do you dare to tell ME the will of Allah?" Beloved fairly screamed. "You will do as I say, or I will send your soul to utter damnation; to eternal darkness!"

Fawaz' face grew stony. "Beloved, you are our spiritual leader. Would you leave us without souls in our hour of need?"

"I spit on your miserable cur dog souls! No more talk! Go and kill the hostages!"

A deeper shadow covered Fawaz' face. Instead of bowing and retreating, always keeping his face toward Beloved, he spun on his heel and quickly left the room. Beloved staggered back from the insult as if he had been slapped in the face.

In a moment, Fawaz returned. In his hand was an M-16 automatic rifle.

Beloved opened and closed his mouth like a fish on the beach. No words came out.

Fawaz raised the rifle to his hip. He flipped the switch to full automatic. Beloved's mouth opened wider. His eyes stared.

Beloved stared into the eternal darkness at the center of the muzzle of the M-16. His soul spiraled out of his body, across the room and down into the blackness of the rifle barrel. There was nothing left in his body. He was all soul, and where he was, it was dark.

Fawaz stood. Beloved entranced. The snake and the bird.

"[Allah, give me a sign. How can I cleanse myself from this evil? Where does the evil lie? Let me root it out. Let me start with the evil here. In me. In this room. In him.]"

Fawaz waited for his answer. Beloved transfixed.

His answer came in a muffled tearing sound. Startled, Beloved tore himself away from the yawning black hole of the M-16's muzzle. He waddled gingerly over to the window and looked out.

The tearing sound from the machine guns was now mixed with the rattle of small arms fire and the thump thump of mortars.

Druse militiamen were moving down the street in short, efficient darts, dropping prone, firing, then darting forward

again.

They fired straight, with deadly accuracy, into the scattered, preoccupied soldiers of Beloved of God. Most of Beloved's soldiers were still running around like madmen, firing into the air at the Great Satan's machines. Their shots zinged harmlessly and aimlessly high. The Druse fired low and straight and deadly.

Here and there, in isolated pockets, startled soldiers realized what was going on, and tried to cope with the new menace. But the fight had been taken out of them. They were no match for the Druse.

Beloved reeled back from the window at this new horror. The devil was winning.

Fawaz clicked the safety on, turned and left the room. He did not come back.

CHAPTER SIXTY

It Takes Guts – The flight home was too long. It was too short. They were passing by Gibraltar before he was able to say a word.

"Well, I guess that's over."

"Yes."

"Some experience, huh?"

"Yes."

"How did they treat you?"

"OK. – Except for wanting to kill me." Martha tried to laugh, but something else came out.

"They didn't ... did they?"

"Oh – no."

"That's good."

There seemed to be nothing else to say. They were sitting there next to each other, as they had been for so long, so long ago, on the sweltering tarmac at Beirut airport. It was so familiar. But something was different. Something felt different.

Balfleur stared straight ahead.

Finally, somewhere over the Atlantic:

MARTHA: "I hope Ahmed will be all right."

BALFLEUR: "He'll be all right."

MARTHA: "I just wish he could have come back with us."

BALFLEUR: "The ambassador promised me they'd grant him temporary asylum and try to arrange a visa."

That wasn't what she had wanted to say. More ocean passed underneath.

MARTHA: "Fred... I don't know what I want to do."

Balfleur squirmed.

MARTHA: "I ... I don't know what to say. I don't know how I feel... Say something."

Balfleur took a deep breath.

BALFLEUR: "It's OK. It was different ... in Beirut... Now it's different."

MARTHA: "You mean, about who my father is. So anyway, what now? Where do we go from here?"

BALFLEUR: "I don't know."

They were the same people, and yet not the same. Two frightened people, a man and a woman, had clutched each other and found something solid in an ocean of fear. Then it hadn't mattered – money, family, background – nothing had mattered except their physical presence, and the fact that both were still alive, breathing, offering life instead of death.

Now, it was as if they were meeting for the first time. Familiar strangers.

Balfleur wished the flight would be over. It began to seem as if he had spent his entire life on an airplane. "Me too," Martha said, reading his thoughts. "Only with me, it's more nearly the truth. I have spent years on these machines. I'm getting tired of it. I never thought I'd say that, but I am. I'm tired of nothing under me but air. I want something solid."

"You mean, your cell walls weren't solid enough?"

Balfleur asked. Martha laughed. Balfleur wished the flight would last forever.

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

Solid Ground – Far out at sea, out of sight of land, the big jetliner's engines changed pitch. The plane began to drop slightly. Individual waves, frothed in white, could be distinguished from the blue wilderness. The vivid light blue of the sky rivaled the sparkling dark blue of the sea. Frothy white foamy waves competed with their more ethereal, majestic, heavenly counterparts.

It was a glorious day for hero-worship.

A brass band resplendent in Army dress blue uniforms started playing as the plane touched down. A red carpet was rolled out to the base of the boarding stairs – the only dramatic way to leave a plane. (The newfangled, covered, accordion-like companionways are too anti-climactic for a homecoming like this.)

The President walked toward his daughter with outstretched arms. Martha was visibly moved, but not bawling unattractively. In the TV film clips, Balfleur was the out-of-place-looking young man in the background, contrasting absurdly with the fierce, serious glances of the secret-service men.

Then the President came forward and shook Balfleur's hand. "Thank you for saving my daughter, young man." Balfleur was on crutches, and both his feet were heavily bandaged. The bandages were not only genuine, they lent an heroic note to the occasion. Balfleur just nodded. He couldn't think of anything to say. The band played on, and the well-wishers cheered.

Balfleur wasn't surprised that no family had come to meet him. His parents didn't like big cities and big crowds, and they especially didn't want to make a spectacle of themselves on national TV. They loved their son – didn't everybody? – no need to demonstrate it to all the world. He'd be coming home soon. They could wait.

Everything went smoothly. Balfleur and Martha were swept along in the President's entourage through lobbies and corridors, to waiting limousines. Once inside, they were out of reach of the cameras. Balfleur sat and watched the scenery flash by as in a movie. In a short while, they were pulling up in front of the most famous building in America.

Things continued to develop in a well-organized and orderly fashion. Martha and Balfleur were deftly separated, with never a hint of coercion. He was shown to his room.

–+–

The President and his daughter were alone.

"Pum... Martha ... How are you?" Daddy/President asked.

"I'm fine, Dad." They both just stood there.

"I mean – how have you BEEN?"

"Fine, Dad."

"Martha..."

"It's OK, Dad."

"It's just that...that... I'm just so glad you're all right." Daddy blinked and gulped.

"I love you too, Dad." Then she was in his arms. She was a little girl again, back in Kansas. They hugged each other hard.

Dad swallowed. "Well, what now?"

"I don't know, Dad. I have to think."

"Sounds like you need something solid, Pumpkin; something to hold on to. I'd like to be that something," Daddy said.

That was it. It broke loose. She couldn't hold it in. Daddy wrapped her in his arms.

–+–

Balfleur needed a shot of reality. He was fighting jet lag, plus the shock of suddenly being free. ["I think I can understand a little bit, now, how Vietnam veterans feel. You're back, you're safe, and you know it, but a part of you is still

over there, still endangered. You're afraid to wake up, and find it's all a nice dream, and you're still back there, waiting for it to start again."]

He hobbled on his crutches over to the window to reassure himself. Yes, he was really back in the United States. He could see picketers carrying signs, protesting something. From his distance he couldn't hear what they were chanting or read their signs. There seemed to be two or more groups, perhaps picketing different things; they didn't seem to be paying any attention to each other. ["Yep, it's America, all right. Where else could you protest the leader's actions right in front of the leader's house, and not get thrown in jail?"]. Balfleur's mood was ironic and light as he formulated his thought, but suddenly his throat grew tight and his eyes got hot.

There was a polite, crisp rap on Balfleur's door. He opened it. A brisk, business-like man in a dark suit stood in the hall.

"Mr. Balfleur? My name is Thurgood Toffler. May I have a few words with you? I have a proposition from ...the President...that might interest you." Thurgood Toffler intoned the words "the President" with solemnity and pomp, so that it sounded almost like a prayer.

"Sure. Come in, Mr. Toffler."

"Mr. Balfleur, you are a very brave man – a hero. You have saved the President's [amen] daughter from a terrible fate. Needless to say, the President [hallelujah] is very grateful. He would like to show his gratitude. We would like to offer you a very [yes, brother] attractive government position, with considerable compensation."

"You mean, you're offering me a job?"

"Precisely."

"What kind of job?"

Thurgood Toffler raised his eyebrow and gave Balfleur a sharp look. He carefully hid his contempt behind a bureaucratic mask. ["Just how dumb is this bayou boob? Does he really think I'm offering him a real job with real work, real responsibility?"]. What Toffler said was, "I'm sure something could be worked out to your liking, Mr. Balfleur. I assure you, it would be a most attractive position."

"Now, just what kind of job do you think I'm qualified for?" Balfleur asked. "Have you seen my resume?"

Toffler's mouth hung open for a second. "The U.S. government is a large employer, Mr. Balfleur. I am quite sure something could be found that would be ideally suited to your talents."

"In other words, you're going to give me some cushy, do-nothing job, somewhere where I'll never be seen and never get in the way, is that it?" Balfleur touched his lips lightly with his fingers, to make sure that it was he who was saying those things. ["Yep, the lips are moving, sure enough."] The old Balfleur might have thought those things, but never could have said them – but the old Balfleur had been shed back there on that bloody torture table in Beirut.

Toffler's eyes narrowed, and he nodded slightly. He looked at Balfleur with respect. ["Maybe there's more to this hick than meets the eye. He wants a real job – real POWER – the stuff that draws us all to Washington."] ["I... I couldn't say just precisely what we have available at this time, but as I say, I'm sure we could find something that would be amenable to you desires and abilities," Toffler said.

"I don't think so, Mr. Toffler. Thanks, anyway."

"Well, I... I..." Toffler stammered. "Well... think it over. You don't have to decide right now, of course." Toffler turned to go.

BALFLEUR: "I gave you my answer. Thank you, but no. I don't want to work for the government, and I don't want to live in Washington. Please give my thanks to ...the President."

Toffler turned and left.

Balfleur spent the night in his plush White House guest room. It was a luxury he could afford to grant himself, after

all he'd been through. His feet were still a mess; he wouldn't mind staying on as a White House guest until they healed. He tried, and almost succeeded in fooling himself, that part of the reason for staying wasn't Martha.

As soon as he fell asleep, Balfleur was back on the torture table. He woke up wet with sweat, and his feet were aching. ["Great. When I was there, I dreamed of home, and now that I'm here, I dream I'm back there."] He couldn't get back to sleep. He tossed and turned for at least two hours, his brain racing and spinning its gears. Finally, although he didn't remember getting drowsy, sleep suddenly took him.

The next time he woke up, it was late in the day; he didn't know how late. Someone rapped lightly on his door. He eased himself gingerly out of bed with the help of his crutches, and made his way across the room. It was Martha.

"May I come in?" she asked.

"Of course." Balfleur hobbled aside.

"I wanted to see you again, and thank you, before I said goodbye."

Bubbles rolled and tumbled in Balfleur's stomach. "Good-bye?"

"Yes." She tried to meet his eyes honestly and openly, but his glance was fixed on the blank wall past her shoulder. "This may seem a bit sudden, but it's something I have to do now, before I lose my nerve or change my mind."

Everything seemed to stop inside Balfleur.

When he didn't speak, Martha continued. "It was something Dad said. It didn't dawn on me until later. I don't think he meant it that way, anyway. I mean ..."

Balfleur seemed to be very interested in a slight smudge on the wall. ["I didn't love her, anyway."]

MARTHA: "Dad was saying I needed something firm to hold onto. Maybe he was trying to make up for the times we missed being together. That's over now. I don't blame him. But what he said made me think. I do need to get my feet back on solid ground – I've been up in the air long enough. I need to get back to Kansas – to Jeremy and the kids – and Toto and Auntie Em, of course."

Martha smiled brightly at her joke. Balfleur was not amused.

MARTHA: "Jeremy may be boring, but if there's one thing he is, he is solid. That's what I need now. I've been needing it all along, but was too stubborn to see it. – And I was afraid to go back – afraid of rejection. But you cured me; gave me my courage back, just like the Wizard of Oz gave Dorothy and her friends what they needed. So I'm going to see if he'll take me back. If he won't – well, that's a chance I'll have to take."

"But..." Balfleur stammered. "I thought we could have a few days together to relax and kind of sort things out – at least until my feet get better." Immediately he felt foolish, childish.

"I'm sorry, Fred. I really am. But if I don't go now, I might lose my nerve. I just wanted to thank you again for saving my life – and for being there with me on the plane..."

BALFLEUR: "You're the one who saved me."

MARTHA: "I'll always be your friend. I'll never forget – although parts of it I'd like to forget." She laughed.

BALFLEUR: "Me too." He felt like a fool ["Me too! Brilliant, Balfleur."]

MARTHA: "Well, goodbye."

She moved closer. Balfleur didn't move. His crutches were rooted to the floor. Martha's lips moved a little, and a quirky smile played upon them. Her arms raised a little from her sides, all in motion. Balfleur's wings flapped to and fro on his crutches. Finally, she extended her hand. He took it and pressed, and then she was gone.

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

Home to Roost – When "Miss Piggy" started heading steeply for the glittering Mediterranean, *Bomb Squad* Miller didn't

figure they had much of a chance. Sunbathers on the beach looked up, startled and terrified, to see a hunk of burning metal floundering through the sky; that was *Miss Piggy*.

Miller let her go, just trimming the flaps lightly. They still worked, thank God. The plane was losing power, and it was clear they could not stay in the air – but maybe Miller could cushion the blow enough to let them survive.

It was a race between vertical and horizontal distance. *Miss Piggy* was headed out toward the sea, but she was also pointing down toward the beach. The ground rushed up at them, and passed underneath with agonizing slowness. Miller held his breath in an absurd attempt to lighten the plane. It seemed as if *Miss Piggy* were held suspended, motionless. Inch by inch, the beach eased past Miller's window. Now the breakers rushed up. Slowly, Miller let his breath whistle out. Their rate and angle of descent were still too fast, too steep. Soon it would be time for one last desperate maneuver. If it failed, *Miss Piggy* would burrow into the waves, and head straight for the bottom, taking them all with her.

"Grab onto something and hold tight," Miller shouted over the intercom. "We're going in!"

Miller let out the rest of his breath, then jerked back sharply on the controls. Metal groaned and creaked. Slowly, *Miss Piggy's* snout lifted. Instead of staring straight down into the sparkling waves, he was looking further out to sea; then, oh so slowly, his perspective shifted to the horizon. Miller held tightly onto the controls. Yes – now he was looking at the sky! "Hang on!" he yelled again.

Miss Piggy's tail smacked the water, then the rest of her followed, flinging spray to both sides. The nose and the forward portion of the wings dug in last, and the plane stopped short in a fury of foam.

Miller must have been knocked unconscious briefly. When he came to, he looked over at his co-pilot, Andrew McCarthy. At first, he thought McCarthy was dead. His face was full of blood. But then, McCarthy groaned and stirred. Miller quickly unbuckled himself, then McCarthy. He dragged McCarthy out of his seat. He supported McCarthy's upper body and his heels dragged on the floor. They reached the door behind the cockpit, and Miller threw it open. He yanked on McCarthy's life jacket, then his, inflating them. He pushed McCarthy through the opening, and stepped after him.

It was only a short step down into the water. Miller put his arm under the chin of the still-unconscious McCarthy, and started kicking furiously. *Miss Piggy* settled deeper in the sea. Miller looked back to shore. Now it looked far away – two or three miles. They were still too close to the sinking plane. With fading strength, Miller kicked out again.

Something yellow emerged from behind the tail section. Prima and Bartholomew had inflated a life raft and slid it down the still-open tail ramp. Aaron and Jones had made it too. They paddled over to the struggling Miller. Aaron grabbed McCarthy under his armpits, and Jones grabbed a leg. Miller pushed from down below, and pushed himself under the water. He got a mouth full of water, and came up spluttering. Aaron and Jones grunted and heaved, and rolled McCarthy into the life raft.

"Now you, sir," they called to Miller.

But something made Miller stop. "Everybody here?" he asked. He quickly mustered the occupants of the raft.

"Jameson!" Miller croaked with saltwater-filled throat. Aaron grabbed at him, but missed as Miller kicked off and headed back toward the sinking plane.

Miss Piggy was sinking tail-first. He kicked and paddled to the rear of the plane, which was partially submerged. Miller slipped out of his life jacket and dove under the water, feeling the metal side of the plane. He found the cavernous opening of the rear ramp and tail doors, and turned back up. He broke the surface inside the plane,

gasping for breath.

Miller paddled through the cargo bay until he could stand. Warily he dragged himself through the maze of floating boxes and canisters, which threatened to crush him at every roll and jostle of the plane in the waves.

"Damn nigger luck!" Miller almost laughed to himself. Through it all, Jameson was sleeping peacefully on his bunk. The water lapped only one inch beneath his resting place.

"Ohhh... Where are we, sir?" Jameson asked.

"On your feet, soldier!" Miller told him. "Time to go for a swim."

Now Jameson knew he was delirious.

"That's funny, sir. I thought you said, 'Let's go for a swim.'"

"I did, dammit! Now, let's get going."

Without waiting for more talk, Miller pulled Jameson to a sitting position. Jameson stared down stupidly at his legs, immersed in saltwater. "Jeez" he said.

Miller pulled him forward, and started wading back toward the tailgate. A swell rolled *Miss Piggy* over on her side, throwing Miller off balance. He fell, dropping Jameson. *Miss Piggy* was sinking fast.

Miller fished around in the water, found Jameson, and continued toward the tailgate. "Take a deep breath," he told Jameson. Then he plunged forward, diving and kicking. He went down as long as he could, then turned and headed back up. He bumped his head painfully on something sharp and metallic, but continued up, hoping he was on the right side of the door.

Miller's lungs were near bursting and full of water by the time he broke the surface. Feebly, he tried to kick away from the rapidly disappearing plane. He was exhausted; finished. He wasn't going to make it. Without his life jacket, he began to settle deeper in the water. Jameson drifted in and out of consciousness. Miller gasped a few times, then felt the water close over his head. It wasn't as easy as he thought it would be. ["Got to fight. Find the surface."] He clutched Jameson tightly. He kicked feebly. He was losing. Drifting slowly deeper into the blue. ["Nice try, Miller"] was his last thought before he blacked out.

—+—

When Miller woke up, he was staring into a black face, close to his.

"Oh, Lord!" Miller said. "They warned me about this. I'm sorry about the things I said. I didn't mean any of 'em. Really. I didn't know ... uh ... Lord. I mean – RIGHT ON! Look – Michael Jackson is my favorite singer."

The black face laughed. "Take it easy, Major – you're not in heaven," the black face said.

"You mean I'm ..."

"No, you're not there, either. They'll have to wait. You're aboard the *USS John Hancock*. The guys in the life raft pulled us in."

Miller's vision cleared and he saw that the black face belonged to his navigator, Henry Thoreau Jameson. "Jameson! You... I ... We're... alive!"

Jameson grabbed and clasped hard Miller's hand, which was waving about in the air.

—+—

In another part of the guided missile destroyer, Timothy Bartholomew was having a private telephone conversation with the Secretary of State. Bartholomew had practically taken over the ship since his arrival on board. The captain protested violently, threatening to throw the abrasive civilian overboard. But Bartholomew flashed his ID, and a quick call to the State Department made the captain sufficiently compliant.

Bartholomew obtained a secure phone line, and ordered everybody out of the communications area. He was briefing the Secretary of State.

"It all went reasonably well, sir, despite Bramshaw's

treason."

"What?" The Secretary of State yelled thousands of miles away. "We've got a bad connection. I thought you said *treason*."

"Yes, sir. I did. Bramshaw steered us over the Christian sector of the city, and managed to dump some of the guts, before I stopped him. Luckily, I had studied the aerial photos of Beirut, and knew we were in the wrong spot."

"What happened? Let me talk to Bramshaw," the Secretary of State said.

"Can't, sir. Bramshaw's dead. So is one of the Air Force loaders. Bramshaw knocked him out of the plane, then fell out himself."

"Oh, my God. I want a full report – in writing – the minute you get back. You say the mission still went well?"

"Yes, sir. We dumped tons and tons of pig guts right on the target. We lost one fighter, and we were shot down ourselves. We ditched in the sea, and the Navy picked us up. The rest of us are all OK. I don't know about the crew of the F-16."

"Very well. Get to the carrier and hop a plane home. If you have any trouble getting clearance, give me a buzz."

"Thank you, sir. I don't think I'll have any trouble." Bartholomew grinned, remembering the way he had cowed the captain of the destroyer. ["No trouble at all – I was born to rule."]

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

A Start – Before she knew it, she was standing in front of the door. She had no recollection of the long flight, the waiting in airports, the long taxicab ride. She had traveled in a trance, not thinking of anything. It was just as well. If she had had time to think, she might have turned around and run away.

Now it was too late.

She had already pressed the doorbell.

He was coming.

She could hear his footsteps.

She had nothing planned to say.

What would she say?

Time to panic.

"Hi, Jeremy."

Martha's ex-husband stood looking at her through the screen for a long time.

"May I come in?"

"Uh – sure."

They sat down in the living room; she on the sofa, he in a straight-backed chair facing her. For a long time they said nothing.

"Would you like something to drink?" Jeremy asked finally.

"No, thank you. Uh – where are the kids?" Martha asked. Jeremy's eyes narrowed slightly and he eyed her suspiciously. "Janie's over at one of her friends' house, and Robert's playing basketball."

"Oh. That's good," Martha said. "I wanted to talk to you alone, anyway."

Jeremy relaxed a little.

Martha continued to sit, saying nothing.

"Well?" Jeremy finally asked. "What did you want to talk about?"

"About my coming back," Martha blurted out. There just didn't seem to be any way to ease into it. "Jeremy, I'm ready to come home." Now the words came in a rush. "I'm ready to settle down. For good. No more wandering all over the planet. I've been up the air so long, I need to get back on the ground. I need to come back. I need something solid... I need you."

"Good ole solid, boring Jeremy?"

"Yes. GOOD ole solid, boring Jeremy." Martha tried to smile. Jeremy remained expressionless.

"What brought this on? The hijacking?"

"I don't know, Jeremy. Partly, maybe. I have to be honest. I don't want to try to trick you. But that's not the only reason. Maybe I'm finally growing up. When I was a little girl, I had such big dreams about the world. It seemed I was missing out on that dream. I was feeling cheated."

"And now?"

"Now... now I've been there and back. And the dream's a little flat... a little empty ... lonely."

They fell silent again. For a long time.

Finally, Jeremy spoke.

"One thing. This time it's got to be for good. Like it was supposed to be the first time. The way we both promised. No more running off. This is our home. This is where we stay." He looked intently at her.

"That's what I want," Martha said quietly.

"OK," he said. Then he suddenly grinned. "Who knows? Maybe we'll start a new trend."

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

Going Home – In a few weeks, Balfleur was ready to go home. He had wanted to leave after Martha did – why stay? – but finally decided against it. He wanted to be in good shape for his homecoming. He wanted to be strong; to be able to stand on his own two battered feet. He hadn't called home, and his parents hadn't tried to call him. There was nothing unusual about that. The Balfleur family didn't hold much with telephoning and writing, or other outward signs of affection. Their relationship was based on deep trust and faith. The love was there, like the sea or the earth; self-evident. You breathed it in the air, drank it in with mother's milk. You didn't have to prove it.

So Balfleur was ready to go home. He summoned up all his new-found courage. He was going to need it. He was going up against an old nemesis – an adversary more tenacious than his Arab kidnappers; an adversary he had never once beaten – his mother.

In many ways, she was the ideal mother. She protected and cared for her family with the ferocity of a lioness. She was gentle, loving and devoted. She was a frugal, conscientious, spotless housekeeper and a crackerjack cook.

She had one fault. She was bossy and stubborn. 'Bossy' and 'stubborn' are just two aspects of the same character trait, where Balfleur's mom is concerned. She was stubborn, not in the way that a rock is stubborn; more like a Middle East peace negotiator; more like kudzu.

Kudzu is that hardy, ubiquitous Southern vine that clings and clings, and grows and smothers, and always gets its way. You can chop it down, burn it up, root it out, – it always comes back. You can push it away for a time, and you think you've won. But it always comes back. It's there for the long haul. It'll wear you down. That's kudzu.

Margaret Balfleur was a vigorous Yankee from a dairy farming family in Michigan. She had met George Balfleur, Fred's father, in Missouri during World War II. It was the only time either of them had left home. It was one of those instant things. As soon as they met, they knew marriage was inevitable.

She had definite ideas about the way things were supposed to be done around the house, and the way people were supposed to behave. Her way was the right way, and any deviation was a mistake that needed correcting.

She was not overbearing. She was canny enough to steer events and opinions, without appearing to do so. If the projected course of events differed from her opinion, a discussion usually ensued. At the end of the discussion, action was taken, and the person making the decision nearly always felt he had made a wise choice. He rarely noticed that his decision represented a change from his earlier plans.

In practice, it didn't always go that smoothly, of course.

Sometimes, depending on the situation, it would take days, weeks, even months. If pressed, an individual might dig in his/her heels and refuse to budge on an issue. Margaret would retreat, leaving her adversary with the feeling of victory – for the time being.

Then the sniping would start again. Advance, retreat, advance, retreat, lay siege, dig an intricate pattern of assault trenches, redoubts and earthworks – that was Margaret Balfleur's subtle, tenacious art of domestic warfare.

Balfleur stood poised to face the juggernaut. As he walked down the long, wide concourse at New Orleans Airport, he rehearsed his battle strategy for the hundredth time.

He wouldn't tip his hand. He would keep the plan a secret until he was ready. When he sprang the ambush, there would be no turning back – a brutal, straight-ahead, unstoppable thrust.

Balfleur had a plan. He had made a decision. This time, he was going to stick to it.

The usual three-hour drive by car to Balfleur's home in bayou country took nearly twice that long by bus. It didn't matter. He never glanced out the window. He was busy concentrating on his plan. He knew the scenery by heart, anyway – every stand of scrub pine, every meadow, every cypress marsh.

No interstate here. The black-topped, two-lane road led to Calcasieu, a one-gas station town known by everyone in that area as "town." As in, "I'm goin' to town, ya."

It hadn't been hard for Balfleur to slip away unnoticed; to avoid the media. He wasn't the sort to attract attention, even when he was at the center of a big story, such as this one. Much of the hype had died down during the weeks he stayed in Washington. The story had slid down from the top of page one, and finally been bumped inside. Now it just rated one column somewhere in the back pages. He had just melted away from the White House – naturally not without thanking his hosts, the President and First Lady – that would have been ungentlemanly.

When reporters asked where "the hero who saved the President's daughter" was, the White House staff could answer only in the vaguest of terms.

Nobody recognized him when he got off the bus. He had been away a long time. The Army and his captivity had reduced his excess bulk to its hard inner core; not exactly lean and certainly not muscle-bound, but more streamlined; efficient. Calcasieu was a small town. Everybody knew about the *famous* hometown boy. But today the town was almost empty.

Balfleur saw someone out of the corner of his eye as he stepped off the bus. He thought it was *Pop* Millner, one of the three old gents who could always be found sitting in front of the drugstore [they still do that, down South]. But Balfleur couldn't be sure; the old man turned a corner and was out of sight.

The Balfleur place was three miles southwest of town. He decided to walk.

His feet fell right in. They knew what they were doing. Balfleur had been down this road hundreds of times; he could still remember when it was just a whitish brown, dusty dirt road, composed largely of fine sand, and cut through with gullies when it rained, overhung with mimosa and oak trees, offering blessed, cool, sweet-smelling shade from the blistering sun.

On the left side of the road had been an old rusty barbed wire fence hanging precariously on half-rotten, crazily-askew fence posts.

The road had changed a lot over the years. The asphalt had been renewed several times, and was in need of repair again. The trees had been trimmed back so they couldn't overhang the road and get in the way – or provide much-needed shade ["Progress has its good points and its bad points."]

Balfleur could use some shade now. The sun was beating down. Sweat was beginning to prickle his neck. He wished he had had the foresight to buy a hat somewhere along the trip. At least, this time, he wasn't carrying anything heavy, thanks to his Arab kidnappers ["Yeah – thanks a lot"].

Instead of his heavy, bulky Army duffel, all he had was a light overnight bag slung over his shoulder, with one change of clothes and a ditty bag inside with his toilet articles. He was glad of that. Even his light load started to get heavy after the first mile. All that time spent in that unlighted cell, without exercise, had eroded his Army conditioning. The stout whacks on his feet hadn't helped any, either. They started to hurt.

Balfleur put one foot after another, and the road passed under him. The view ahead changed in slow motion. A mockingbird called out from an oak tree whose branches formerly hung over the road. Clear, clean sunlight splashed all over. The sky was brilliant, fiery blue.

Balfleur loved to walk. He started enjoying himself, despite the load and the growing pain in his feet (his socks were starting to feel damp now, and he knew they were bleeding again.)

He rounded a curve and stopped, as he always did, to look into the creek. It was sluggish, and the water was black as ink; rich with dissolved organic matter, and choked with lily pads.

All water held a fascination for him; from mud puddles to rivers, bayous, and oceans. As a kid, he even liked to take baths. He floated fleets of tiny ships, and fought major naval engagements in his white porcelain tub.

He turned and crossed over the bridge. He knew it was coming. He was almost afraid to look up. When he did, he saw the clump of oak trees that half hid the white cypress plank house he called home. His legs jerked and wanted to run ahead, but he held them in check. From here, among the leaves, he could just barely make out a tiny triangle portion of the green roof.

The chimney had long since been torn down, replaced first by a kerosene heater, then a floor furnace. The fireplace had been bricked up. Now fireplaces were getting popular as luxury items, though, and Dad was thinking about opening it back up and rebuilding the chimney.

As he got nearer to the house, the Balfleur rooster crowed, and something grabbed Fred's heart. ["Dooo-oooh". Young Freddie used to lie in bed beside Grandpere, suddenly, deliciously awake, listening, listening in the still, cool morning blackness. Finally it would come, first distant and haunting, from a neighboring farm: "OOooowrr-uh-oooooot-uh-oooooooohh."]

Then the Balfleurs' rooster would pick up the song, with his own unique twist to the lyrics: "Roooooot-uh-ooooooooot-dooo-ooooohh." Freddie couldn't match the roosters' repertoire, and answered back as best he could: ["Dooooo-ooooohh"].

Balfleur saw visions of a small boy running around in the shaded front yard, climbing in the trees, finding roly-polys in the sandy, loamy, clean-swept soil (mowed lawns were for suburbanites, not country folk), running up and down the roads, exploring the creeks...

Balfleur's vision cleared. Through the branches he could see the front porch. Nobody was sitting in the front porch swing or the rocker. He left the road, crossed the yard and went up the steps. The screen door banged behind him.

"Mom, Dad! I'm home!"

CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

Familiar sounds and smells greeted Balfleur. Mom was cooking. The banging of pots and pans and cupboard doors chased the fragrance of fried chicken and biscuits throughout the house. Balfleur stood for a moment, drinking it all in. Two years hadn't changed the house much, as

far as he could see. The battered but still working TV set was still wedged in the corner, with all the other furniture turned toward it, as if bowing in deference to the acknowledged head of the household.

The padded sofa sat in front of the bricked-up fireplace. Little porcelain and crystal animals marched across the mantelpiece, beneath a long, wide mirror. There was a high-backed, padded chair over in the corner, and a low-backed upholstered chair against the wall to Fred's left, just beside the door to the front bedroom. Immediately to Fred's right was a rocking chair.

He put his bag down beside the rocking chair. Behind him, he knew without turning around, were the old curtains, supposedly white, but yellowed by the sun. Between the window and the front door hung a full-color painting of Jesus, hands folded, looking heavenward, with a bright light surrounding his head.

She must not have heard his call over all the clatter. He headed across the living room, through the dining room for the kitchen, the hardwood floor creaking under his feet. She was bent over, fumbling under the sink for a pot to cook the turnip greens in.

She didn't see Fred, but she felt and heard the vibrations of the wooden floor. Without turning around, she said, "Why are you using the front door, George, I told you ...". She stood up, turned around and stopped in mid-sentence, seeing Fred standing there.

"Oh, Lordy," was all she could say, before Balfleur pumped the breath out of her with a crushing embrace.

When he finally let her go and took a step back for a better look, Fred was shocked. His mother was old. He couldn't believe what two years had done to her smooth cheeks and clear blue eyes.

There were wrinkles where wrinkles never were before, and the eyes were overcast and cloudy. The grayish wisps of hair he remembered had multiplied a hundredfold. Her formerly strong-boned, powerful frame felt curiously light in his grasp.

Margaret Balfleur was one of the last women in America to wear an apron ["it probably has something to do with the Women's Lib movement; some sort of symbol of kitchen slavery, I guess – a liberated woman wouldn't wear it, no matter how practical it is"]. Underneath, she wore a simple house dress. She stood about the same height as her son; they were both short. Battered house shoes were on her feet.

Fred hoped the consternation didn't show on his face. He felt his grand strategy beating a retreat, before a shot had been fired.

"Yes, son, I'm getting old," she said. Margaret Balfleur, like all mothers, was an accomplished mind reader.

"Aww, mom," was Fred's brilliant rejoinder. Then: "Where's Dad?"

"He's outside, piddling around with something" she answered. Margaret Balfleur had lived in the South so long, she had picked up some of the vocabulary, although she clung to Northern grammar. Her cooking was like her speech; a mixture of Yankee, Southern and Cajun.

"I'll go get him," Fred said.

"No, cher. He'll be in soon enough. It's almost dinner time." Margaret was being selfish; she wanted Fred to herself just a few moments longer. "Oh, that reminds me. I'd better throw some more on the stove, now that you're here."

The meal was everything Balfleur had dreamed about for two years, and especially the last few months in captivity. It was heavy and greasy – and delicious. Fried chicken, biscuits, cornbread, turnip greens, black-eyed peas, squash, and iced tea, followed by banana pudding.

Meal time at the Balfleur's was discussion time; time to catch up on all the news. They avoided asking about the hijacking, and Fred was grateful. George Balfleur directed

the conversation. He had gotten over the hot, glistening-eyed surprise of finding his son in the kitchen. The two had exchanged firm grins, handshakes, and a crushing bear hug. "Well, cher, what now? You all shut with the Army now, yah?"

"Yo, Pa, I got my discharge in Washington," Fred reported. At home, Fred's speech took on a little more Cajun character.

"So. What are your plans now, cher?"

Fred, without looking, felt his mother's eyes boring in on him. ["Hold the line. Hold the line. Don't tip your hand too soon."] "Nothing, Papa. I mean, I haven't given it much thought, yet. I just got back, y'know."

That was it for a while. Balfleur cleaned himself up, scraped the dried blood off his feet, and crawled into hisfamiliar old iron frame bed with the squeaky springs. He crawled in between the cool sheets topped with a worn, soft patchwork quilt, and was instantly asleep. His dreams were a crazy mix of fishing poles and black bayous, black-bearded terrorists who sailed with the pirate, Jean Lafitte, and the trample of feet on a hot, tar-pitched deck.

He had to save a girl – who was it? from the clutches of the terrorist-pirates. Doooooo-oooooooooh. The rooster canceled all the ghosts and brought everything back to its real form.

Time flew by as quickly as the dreams. During the day, Fred helped his father around the place. There was lots to do. George Balfleur was a tall, stringy, independent man. He was a genius at adapting to circumstances. When cotton was no longer sufficient to keep the farm going, he had expanded into corn, tobacco, and truck farming. In addition, he built a compost heap, and raised worms to sell to local fishermen. He also had crickets, and plucked catawpa caterpillars off the trees in season.

He sharpened saws for his neighbors, and was planning to put in a catfish pond. No Balfleur would ever go hungry, or go on welfare, if George could help it. He and Margaret had raised four children. Fred was the youngest; the two girls and Jamie, Fred's older brother, were all married. Sally had married a car salesman from Cleveland, Ohio, but Susan and Jamie were both living nearby.

Sooner or later, Fred would have to tell them. It would take more courage than lying passively on a table, letting some bearded freak whack away with a stick. ["Might as well make it sooner. Get it over with."]

At supper, Fred said, "Mom, Dad. I'm going to buy a sailboat and go cruising."

Mom was good. She didn't bat an eye. It was as if Fred had said, "Mom, please pass the biscuits."

"Are you sure that's what you want, dear?" she said finally. She was already planning her counterattack. She would get him to think about it, see the folly of it, and he'd change his mind.

Dad was more straightforward. "What do you know about that? We're farmers, not sailors!"

"I know, Dad. But this is something I've been thinking about a long time. A LONG time. Since I was a kid. I've always loved the water. It's something special to me. It's freedom." He looked back and forth at their faces, hoping to see understanding.

Dad just shook his head. "If that don't beat all," he said.

"Well, we'll talk about it later," Mom said. She started clearing away the dishes. But Fred was ready for this delaying tactic.

"No, Mom. I've thought it over. I saved every nickel of my pay. A friend of mine's got a used one over in New-awllins. He'll teach me all I need to know."

"But how will you live, cher? What will you eat? The gulf is a dangerous place."

"It's all planned, mom. I don't need much to get by. I'll fish and take odd jobs – cruise the coast."

Mom sucked in her breath and looked sharply at Fred.

"But..." she started. But something in Fred's eyes made her stop. "Well, it looks like you've made up your mind."

And that was it. Dad shook his hand, and Mom hugged him. Fred felt empty. It wasn't supposed to feel like this. Mom was supposed to go into her act; wheedle and cajole, try to talk him out of it. Dad was supposed to issue ultimatums. Instead, they were wishing him luck. Fred wanted to back up and start over again. Everything was happening in slow motion. It was like he was outside his body, watching them pat him on the back and shake his hand and hug him.

They even called Charlie's Cab Service to bring him to the bus in Calcasieu. "It's not like I'm going away forever," he assured them. "I'll be seein' you. Thanks, Mom and Dad."

They waved and waved, as the taxicab grew smaller.

CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

There was no wind, and no tricky current to contend with, when Captain Fred Balfleur steered his 30-foot sloop south from Lake Pontchartrain down the channel called the Rigolets, and motored out into Lake Borgne, at the western end of the Mississippi Sound.

It was still dark. He felt a low, steadily growing excitement as he always did at dawn. Only this time it was magnified a hundredfold. He was on his own; master of a beautiful vessel, and for once, master of his own fate. He was on his way to adventure.

The breeze came with the sunrise. A pink shimmer in the clouds sent a light ripple across the still, dark water. Then the first tiny slice of orange showed itself at the crack between the black, wet wilderness and the black sky. The hard round rim of red pushed up. The breeze steadily increased.

Balfleur cut the engine and drifted in complete silence. He had the sensation of floating in space; adrift in the black union of sea and sky; in orbit around the growing red ball. A whisper would break the spell; don't whisper.

A wet, washing, snuffling wheeze gasped somewhere in the blackness. Balfleur strained, but could not see the dolphin, rolling and blowing in his dark wet world. Balfleur wasn't alone.

The hard, dark red ball puffed up his fat cheeks and sent a stronger breeze across the surface of the water, now turning from black to gray.

Balfleur silently raised the sails. *Sea Bird* came to life. She began pushing her way through the ripples.

Four pelicans, flying in formation, flew low, barely skimming the waves. They crossed in front of the sun and headed toward the open sea, as if leading the way.

He was halfway to the barrier islands that mark the boundary of the Gulf of Mexico. There was a light chop now. *Sea Bird* heeled slightly, flinging spray to the side. Astern, a slowly fading, narrowing straight white road of foam pointed back toward the receding land.

A humming rose in Balfleur's head. He couldn't keep from grinning. He sailed past Isle au Pitre, and the sun shown full on the sparkling blue Gulf of Mexico. *Sea Bird* stopped pounding through choppy, short waves, and began lifting, soaring, flying on stately ocean swells.

The dolphin, shimmering and grand, leaped high out of the water, his tail flicking pearls. He fell back with a splash, then rolled near *Sea Bird*, flashing a triumphant, yet modest grin.

Balfleur wanted to shout, and then realized that he was shouting – incoherent, high-pitched, wavering cries of exultation. He was filling his lungs; breathing deeply – so deeply, it seemed as if he were breathing for the first time.

—+—

BEIRUT, Lebanon (AP) – The Moslem revolutionary leader Beloved of God has reportedly lost control of his forces, and

has not been seen in many days, sources say. His fragmented troops have been assimilated by rival factions, who are reportedly ready to negotiate with U.S. officials for the release of hostages still held in the hijacking of flight 809.

This work is the intellectual property of:

Charles G. Brooks, Jr.,
3329 Mangrove Dr.
Gautier, MS. 39553
© 1988 Charles Brooks