



SIDNEY SHELDON

THE DOOMSDAY CONSPIRACY

SUSPENSE, INTRIGUE AND
PASSION FROM THE WORLD'S
FAVOURITE STORYTELLER

Sidney Sheldon

The Doomsday Conspiracy

«HarperCollins»

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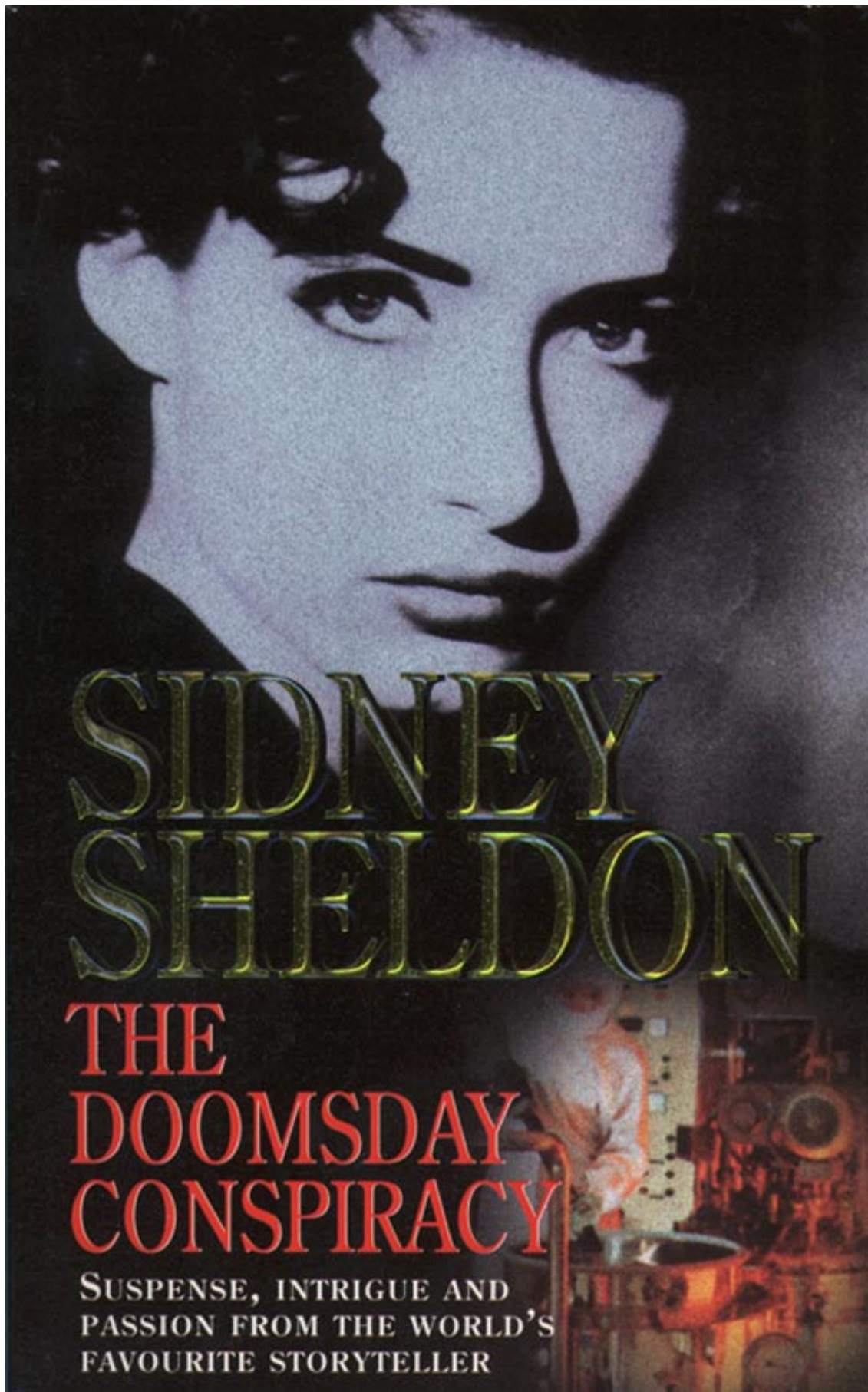
OPERATION DOOMSDAY... ACTIVATE...Commander Robert Bellamy of US Naval Intelligence is dispatched on a top secret mission. A weather balloon carrying sensitive military information has crashed in Switzerland. Bellamy must locate the ten witnesses to the incident so that they can be sworn to secrecy. But as he conducts his search Bellamy begins to suspect that he, too, is being hunted, by an unknown lethal force... that what he was told about the balloon was only one part of an almost unbelievable happening..

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HarperFiction

This is for Jerry Davis

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Prologue

Uetendorf, Switzerland

Sunday, October 14, 1500 Hours

The witnesses standing at the edge of the field were staring in horrified silence, too stunned to speak. The scene that lay before them was grotesque, a primeval nightmare dredged up from some deep, dark depths of primitive man's collective unconscious. Each witness had a different reaction. One fainted. A second one vomited. A woman was shaking uncontrollably. Another one thought: *I'm going to have a heart attack!* The elderly priest clutched his beads and crossed himself. *Help me, Father. Help us all. Protect us against this evil incarnate. We have finally seen the face of Satan. It is the end of the world. Judgment Day has come.*

Armageddon is here ... Armageddon ... Armageddon ...

PART ONE THE HUNTER

Sunday, October 14, 2100 Hours

FLASH MESSAGE

TOP SECRET ULTRA

NSA TO DEPUTY DIRECTOR COMSEC

EYES ONLY

SUBJECT: OPERATION DOOMSDAY

MESSAGE: ACTIVATE

NOTIFY NORAD, CIRVIS, GEPAN, DIS, GHG, VSAF, INS.

END OF MESSAGE

Sunday, October 14, 2115 Hours

FLASH MESSAGE

TOP SECRET ULTRA

NSA TO DEPUTY DIRECTOR—

NAVAL INTELLIGENCE 17TH DISTRICT

EYES ONLY

SUBJECT: COMMANDER ROBERT BELLAMY

ARRANGE TEMPORARY TRANSFER THIS AGENCY, EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY.

YOUR CONCURRENCE IN THE ABOVE IS ASSUMED.

END OF MESSAGE

Chapter One

DAY ONE

Monday, October 15

He was back in the crowded hospital ward at Cu Chi Base in Vietnam and Susan was leaning over his bed, lovely in her crisp white nurse's uniform, whispering, "Wake up, sailor. You don't want to die."

And when he heard the magic of her voice, he could almost forget his pain. She was murmuring something else in his ear, but a loud bell was ringing, and he could not hear her clearly. He reached up to pull her closer, and his hands clutched empty air.

It was the sound of the telephone that fully awoke Robert Bellamy. He opened his eyes reluctantly, not wanting to let go of the dream. The telephone at his bedside was insistent. He looked at the clock. Four A.M. He snatched up the instrument, angry at having his dream interrupted. "Do you know what the hell time it is?"

"Commander Bellamy?" A deep, male voice.

"Yes—"

"I have a message for you, Commander. You are ordered to report to General Hilliard at National Security Agency headquarters at Fort Meade at oh six hundred this morning. Is the message understood, Commander?"

"Yes." *And no. Mostly no.*

Commander Robert Bellamy slowly replaced the receiver, puzzled. What the devil could the NSA want with him? He was assigned to ONI, the Office of Naval Intelligence. And what could be urgent enough to call for a meeting at six o'clock in the morning? He lay down again and closed his eyes, trying to recapture the dream. It had been so real. He knew, of course, what had triggered it. Susan had telephoned the evening before.

"Robert ..."

The sound of her voice did to him what it always did. He took a shaky breath. "Hello, Susan."

"Are you all right, Robert?"

"Sure. Fantastic. How's Moneybags?"

"Please, don't."

"All right. How's Monte Banks?"

He could not bring himself to say "your husband." *He* was her husband.

"He's fine. I just wanted to tell you that we're going to be away for a little while. I didn't want you to worry."

That was so like her, so Susan. He fought to keep his voice steady. "Where are you going this time?"

"We're flying to Brazil."

On Moneybags's private 727.

"Monte has some business interests there."

"Really? I thought he owned the country."

"Stop it, Robert. Please."

"Sorry."

There was a pause. "I wish you sounded better."

"If you were here, I would."

"I want you to find someone wonderful and be happy."

"I did find someone wonderful, Susan." The damned lump in his throat made it difficult for him to speak. "And do you know what happened? I lost her."

"If you're going to do this, I won't call you again."

He was filled with sudden panic. “Don’t say that. Please.” She was his lifeline. He could not bear the thought of never speaking to her again. He tried to sound cheerful. “I’m going to go out and find some luscious blonde and screw us both to death.”

“I want you to find someone.”

“I promise.”

“I’m concerned about you, darling.”

“No need. I’m really fine.” He almost gagged on his lie. If she only knew the truth. But it was nothing he could bring himself to discuss with anyone. Especially Susan. He could not bear the thought of her pity.

“I’ll telephone you from Brazil,” Susan said.

There was a long silence. They could not let go of each other because there was too much to say, too many things that were better left unsaid, that had to be left unsaid.

“I have to go now, Robert.”

“Susan?”

“Yes?”

“I love you, baby. I always will.”

“I know. I love you too, Robert.”

And that was the bittersweet irony of it. They still loved each other so much.

You two have the perfect marriage, all their friends used to say. What had gone wrong?

Commander Robert Bellamy got out of bed and walked through the silent living room in his bare feet. The room screamed out Susan’s absence. There were dozens of photographs of Susan and himself scattered around, frozen moments in time. The two of them fishing in the Highlands of Scotland, standing in front of a Buddha near a Thai *klong*, riding a carriage in the rain through the Borghese gardens in Rome. And in each picture, they were smiling and hugging, two people wildly in love.

He went into the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee. The kitchen clock read 4:15 A.M. He hesitated a moment, then dialed a number. There were six rings, and finally he heard Admiral Whittaker’s voice at the other end of the line. “Hello.”

“Admiral—”

“Yes?”

“It’s Robert. I’m terribly sorry to wake you, sir. I just had a rather strange phone call from the National Security Agency.”

“The NSA? What did they want?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been ordered to report to General Hilliard at oh six hundred.”

There was a thoughtful silence. “Perhaps you’re being transferred there.”

“I can’t be. It doesn’t make sense. Why would they—?”

“It’s obviously something urgent, Robert. Why don’t you give me a call after the meeting?”

“I will. Thank you.”

The connection was broken. *I shouldn’t have bothered the old man*, Robert thought. The admiral had retired as head of Naval Intelligence two years earlier. *Forced* to retire, was more like it. The rumor was that as a sop, the Navy had given him a little office somewhere and put him to work counting barnacles on the mothball fleet, or some such shit. The admiral would have no idea about current intelligence activities. But he was Robert’s mentor. He was closer to Robert than anyone in the world, except, of course, Susan. And Robert had needed to talk to someone. With Susan gone, he felt as though he were living in a time warp. He fantasized that somewhere, in another dimension of time and space, he and Susan were still happily married, laughing and carefree and loving. *Or maybe not*, Robert thought wearily. *Maybe I just don’t know when to let go.*

The coffee was ready. It tasted bitter. He wondered whether the beans came from Brazil.

He carried the coffee cup into the bathroom and studied his image in the mirror. He was looking at a man in his early forties, tall and lean and physically fit with a craggy face, a strong chin, black hair, and intelligent, probing dark eyes. There was a long, deep scar on his chest, a souvenir from the plane crash. But that was yesterday. That was Susan. This was today. Without Susan. He shaved and showered and walked over to his clothes closet. *What do I wear*, he wondered, *Navy uniform or civilian clothes? And on the other hand, who gives a damn?* He put on a charcoal gray suit, a white shirt, and a gray silk tie. He knew very little about the National Security Agency, only that the Puzzle Palace, as it was nicknamed, superseded all other American intelligence agencies and was the most secretive of them all. *What do they want with me? I'll soon find out.*

Chapter Two

The National Security Agency is hidden discreetly away on eighty-two rambling acres at Fort Meade, Maryland, in two buildings that together are twice the size of the CIA complex in Langley, Virginia. The agency, created to give technical support to protect United States communications and acquire worldwide electronic intelligence data, employs thousands of people, and so much information is generated by its operations that it shreds more than forty tons of documents every day.

It was still dark when Commander Robert Bellamy arrived at the first gate. He drove up to an eight-foot-high Cyclone fence with a topping of barbed wire. There was a sentry booth there, manned by two armed guards. One of them stayed in the booth watching as the other approached the car. "Can I help you?"

"Commander Bellamy to see General Hilliard."

"May I see your identification, Commander?"

Robert Bellamy pulled out his wallet and removed his 17th District Naval Intelligence ID card. The guard studied it carefully and returned it. "Thank you, Commander."

He nodded to the guard in the booth, and the gate swung open. The guard inside picked up a telephone. "Commander Bellamy is on his way."

A minute later, Robert Bellamy drove up to a closed, electrified gate.

An armed guard approached the car. "Commander Bellamy?"

"Yes."

"May I see your identification, please?"

He started to protest and then he thought, *What the hell. It's their zoo.* He took out his wallet again and showed his identification to the guard.

"Thank you, Commander." The guard gave some invisible sign, and the gate opened.

As Robert Bellamy drove ahead, he saw a third Cyclone fence ahead of him. *My God,* he thought, *I'm in the Land of Oz.*

Another uniformed guard walked up to the car. As Robert Bellamy reached for his wallet, the guard looked at the license plate and said, "Please drive straight ahead to the administration building, Commander. There will be someone there to meet you."

"Thank you."

The gate swung open, and Robert followed the driveway up to an enormous white building. A man in civilian clothes was standing outside waiting, shivering in the chill October air. "You can leave your car right there, Commander," he called out. "We'll take care of it."

Robert Bellamy left the keys in his car and stepped out. The man greeting him appeared to be in his thirties, tall, thin, and sallow. He looked as though he had not seen the sun in years.

"I'm Harrison Keller. I'll escort you to General Hilliard's office."

They walked into a large high-ceilinged entrance hall. A man in civilian clothes was seated behind a desk. "Commander Bellamy—"

Robert Bellamy swung around. He heard the click of a camera.

"Thank you, sir."

Robert Bellamy turned to Keller. "What—?"

"This will take only a minute," Harrison Keller assured him.

Sixty seconds later, Robert Bellamy was handed a blue and white identification badge with his photograph on it.

"Please wear this at all times while you're in the building, Commander."

"Right."

They started walking down a long, white corridor. Robert Bellamy noticed security cameras mounted at twenty-foot intervals on both sides of the hall.

“How big is this building?”

“Just over two million square feet, Commander.”

“*What?*”

“Yes. This corridor is the longest corridor in the world—nine hundred and eighty feet. We’re completely self-contained here. We have a shopping center, cafeteria, post exchange, eight snack bars, a hospital, complete with an operating room, a dentist’s office, a branch of the State Bank of Laurel, a dry-cleaning shop, a shoe shop, a barbershop, and a few other odds and ends.”

It’s a home away from home, Robert thought. He found it oddly depressing.

They passed an enormous open area filled with a vast sea of computers. Robert stopped in amazement.

“Impressive, isn’t it? That’s just one of our computer rooms. The complex contains three billion dollars’ worth of decoding machines and computers.”

“How many people work in this place?”

“About sixteen thousand.”

So what the hell do they need me for? Robert Bellamy wondered.

He was led into a private elevator that Keller operated with a key. They went up one floor and started on another trek down a long corridor until they reached a suite of offices at the end of the hall.

“Right in here, Commander.” They entered a large reception office with four secretaries’ desks. Two of the secretaries had already arrived for work. Harrison Keller nodded to one of them, and she pressed a button, and a door to the inner office clicked open.

“Go right in, please, gentlemen. The general is expecting you.”

Harrison Keller said, “This way.”

Robert Bellamy followed him into the inner sanctum. He found himself in a spacious office, the ceilings and walls heavily soundproofed. The room was comfortably furnished, filled with photographs and personal mementos. It was obvious that the man behind the desk spent a lot of time there.

General Mark Hilliard, deputy director of the NSA, appeared to be in his middle fifties, very tall, with a face carved in flint, icy, steely eyes, and a ramrod-straight posture. The general was dressed in a gray suit, white shirt, and gray tie. *I guessed right*, Robert thought.

Harrison Keller said, “General Hilliard, this is Commander Bellamy.”

“Thank you for dropping by, Commander.”

As though it was an invitation to some tea party.

The two men shook hands.

“Sit down. I’ll bet you could do with a cup of coffee.”

The man was a mind reader. “Yes, sir.”

“Harrison?”

“No, thank you.” He took a chair in the corner.

A buzzer was pressed, the door opened, and an Oriental in a mess jacket entered with a tray of coffee and Danish pastry. Robert noted that he was not wearing an identification badge. *Shame.* The coffee was poured. It smelled wonderful.

“How do you take yours?” General Hilliard asked.

“Black, please.” The coffee tasted great.

The two men were seated facing each other in soft leather chairs.

“The director asked that I meet with you.”

The director. Edward Sanderson. A legend in espionage circles. A brilliant, ruthless puppet master, credited with masterminding dozens of daring coups all over the world. A man seldom seen in public and whispered about in private.

“How long have you been with the 17th District Naval Intelligence Group, Commander?” General Hilliard asked.

Robert played it straight. “Fifteen years.” He would have bet a month’s pay that the general could have told him the time of day when he had joined ONI.

“Before that, I believe you commanded a naval air squadron in Vietnam.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You were shot down. They didn’t expect you to pull through.”

The doctor was saying, “Forget about him. He won’t make it.” He had wanted to die. The pain was unbearable. And then Susan was leaning over him. “*Open your eyes, sailor, you don’t want to die.*” He had forced his eyes open and through the haze of pain was staring at the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She had a soft oval face and thick black hair, sparkling brown eyes and a smile like a blessing. He had tried to speak, but it was too much of an effort.

General Hilliard was saying something.

Robert Bellamy brought his mind back to the present. “I beg your pardon, General?”

“We have a problem, Commander. We need your help.”

“Yes, sir?”

The general stood up and began to pace. “What I’m about to tell you is extremely sensitive. It’s above top secret.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Yesterday, in the Swiss Alps, a NATO weather balloon crashed.

There were some experimental military objects aboard the balloon that are highly secret.”

Robert found himself wondering where all this was leading.

“The Swiss government has removed those objects from the balloon, but unfortunately, it seems that there were some witnesses to the crash. It is of vital importance that none of them talk to anyone about what they saw. It could provide valuable information to certain other countries. Do you follow me?”

“I think so, sir. You want me to speak to the witnesses and warn them not to discuss what they saw.”

“Not exactly, Commander.”

“Then I don’t under—”

“What I want you to do is simply track down those witnesses. Others will talk to them about the necessity for silence.”

“I see. Are the witnesses all in Switzerland?”

General Hilliard stopped in front of Robert. “That’s our problem, Commander. You see, we have no idea where they are. Or who they are.”

Robert thought he had missed something. “I beg your pardon?”

“The only information we have is that the witnesses were on a tour bus. They happened to be passing the scene when the weather balloon crashed near a little village called ...” He turned to Harrison Keller.

“Uetendorf.”

The general turned back to Robert. “The passengers got off the bus for a few minutes to look at the crash and then continued on. When the tour ended, the passengers dispersed.”

Robert said slowly, “General Hilliard, are you saying that there is *no* record of who these people are or where they went?”

“That is correct.”

“And you want me to go over and find them?”

“Exactly. You’ve been very highly recommended. I’m told that you speak half a dozen languages fluently, and you have an excellent field record. The director arranged to have you temporarily transferred to the NSA.”

Terrific. “I assume I’ll be working with the Swiss government on this?”

“No, you’ll be working alone.”

“Alone? But—”

“We must not involve anyone else in this mission. I can’t stress enough the importance of what was in that balloon, Commander. Time is of the essence. I want you to report your progress to me every day.”

The general wrote a number on a card and handed it to Robert. “I can be reached through this number day or night. There’s a plane waiting to fly you to Zurich. You’ll be escorted to your apartment, so you can pack what you need, and then you’ll be taken to the airport.”

So much for “Thank you for dropping by.” Robert was tempted to ask “Will someone feed my goldfish while I’m gone?” but he had a feeling the answer would be “You have no goldfish.”

“In your work with ONI, Commander, I assume you’ve acquired intelligence contacts abroad?”

“Yes, sir. I have quite a few friends who could be of use—”

“You’re not to get in touch with any of them. You are not authorized to make any contacts at all. The witnesses you’re looking for are undoubtedly nationals of various countries.” The general turned to Keller. “Harrison—”

Keller walked over to a filing cabinet in the corner and unlocked it. He removed a large manila envelope and passed it to Robert.

“There’s fifty thousand dollars in here in different European currencies and another twenty thousand in U.S. dollars. You will also find several sets of false identifications that may come in handy.”

General Hilliard held out a thick, shiny black plastic card with a white stripe on it. “Here’s a credit card that—”

“I doubt if I’ll need that, General. The cash will be enough, and I have an ONI credit card.”

“Take it.”

“Very well.” Robert examined the card. It was drawn on a bank he had never heard of. At the bottom of the card was a telephone number. “There’s no name on the card,” Robert said.

“It’s the equivalent of a blank check. It requires no identification. Just have them call the telephone number on the card when you make a purchase. It’s very important that you keep it with you at all times.”

“Right.”

“And Commander?”

“Sir?”

“You must find those witnesses. Every one of them. I’ll inform the director that you have started the assignment.”

The meeting was over.

Harrison Keller walked Robert to the outer office. A uniformed marine was seated there. He rose as the two men came in.

“This is Captain Dougherty. He’ll take you to the airport. Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

The two men shook hands. Keller turned and walked back into General Hilliard’s office.

“Are you ready, Commander?” Captain Dougherty asked.

“Yes.” *But ready for what?* He had handled difficult intelligence assignments in the past, but never anything as crazy as this. He was expected to track down an unknown number of unknown witnesses from unknown countries. *What are the odds against that?* Robert wondered. *I feel like the White Queen in Through the Looking Glass. “Why sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.” Well, this was all six of them.*

“I have orders to take you directly to your apartment and then to Andrews Air Force Base,” Captain Dougherty said. “There’s a plane waiting to—”

Robert shook his head. “I have to make a stop at my office first.”

Dougherty hesitated. “Very well. I’ll go there with you and wait for you.”

It was as if they didn't trust him out of their sight. Because he knew that a weather balloon had crashed? It made no sense. He surrendered his badge at the reception desk and walked outside, into the chill, breaking dawn. His car was gone. In its place was a stretch limousine.

"Your car will be taken care of, Commander," Captain Dougherty informed him. "We'll ride in this."

There was a high-handedness about all this that Robert found vaguely disturbing.

"Fine," he said.

And they were on their way to Naval Intelligence. The pale morning sun was disappearing behind rain clouds. It was going to be a miserable day. *In more ways than one*, Robert thought.

Chapter Three

Ottawa, Canada 2400 Hours

His code name was Janus. He was addressing twelve men in the heavily guarded room of a military compound.

“As you have all been informed, Operation Doomsday has been activated. There are a number of witnesses who must be found as quickly and as quietly as possible. We are not able to attempt to track them down through regular security channels because of the danger of a leak.”

“Who are we using?” The Russian. *Huge. Short-tempered.*

“His name is Commander Robert Bellamy.”

“How was he selected?” The German. *Aristocratic. Ruthless.*

“The commander was chosen after a thorough computer search of the files of the CIA, FBI, and a half dozen other security agencies.”

“Please, may I inquire what are his qualifications?” The Japanese. *Polite. Sly.*

“Commander Bellamy is an experienced field officer who speaks six languages fluently and has an exemplary record. Again and again he has proved himself to be very resourceful. He has no living relatives.”

“Is he aware of the urgency of this?” The Englishman. *Snobbish. Dangerous.*

“He is. We have every expectation that he will be able to locate all the witnesses very quickly.”

“Does he understand the purpose of his mission?” The Frenchman. *Argumentative. Stubborn.*

“No.”

“And when he has found the witnesses?” The Chinese. *Clever. Patient.*

“He will be suitably rewarded.”

Chapter Four

The headquarters of the Office of Naval Intelligence occupies the entire fifth floor of the sprawling Pentagon, an enclave in the middle of the largest office building in the world, with seventeen miles of corridors and twenty-nine thousand military and civilian employees.

The interior of the Office of Naval Intelligence reflects its seagoing traditions. The desks and file cabinets are either olive green, from the World War II era, or battleship gray, from the Vietnam era. The walls and ceilings are painted a buff or cream color. In the beginning, Robert had been put off by the Spartan decor, but he had long since grown accustomed to it.

Now, as he walked into the building and approached the reception desk, the familiar guard at the desk said, "Good morning, Commander. May I see your pass?"

Robert had been working here for seven years, but the ritual never changed. He dutifully displayed his pass.

"Thank you, Commander."

On his way to his office, Robert thought about Captain Dougherty, waiting for him in the parking lot at the river entrance. Waiting to escort him to the plane that would fly him to Switzerland to begin an impossible hunt.

When Robert reached his office, his secretary, Barbara, was already there.

"Good morning, Commander. The deputy director would like to see you in his office."

"He can wait. Get me Admiral Whittaker, please."

"Yes, sir."

A minute later Robert was speaking with the admiral.

"I presume you have finished your meeting, Robert?"

"A few minutes ago."

"How did it go?"

"It was—interesting. Are you free to join me for breakfast, Admiral?" He tried to keep his voice casual.

There was no hesitation. "Yes. Shall we meet there?"

"Fine. I'll leave a visitors' pass for you."

"Very well. I'll see you in an hour."

Robert replaced the receiver and thought, *It's ironic that I have to leave a visitors' pass for the admiral. A few years ago, he was the fairhaired boy here, in charge of Naval Intelligence. How must he feel?*

Robert buzzed his secretary on the intercom.

"Yes, Commander?"

"I'm expecting Admiral Whittaker. Arrange a pass for him."

"I'll take care of it right away."

It was time to report to the deputy director. Dustin fucking Thornton.

Chapter Five

Dustin “Dusty” Thornton, deputy director of the Office of Naval Intelligence, had won his fame as one of the greatest athletes ever to come out of Annapolis. Thornton owed his present exalted position to a football game. An Army-Navy game, to be precise. Thornton, a towering monolith of a man, had played fullback as a senior at Annapolis in Navy’s most important game of the year. At the beginning of the fourth quarter, with Army leading 13–0, two touch-downs and a conversion ahead, destiny stepped in and changed Dustin Thornton’s life. Thornton intercepted an Army pass, pivoted around, and charged through the Army phalanx for a touchdown. Navy missed on the extra point but soon scored a field goal. After the ensuing kick-off, Army failed to make a first down and punted into Navy territory. The score stood at Army 13, Navy 9, and the clock was running.

When play resumed, the ball was passed to Thornton, and he went down under a heap of Army uniforms. It took him a long time to get to his feet. A doctor came running out onto the field. Thornton angrily waved him away.

With seconds left to play, signals were called for a lateral pass. Thornton caught it on his own ten yard line and took off. He was unstoppable. He charged through the opposition like a tank, knocking down everyone unlucky enough to get in his way. With two seconds to go, Thornton crossed the goal line for the winning touchdown, and Navy scored its first victory against Army in four years. That, in itself, would have had little effect on Thornton’s life. What made the event significant was that seated in a box reserved for VIPs were Willard Stone and his daughter, Eleanor. As the crowd rose to its feet, wildly cheering the Navy hero, Eleanor turned to her father and said quietly, “I want to meet him.”

Eleanor Stone was a woman of large appetites. Plain-faced, she had a voluptuous body and an insatiable libido. Watching Dustin Thornton savagely plow his way down the football field, she fantasized what he would be like in bed. If his manhood was as big as the rest of his body ... She was not disappointed.

Six months later, Eleanor and Dustin Thornton were married. That was the beginning. Dustin Thornton went to work for his father-in-law and was inducted into an arcane world he had not dreamed existed.

Willard Stone, Thornton’s new father-in-law, was a man of mystery. A billionaire with powerful political connections and a past shrouded in secrecy, he was a shadowy figure who pulled strings in capitals all over the world. He was in his late sixties, a meticulous man whose every movement was precise and methodical. He had razorsharp features and hooded eyes that revealed nothing. Willard Stone believed in wasting neither words nor emotions, and he was ruthless in obtaining what he wanted.

The rumors about him were fascinating. He was reported to have murdered a competitor in Malaysia and to have had a torrid affair with the favorite wife of an emir. He was said to have backed a successful revolution in Nigeria. The government had brought half a dozen indictments against him, but they were always mysteriously dropped. There were tales of bribes, and senators suborned, business secrets stolen, and witnesses who disappeared. Stone was an adviser to presidents and kings. He was raw, naked power. Among his many properties was a large, isolated estate in the Colorado mountains where every year scientists, captains of industry, and world leaders gathered for seminars. Armed guards kept out unwanted visitors.

Willard Stone had not only approved his daughter’s marriage, he had encouraged it. His new son-in-law was brilliant, ambitious, and most important, malleable.

Twelve years after the marriage, Stone arranged for Dustin to be appointed ambassador to South Korea. Several years later, the President appointed him ambassador to the United Nations. When Admiral Ralph Whittaker was suddenly ousted as acting director of ONI, Thornton took his place.

That day Willard Stone sent for his son-in-law.

“This is merely the beginning,” Stone promised. “I have bigger plans for you, Dustin. Great plans.” And he had proceeded to outline them.

Two years earlier, Robert had had his first meeting with the new acting director of ONI.

“Sit down, Commander.” There was no cordiality in Dustin Thornton’s voice. “I see by your record that you’re something of a maverick.”

What the hell does he mean? Robert wondered. He decided to keep his mouth shut.

Thornton looked up. “I don’t know how Admiral Whittaker ran this office when he was in charge, but from now on we’re doing everything by the book. I expect my orders to be carried out to the letter. Do I make myself clear?”

Jesus, Robert thought, *what the hell are we in for here?*

“Do I make myself clear, Commander?”

“Yes. You expect your orders to be carried out to the letter.” He wondered whether he was expected to salute.

“That’s all.”

But it was not all.

A month later, Robert was sent to East Germany to bring in a scientist who wanted to defect. It was a dangerous assignment because *Stasi*, the East German secret police, had learned about the proposed defection and was watching the scientist closely. In spite of that, Robert had managed to smuggle the man across the border, to a safe house. He was making arrangements to bring him to Washington when he received a call from Dustin Thornton telling him that the situation had changed and that he was to drop the assignment.

“We can’t just dump him here,” Robert had protested. “They’ll kill him.”

“That’s his problem,” Thornton had replied. “Your orders are to come back home.”

Screw you, Robert thought. *I’m not going to abandon him.* He had called a friend of his in MI6, British Intelligence, and explained the situation.

“If he goes back to East Germany,” Robert said, “they’ll chop him. Will you take him?”

“I’ll see what can be done, old chap. Bring him along.”

And the scientist had been given haven in England.

Dustin Thornton never forgave Robert for disobeying his instructions. From that point on, there was open animosity between the two men. Thornton had discussed the incident with his father-in-law.

“Loose cannons like Bellamy are dangerous,” Willard Stone warned. “They’re a security hazard. Men like that are expendable. Remember that.”

And Thornton had remembered.

Now, walking down the corridor toward Dustin Thornton’s office, Robert could not help thinking about the difference between Thornton and Whittaker. In a job like his, trust was the *sine qua non*. He did not trust Dustin Thornton.

Thornton was seated behind his desk when Robert walked into his office.

“You wanted to see me?”

“Yes. Sit down, Commander.” Their relationship had never reached the “Robert” phase.

“I’ve been told you’ve been temporarily transferred to the National Security Agency. When you come back, I have a—”

“I’m not coming back. This is my last assignment.”

“What?”

“I’m quitting.”

Thinking about it later, Robert was not sure exactly what reaction he had expected. Some kind of scene. Dustin Thornton could have shown surprise, or he could have argued, or been angry, or relieved. Instead, he had merely looked at Robert and nodded. “That’s it then, isn’t it?”

When Robert returned to his own office, he said to his secretary, “I’m going to be away for a while. I’ll be leaving in about an hour.”

“Is there some place where you can be reached?”

Robert remembered General Hilliard’s orders. “No.”

“There are some meetings you—”

“Cancel them.” He looked at his watch. It was time to meet Admiral Whittaker.

They had breakfast in the center yard of the Pentagon at the Ground Zero Cafe, so named because it was once thought that the Pentagon was where the first nuclear-bomb attack against the United States would take place. Robert had arranged for a corner table where they would have a degree of privacy. Admiral Whittaker was punctual, and as Robert watched him approach the table, it seemed to him that the admiral looked older and smaller, as though semi-retirement had somehow aged and shrunk him. He was still a striking-looking man with strong features, a Roman nose, good cheekbones, and a crown of silvered hair. Robert had served under the admiral in Vietnam and later in the Office of Naval Intelligence, and he had a high regard for him. *More than a high regard*, Robert admitted to himself. Admiral Whittaker was his surrogate father.

The admiral sat down. “Good morning, Robert. Well, did they transfer you to the NSA?”

Robert nodded. “Temporarily.”

The waitress arrived, and the two men studied the menu.

“I had forgotten how bad the food here was,” Admiral Whittaker said, smiling. He looked around the room, his face reflecting an unspoken nostalgia.

He wishes he were back here, Robert thought. *Amen.*

They ordered. When the waitress was out of earshot, Robert said, “Admiral, General Hilliard is sending me on an urgent three-thousand-mile trip to locate some witnesses who saw a weather balloon crash. I find that strange. And there’s something else that’s even stranger. ‘Time is of the essence,’ to quote the general, but I’ve been ordered not to use any of my intelligence contacts abroad to help me.”

Admiral Whittaker looked puzzled. “I suppose the general must have his reasons.”

Robert said, “I can’t imagine what they are.”

Admiral Whittaker studied Robert. Commander Bellamy had served under him in Vietnam and had been the best pilot in the squadron. The admiral’s son, Edward, had been Robert’s bombardier, and on the terrible day their plane had been shot down, Edward had been killed. Robert had barely survived. The admiral had gone to the hospital to visit him.

“He’s not going to make it,” the doctors had told him. Robert, lying there in agonizing pain, had whispered, “I’m sorry about Edward ... I’m so sorry.”

Admiral Whittaker had squeezed Robert’s hand. “I know you did everything you could. You’ve got to get well, now. You’re going to be fine.” He wanted desperately for Robert to live. In the admiral’s mind, Robert was his son, the son who would take Edward’s place.

And Robert had pulled through.

“Robert—”

“Yes, Admiral?”

“I hope your mission is successful.”

“So do I. It’s my last one.”

“You’re still determined to quit?”

The admiral was the only one Robert had confided in. “I’ve had enough.”

“Thornton?”

“It’s not just him. It’s me. I’m tired of interfering with other people’s lives.” *I’m tired of the lies and the cheating, and the broken promises that were never meant to be kept. I’m tired of manipulating people and of being manipulated. I’m tired of the games and the danger and the betrayals. It’s cost me everything I ever gave a damn about.*

“Do you have any idea what you’re going to do?”

“I’ll try to find something useful to do with my life, something positive.”

“What if they won’t let you go?”

Robert said, “They have no choice, have they?”

Chapter Six

The limousine was waiting at the river-entrance parking lot.

“Are you ready, Commander?” Captain Dougherty asked.

As ready as I'll ever be, Robert thought. “Yes.”

Captain Dougherty accompanied Robert to his apartment so he could pack. Robert had no idea how many days he would be gone. *How long does an impossible assignment take?* He packed enough clothes for a week and, at the last minute, put in a framed photograph of Susan. He stared at it for a long time and wondered if she were enjoying herself in Brazil. He thought, *I hope not. I hope she's having a lousy time.* And was immediately ashamed of himself.

When the limousine arrived at Andrews Air Force Base, the plane was waiting. It was a C20A, an Air Force jet.

Captain Dougherty held out his hand. “Good luck, Commander.”

“Thanks.” *I'll need it.* Robert walked up the steps to the cabin. The crew was inside finishing the preflight check. There was a pilot, a co-pilot, a navigator, and a steward, all in Air Force uniforms. Robert was familiar with the plane. It was loaded with electronic equipment. On the outside near the tail was a high-frequency antenna that looked like an enormous fishing pole. Inside the cabin were twelve red telephones on the walls and a white, unsecured phone. Radio transmissions were in code, and the plane's radar was on a military frequency. The primary color inside was air force blue, and the cabin was furnished with comfortable club chairs.

Robert found that he was the only passenger. The pilot greeted him. “Welcome aboard, Commander. If you'll put on your seat belt, we have clearance to take off.”

Robert strapped himself in and leaned back in his seat as the plane taxied down the runway. A minute later, he felt the familiar pull of gravity as the jet screamed into the air. He had not piloted a plane since his crash, when he had been told he would never be able to fly again. *Fly again, hell*, Robert thought, *they said I wouldn't live. It was a miracle—No, it was Susan ...*

Vietnam. He had been sent there with the rank of lieutenant commander, stationed on the aircraft carrier *Ranger* as a tactics officer, responsible for training fighter pilots and planning attack strategy. He had led a bomber squadron of A-6A Intruders, and there was very little time away from the pressures of battle. One of the few leaves he had was in Bangkok for a week of R and R, and during that time he never bothered to sleep. The city was a Disneyland designed for the pleasure of the male animal. He had met an exquisite Thai girl his first hour in town, and she had stayed at his side the whole time and taught him a few Thai phrases. He had found the language soft and mellifluous.

Good morning. *Arun sawasdi.*

Where are you from? *Khun na chak nai?*

Where are you going now? *Khun kamrant chain pai?*

She taught him other phrases too, but she would not tell him what they meant, and when he said them, she giggled.

When Robert returned to the *Ranger*, Bangkok seemed like a faraway dream. The war was the reality and it was a horror. Someone showed him one of the leaflets the marines dropped over North Vietnam. It read:

Dear Citizens:

The U.S. Marines are fighting alongside South Vietnamese forces in Duc Pho in order to give the Vietnamese people a chance to live a free, happy life, without fear of hunger and suffering. But many Vietnamese have paid with their lives, and their homes have been destroyed because they helped the Vietcong.

The hamlets of Hai Mon, Hai Tan, Sa Binh, Ta Binh, and many others have been destroyed because of this. We will not hesitate to destroy every hamlet that helps the Vietcong, who are

powerless to stop the combined might of the GVN and its allies. The choice is yours. If you refuse to let the Vietcong use your villages and hamlets as their battlefield, your homes and your lives will be saved.

We're saving the poor bastards, all right. Robert thought grimly. And all we're destroying is their country.

The aircraft carrier *Ranger* was equipped with all the state-of-the-art technology that could be crammed into it. The ship was home base for 16 aircraft, 40 officers, and 350 enlisted men. Flight schedules were handed out three or four hours before the first launch of the day.

In the mission planning section of the ship's intelligence center, the latest information and reconnaissance photos were given to the bombardiers, who then planned their flight patterns.

"Jesus, they gave us a beauty this morning," said Edward Whittaker, Robert's bombardier.

Edward Whittaker looked like a younger version of his father, but he had a completely different personality. Where the admiral was a formidable figure, dignified and austere, his son was down-to-earth, warm and friendly. He had earned his place as "just one of the boys." The other airmen forgave him for being the son of their commander. He was the best bombardier in the squadron, and he and Robert had become fast friends.

"Where are we heading?" Robert asked.

"For our sins, we've drawn Package Six."

It was the most dangerous mission of all. It meant flying north to Hanoi, Haiphong, and up the Red River delta, where the flak was heaviest. There was a catch-22: They were not permitted to bomb any strategic targets if there were civilians nearby, and the North Vietnamese, not being stupid, immediately placed civilians around all their military installations. There was a lot of grumbling in the allied military, but President Lyndon Johnson, safely back in Washington, was giving the orders.

The twelve years that United States troops fought in Vietnam were the longest period it has ever been at war. Robert Bellamy had come into it late in 1972, when the Navy was having major problems. Their F-4 squadrons were being destroyed. In spite of the fact that their planes were superior to the Russian MiG's, the U.S. Navy was losing one F-4 for every two MiG's shot down. It was an unacceptable ratio.

Robert was summoned to the headquarters of Admiral Ralph Whittaker.

"You sent for me, Admiral?"

"You have the reputation of being a hotshot pilot, Commander. I need your help."

"Yes, sir?"

"We're getting murdered by the goddamned enemy. I have had a thorough analysis made. There's nothing wrong with our planes—it's the training of the men who are flying them. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"I want you to pick a group and retrain it in maneuvers and weapons employment ..."

The new group was called Top Gun, and before they were through, the ratio changed from two to one to twelve to one. For every two F-4's lost, twenty-four MiG's were shot down. The assignment had taken eight weeks of intensive training, and Commander Bellamy had finally returned to his ship. Admiral Whittaker was there to greet him. "That was a damned fine job, Commander."

"Thank you, Admiral."

"Now, let's get back to work."

"I'm ready, sir."

Robert had flown thirty-four bombing missions from the *Ranger* without incident.

His thirty-fifth mission was Package Six.

They had passed Hanoi and were heading northwest toward Phu Tho and Yen Bai. The flak was getting increasingly heavy. Edward Whittaker was seated on Robert's right, staring at the radar screen, listening to the ominous bass tones of enemy search radars sweeping the sky.

The sky directly ahead of them looked like the Fourth of July, streaked with white smoke from the light guns below, dark gray bursts from the fifty-five-millimeter shells, black clouds from the hundred-millimeter shells, and colored tracer bullets from heavy machine-gun fire.

"We're approaching target," Edward said. His voice through the headphones sounded eerily far away.

"Roger."

The A-6A Intruder was flying at 450 knots, and at that speed, even with the drag and weight of the bomb load, it handled remarkably well, moving too fast for enemies to track it.

Robert reached out and turned on the master armament switch. The dozen 500-pound bombs were now ready to be released. He was headed straight for the target.

A voice on his radio said, "Romeo—you have a bogey at four o'clock high."

Robert turned to look. A MiG was hurtling toward him, coming out of the sun. Robert banked and sent the plane into a steep dive. The MiG was on his tail. It loosed a missile. Robert checked his instrument panel. The missile was closing in rapidly. A thousand feet away ... six hundred ... four hundred ...

"Holy shit!" Edward yelled. "What are we waiting for?"

Robert waited until the last second, then released a stream of metal chaff and went into a steep climbing turn, leaving the missile to follow the chaff and crash harmlessly into the ground below.

"Thank you, God," Edward said. "And you, pal."

Robert continued the climb and swung behind the MiG. The pilot started to take evasive action, but it was too late. Robert loosed a Sidewinder missile and watched it crawl up the tail pipe of the MiG and explode. An instant later, the sky was showered with pieces of metal.

A voice came over the intercom. "Nice work, Romeo."

The plane was over the target now. "Here we go," Edward said. He pressed the red button that released the bombs and watched them tumble down toward their target. Mission accomplished. Robert headed the plane back toward the carrier.

At that instant, they felt a heavy thud. The swift and graceful bomber suddenly became sluggish.

"We've been hit!" Edward called.

Both fire-warning lights were flashing red. The plane was moving erratically, out of control.

A voice came over the radio. "Romeo, this is Tiger. Do you want us to cover you?"

Robert made a split-second decision. "No, go on to your targets. I'm going to try to make it back to base."

The plane had slowed down and was becoming more difficult to handle.

"Faster," Edward said nervously, "or we're going to be late for lunch."

Robert looked at the altimeter. The needle was dropping rapidly. He activated his radio mike. "Romeo to home base. We've taken a hit."

"Home base to Romeo. How bad is it?"

"I'm not sure. I think I can bring it home."

"Hold on." A moment later the voice returned. "Your signal is 'Charlie on arrival.'"

That meant they were cleared to land on the carrier immediately.

"Roger."

"Good luck."

The plane was starting to roll. Robert fought to correct it, trying to gain altitude. "Come on, baby, you can make it." Robert's face was tight. They were losing too much altitude. "What's our ETA?"

Edward looked at his chart. "Seven minutes."

"I'm going to get you that hot lunch."

Robert was nursing the plane along with all the skill at his command, using the throttle and rudder to try to keep it on a straight course. The altitude was still dropping alarmingly. Finally, ahead of him, Robert saw the sparkling blue waters of the Tonkin Gulf.

“We’re home free, buddy,” Robert said. “Just a few more miles.”

“Terrific. I never doubted—”

And out of nowhere, two MiG’s descended on the plane with a thunderous roar. Bullets began thudding against the fuselage.

“Eddie! Bail out!” He turned to look. Edward was slumped against his seat belt, his right side torn open, blood spattering the cockpit.

“No!” It was a scream.

A second later, Robert felt a sudden, agonizing blow to his chest. His flight suit was instantly soaked in blood. The plane started to spiral downward. He felt himself losing consciousness. With his last ounce of strength, he unfastened his seat belt. He turned to take a final look at Edward. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. He blacked out and later had no recollection of how he ejected out of the plane and parachuted into the water below. A Mayday call had been sent out, and a Sikorsky SH-3A Sea King helicopter from the U.S.S. *Yorktown* was circling, waiting to pick him up. In the distance, the crew could see Chinese junks rapidly closing in for the kill, but they were too late.

When they loaded Robert into the helicopter, a medical corpsman took one look at his torn body and said, “Jesus Christ, he’ll never even make it to the hospital.”

They gave Robert a shot of morphine, wrapped pressure bandages tightly around his chest, and flew him to the 12th Evacuation Hospital at Cu Chi Base.

The “12th Evac,” which served Cu Chi, Tay Ninh, and Dau Tieng bases, had four hundred beds in a dozen wards, housed in quonset huts arranged around a U-shaped compound connected by covered walkways. The hospital had two intensive-care units, one for surgery cases, the other for burns, and each unit was seriously overcrowded. When Robert was brought in, he left a bright red trail of blood across the hospital floor.

A harried surgeon cut the bandages from Robert’s chest, took one look, and said wearily, “He’s not going to make it. Take him in back to cold storage.”

And the doctor moved on.

Robert, fading in and out of consciousness, heard the doctor’s voice from a far distance. *So, this is it*, he thought. *What a lousy way to die.*

“You don’t want to die, do you, sailor? Open your eyes. Come on.”

He opened his eyes and saw a blurred image of a white uniform and a woman’s face. She was saying something more, but he could not make out the words. The ward was too noisy, filled with a cacophony of screams and moans of patients, and doctors yelling out orders, and nurses frantically running around administering to the savaged bodies that lay there.

Robert’s memory of the next forty-eight hours was a haze of pain and delirium. It was only later that he learned that the nurse, Susan Ward, had persuaded a doctor to operate on him and had donated her own blood for a transfusion. Fighting to keep him alive, they had put three IV’s into Robert’s ravaged body and pumped blood through them simultaneously.

When the operation was over, the surgeon in charge sighed. “We’ve wasted our time. He’s got no more than a ten percent chance of pulling through.”

But the doctor did not know Robert Bellamy. And he did not know Susan Ward. It seemed to Robert that whenever he opened his eyes, Susan was there, holding his hand, stroking his forehead, ministering to him, willing him to live. He was delirious most of the time. Susan sat quietly next to him in the dark ward in the middle of the lonely nights and listened to his ravings.

“... The DOD is wrong, you can’t head in perpendicular to the target or you’ll hit the river ... Tell them to angle the dives a few degrees off target heading ... Tell them ...” he mumbled.

Susan said soothingly, “I will.”

Robert's body was soaked in perspiration. She sponged him off. "... You have to remove all five of the safety pins or the seat won't eject ... Check them ..."

"All right. Go back to sleep now."

"... The shackles on the multiple ejector racks malfunctioned ... God only knows where the bombs landed ..."

Half the time Susan could not understand what her patient was talking about.

Susan Ward was head of the emergency operating-room nurses. She had come from a small town in Idaho and had grown up with the boy next door, Frank Prescott, the son of the mayor. Everyone in town assumed they would be married one day.

Susan had a younger brother, Michael, whom she adored. On his eighteenth birthday, he joined the Army and was sent to Vietnam, and Susan wrote to him there every day. Three months after he had enlisted, Susan's family received a telegram, and she knew what it contained before they opened it.

When Frank Prescott heard the news, he rushed over. "I'm really sorry, Susan. I liked Michael a lot." And then he made the mistake of saying, "Let's get married right away."

And Susan had looked at him and made a decision. "No. I have to do something important with my life."

"For God's sake! What's more important than marrying me?"

The answer was Vietnam.

Susan Ward went to nursing school.

She had been in Vietnam for eleven months, working tirelessly, when Commander Robert Bellamy was wheeled in and sentenced to die. Triage was a common practice in emergency evacuation hospitals. The doctors would examine two or three patients and make summary judgments as to which one they would try to save. For reasons that were never truly clear to her, Susan had taken one look at the torn body of Robert Bellamy and had known that she could not let him die. Was it her brother she was trying to save? Or was it something else? She was exhausted and overworked, but instead of taking her time off, she spent every spare moment tending to him.

Susan had looked up her patient's record. An ace Navy pilot and instructor, he had earned the Naval Cross. His birthplace was Harvey, Illinois, a small industrial city south of Chicago. He had enlisted in the Navy after graduating from college and had trained at Pensacola. He was unmarried.

Each day, as Robert Bellamy was recuperating, walking the thin line between death and life, Susan whispered to him, "Come on, sailor. I'm waiting for you."

One night, six days after he had been brought into the hospital, Robert was rambling on in his delirium, when suddenly he sat straight up in bed, looked at Susan, and said clearly, "It's not a dream. You're real."

Susan felt her heart give a little jump. "Yes," she said softly. "I'm real."

"I thought I was dreaming. I thought I had gone to heaven and God assigned you to me."

She looked into Robert's eyes and said seriously, "I would have killed you if you had died."

His eyes swept the crowded ward. "Where—where am I?"

"The 12th Evacuation Hospital at Cu Chi."

"How long have I been here?"

"Six days."

"Eddie—he—"

"I'm sorry."

"I have to tell the admiral."

She took Robert's hand and said gently, "He knows. He's been here to visit you."

Robert's eyes filled with tears. "I hate this goddamn war. I can't tell you how much I hate it."

From that moment on, Robert's progress astonished the doctors. All his vital signs stabilized.

"We'll be shipping him out of here soon," they told Susan. And she felt a sharp pang.

Robert was not sure exactly when he fell in love with Susan Ward. Perhaps it was the moment when she was dressing his wounds, and nearby they heard the sounds of bombs dropping and she murmured, “They’re playing our song.”

Or perhaps it was when they told Robert he was well enough to be transferred to Walter Reed Hospital in Washington to finish his convalescence, and Susan said, “Do you think I’m going to stay here and let some other nurse have that great body? Oh, no. I’m going to pull every string I can to go with you.”

They were married two weeks later. It took Robert a year to heal completely, and Susan tended to his every need, night and day. He had never met anyone like her, nor had he dreamed that he could ever love anyone so much. He loved her compassion and sensitivity, her passion and vitality. He loved her beauty and her sense of humor.

On their first anniversary, he said to her, “You’re the most beautiful, the most wonderful, the most caring human being in the world. There is no one on this earth with your warmth and wit and intelligence.”

And Susan had held him tightly and whispered in a nasal, chorus-girl voice, “Likewise, I’m sure.”

They shared more than love. They genuinely liked and respected each other. All their friends envied them, and with good reason. Whenever they talked about a perfect marriage, it was always Robert and Susan they held up as an example. They were compatible in every way, complete soul mates. Susan was the most sensual woman Robert had ever known, and they were able to set each other on fire with a touch, a word. One evening, when they were scheduled to go to a formal dinner party, Robert was running late. He was in the shower when Susan came into the bathroom carefully made up and dressed in a lovely strapless evening gown.

“My God, you look sexy,” Robert said. “It’s too bad we don’t have more time.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Susan murmured. And a moment later she had stripped off her clothes and joined Robert in the shower.

They never got to the party.

Susan sensed Robert’s needs almost before he knew them, and she saw to it that they were attended to. And Robert was equally attentive to her. Susan would find love notes on her dressing-room table, or in her shoes when she started to get dressed. Flowers and little gifts would be delivered to her on Groundhog Day and President Polk’s birthday and in celebration of the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

And the laughter that they shared. The wonderful laughter ...

The pilot’s voice crackled over the intercom. “We’ll be landing in Zurich in ten minutes, Commander.”

Robert Bellamy’s thoughts snapped back to the present, to his assignment. In his fifteen years with Naval Intelligence, he had been involved in dozens of challenging cases, but this one promised to be the most bizarre of them all. He was on his way to Switzerland to find a busload of anonymous witnesses who had disappeared into thin air. *Talk about looking for a needle in a haystack. I don’t even know where the haystack is. Where is Sherlock Holmes when I need him?*

“Will you fasten your seat belt, please?”

The C20A was flying over dark forests, and a moment later, skimming over the runway etched by the landing lights of the Zurich International Airport. The plane taxied to the east side of the airport and headed for the small general aviation building, away from the main terminal. There were still puddles on the tarmac from the earlier rainstorms, but the night sky was clear.

“Crazy weather,” the pilot commented. “Sunny here Sunday, rainy all day today, and clearing tonight. You don’t need a watch here. What you really need is a barometer. Can I arrange a car for you, Commander?”

“No, thanks.” From this moment on, he was completely on his own. Robert waited until the plane taxied away, and then boarded a minibus to the airport hotel, where he collapsed into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter Seven

DAY TWO

0800 Hours

The next morning Robert approached a clerk behind the Europcar desk.

“*Guten Tag.*”

It was a reminder that he was in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. “*Guten Tag.* Do you have a car available?”

“Yes, sir, we do. How long will you be needing it?”

Good question. An hour? A month? Maybe a year or two? “I’m not sure.”

“Do you plan to return the car to this airport?”

“Possibly.”

The clerk looked at him strangely. “Very well. Will you fill out these papers, please?”

Robert paid for the car with the special black credit card General Hilliard had given him. The clerk examined it, perplexed, then said, “Excuse me.” He disappeared into an office, and when he returned, Robert asked, “Any problem?”

“No, sir. None at all.”

The car was a gray Opel Omega. Robert got onto the airport highway and headed for downtown Zurich. He enjoyed Switzerland. It was one of the most beautiful countries in the world. Years earlier he had skied there. In more recent times, he had carried out assignments there, liaising with Espionage Abteilung, the Swiss intelligence agency. During World War II, the agency had been organized into three bureaus: D, P, and I, covering Germany, France, and Italy, respectively. Now its main purpose was related to detecting undercover espionage operations conducted within the various UN organizations in Geneva. Robert had friends in Espionage Abteilung, but he remembered General Hilliard's words: “*You're not to get in touch with any of them.*”

The drive into the city took twenty-five minutes. Robert reached the Dübendorf downtown exit ramp and headed for the Dolder Grand Hotel. It was exactly as he remembered it: an overgrown Swiss chateau with turrets, stately and imposing, surrounded by greenery and overlooking Lake Zurich. He parked the car and walked into the lobby. On the left was the reception desk.

“*Guten Tag.*”

“*Guten Tag. Haben Sie ein Zimmer für eine Nacht?*”

“*Ja. Wie möchten Sie bezahlen?*”

“*Mit Kreditkarte.*” The black and white credit card that General Hilliard had given him. Robert asked for a map of Switzerland and was escorted to a comfortable room in the new wing of the hotel. It had a small balcony that overlooked the lake. Robert stood there, breathing in the crisp, autumn air, thinking about the task that lay ahead of him.

He had nothing to go on. Not one damned thing. All the factors to the equation of his assignment were completely unknown. The name of the tour company. The number of passengers. Their names and where-about. “*Are the witnesses all in Switzerland?*” “*That's our problem. We have no idea where they are, or who they are.*” And it wasn't enough to find some of the witnesses. “*You must find every one of them.*” The only information he had was the place and date: Uetendorf, Sunday, October 14.

He needed a handle, something to grab onto.

If he remembered correctly, all-day tour buses left from only two major cities: Zurich and Geneva. Robert opened a desk drawer and took out the bulky *Telefonbuch*. *I should look under M, for miracle*, Robert thought. There were more than half a dozen tour companies listed: Sunshine Tours, Swisstour, Tour Service, Touralpino, Tourisma Reisen ... He would have to check each of them. He copied down the addresses of all the companies and drove to the offices of the nearest one listed.

There were two clerks behind the counter taking care of tourists. When one of them was free, Robert said, "Excuse me. My wife was on one of your tours last Sunday, and she left her purse on the bus. I think she got excited because she saw the weather balloon that crashed near Uetendorf."

The clerk frowned. "*Es tut mir viel leid.* You must be mistaken. Our tours do not go near Uetendorf."

"Oh. Sorry." *Strike one.*

The next stop promised to be more fruitful.

"Do your tours go to Uetendorf?"

"Oh, *ja.*" The clerk smiled. "Our tours go everywhere in Switzerland. They are the most scenic. We have a tour to Zermatt—the Tell Special. There is also the Glacier Express and the Palm Express. The Great Circle Tour leaves in fifteen—"

"Did you have a tour Sunday that stopped to watch that weather balloon that crashed? I know my wife was late getting back to the hotel and—"

The clerk behind the counter said indignantly, "We take great pride in the fact that our tours are *never* late. We make no unscheduled stops."

"Then one of your buses didn't stop to look at that weather balloon?"

"Absolutely not."

"Thank you." *Strike two.*

The third office Robert visited was located at Bahnhofplatz, and the sign outside said Sunshine Tours. Robert walked up to the counter. "Good afternoon. I wanted to ask you about one of your tour buses. I heard that a weather balloon crashed near Uetendorf and that your driver stopped for half an hour so the passengers could look at it."

"No, no. He only stopped for fifteen minutes. We have very strict schedules."

Home run!

"What was your interest in this, did you say?"

Robert pulled out one of the identification cards that had been given him. "I'm a reporter," Robert said earnestly, "and I'm doing a story for *Travel and Leisure* magazine on how efficient the buses in Switzerland are, compared with other countries. I wonder if I might interview your driver?"

"That would make a very interesting article. Very interesting, indeed. We Swiss pride ourselves on our efficiency."

"And that pride is well deserved," Robert assured him.

"Would the name of our company be mentioned?"

"Prominently."

The clerk smiled. "Well, then I see no harm."

"Could I speak with him now?"

"This is his day off." He wrote a name on a piece of paper.

Robert Bellamy read it upside down. *Hans Beckerman.*

The clerk added an address. "He lives in Kappel. That's a small village about forty kilometers from Zurich. You should be able to find him at home now."

Robert Bellamy took the paper. "Thank you very much. By the way," Robert said, "just so we have all the facts for the story, do you have a record of how many tickets you sold for that particular tour?"

"Of course. We keep records of all our tours. Just a moment." He picked up a ledger underneath the counter and flipped a page. "Ah, here we are. Sunday. Hans Beckerman. There were seven passengers. He drove the Iveco that day, the small bus."

Seven unknown passengers and the driver. Robert took a stab in the dark. "Would you happen to have the names of those passengers?"

"Sir, people come in off the street, buy their ticket, and take the tour. We don't ask for identification."

Wonderful. “Thank you again.” Robert started toward the door.

The clerk called out, “I hope you will send us a copy of the article.”

“Absolutely,” Robert said.

The first piece of the puzzle lay in the tour bus, and Robert drove to Talstrasse, where the buses departed, as though it might reveal some hidden clue. The Iveco bus was brown and silver, small enough to traverse the steep Alpine roads, with seats for fourteen passengers. *Who are the seven, and where have they disappeared to?* Robert got back in his car. He consulted his map and marked it. He took Lavessneralle out of the city, into the Albis, the start of the Alps, toward the village of Kappel. He headed south, driving past the small hills that surround Zurich, and began the climb into the magnificent mountain chain of the Alps. He drove through Adliswil and Langnau and Hausen and nameless hamlets with chalets and colorful picture-postcard scenery until almost an hour later, he came to Kappel. The little village consisted of a restaurant, a church, a post office, and a twelve or so houses scattered around the hills. Robert parked the car and walked into the restaurant. A waitress was clearing a table near the door.

“Entschuldigen Sie bitte, Fraulein. Welche Richtung ist das Haus von Herr Beckerman?”

“Ja.” She pointed down the road. *“An der Kirche rechts.”*

“Danke.”

Robert turned right at the church and drove up to a modest two-story stone house with a ceramic tiled roof. He got out of the car and walked up to the door. He could see no bell, and knocked.

A heavyset woman with a faint mustache answered the door. “Ja?”

“I’m sorry to bother you. Is Mr. Beckerman in?”

She eyed him suspiciously. “What do you want with him?”

Robert gave her a winning smile. “You must be Mrs. Beckerman.” He pulled out his reporter’s identification card. “I’m doing a magazine article on Swiss bus drivers, and your husband was recommended to my magazine as having one of the finest safety records in the country.”

She brightened and said proudly, “My Hans is an excellent driver.”

“That’s what everyone tells me, Mrs. Beckerman. I would like to do an interview with him.”

“An interview with my Hans for a magazine?” She was flustered. “That is very exciting. Come in, please.”

She led Robert into a small, meticulously neat living room. “Wait here, *bitte*. I will get Hans.”

The house had a low, beamed ceiling, dark wooden floors, and plain wooden furniture. There was a small stone fireplace and lace curtains at the windows.

Robert stood there thinking. This was not only his best lead, it was his *only* lead. *“People come in off the street, buy their ticket, and take the tour. We don’t ask for identification. ...”* There’s no place to go from here, Robert thought grimly. *If this doesn’t work out, I can always place an ad: Will the seven bus passengers who saw a weather balloon crash Sunday please assemble in my hotel room at oh twelve hundred tomorrow. Breakfast will be served.*

A thin, bald man appeared. His complexion was pale, and he wore a thick, black mustache that was startlingly out of keeping with the rest of his appearance. “Good afternoon, *Herr—?*”

“Smith. Good afternoon.” Robert’s voice was hearty. “I’ve certainly been looking forward to meeting you, Mr. Beckerman.”

“My wife tells me you are writing a story about bus drivers.” He spoke with a heavy German accent.

Robert smiled ingratiatingly. “That’s right. My magazine is interested in your wonderful safety record and—”

“Scheissdreck!” Beckerman said rudely. “You are interested in the thing that crashed yesterday afternoon, no?”

Robert managed to look abashed. “As a matter of fact, yes, I am interested in discussing that too.”

“Then why do you not come out and say so? Sit down.”

“Thank you.” Robert took a seat on the couch.

Beckerman said, “I am sorry I cannot offer you a drink, but we do not keep schnapps in the house anymore.” He tapped his stomach. “Ulcers. The doctors cannot even give me drugs to relieve the pain. I am allergic to all of them.” He sat down opposite Robert. “But you did not come here to talk about my health, eh? What is it you wish to know?”

“I want to talk to you about the passengers who were on your bus Sunday when you stopped near Uetendorf at the site of the weather-balloon crash.”

Hans Beckerman was staring at him. “Weather balloon? What weather balloon? What are you talking about?”

“The balloon that—”

“You mean the spaceship.”

It was Robert's turn to stare. “The ... *spaceship*?”

“*Ja*, the flying saucer.”

It took a moment for the words to sink in. Robert felt a sudden chill. “Are you telling me that you saw a flying saucer?”

“*Ja*. With dead bodies in it.”

“*Yesterday, in the Swiss Alps, a NATO weather balloon crashed. There were some experimental military objects aboard the balloon that are highly secret.*”

Robert tried hard to sound calm. “Mr. Beckerman, are you certain that what you saw was a flying saucer?”

“Of course. What they call a UFO.”

“And there were dead people inside?”

“Not people, no. *Creatures*. It is hard to describe them.” He gave a little shiver. “They were very small with big, strange eyes. They were dressed in suits of a silver metallic color. It was very frightening.”

Robert listened, his mind in a turmoil. “Did your passengers see this?”

“Oh, *ja*. We all saw it. I stopped there for maybe fifteen minutes. They wanted me to stay longer, but the company is very strict about schedules.”

Robert knew the question was futile before he even asked it. “Mr. Beckerman, would you happen to know the names of any of your passengers?”

“Mister, I drive a bus. The passengers buy a ticket in Zurich, and we take a tour southwest to Interlaken and then northwest to Bern. They can either get off at Bern or return to Zurich. Nobody gives their names.”

Robert said desperately, “There's *no* way you can identify any of them?”

The bus driver thought for a moment. “Well, I can tell you there were no children on that trip. Just men.”

“Only men?”

Beckerman thought for a moment. “No. That's not right. There was one woman too.”

Terrific. That really narrows it down, Robert thought. *Next question: Why the hell did I ever agree to this assignment?* “What you're saying, Mr. Beckerman, is that a group of tourists boarded your bus at Zurich, and then when the tour was over, they simply scattered?”

“That's right, Mr. Smith.”

So there's not even a haystack. “Do you remember *anything* at all about the passengers? Anything they said or did?”

Beckerman shook his head. “Mister, you get so you don't pay no attention to them. Unless they cause some trouble. Like that German.”

Robert sat very still. He asked softly, “What German?”

“*Affenarsch!* All the other passengers were excited about seeing the UFO and those dead creatures in it, but this old man kept complaining about how we had to hurry up to get to Bern because he had to prepare some lecture for the university in the morning ...”

A beginning. “Do you remember anything else about him?”

“No.”

“Nothing at all?”

“He was wearing a black overcoat.”

Great. “Mr. Beckerman, I want to ask you for a favor. Would you mind driving out with me to Uetendorf?”

“It's my day off. I am busy with—”

“I'll be glad to pay you.”

“*Ja?*”

“Two hundred marks.”

“I don't—”

“I'll make it four hundred marks.”

Beckerman thought for a moment. “Why not? It's a nice day for a drive, *nicht?*”

They headed south, past Luzern and the picturesque villages of Immensee and Meggen. The scenery was breathtakingly beautiful, but Robert had other things on his mind.

They passed through Engelberg, with its ancient Benedictine monastery, and Brünig, the pass leading to Interlaken. They sped past Leissigen and Faulensee, with its lovely blue lake dotted with white sailboats.

“How much farther is it?” Robert asked.

“Soon,” Hans Beckerman promised.

They had been driving for almost an hour when they came to Spiez. Hans Beckerman said, “It is not far now. Just past Thun.”

Robert felt his heart beginning to beat faster. He was about to witness something that was far beyond imagination, alien visitors from the stars. They drove through the little village of Thun, and a few minutes later, as they neared a grove of trees across the highway, Hans Beckerman pointed and said, “There!”

Robert braked to a stop and pulled over to the side of the road.

“Across the highway. Behind those trees.”

Robert felt a growing sense of excitement. “Right. Let's have a look.”

A truck was speeding by. When it had passed, Robert and Hans Beckerman crossed the road. Robert followed the bus driver up a small incline into the stand of trees.

The highway was completely hidden from sight. As they stepped into a clearing, Beckerman announced, “It is right there.”

Lying on the ground in front of them were the torn remains of a weather balloon.

Chapter Eight

I'm getting too old for this, Robert thought wearily. *I was really beginning to fall for his flying-saucer fairy tale.*

Hans Beckerman was staring at the object on the ground, a confused expression on his face. “*Verfalschen!* That is not it.”

Robert sighed. “No, it isn't, is it?”

Beckerman shook his head. “It was here yesterday.”

“Your little green men probably flew it away.”

Beckerman was stubborn, “No, no. They were both *tot*—dead.”

Tot—dead. That sums up my mission pretty well. My only lead is a crazy old man who sees spaceships.

Robert walked over to the balloon to examine it more closely. It was a large aluminum envelope, fourteen feet in diameter, with serrated edges where it had ripped open when it crashed to earth. All the instruments had been removed, just as General Hilliard had told him. “*I can't stress enough the importance of what was in that balloon.*”

Robert circled the deflated balloon, his shoes squishing in the wet grass, looking for anything that might give him the slightest clue. Nothing. It was identical to a dozen other weather balloons he had seen over the years.

The old man still would not give up, filled with Germanic stubbornness. “Those alien things ... They made it look like this. They can do anything, you know.”

There's nothing more to be done here, Robert decided. His socks had gotten wet walking through the tall grass. He started to turn away, then hesitated, struck by a thought. He walked back to the balloon. “Lift up a corner of this, will you?”

Beckerman looked at him a moment, surprised. “You wish me to raise it up?”

“*Bitte.*”

Beckerman shrugged. He picked up a corner of the lightweight material and lifted it while Robert raised another corner. Robert held the piece of aluminum over his head while he walked underneath the balloon toward the center. His feet sank into the grass. “It's wet under here,” Robert called out.

“Of course.” The *Dummkopf* was left unsaid. “It rained all yesterday. The whole ground is wet.”

Robert crawled out from under the balloon. “It should be dry.” “*Crazy weather,*” the pilot said. “*Sunny here Sunday.*” *The day the balloon crashed. “Rainy all day today and clearing tonight. You don't need a watch here. What you really need is a barometer.”*

“What?”

“What was the weather like when you saw the UFO?”

Beckerman thought for a moment. “It was a nice afternoon.”

“Sunny?”

“*Ja.* Sunny.”

“But it rained all day yesterday?”

Beckerman was looking at him, puzzled. “So?”

“So if the balloon was here all night, the ground under it should be dry—or damp, at the most, through osmosis. But it's soaking wet, like the rest of this area.”

Beckerman was staring. “I don't understand. What does that mean?”

“It could mean,” Robert said carefully, “that someone placed this balloon here yesterday after the rain started and took away what you saw.” Or was there some saner explanation he had not thought of?

“Who would do such a crazy thing?”

Not so crazy, Robert thought. *The Swiss government could have planted this to deceive any curious visitors. The first stratagem of a cover-up is disinformation.* Robert walked through the wet grass scanning the ground, cursing himself for being a gullible idiot.

Hans Beckerman was watching Robert suspiciously. "What magazine did you say you write for, mister?"

"*Travel and Leisure.*"

Hans Beckerman brightened. "Oh. Then I suppose you will want to take a picture of me, like the other fellow did."

"What?"

"That photographer who took pictures of us."

Robert froze. "Who are you talking about?"

"That photographer fellow. The one who took pictures of us at the wreck. He said he would send us each a print. Some of the passengers had cameras, too."

Robert said slowly, "Just a moment. Are you saying that someone took a picture of the passengers here in front of the UFO?"

"That's what I am trying to tell you."

"And he promised to send you each a print?"

"That's right."

"Then he must have taken your names and addresses."

"Well, sure. Otherwise, how would he know where to send them?"

Robert stood still, a feeling of euphoria sweeping over him. *Serendipity, Robert, you lucky sonofabitch!* An impossible mission had suddenly become a piece of cake. He was no longer looking for seven unknown passengers. All he had to do was find one photographer. "Why didn't you mention him before, Mr. Beckerman?"

"You asked me about passengers."

"You mean he wasn't a passenger?"

Hans Beckerman shook his head. "*Nein.*" He pointed. "His car was stalled across the highway. A tow truck was starting to haul it away, and then there was this loud crash, and he ran across the road to see what was happening. When he saw what it was, the fellow ran back to his car, grabbed his cameras, and came back. Then he asked us all to pose in front of the saucer thing."

"Did this photographer give you his name?"

"No."

"Do you remember anything about him?"

Hans Beckerman concentrated. "Well, he was a foreigner. American or English."

"You said a tow truck was getting ready to haul his car away?"

"That's right."

"Do you remember which way the truck was headed?"

"North. I figured he was towing it into Bern. Thun is closer, but on Sunday, all the garages in Thun are closed."

Robert grinned. "Thank you. You've been very helpful."

"You won't forget to send me your article when it's finished?"

"No. Here's your money and an extra hundred marks for your great help. I'll drive you home." They walked over to the car. As Beckerman opened the door, he stopped and turned toward Robert.

"That was very generous of you." He took from his pocket a small rectangular piece of metal, the size of a cigarette lighter, containing a tiny white crystal.

"What's this?"

"I found it on the ground Sunday before we got back on the bus."

Robert examined the strange object. It was as light as paper and was the color of sand. A rough edge at one end indicated that it might be part of another piece. *Part of the equipment that was in the weather balloon? Or part of a UFO?*

“Maybe it will bring you luck,” said Beckerman, as he placed the bills Robert had given him in his wallet. “It certainly worked for me.” He smiled broadly and got into the car.

It was time to ask himself the hard question: *Do I really believe in UFOs?* He had read many wild newspaper stories about people who said they had been beamed up into spaceships and had had all kinds of weird experiences, and he had always attributed those reports to people who were either looking for publicity or who should have thrown themselves on the mercy of a good psychiatrist. But in the past few years, there had been reports that were less easy to dismiss. Reports of UFO sightings by astronauts, Air Force pilots, and police officials, people with credibility, who shunned publicity. In addition there had been the disturbing report of the UFO crash at Roswell, New Mexico, where the bodies of aliens had purportedly been discovered. The government was supposed to have hushed that up and removed all the evidence. In World War II, pilots had reported strange sightings of what they called Foo fighters, unidentified objects that buzzed them and then disappeared. There were stories of towns visited by unexplainable objects that had come speeding through the sky. *What if there really are aliens in UFOs from another galaxy?* Robert wondered. *How would it affect our world? Would it mean peace? War? The end of civilization as we know it?* He found himself half hoping that Hans Beckerman was a raving lunatic, and that what had crashed was really a weather balloon. He would have to find another witness either to verify Beckerman's story or to refute it. On the surface, the story seemed incredible, but yet, there was something nagging at Robert. *If it was only a weather balloon that crashed, even if it did carry special equipment, why was I called into a meeting at the National Security Agency at six o'clock in the morning and told that it was urgent that all the witnesses be found quickly? Is there a cover-up? And if so ... why?*

Chapter Nine

Later that day, a press conference was held in Geneva in the austere offices of the Swiss Ministry of Internal Affairs. There were more than fifty reporters in the room and an overflow crowd outside in the corridor. There were representatives from television, radio, and the press from more than a dozen countries, many of them loaded down with microphones and television gear. They all seemed to be speaking at once.

“We've heard reports that it was not a weather balloon ...”

“Is it true that it was a flying saucer?”

“There are rumors that there were alien bodies aboard the ship ...”

“Was one of the aliens alive?”

“Is the government trying to hide the truth from the people? ...”

The press officer raised his voice to regain control. “Ladies and gentlemen, there has been a simple misunderstanding. We get calls all the time. People see satellites, shooting stars ... Isn't it interesting that reports of UFOs are always made anonymously? Perhaps this caller really believed it was a UFO, but in actuality it was a weather balloon that fell to the ground. We have arranged transportation to take you to it. If you will follow me, please ...”

Fifteen minutes later, two busloads of reporters and television cameras were on their way to Uetendorf to see the remains of a weather-balloon crash. When they arrived, they stood in the wet grass surveying the torn metallic envelope. The press officer said, “This is your mysterious flying saucer. It was sent aloft from our air base in Vevey. To the best of our knowledge, ladies and gentlemen, there are no unidentified flying objects that our government has not been able to explain satisfactorily, nor to our knowledge, are there any extraterrestrials visiting us. It is our government's firm policy that if we should come across any such evidence, we would immediately make that information available to the public. If there are no further questions ...”

Chapter Ten

Hangar 17 at Langley Air Force Base in Virginia was locked in complete and rigid security. Outside, four armed marines guarded the perimeter of the building, and inside, three high-ranking Army officers stayed on alternate watches of eight hours each, guarding a sealed room inside the hangar. None of the officers knew what he was guarding. Besides the scientists and doctors who were working inside, there had been only three visitors permitted in the sealed chamber.

The fourth visitor was just arriving. He was greeted by Brigadier General Paxton, the officer in charge of security. "Welcome to our menagerie."

"I've been looking forward to this."

"You won't be disappointed. Come this way, please."

Outside the door of the sealed room was a rack containing four white, sterile suits that completely covered the body.

"Would you please put one on?" the general asked.

"Certainly." Janus slipped into the suit. Only his face was visible through the glass mask. He put large white slippers over his shoes, and the general led him to the entrance of the sealed room. The marine guard stepped aside, and the general opened the door. "In here."

Janus entered the chamber and looked around. In the center of the room was the spaceship. On white autopsy tables at the other side lay the bodies of the two aliens. A pathologist was performing an autopsy on one of them.

General Paxton directed the visitor's attention to the spaceship.

"We're dealing here with what we believe to be a scout ship," General Paxton explained. "We're sure it has some way of communicating directly with the mother ship."

The two men moved closer to examine the spacecraft. It was approximately thirty-five feet in diameter. The interior was shaped like a pearl, had an expandable ceiling, and contained three couches that resembled recliner chairs. The walls were covered with panels containing vibrating metal disks.

"There's a lot here we haven't been able to figure out yet," General Paxton admitted. "But what we've already learned is amazing." He pointed to an array of equipment in small panels. "There's an integrated wide-field-of-view optical system, what appears to be a life-scan system, a communication system with voice-synthesis capability, and a navigational system that, frankly, has us stumped. We think it works on some kind of electromagnetic pulse."

"Any weapons aboard?" Janus asked.

General Paxton spread out his hands in a gesture of defeat. "We're not sure. There's a lot of hardware here we don't begin to understand."

"What is its source of energy?"

"Our best guess is that it uses monoatomic hydrogen in a closed loop so that its waste product, water, can be continuously recycled into hydrogen for power. With all that perpetual energy, it has a free ride in interplanetary space. It may be years before we solve all the secrets here. And there's something else that's puzzling. The bodies of the two aliens were strapped into their couches. But the indentations in the third couch indicate that it was occupied."

"Are you saying," Janus asked slowly, "that one may be missing?"

"It certainly looks that way."

Janus stood there a moment frowning. "Let's have a look at our trespassers."

The two men walked over to the tables where the two aliens lay. Janus stood there staring at the strange figures. It was incredible that things so foreign to humanity could exist as sentient beings. The foreheads of the aliens were larger than he had expected. The creatures were completely bald, with no eyelids or eyebrows. The eyes resembled Ping-Pong balls.

The doctor performing the autopsy looked up as the men approached. "It's fascinating," he said. "A hand has been severed from one of the aliens. There's no sign of blood, but there are what appear to be veins that contain a green liquid. Most of it has drained out."

"A green liquid?" Janus asked.

"Yes." The doctor hesitated. "We believe these creatures are a form of vegetable life."

"A thinking vegetable? Are you serious?"

"Watch this." The doctor picked up a watering can and sprinkled water over the arm of the alien with a missing hand. For a moment, nothing happened. And then suddenly, at the end of the arm, green matter oozed out and slowly began to form a hand.

The two men stared, shocked. "Jesus! Are these things dead or not?"

"That's an interesting question. These two figures are not alive, in the human sense, but neither do they fit our definition of death. I would say they're dormant."

Janus was still staring at the newly formed hand.

"Many plants show various forms of intelligence."

"Intelligence?"

"Oh, yes. There are plants that disguise themselves, protect themselves. At this moment, we're doing some amazing experiments on plant life."

Janus said, "I would like to see those experiments."

"Certainly. I'll be happy to arrange it."

The huge greenhouse laboratory was in a complex of government buildings thirty miles outside of Washington, D.C. Hanging on the wall was an inscription that read:

The maples and ferns are still uncorrupt,

Yet, no doubt, when they come to consciousness,

They too, will curse and swear.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Nature, 1836

Professor Rachman, who was in charge of the complex, was an earnest gnome of a man, filled with enthusiasm for his profession. "It was Charles Darwin who was the first to perceive the ability of plants to think. Luther Burbank followed up by communicating with them."

"You really believe that is possible?"

"We know it is. George Washington Carver communed with plants, and they gave him hundreds of new products. Carver said, 'When I touch a flower, I am touching Infinity. Flowers existed long before there were human beings on this earth, and they will continue to exist for millions of years after. Through the flower, I talk to Infinity ...'"

Janus looked around the enormous greenhouse they were standing in. It was filled with plants and exotic flowers that rainbowed the room. The mixture of perfumes was overpowering.

"Everything in this room is alive," Professor Rachman said. "These plants can feel love, hate, pain, excitement ... just as animals do. Sir Jagadis Chandra Bose proved that they respond to a tone of voice."

"How does one prove something like that?" Janus asked.

"I will be happy to demonstrate." Rachman walked over to a table covered with plants. Beside the table was a polygraph machine. Rachman lifted one of the electrodes and attached it to a plant. The needle on the dial of the polygraph was at rest. "Watch," he said.

He leaned closer to the plant and whispered, "I think you are very beautiful. You are more beautiful than all the other plants here ..."

Janus watched the needle move ever so slightly.

Suddenly, Professor Rachman screamed at the plant, "You are ugly! You are going to die! Do you hear me? You are going to die!"

The needle began to quiver, then it moved sharply upward.

“My God,” Janus said. “I can't believe it.”

“What you see,” Rachman said, “is the equivalent of a human being screaming. National magazines have published articles about these experiments. One of the most interesting was a blind experiment conducted by six students. One of them, unknown to the others, was chosen to walk into a room with two plants, one of them wired to a polygraph. He completely destroyed the other plant. Later, one by one, the students were sent into the room to pass by the plants. When the innocent students walked in, the polygraph registered nothing. But the moment the guilty one appeared, the needle on the polygraph shot up.”

“That's incredible.”

“But true. We've also learned that plants respond to different kinds of music.”

“*Different* kinds?”

“Yes. They did an experiment at Temple Buell College in Denver where healthy flowers were put in three separate glass cases. Acid rock was piped into one, soft East Indian sitar music was piped into the second, and the third had no music. A CBS camera crew recorded the experiment using time-lapse photography. At the end of two weeks, the flowers exposed to the rock music were dead, the group with no music was growing normally, and the ones that heard the sitar music had turned into beautiful blooms, with flowers and stems reaching toward the source of the sound. Walter Cronkite ran the film on his news show. If you wish to check it, it was on October 26, 1970.”

“Are you saying plants have an intelligence?”

“They breathe, and eat, and reproduce. They can feel pain, and they can utilize defenses against their enemies. For example, terpenes are used by certain plants to poison the soil around them and to discourage competitors. Other plants exude alkaloids to make them unpalatable to insects. We've proved that plants communicate with one another by pheromones.”

“Yes. I've heard of that,” Janus said.

“Some plants are meat eaters. The venus flytrap, for example. Certain orchids look and smell like female bees, to decoy male bees. Others resemble female wasps to attract the males to visit them and pick up pollen. Another type of orchid has an aroma like rotting meat to coax carrion flies in the neighborhood to come to them.”

Janus was listening to every word.

“The pink lady's-slipper has a hinged upper lip that closes when a bee lands, and traps it. The only escape is through a narrow passageway out the rear, and as the bee fights its way to freedom, it picks up a cap of pollen. There are five thousand flowering plants that grow in the Northeast, and each species has its own characteristics. There is no doubt about it. It's been proven over and over that living plants have an intelligence.”

Janus was thinking: *And the missing alien is at large somewhere.*

Chapter Eleven

DAY THREE

Bern, Switzerland

Wednesday, October 17

Bern was one of Robert's favorite cities. It was an elegant town, filled with lovely monuments and beautiful old stone buildings dating back to the eighteenth century. It was the capital of Switzerland and one of its most prosperous cities, and Robert wondered whether the fact that the streetcars were green had anything to do with the color of money. He had found that the Berners were more easygoing than the citizens from other parts of Switzerland. They moved more deliberately, spoke more slowly, and were generally calmer. He had worked in Bern several times in the past with the Swiss Secret Service, operating out of their headquarters at Waisenhausplatz. He had friends there who could have been helpful, but his instructions were clear. Puzzling, but clear.

It took fifteen phone calls for Robert to locate the garage that towed the photographer's car. It was a small garage located on Fribourgstrasse, and the mechanic, Fritz Mandel, was also the owner. Mandel appeared to be in his late forties, with a gaunt, acne-pitted face, a thin body, and an enormous beer belly. He was working down in the pit of the grease rack when Robert arrived.

"Good afternoon," Robert called.

Mandel looked up. "*Guten Tag*. What can I do for you?"

"I'm interested in a car you towed in Sunday."

"Just a minute till I finish this up."

Ten minutes later, Mandel climbed out of the pit and wiped his oily hands on a filthy cloth.

"You're the one who called this morning. Was there some complaint about that tow job?" Mandel asked. "I'm not responsible for—"

"No," Robert reassured him. "Not at all. I'm conducting a survey, and I'm interested in the driver of the car."

"Come into the office."

The two men went into the small office, and Mandel opened a file cabinet. "Last Sunday, you said?"

"That's right."

Mandel took out a card. "*Ja*. That was the *Arschficker* who took our picture in front of that UFO."

Robert's palms felt suddenly moist. "You saw the UFO?"

"*Ja*. I almost *brachte aus*."

"Can you describe it?"

Mandel shuddered. "It—it seemed alive."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I mean ... there was a kind of light around it. It kept changing colors. It looked blue ... then green ... I don't know. It's hard to describe. And there were these little creatures inside. Not human, but—" He broke off.

"How many?"

"Two."

"Were they alive?"

"They looked dead to me." He mopped his brow. "I'm glad you believe me. I tried to tell my friends, and they laughed at me. Even my wife thought I had been drinking. But I know what I saw."

"About the car you towed ..." Robert said.

"*Ja*. The Renault. It had an oil leak, and the bearings burned out. The tow job cost a hundred and twenty-five francs. I charge double on Sundays."

“Did the driver pay by check or credit card?”

“I don't take checks, and I don't take no credit cards. He paid in cash.”

“Swiss francs?”

“Pounds.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I remember I had to check the rate of exchange.”

“Mr. Mandel, do you happen to have a record of the license number of the car?”

“Of course.” Mandel said. He glanced down at the card. “It was a rental. Avis. He rented it in Geneva.”

“Would you mind giving me that license number?”

“Sure, why not?” He wrote the number down on a piece of paper and handed it to Robert.

“What is this all about, anyway? The UFO thing?”

“No,” Robert said, in his sincerest voice. He took out his wallet and pulled out an identification card. “I'm with the IAC, the International Auto Club. My company is doing a survey on tow trucks.”

“Oh.”

Robert walked out of the garage and thought dazedly, *It looks like we have a fucking UFO with two dead aliens on our hands.* Then why had General Hilliard lied to him when he knew Robert would discover that it was a flying saucer that had crashed?

There could only be one explanation, and Robert felt a sudden, cold chill.

Chapter Twelve

The huge mother ship floated noiselessly through dark space, seemingly motionless, traveling at twenty-two thousand miles an hour in exact synchronization with the orbit of the earth. The six aliens aboard were studying the three-dimensional field-of-view optical screen that covered one wall of the spaceship. On the monitor, as the planet Earth rotated, they watched holographic pictures of what lay below while an electronic spectrograph analyzed the chemical components of the images that appeared. The atmosphere of the land masses they overflowed was heavily polluted. Huge factories befouled the air with thick, black, poisonous gases while unbiodegradable refuse was dumped into landfills and into the seas.

The aliens looked down at the oceans, once pristine and blue, now black with oil and brown with scum. The coral of the Great Barrier Reef was turning bleach-white, and fish were dying by the billions. Where trees had been stripped in the Amazon rain forest, there was a huge, barren crater. The instruments on the spaceship indicated that the earth's temperature had risen since their last exploration three years earlier. They could see wars being waged on the planet below, which spewed new poisons into the atmosphere.

The aliens communicated by mental telepathy.

Nothing has changed with the earthlings.

It is a pity. They have learned nothing.

We will teach them.

Have you tried to reach the others?

Yes. Something is wrong. There is no reply.

You must keep trying. We must find the ship.

On earth, thousands of feet below the spaceship's orbit, Robert placed a call from a secure phone to General Hilliard. He came on the line almost immediately.

"Good afternoon, Commander. Do you have anything to report?"

Yes. I would like to report that you are a lying sonofabitch. "About that weather balloon, General ... it seems to have turned out to be a UFO." He waited.

"Yes, I know. There were important security reasons why I couldn't tell you everything earlier."

Bureaucratic double-talk. There was a short silence.

General Hilliard said, "I'm going to tell you something in the strictest confidence, Commander. Our government had an encounter with extraterrestrials three years ago. They landed at one of our NATO air bases. We were able to communicate with them."

Robert felt his heart begin to beat faster. "What—what did they say?"

"That they intended to destroy us."

He felt a shock go through him. "*Destroy us?*"

"Exactly. They said they were coming back to take over this planet and make slaves of us, and that there is nothing we can do to prevent them. Not yet. But we're working on ways to stop them. That's why it's imperative that we avoid a public panic so we can buy time. I think you can understand now why it's so important that the witnesses are warned not to discuss what they saw. If word of the Idents, as we refer to them, leaked out, it would be a worldwide disaster."

"You don't think it would be better to prepare people and—?"

"Commander, in 1938, a young actor named Orson Welles broadcast a radio play called 'War of the Worlds' about aliens invading the earth. Within minutes there was panic in cities all over America. A hysterical population tried to flee from the imaginary invaders. The telephone lines were jammed, the highways were clogged. People were killed. There was total chaos. No, we have to be prepared for the aliens before we go public with this. We want you to find those witnesses for their own protection, so we can keep this under control."

Robert found that he was perspiring. "Yes. I—I understand."

"Good. I gather you've talked to one of the witnesses?"

"I've found two of them."

"Their names?"

"Hans Beckerman—he was the driver of the tour bus. He lives in Kappel ..."

"And the second?"

"Fritz Mandel. He owns his own garage in Bern. He was the mechanic who towed the car of a third witness."

"The name of that witness?"

"I don't have it yet. I'm working on it. Would you like me to speak with them about not discussing this UFO business with anyone?"

"Negative. Your assignment is simply to locate the witnesses. After that we'll let their respective governments deal with them. Have you learned how many witnesses there are?"

"Yes. Seven passengers plus the driver, the mechanic, and a passing motorist."

"You must locate them all. Each and every one of the ten witnesses who saw the crash. Understood?"

"Yes, General."

Robert replaced the receiver, his mind in a whirl. UFOs were real. The aliens were enemies. It was a horrifying thought.

Suddenly, the uneasy feeling Robert had had earlier returned in full force. General Hilliard had given him this assignment, but they had not told him everything. What else were they holding back?

The Avis rental-car company is located at 44 Rue de Lausanne in the heart of Geneva. Robert stormed into the office and approached a woman behind the desk.

"May I help you?"

Robert slammed down the piece of paper with the license number of the Renault written on it. "You rented this car out last week. I want the name of the person who rented it." His voice was angry.

The clerk drew back. "I'm sorry, we are not permitted to give out that information."

"Well, that's just too bad," Robert retorted, "because in that case, I'm going to have to sue your company for a great deal of money."

"I do not understand. What is the problem?"

"I'll tell you what the problem is, lady. Last Sunday this car ran into mine on the highway and did a hell of a lot of damage. I managed to get his license number, but the man drove away before I could stop him."

"I see." The clerk studied Robert a moment. "Excuse me, please." She disappeared into a back room. In a few minutes when she returned, she was carrying a file. "According to our records, there was a problem with the engine of the car, but there was no report of any accident."

"Well, I'm reporting it now. And I'm holding your company responsible for this. You're going to have to pay to have my car repaired. It's a brand-new Porsche, and it's going to cost you a fortune ..."

"I'm very sorry, sir, but since the accident was not reported, we cannot take any responsibility for it."

"Look," Robert said in a more reasonable tone of voice, "I want to be fair. I don't want to hold your company responsible. All I want to do is have that man pay for the damage he did to my car. It was a hit-and-run. I may even have to bring the police into this. If you give me the man's name and address, I can talk directly to him, and we can settle it between us and leave your company out of it. Is that fair enough?"

The clerk stood there, making up her mind. "Yes. We would much prefer that." She looked down at the file in her hand. "The name of the person who rented the car is Leslie Mothershed."

"And his address?"

“Two thirteen A Grove Road, Whitechapel, London, East Three.” She looked up. “You are certain our company will not be involved in any litigation?”

“You have my word on it,” Robert assured her. “This is a private matter between Leslie Mothershed and me.”

Commander Robert Bellamy was on the next Swissair flight to London.

He sat in the dark alone, concentrating, meticulously going over every phase of the plan, making certain that there were no loopholes, that nothing could go wrong. His thoughts were interrupted by the soft buzz of the telephone.

“Janus here.”

“Janus. General Hilliard.”

“Proceed.”

“Commander Bellamy has located the first two witnesses.”

“Very good. Have it attended to immediately.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Where is the commander now?”

“On his way to London. He should have number three confirmed shortly.”

“I will alert the committee as to his progress. Continue to keep me informed. The condition of this operation must remain Nova Red.”

“Understood, sir. I would suggest—”

The line was dead.

FLASH MESSAGE

TOP SECRET ULTRA

NSA TO DEPUTY DIRECTOR BUNDESANWALTSCHAFT

EYES ONLY

COPY ONE OF (ONE) COPIES

SUBJECT: OPERATION DOOMSDAY

1. HANS BECKERMAN—KAPPEL

2. FRITZ MANDEL—BERN

END OF MESSAGE

Chapter Thirteen

At midnight in a small farmhouse fifteen miles from Uetendorf, the Lagenfeld family was disturbed by a series of strange events. The older child was awakened by a shimmering yellow light shining through his bedroom window. When he got up to investigate, the light had disappeared.

In the yard, Tozzi, their German shepherd, began barking furiously, awakening old man Lagenfeld. Reluctantly, the farmer got out of bed to quiet the animal, and when he stepped outside he heard the sound of frightened sheep crashing against their pen, trying to escape. As Lagenfeld passed the trough, which had been filled to the brim by the recent rainfall, he noticed that it was bone dry.

Tozzi came running to his side, whimpering. Lagenfeld absently patted the animal on the head. "It's all right, boy. It's all right."

And at that moment, every light in the house went out. When the farmer returned to the house and picked up the telephone to call the power company, the phone was dead.

If the lights had remained on a moment longer, the farmer might have seen a strangely beautiful woman walk out of his barnyard and into the field beyond.

Chapter Fourteen

The Bundesanwaltschaft—Geneva

1300 Hours

The government minister seated in the inner sanctum of the headquarters of the Swiss intelligence agency watched the deputy director finish reading the message. He put the message in a folder marked Top Secret, placed the folder in the desk drawer, and locked the drawer.

“Hans Beckerman *und* Fritz Mandel.”

“Ja.”

“No problem, *Herr* Minister. It shall be taken care of.”

“Gut.”

“Wann?”

“Sofort. Immediately.”

The following morning on his way to work, Hans Beckerman's ulcers were bothering him. *I should have pushed that reporter fellow to pay me for that thing I found on the ground. These magazines are all rich. I probably could have gotten a few hundred marks. Then I could have gone to a decent doctor and had my ulcers taken care of.*

He was driving past Turler Lake, when ahead of him, at the side of the highway, he saw a woman waving, trying to get a lift. Beckerman slowed down to get a better look at her. She was young and attractive. Hans pulled over to the side of the road. The woman approached the car.

“Guten Tag,” Beckerman said. “Can I help you?” She was even prettier close up.

“Danke.” She had a Swiss accent. “I had a fight with my boyfriend, and he dropped me here in the middle of nowhere.”

“Tsk, tsk. That's terrible.”

“Would you mind giving me a lift into Zurich?”

“Not at all. Get in, get in.”

The hitchhiker opened the door and climbed in beside him. “This is very kind of you,” she said. “My name is Karen.”

“Hans.” He started driving.

“I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't come along, Hans.”

“Oh, I'm sure someone else would have picked up a pretty woman like you.”

She moved closer to him. “But I'll bet he wouldn't have been as good looking as you.”

He glanced over at her. “Ja?”

“I think you are very handsome.”

He smiled. “You should tell that to my wife.”

“Oh, you're married.” She sounded disappointed. “Why is it all the wonderful men are married? You look very intelligent, too.”

He sat up straighter.

“To tell you the truth, I'm sorry I ever got involved with my boyfriend.” She shifted around in her seat, and her skirt climbed up her thigh. He tried not to look. “I like older, mature men, Hans. I think they're much more sexy than young men.” She snuggled up against him. “Do you like sex, Hans?”

He cleared his throat. “Do I—? Well, you know ... I'm a man ...”

“I can see that,” she said. She stroked his thigh. “Can I tell you something? That fight with my boyfriend made me very horny. Would you like me to make love to you?”

He could not believe his luck. She was a beauty, and from what he could see, she had a great body. He swallowed. “I would, but I'm on my way to work and—”

“It will only take a few minutes.” She smiled. “There’s a side road up ahead that leads into the woods. Why don’t we stop there?”

He could feel himself getting excited. *Sicher. Wait until I tell the boys at the office about this! They’ll never believe it.*

“Sure. Why not?” Hans turned the car off the highway and took the little dirt road that led into a grove where they could not be seen by passing motorists.

She slowly ran her hand up his thigh. “*Mein Gott*, you have strong legs.”

“I was a runner when I was younger,” Beckerman boasted.

“Let’s get your trousers off.” She undid his belt and helped him slide his pants down. He was already tumescent.

“*Ach! Ein grosser!*” She began to stroke him.

He moaned, “*Leck mich doch am Schwanz.*”

“You like to be kissed down there?”

“*Ja.*” His wife never did that for him.

“*Gut.* Now just relax.”

Beckerman sighed and closed his eyes. Her soft hands were caressing his balls. He felt the sharp sting of a needle in his thigh, and his eyes flew open. “*Wie—?*”

His body stiffened, and his eyes bulged out. He was choking, unable to breathe. The woman watched as Beckerman slumped over the steering wheel. She got out of the car and slid his body into the passenger seat, then got behind the wheel of the car and drove back down the dirt road onto the highway. At the edge of the steep mountain road, she waited until the road was clear, then opened the door, stepped on the gas pedal, and as the car started to move, she jumped. She stood there watching the car tumble down the steep cliff. Five minutes later, a black limousine pulled up beside her.

“*Irgendwelche Problem?*”

“*Keins.*”

Fritz Mandel was in his office ready to close the garage when two men approached.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I’m closing. I can’t—”

One of the men interrupted. “Our car is stuck down the highway. *Kaputt!* We need a tow.”

“My wife is waiting for me. We are having company tonight. I can give you the name of another —”

“It’s worth two hundred dollars to us. We’re in a hurry.”

“Two hundred dollars?”

“Yes. And our car is in pretty bad shape. We’d like you to do some work on it. That would probably come to another two, three hundred.”

Mandel was becoming interested. “*Ja?*”

“It’s a Rolls,” one of the men said. “Let’s see the kind of equipment you have here.” They walked into the service area and stood at the edge of the pit. “That’s pretty good equipment.”

“Yes, sir,” Mandel said proudly. “The very best.”

The stranger took out a wallet. “Here. I can give you some money in advance.” He removed some bills and handed them to Mandel. As he did so, the wallet slipped out of his hands and fell down into the pit. “*Verflucht!*”

“Don’t worry,” Mandel said. “I’ll get it.”

He climbed down into the pit. As he did so, one of the men walked over to the control button that operated the raised hydraulic lift and pressed it. The lift started to descend.

Mandel looked up. “*Be careful! What are you doing?*”

He started to scramble up the side. As his fingers touched the ledge, the second man slammed his foot down on Mandel’s hand, smashing it, and Mandel dropped back down into the pit, shrieking. The heavy hydraulic lift was inexorably descending on him.

“Let me out of here!” he cried. “*Hilfe!*”

The lift caught him on his shoulder and began pressing him down into the cement floor. A few minutes later, when the terrible screams had stopped, one of the men pressed the button that raised the lift. His companion went down into the pit and retrieved his wallet, careful not to get blood on his clothes. The two men returned to their car and drove off into the quiet night.

FLASH MESSAGE

TOP SECRET ULTRA

ESPIONAGE ABTEILUNG TO

DEPUTY DIRECTOR NSA

EYES ONLY

COPY ONE OF (ONE) COPIES

SUBJECT:

OPERATION DOOMSDAY

1. HANS BECKERMAN—

TERMINATED

2. FRITZ MANDEL—

TERMINATED

END OF MESSAGE

Ottawa, Canada

2400 Hours

Janus was addressing the group of twelve.

“Satisfactory progress is being made. Two of the witnesses have already been silenced. Commander Bellamy is on the trail of a third.”

“Has there been a breakthrough yet on SDI?” The Italian. *Impetuous. Volatile.*

“Not yet, but we're confident that the Star Wars technology will be up and functioning very soon.”

“We must do everything possible to hurry it. If it is a question of money—” The Saudi. *Enigmatic. Withdrawn.*

“No. There's just a bit more testing to do.”

“When is the next test taking place?” The Australian. *Hearty. Clever.*

“In one week. We will meet here again in forty-eight hours.”

Chapter Fifteen

DAY FOUR

London, Thursday, October 18

Leslie Mothershed's role model was Robin Leach. An avid viewer of “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous,” Mothershed carefully studied the way Robin Leach's guests walked and talked and dressed because he knew that one day he would appear on that program. From the time he was a small boy, he had felt that he was destined to be *somebody*, to be rich and famous.

“You're very special,” his mother would tell him. “My baby is going to be known all over the world.”

The young boy would go to sleep with that sentence ringing in his ears until he truly believed it. As Mothershed grew older, he became aware that he had a problem: He had no idea exactly *how* he was going to become rich and famous. For a period of time, he toyed with the notion of being a movie star, but he was inordinately shy. He briefly contemplated becoming a soccer star, but he was not athletic. He thought about being a famous scientist, or a great lawyer, commanding tremendous fees. His school grades, unfortunately, were mediocre, and he dropped out of school without being any closer to fame. Life was simply not fair. He was physically unprepossessing, thin, with a pale, sickly complexion, and he was short, exactly five feet five and a half inches. Mothershed always stressed the extra half inch. He consoled himself with the fact that many famous men were short: Dudley Moore, Dustin Hoffman, Peter Falk ...

The only profession that really interested Leslie Mothershed was photography. Taking photographs was so ridiculously simple. Anyone could do it. One simply pressed a button. His mother had bought him a camera for his sixth birthday and had been wildly extravagant in her praise of the pictures he had taken. By the time he was in his teens, Mothershed had become convinced that he was a brilliant photographer. He told himself that he was every bit as good as Ansel Adams, Richard Avedon, or Margaret Bourke-White. With a loan from his mother, Leslie Mothershed set up his own photography business in his Whitechapel flat.

“Start small,” his mother told him, “but think big,” and that is exactly what Leslie Mothershed did. He started very small and thought very big, but unfortunately, he had no talent for photography. He photographed parades and animals and flowers, and confidently sent his pictures off to newspapers and magazines, and they were always returned. Mothershed consoled himself with the thought of all the geniuses who had been rejected before their ability was recognized. He considered himself a martyr to philistinism.

And then, out of the blue, his big opportunity had come. His mother's cousin, who worked for the British publishing firm of HarperCollins, had confided to Mothershed that they were planning to commission a coffee-table book on Switzerland.

“They haven't selected the photographer yet, Leslie, so if you get yourself over to Switzerland right away and bring back some great pictures, the book could be yours.”

Leslie Mothershed hurriedly packed up his cameras and headed for Switzerland. He knew—he really knew—that this was the break he had been looking for. At last the idiots were going to recognize his talents. He rented a car in Geneva and traveled around the country taking pictures of Swiss chalets, waterfalls, and snow-capped peaks. He photographed sunrises and sunsets and farmers working in the fields. And then, in the middle of all that, fate had stepped in and changed his life. He was on his way to Bern when his motor failed. He pulled over to the side of the highway, furious. *Why me?* Mothershed moaned. *Why do these things always happen to me?*

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