

THE THIRD **REVOLUTION**

By Gregory Kay

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Other Books by Gregory Kay

THE THIRD REVOLUTION II: THE LONG KNIVES
THE THIRD REVOLUTION III: THE BLACK FLAG
DARK PATHS

Dedication

The Third Revolution is dedicated to Michael Westerman and to every Southerner who has been slain, wounded, or persecuted for the Cause of Dixie and for supporting her banner and traditions from the 19th Century to this one. We will never forget. God bless you all.

A Note of Thanks

I thank God first; without His Son I would be nothing.

There are many people who helped with this book, far too many to list, so I'll just say "Thank you." I do want to give special thanks to Rhonda, Jerry and Rena for the editing; Jerry and Sam for the technical advice; Joyce, Joel, Mike, Jeff, and Linda for the ego boosts; Eric for pestering me to keep at it; and my wife and children for somehow managing to survive this project.

Finally, I'd also like to thank the anonymous Southerner who wrote to me a few years ago to get my opinion on the draft of the first chapter of a very different story on the subject of a second War for Southern Independence. I read it and then thought to myself, *"that's not how I'd do it at all!"*

The result of that thought you now hold in your hand.

“There is only one way to appease a ghost. You must do the thing it asks you. The ghosts of a nation sometimes ask very big things; and they must be appeased, whatever the cost.”

Pádraic H. Pearse

Prologue

All these years, and the arguments still rage over how it began. It's hard to find an exact point and say, "It started here." There's really no one thing you can put your finger on. Some say it started all the way back before the Second Revolution: the first War for Southern Independence, back in 1861. Maybe so, but the embers that would eventually ignite the conflagration didn't really begin to glow until the last part of the 20th Century.

People can only put up with so much crowding: not just physically, but also having their minds crowded, remolded, and shaped to fit a government-approved box just so it can make a neat and easy to handle stack. People will speak out against it and some of them will eventually resist.

The constant erosion of rights in the name of ecology, diversity, and wars on poverty, drugs and terrorism all laid the groundwork. Militias came and went, political and ethnic nationalism simmered and boiled for over twenty years, bridging the end of the 20th Century into the next. But it took the great economic crash of the 21st Century to take it over the top. That was when the United States, as a super power, melted down like the wicked witch of the west. No water was thrown on her; this time it was oil.

We had done as we pleased in every corner of the Earth and seldom gave thought to the old saying about the chickens finally coming home to roost. The rest of the world viewed the growing power of the American colossus with alarm, and finally decided to stop it in its tracks to ensure the preservation of their own sovereignty.

China and Russia, in an effort to blunt U.S. competition with their own growing international power base, formed an alliance of necessity, and quietly pressured OPEC to launch an oil embargo against us. Tired of years of the U.S. meddling in their affairs, actively supporting their enemy Israel, and the increasingly frequent military actions against the Islamic States, the Arab world was only too happy to comply. Unlike the embargo of the '70's, this one was

total and indefinite: an economic jihad. An attempt to return sanctions against the oil states failed, as no other country would support it. Great Britain's representative to the European Union put it most succinctly: "the Americans have made their bed; now let them lie in the bloody thing."

In desperation, the Republican administration, responding to public pressure, decided to simply take the oil the U.S. needed, using the military to force compliance. The Chinese, Russians, and the E.U. checkmated them by responding to urgent requests by the OPEC nations to station troops on their soil to protect them from aggression. They were happy to oblige, particularly since they got trade concessions of their own in the bargain, along with enormous influence in that strategically vital area. Even in America's desperation a spark of sanity remained, and the U.S., despite the daily inflammatory rhetoric and saber rattling, did not quite dare to make an attempt to force the issue against other nuclear powers, even if those powers were not quite so powerful as their own. The U.S. was left out in the cold. With the loss of oil and the following loss of face that proved her not invincible after all, America suddenly found herself displaced from the world stage and reduced to the status of a virtual pariah nation. To add insult to injury, the Russians and Chinese began divesting themselves of their investments in American dollars, and Japan, following the economic wind, followed suit.

For the United States, the results were disastrous. Unemployment, already high from the continued moving of manufacturing jobs overseas and the influx of cheap immigrant labor, skyrocketed. Smaller nations with personal complaints against the U.S., upon seeing its weakness, began instituting trade sanctions of their own. Wall Street crumpled in the resulting panic and there were riots in the streets. America entered a full-blown depression and rapidly began descending to the level of a Third World Society.

Attempting to deal with the growing chaos, the president declared martial law, placing large sections of the country under Federal Emergency Management Administrators, called 'advisors'

but acting as dictators, who were backed up by the threat of the power of the U.S. military forces. In the name of 'homeland security,' the spineless state and local governments caved in with barely a whimper.

Under the frustration caused by the unconstitutional restrictions, the militia movement, dying from government suppression, and lack of focus since the end of the Clinton administration, quietly began to revive.

In an effort to keep order, the large cities, mostly in the North and on the West Coast, were given priority for the limited supplies of power and fuel. Rural and small town America became a land of rolling blackouts, restricted travel, and rationed gasoline that was quadruple the price from before the crisis, when it was available at all. As transportation and food prices skyrocketed, so did unemployment. Taxes were raised to provide the sustenance needed to keep the urban poor from burning the cities. Homes and farms that had been in families for generations were seized for taxes that the people could no longer pay. Others lost their land because it was home to an endangered bug or under the new government directives to maintain 'security'.

As usual, the Southern States bore the brunt of the cuts.

People, not only without the luxuries they had come to take for granted, but often with barely enough to eat, can quickly become dangerous. The Southern Nationalist politicians and activists took full advantage of that dissatisfaction. Every time a crowd gathered in the South, they were in it, waving their flags and shouting the loudest. As things got worse and the police began to crack down with more and more force using their emergency powers, these same politicians began leading the demonstrations, demanding Southern rights with increasing militancy. The term 'Fire Eater' came back into common usage once more. They pointed out what was wrong: big government had run the country into the ground, and now they were running amok over the rights of Southerners once again. They were siphoning off the Southern oil, coal, food, and money to feed the big Northern population centers while Dixie's own people sat hungry and cold in the dark. Our sons, our flesh and blood, went to

feed the imperial war machine's gory maw that turned them into killers as they slaughtered other men's sons in a hundred little hell-holes around the world in the name of 'peace' as the U.S. desperately tried to hold on to what little foreign power it still had. The Southern Nationalists pointed directly toward DC and North; "there is the problem," they said, "and here is the solution! Secession! A reclamation of the Confederate States of America's status as its own nation, one truly under God; a Southern Republic separate from the den of thieves in the North!"

It was a radical idea to many, but then these were radical, desperate times. The people needed a vision, and they gave that vision to them. They were not only a real choice for Dixie's people, they were her only choice, short of the spiraling descent into a socialistic, multicultural, corporate brand of feudalism under the control of the international bankers and corporations.

And their flags; always that Southern Cross of the old Battle Flag was leading the way. Soon the Southern people began looking to them as a symbol of their hope for social and economic salvation once again, instead of toward the Stars and Stripes. Desperate Southerners suddenly began to rediscover who they were, and the Federal Government began to feel the first twinges of fear that the South might, just might, actually rise again after all these years. Dixie was a powder keg, ready to blow. To the regime in Washington, the Battle Flag returned to its original meaning – a symbol of a willingness to fight against tyranny and interference – a willingness to fight against THEM. That fear led to suppression, and suppression, as always, led to resistance. Then came the Columbia incident...

DAY 1

Chapter 1

State Capitol Grounds: Columbia
22 May, 12:00 noon

“Take it down! Take it down! Take it down!”

“I’ll take *you* down, you worthless son of a bitch!”

“Get back there!” Officer Frank Gore roared in a voice already hoarse from shouting, as he shoved back against his section of the crowd that tried to surge past him to get at its opposition, who were being held back in turn by the second line of officers. “Get – *back!*”

He punctuated this last command with a hard thrust of his riot baton, held like a chinning bar, across the chest of the middle-aged white man with a red shirt and a redder face attempting to get past him. The blow knocked the man back and he was only prevented from falling by the crowd pressing close against him.

The scene was being repeated all up and down the dual lines in front of the capitol. The Columbia Police Department, along with the Sheriff’s Department, and all available State Troopers and South Carolina Law Enforcement Division (SLED) officers had thoroughly closed off Main Street a block away from where it ended in a T intersection with Gervais Street in front of the State House, forcing the protesters to go one of two directions around either block. The police had formed two lines across Gervais Street directly in front of the capitol: one from the buildings at each corner of Main Street to the capitol grounds, where each line bent ninety degrees along the sidewalk in an L shape, corralling the protesters in their angles and blocking them both from the grounds and from one another, and leaving a no-man’s land of empty concrete between, inhabited only by shouting police commanders and a scattering of darting reporters.

The contribution that the humid, unseasonable ninety-plus degree temperature was making to the rising tempers did nothing to help.

The noise of the two crowds was deafening. One, almost entirely white under a scarlet sea of Confederate flags, shouted with rage, and the other, largely black, responded with taunts and chants, usually profane. Prevented from reaching each other and physically separated by the width of Main Street, they were almost out of throwing range: almost, but not quite. From the anonymous center of both mobs, a dangerous sprinkling of rocks, bottles, and other objects were hurled at their rivals. Most fell well short, but even those were enough to keep the commanders and the press between the lines on their toes.

Of course some people could throw better than others. A liquid-filled balloon tossed from the anti-flag crowd wobbled through the air before bursting against the back of Gore's body armor. Instantly, his nostrils filled with the acrid smell of the urine it had contained.

Wonderful! Just freaking wonderful!

The Battle Flag that had flown behind the Confederate soldiers' monument since the 2000 State Legislature's decision was coming down today, this time by a Federal Court order forbidding the display of any 'racially divisive symbol' on public property. One crowd had come to protest and the other had come to gloat.

As far as Frank Gore was concerned, they had all come to be a royal pain in his rear-end, and they were succeeding admirably.

He personally had no objection to the flag; in fact, he supported its Southern Cross as a time-honored symbol of Dixie just as most white Southerners did. His personal sympathies were entirely with the flag's supporters; they were just a bunch of ordinary men and women for the most part, fighting for what they believed in. Unlike the opposing crowd, these people almost never complained publicly, and certainly never pictured themselves straining against a police line at a protest. Many of them were older folks, and such radical measures were, from their point of view, best left to disgruntled blacks, longhaired hippies, and wild-eyed anarchists, yet here they were. Frank reflected that maybe, just maybe, if both they and he had been willing to speak out sooner, none of them would need to be here today. Still, as much as he might feel for them, he was a law enforcement officer and he had a job to do.

There was no question that Frank Gore was up to the job. Handsome in a rugged sort of way, he had a strong, clean-shaven jaw and slightly weathered skin from a lot of time spent outdoors. Subtle scarring and a somewhat bent nose evidenced his youthful experience as an amateur boxer and full-contact fighter, as well as the harder and increasingly more dangerous experience of patrolling the streets of Columbia. His head of thick brown hair that fell just short of violating department regulations showed no signs of thinning. Thirty-two years old, six feet tall and a shade over two hundred pounds, the eleven year veteran of the Columbia PD was in tremendously good physical shape. He had little body fat; his weight was all hard muscle, built by long hours of daily exercise and by a regular training regimen in several systems of both Western and Eastern fighting arts he had engaged in since childhood. A firearms expert, he was the hands-down favorite in the running for the law enforcement combat shooting champion of the Columbia PD and maybe the entire State.

Not that he would need that particular skill here today in working crowd control. This was all give and take; they pushed forward and he pushed back. He was proud to be a police officer, but some days, this one in particular, his pride was subdued to the point that he wondered if he was on the right side after all.

Oh well; it would all be over soon. From the corner of his eye, he could see that Governor Jeffery Simms, the latest neo-conservative Republican to occupy the office, had just finished his speech: something about a ‘great day of reconciliation’, but the rival crowds had drowned out most of it. He and his small entourage of fellow Palmetto politicians were stepping briskly toward the flagpole that stood just behind the Confederate Memorial. They reached it and the governor, a tall white man in his fifties with a medium build and glasses, who appeared to have been stamped out with a cookie cutter labeled ‘politician,’ looked up for a moment, unable to hide a faint smirk at finally getting to perform an action that he had always wanted. He put out his hand for the rope that would lower the flag from its display on the capitol grounds for the final time...and an old man with a cane stepped up seemingly out of nowhere and, as

Officer Gore's late father would have said, just knocked the pure old hell out of him!

The seasoned hickory shaft, held in both the old gnarled hands and swung like a Louisville slugger, hit Simms squarely across the bridge of the nose. Twin streams of blood shot out as the cartilage shattered and Simms dropped like a poll-axed steer.

The crowd on both sides went abruptly silent, gaping at the scene. Frank vaguely remembered seeing the old man hobbling around over on the lawn earlier, but he figured that he belonged there – he certainly couldn't be a threat.

Shoot, he looked to be eighty if he was a day.

He sure didn't move like he was eighty, though. The commanders between the lines were as stunned at the sudden development as everyone else. Desk jockeys for the most part, it took them several seconds to begin to move to help, but the closest of them was nearly a hundred feet away. The ordinary officers watched helplessly, no one daring to leave the crowd that quickly recovered and was beginning to roar and shove with a whole new vigor in reaction to the scene being played out before them. The old man took another step forward and caught the surprised speaker of the state house, a chubby blonde Democrat representative named Joel Vereen, right in the mouth on the back-swing. The blow sent him sprawling, his broken teeth flying out and clattering as they skittered across the walk. Frank saw the officer beside him try to draw his gun, but a hand from the crowd snatched at it and he was forced to turn his attention back to the immediate threat.

The governor's entourage proved to be of no help; a few were still frozen with shock while the rest scattered in a squealing panic.

State Senator Archie McCoy, a black Democrat with a shiny bald head, was one of those who turned to run, and the old man clipped him across the back of his bare pate just before he got out of reach. Knocked down, he scrambled wildly away on all fours, off the walk and onto the lawn heedless of the dirt and grass staining the knees of his expensive suit or of the governor and the speaker lying behind him.

The old man stepped to the flagpole and set his back against it. Although his face was flushed with effort and his chest heaved like he was having a heart attack, he raised the cane above his head in both hands like a sword and rasped, “*anybody* wants to take down this flag, *come on!*” He paused to gasp in another lung-full of air. “Come on, you dirty sons of bitches! *Come and take it!*”

The pro-flag crowd wildly cheered their approval and Frank heard someone shouting, “look! That’s ol’ Bob Franklin!” While they were applauding, the anti-flag crowd surged against the line; not the leg of the formation separating the two crowds this time, but the one separating them from the defiant old man. The desperate officers were being pushed slowly, inexorably back towards the capitol, fighting to hold their ground every step.

The Reverend James Bessant, three-hundred-plus pounds of some-time preacher and full-time black rabble-rouser, whose organization, the National Association of Black Persons, had organized and bussed in the anti-flag crowd from all over the Eastern half of the United States, threw his ever-present bullhorn to his thick lips, and Frank clearly heard the electronically amplified voice above the crowd.

“Get that white bastard! *Kill* his ass!”

Then, to Frank’s horror, he glanced over his shoulder to see a black cop in the line between the flag opponents and the pole lower his baton and step quickly and deliberately to one side.

The officer to the man’s right had just enough time to yell “Jackson! Close it up!” before the crowd surging through the gap like a flood from a broken dam knocked him to the ground and trampled him underfoot. They poured like a dark, angry river toward the old man, wedging the police aside by the weight of their bodies and suddenly there was no one else between them and Bob Franklin. He had time for only a single strike of his cane that bounced harmlessly off the muscular shoulder of a burly twenty-year-old Negro before they crushed him back against the pole and he disappeared under a sea of flailing fists, swinging bottles, and stomping feet.

The enraged white crowd jammed against the lines as they sought to come to the old man's aid. Struggling to hold his position, Frank was numb with shock over what he had just seen. Torn between two imperatives, he couldn't decide whether to obey orders and hold the line while the other crowd savaged the old man or to break; but that would allow the crowds at each other, and he had no doubt that people would die, because both sides were killing mad.

The decision was taken away from him when the angry man in the red shirt grabbed his riot baton, cursing and wrenching at it like a mad man. Frank used the stick's leverage to twist it against the man's wrist, then yanked the hard plastic club out of his reach and, flushed with adrenaline, knocked him back harder than he meant to with another cross-body block.

A pair of voices echoed above the crowd from close enough for him to make out the words. "Hang on, bro! I'm gonna' make a hole!" followed immediately by the other voice yelling "Oh *shit!*"

The biggest biker the cop had ever seen brushed the man he had just struck aside. He looked like a six and a half foot wall of black leather and denim, with an unruly mop of reddish-blond hair perched on top. His arms were like tree trunks, blue with tattooing, and he must have weighed close to four hundred pounds. Frank Gore watched in amazement as the giant lifted another, much smaller and darker-haired version of himself squirming and swearing over his head by the thigh and the leather-jacket front. The big man looked directly at the cop, his beard split in a ferocious grin and he said one word: "Catch!"

Stunned with amazement in realization as to what was coming, he watched the huge arms fling themselves forward as if in slow motion, and the smaller biker leave them, hurtling like a flailing and cursing missile directly toward him. From a distance of only three feet, there was no time to do anything about it.

He barely managed to raise his stick in a vain attempt to block the other man's body as it hit him horizontally across the chin and upper chest. The mass and momentum drove Frank off his feet, and slammed him on his back on the concrete, with the smaller biker on top of him. The breath was driven sharply out of his lungs, his vision

filled with a dark, starburst sky and he blacked out for an instant despite the helmet as his head slammed into the pavement hard enough to split the police-issue plastic bubble up the back for nearly half its diameter. In an instant the mob poured through the gap and he instinctively curled into a tight ball, his world an insane jumble of pain and terror as hundreds of running feet pounded him like a rockslide.

Even with his body armor, if he hadn't been such a conditioned athlete, he would have been crippled or killed in the trampling. As it was, it was a near thing.

The crowd passed and Frank rolled to his stomach, nausea sweeping over him. He heaved once, spewing a mouthful of bile against the inside of his face shield, cracked by an anonymous passing boot, and the foul liquid splashed back in his face.

Stabbing pains shot through his left side taking his breath away. Clutching at his ribs and gasping, he raised his head, but found that his vision was obscured by his own vomit, rendering the broken shield opaque. Fighting for breath and puking again, he fumbled with the chinstrap and wrenched the ruined helmet off. Frantically blinking the stomach acid and blood out of his eyes as they struggled to focus, he was stunned by what he saw.

The two crowds ripped and tore at each other in a frenzy, pressed so tightly together that there was often no room for the injured and unconscious to fall. Fists, boots, knives, belt-buckles and afro-picks were all put to bloody use. The hapless officers who were not pushed aside by the flag supporters' charge had been driven into the center of the action. Here and there he could see a black-clad arm waving a riot baton ineffectively like a beacon, with no room to strike. The NABP crowd was already being pushed back. Many turned and fled outright, following Reverend Bessant's example, who had disappeared as fast as his fat legs could carry him as soon as the snarling Southerners struck his followers' lines.

Broken bodies from both sides were beginning to litter the area, from the monument, across the sidewalk and out in the street. Among them, Frank saw the man in the red shirt who had been so desperate to get past him. He was face down and still now, the blood

from a massive head wound and from his mouth, ears, and nose pouring down to form a puddle. From where Frank lay, he didn't look like he was breathing.

Gore spotted the two bikers deep in the melee, still at the forefront of the pro-flag charge. The smaller one, having been scooped up by his giant companion in passing and thus escaping the trampling, had come out much better than Frank. He was on his feet, cursing in a steady stream while slashing and kicking left and right in a flurry of karate blows. His oversized partner had snatched a riot baton from one of the cops after sending the officer sprawling with a bear-like swipe of a massive forearm, and was using the stick with brutal effect until he hammered a corn-rowed skull so hard the heavy, high impact plastic club snapped in two pieces. He dropped the remaining stub, clenched a huge, ham-sized fist, and drove it into a handy face with an impact like a caulking maul, before catching a pair of black combatants by their necks, one in each hand, and slamming their heads together with a *crack* that could be heard over the cacophony.

A young white opponent of the flag – the type other Whites derisively referred to as a ‘whigger’, with his blonde hair tangled into dreadlocks and his oversized pants drooping to expose a pair of checkered underwear – slipped behind the big man, taking aim at his kidney with an open switchblade. Before he could drive the steel home, the little biker caught a fist-full of his braids, wrenched his head back sharply, pivoted and expertly delivered a chop with the edge of his hand across the exposed throat with all his body torque behind it. The man fell to the ground clawing at his neck and gagging, his trachea crushed.

The action was no less intense at the flagpole, although a couple of men and a woman had been diverted to the side of the governor, where they shouted “scalawag son of a bitch!” and repeatedly kicked him in the ribs and head as he tried to rise. A South Carolina Law Enforcement agent attempted to come to his aid, only to be tackled by a young man with a crew cut, wearing a high school jacket with a football letter, who proceeded to beat the SLED agent's head against the turf.

A large, muscular Negro Frank vaguely recognized as one of the first to attack the old man, who was now crumpled in a bloody pile at the foot of the pole, sent a white teenager reeling back with a slash across the face from a large lock blade knife, before reaching up to cut the rope holding the flag. He slid it down the pole and had just begun to close his hand around the scarlet cloth when he was in turn set upon by a remarkable figure.

A strikingly pretty young white woman with flaming red hair, tight jeans, silver-trimmed cowboy boots, and a black T-shirt that carried the words 'NO APOLOGIES!' along with an image of the same flag she was now fighting for, flung herself on his back like a fury and clawed at his face. Frank winced as he saw one of the sharp fingernails penetrate the man's eye socket and pop the orb like a grape.

Forgetting all about the flag and dropping the knife in his agony, the screaming man managed to pull the woman off, only to have her immediately leap on him again, biting, clawing, and kicking. He grabbed her T-shirt to jerk her away once more, and the garment ripped completely off in his hands, leaving her naked from the waist up, her full white breasts swaying. The woman replied by slamming the pointed toe of her metal-tipped boot into his crotch with enough force to bring him up onto his toes. His remaining eye rolled white before he collapsed forward in a heap and rolled into a fetal position, clutching his crushed manhood. She leaped high into the air and came down with a shout, driving her tall boot heel against his temple with all her might.

More concerned with the flag than with her half-naked condition, she snatched up the banner from the ground and held it above her head like a figure from an old engraving: an allegory of Southern victory. The bare-breasted goddess with her red hair whipping like a flame in the wind, shouted out above the din: "Here are your colors! Rally on the colors, men! Rally on the colors!" A ragged but rising tide of cheers and Rebel yells rose from the whites who saw her act, and they tore at their faltering opponents with renewed vigor.

The black officer, Martin L. Jackson, who had opened the path for the mob to reach the old man, shoved his way toward her. With

his teeth bared in rage, he unsnapped his holster and drew his issue 9 millimeter Glock. At only ten feet away, he dropped into a combat crouch and aimed at the girl. She locked her green eyes with the darkness of the sunglasses beneath his face shield and, raising her flag even higher, screamed out a single word.

“*Dixie!*”

Even at a distance Frank saw both resignation and fearless defiance in her eyes as Jackson squeezed the trigger.

With an ear-splitting *crack!* the copper-jacketed hollow-point struck the girl exactly between her breasts, shattering her sternum and puncturing her heart. The hollow point expanded all the way from entrance to exit, and ricocheted off the flagpole behind her with an audible clang.

As if the shot was a signal, several other policemen who heard the report drew their own guns reflexively and, in the adrenaline rush, two actually pulled the triggers, firing into the crowd. It escalated within seconds, and the sound of ragged gunfire increased as more and more officers followed suit, and people began to fall. The police snipers on nearby rooftops heard the firing, and began frantically searching for the source. Most of them cursed, unable to find targets. Two of them thought that they saw something in the hands of members of the crowd and fired.

“No!” breathed Frank, grimacing with pain and shock. “Oh please, God, no!”

The girl’s eyes closed as she fell back and she left a bloody track as she slowly slid down the pole. Still clutching her precious flag, she came to rest half-lying, half-sitting atop Bob Franklin’s broken body. As she relaxed in death, the Southern Cross settled over both of them like a shroud, soaking up their blood.

Frank Gore tried to say something; tried to shout, but his voice came out an inaudible rasp. Jackson, his face still twisted in an animalistic grimace, proceeded to shoot a stunned white man nearby in the face, just under the right eye, killing him instantly, then shot another, this time through the side as he turned to flee. The slug went through one side of his ribcage and out the other, and the victim fell to the ground in agony, blood bubbling from his punctured lungs.

Through the fog of pain and semi-consciousness, Frank clawed for his own pistol. *This has to stop!*

Crack! Another round from Jackson shattered the shoulder joint of a woman: a re-enactor dressed in a period hoop skirt. Arterial blood darkened her blue satin as her arm flopped like a wet rag.

Frank cursed himself as he fumbled the draw. It was taking too long, like being stuck in a slow motion nightmare!

Crack! A bullet through the back of the head blew apart the skull of the teenaged boy with the slashed face as he knelt on the ground cradling his wound. A palm-sized piece of bone with the scalp attached flew through the air.

Bringing his Glock to aim, he frantically tried to get his concussion dilated eyes to focus on the suddenly elusive sights.

Damn it!

Crack! A hole appeared in a fleeing man's back, near his kidney. He stumbled to one knee, then rose and kept going.

A large black man – one of no more than two or three Negroes there to join the whites in protesting the flag's removal – built like a bull and incongruously dressed in a gray Confederate uniform charged Jackson shouting "Stop it! Stop it!" His scowl twisting even further, Jackson drew a bead on the center of mass.

Frank did the same thing on Jackson, and then realized through his mental daze that his target would be wearing a vest. He shifted his aim lower.

His vision wouldn't stop swimming!

Crack! Frank's desperate shot broke Jackson's left femur six inches above the knee and severed his hamstring on its way out. The leg began folding backwards at this unexpected new joint.

Before Jackson could collapse, the other black man hit him like a linebacker and drove him to the ground. Coming down on top of him, he grabbed the officer's gun hand in both of hands as he fought to get it away and stop the killing, while his opponent fought to keep it. The big gray-clad form twisted the weapon sharply, and just as the muzzle was passing under Jackson's chin, one of them squeezed at the wrong time.

There was a loud report, and a fan-shaped spray of blood, brains, and broken plastic painted the concrete walk as the weapon discharged and sent the bullet into Jackson's throat and out through the top of his riot helmet. The projectile ricocheted off the walkway and whined off toward the capitol building.

The bigger man jumped, thinking at first that he had been shot, and rolled off with the gun still in his hand. His face ashen, he looked on in horrified fascination at Jackson as the dead man's heels beat a spastic final tattoo on the pavement. It hit him then that the blood that was staining the gray wool of his uniform was not his. A moment later, it hit him what he had just done.

He stood up quickly, slinging the Glock aside as if it were hot. He turned and looked at Frank Gore, lying on the pavement with his own pistol in his hand, still pointing in the direction of the dead officer and his assailant. They stared at each other for seconds that seemed an eternity. Frank lowered his pistol; cop or no cop, there'd been enough killing at this place for one day, or a dozen days, or a dozen lifetimes.

Tears were streaming down the man's ebony face as he turned and stumbled toward the pole and knelt by the young woman. Gently he pried the flag from her hands and, as if unmindful of the rioting going on around him, wadded it up and tucked it under his arm. He stood and stared, his eyes fixed on the old man and young woman joined in death at the foot of the pole.

Taking one step back, then another, he suddenly turned and left at a staggering run, giving Frank Gore one last, sad, pitiable look before he disappeared.

Frank watched him go, vaguely curious. *I wonder what that was all about.* Like an old friend from school used to say, "*There's a story there.*" The only thing was that, right now, the cop didn't give a damn what it was. He suddenly felt very, very tired. Slowly lowering his head to the bloody pavement, he closed his eyes.

Even as the bulk of both crowds ran, sometimes mixed together in a frantic effort to get away from the gunfire, the fighting continued. The capitol grounds quickly cleared except for the police,

the wounded, and the dead, but the flight and pursuit broke one big riot up into a dozen little ones as the warring factions spread out into streets, alleys, parking lots, and businesses. Lone individuals or small groups of supporters of one side or another, and occasionally even a policeman or simply a passerby who was unfortunate enough to seek shelter in the wrong place were left battered and bloody. Due to the demands of the rally organizers and the cop's frequent but random use of metal detectors, few firearms had come into the fray, but those few who had them, used them now, blasting at the attacking police as well as at their original opponents. Others raced to their vehicles for whatever weapons they had hidden there. The pursuit of the gun-waving cops ground to a sudden halt in place after place as they were met with return fire from the shotguns and rifles of frightened, angry white Southerners. In short order several officers were hurriedly retreating, dragging wounded comrades with them.

Finally seeing legitimate armed targets, the police snipers on the roofs began the slaughter.

From FEMA's recently appropriated office in the capitol building, a man in an expensive but nondescript suit and wire-rimmed glasses over indeterminately colored eyes, stood alone at the window, hands clasped behind him, gazing out at the violence raging below with a slightly perturbed expression on his face. Largely indifferent to the death and destruction itself, Ronald Peters saw only that his own already tough job was about to get a lot harder.

What a mess!

Newscast: Columbia

1:05 PM

“Cindy, what's going on there at the capitol?”

A small blonde woman with boy-cut hair and a black pants suit spoke into the microphone, her voice abnormally loud from the excitement. She stood near the steps on the capitol grounds against

the backdrop of a black Humvee and several heavily armed officers milling around looking for something to shoot at.

“Dan, we have a riot situation here. There are people fighting everywhere. The disturbance started about an hour ago and the police still haven’t been fully able to regain control.”

“Is there any word on injuries?”

“Preliminary reports indicate that at least four people are confirmed dead so far, including one police officer, and there are dozens and possibly hundreds injured, some of them severely. I need to stress that this is only a preliminary report, and that the fighting is still going on along the edges of the capitol grounds and in the surrounding neighborhoods.”

There was an audible series of rapid popping sounds and the reporter flinched and half-ducked.

“Cynthia, we can hear something in the background that sounds like gunfire. Can you confirm that?”

“Yes, Dan,” she replied, recovering her composure and straightening up, although her eyes remained unnaturally wide, “we can. We have word that the police came under fire from snipers and are returning fire. If you’ll notice behind me, you can see one of the SWAT vehicles parked right here on the capitol lawn.”

“Do we know what started it yet?”

“As you know, Dan, noon today was the Federal deadline for the last Confederate flags to be taken down from all public property. As the governor attempted to comply with the court order, he was attacked and severely injured, along with the State House and Senate leaders, by an unidentified white male reportedly armed with a heavy club. The police spokesmen stated that, when a group of young black men attempted to come to the governor’s aid, the flag supporters – many of whom are alleged to be members of white supremacist and neo-Confederate militia groups – broke through the police lines and attacked both the officers and the civil rights marchers there supporting the federal decision.”

“Was this an organized attack?”

“The police say that it’s too early to tell, but they did admit that it appeared to be a well-planned, organized assault, carried out with almost military precision.”

“So this may have been a racist paramilitary conspiracy, Cindy?”

“That seems to be a definite possibility, Dan.”

Newscast: Columbia

6:00 PM

“Welcome to the Evening News,” the thirty-something black newscaster said as her face filled the screen. “This is Connie Mayo reporting.

“Our top story is the riot that broke out today on the State Capitol grounds here in Columbia. We now go live to our man on the scene, Ben O’Riley. Ben, can you tell us what’s happening?”

“Connie, the police gained control of the riot between two and three o’clock this afternoon, but, as you can see behind me, law enforcement presence is still heavy as ambulances and coroner’s units are searching for casualties, both here on the grounds and in the surrounding area.”

“How heavy were the casualties?”

“The official police figures indicate that twenty-nine people are now known dead, including one Columbia Police Officer, Martin L. Jackson. Over two-hundred-fifty serious injuries have been reported so far, some of them critical. Several of the injured are police officers. Bear in mind, Connie, that casualty reports are still coming in at this hour and some of the wounded are not expected to survive.”

“Can you tell us how the riot started?”

“Connie, I have Columbia Police Chief Jim Perkins with me on the scene, and he can answer that question better than I can. Chief Perkins, what can you tell us?”

“Ben, we believe that the violence was sparked by the unprovoked felonious assault on Governor Simms, Senate President McCoy and House speaker Vereen by an individual named Robert L.

Franklin, as the officials were attempting to comply with a Federal court order to remove the Confederate flag from public property.”

“Is Franklin in custody now?”

“No, unfortunately, Mr. Franklin has been confirmed to be among the dead.”

“Do you have any idea what would cause him to attack the governor?”

“Mr. Franklin has been under Federal and State investigation for some time because of his connections to various right-wing, racist, and anti-government militia groups. We have reason to believe that those extremist views may have led him to take this course of action.”

“How did his action lead to the carnage that we saw here today?”

“A group of young men slipped through the police lines in a desperate attempt to protect the governor; however, they were attacked by Mr. Franklin as well. At this time, the flag supporters, which included representatives and members of the same groups that Mr. Franklin was associated with, violently forced their way through the police lines, seriously injuring several officers, and attacked the crowd of civil rights supporters with illegal firearms and makeshift weapons.

“Coinciding with this action, concealed snipers began firing at the police, who also took fire from automatic assault weapons from the mob, forcing the officers to return fire.”

“How is the governor?”

“I don’t have that information yet.”

Chapter 2

“How do you feel, Frankie?”

Frank Gore looked up from the white sheets of his hospital bed into the kind eyes of his grandmother, the only one to ever call him ‘Frankie,’ and smiled. The old woman smiled worriedly in return, looking for all the world like a tiny, ancient leprechaun with neat gray curls. He really wished she hadn’t heard about him being injured, but Bill Harris, one of his buddies from the force, had called her when they were loading Frank into the ambulance. She had immediately turned off the stove, put on one of her church dresses, a red and black print, and driven the thirty miles to Columbia just to sit beside him.

As he used the remote control to flip off the TV, he could hear the muffled sounds of a steady stream of shouted instructions, foot traffic, and rolling gurneys as the facility continued to fill with the wounded. He was one of the lucky ones; being a cop, he was among the first to be transported, so he at least had a room. Several of the patients were set, beds and all, into side hallways.

He inhaled the unpleasant disinfectant smell peculiar to hospitals and shifted his weight painfully, careful not to bump the IV tube that coiled like a transparent snake from the bag to his left arm.

“Not too bad, Granny. Maybe a few cracked ribs, a mild concussion, some lumps and bruises; they want me to stay the night for observation. I’m just a little sore.” Actually, his body was one big bruise, there was blood in his urine, and his head was hurting worse than it ever had in his life, but he didn’t want to worry her.

“I reckon that’s to be expected,” she said, squinting at the IV with a critical eye. “It’s not everyday you get run over by a couple of thousand people.” She gazed affectionately at him for a moment, before continuing in a sober voice, “What happened down there, son?”

He knew better than to try to hide the truth from his grandmother. For someone who wore trifocals, she had an uncanny knack for seeing through a lie, and her wrath over an attempt at

falsehood tended to be all out of proportion to her rather diminutive size. So he told her – all of it.

His grandmother patted Frank's head with her liver-spotted hand when he was through, just as she had when he lost his parents in the car wreck at nine years old.

"It'll be alright, Frankie. It'll be all right."

"No, Granny," he said with a deep sigh. "It won't be all right. It'll never be all right. I shot another cop; I killed a brother officer."

"No, son, you didn't shoot no brother, or no cop either, as far as I'm concerned. You shot a killer, to keep him from killing more."

"But he was a brother..."

"*No, he was not!*" the old woman snapped, her face coloring. "I don't care what uniform he wore, you're no brother to a murderer, and that's exactly what that...that..." She hesitated a moment, looking for a slightly less scandalous word than the one that came immediately to mind, finally settling with, "*he was.*" She shook her head, her prim gray curls swaying. "You remember that police motto – to protect and serve – and that oath; the one to uphold the Constitution and laws of South Carolina? Well, that's exactly what you did. You protected the people and you served them well by taking that no-good... *him* off the street. You kept your promise and you did your duty; no more and no less."

She smiled and patted his hand again. "I wouldn't expect anything else out of a boy I brought up."

He went on, determined to make her understand. "It's more than that, Granny. I *know* what happened! You've heard the Chief and all the others on the news; they're saying that they returned sniper fire, but there weren't any snipers except ours! There was just one killer and a bunch of panicked cops!" He slammed his head back into the pillow in frustration. "God only knows how many people are dead out there! They're going to take my statement first thing in the morning. What am I going to do?"

The old woman's face went stony. "What do you mean, 'What are you going to do'?"

“They’ve already made up their story. They’re going to cover it up, and I’m in this too deep over shooting Jackson to say that they’re lying.”

“*You listen here, young man!*” The old lady’s eyes were blazing and she leapt from her seat, her bony finger shaking at the end of his nose. For a moment, Frank thought she was actually going to slap him. “I didn’t bring up a liar, nor a coward neither! You did what was right back there at the capitol grounds, and I expect you to do what’s right now and tell the truth!”

“But they’ll crucify me!”

“They crucified Jesus Christ and about half of His apostles, as I recollect. I don’t reckon they’ll crucify you, but if they do, at least you’ll be in good company. I’d rather have you as an apostle than a Judas any day of the week!”

“A Judas is just what they’ll call me, if I betray my brother officers.”

“This is the last time I’m going to tell you, you ain’t a brother to liars and murderers, nor cowards either! I’d sooner hear you called a ‘Judas’ than have you be one, and that’s *just* what you’ll be if you betray those people out there.” She gestured in the direction of the sounds from the corridors. “You work for *them*, not the police department and not those filthy old politicians! Your loyalty is to *them*; you owe *them*! I’ll not have you betray them, nor the State of South Carolina, nor your own family name!” Her voice raised another notch. “There has *never* been a traitor in this family, and as God is my witness, there ain’t going to be one *now*! I won’t stand for it!” Rising up to her full height of five feet, two inches above the bed, she waved her finger in the air like a sword and said sternly, “I forbid it!”

He thought that some of the Old Testament lawgivers and prophets must have looked a lot like that, only bigger: *Jiminy Cricket with an attitude*. Frank smiled in spite of himself.

“I reckon I don’t have any choice then,” he conceded.

“No,” Granny smiled, “I reckon not!” Gazing down at him thoughtfully, she reached behind her neck and fumbled with a clasp.

“Here,” she said, extending her hand, “I want you to have this when you give your statement.”

“Your locket?” Frank Gore was surprised as he watched her pull the object out of the neck of her dress. He had never, in all his thirty-two years, seen the old woman take it off.

“Yes. It’s going to be yours when I’m gone anyway, so you just as well have it now.”

Gingerly, Frank took the precious object into his hands. It was a small brass oval the size of his thumbnail, plain except for a faint cross engraved on the front, nearly worn smooth with time.

“I can’t take your locket now. You wear it.”

“You ain’t got no choice; I’m giving it to you.” She stared straight into his eyes a few seconds, and then looked away. “Besides, I won’t be needing it much longer.”

“Granny, you’ll be around for a long time yet!”

“Son, I’ve lived my life, in some ways longer than I wanted to. I’ve done my duty; first I raised your daddy and then I raised you.” She let out her breath, shaking her head gently. “Between the two of you, that was as much as the good Lord could ask of any one woman, and here lately, He’s given me a feeling that I’ll be headed home soon.” She gazed off into space, as if looking at something far away that only she could see. “I’m ready when He wants me, son. Sometimes, I even look forward to it.”

“Granny...”

“Hush, boy.” Pointing at the locket, she went back to the subject. “Do you know what it’s made of Frankie?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Brass. It was melted down from part of a sword hilt that belonged to my grandfather’s great-grandfather. He carried it when he rode with the Swamp Fox during the Revolution. It was what they call a claymore, and it was the very same sword that his grandfather carried back in Scotland when he fought the English in 1745 at Culloden Moor.

“My great-great-grandfather carried it in the War of 1812 where the blade was broken by the same cannon shot that took his good right arm along with it, and he made the locket out of the guard for

his own daughter. He became a preacher and a missionary to the Cherokees, and he said that it was appropriate that he make it from the sword and put a cross on it, to always remind her that the Word of God was a two-edged sword.

“Open it up.”

Frank suddenly realized that he’d never seen what was inside. Gingerly, he undid the tiny latch and was confronted with a picture of his grandfather in a dress blue Marine uniform on one side, and a small piece of dirty, disreputable-looking red cloth on the other.

“That’s Granddaddy.”

“That’s right. That was taken when he was on leave during World War II, right after he won the bronze star and the purple heart in the South Pacific.

“What else do you see?”

Frank looked carefully, turning the locket over in his hands, but could see nothing else. “All I see is this cloth trim.”

“That’s not trim. That’s a piece of the company Battle Flag that my own grandfather died carrying at Shiloh, fighting the Yankee invaders. Those stains? That’s his blood, Frankie; his blood, my blood, and *your* blood.”

Frank was numb. As he held the object, he could feel a strange warmth coursing through his body and it felt like unseen eyes were upon him.

“This is my heritage. . .”

Granny shook her head. “No, Frankie, *this* is your heritage,” she said, tapping his chest gently over his heart with a bony fingertip. “It’s in here, in the heart and in the blood. Bred in the bone, like the old folks used to say. *This*,” pointing now at the locket, “is just a symbol of it, a reminder, so that we never forget who we are!”

Gently, he touched the stained red cloth, and the image sprang to mind of a blood-soaked form lying on a muddy field under the folds of the flag, superimposed with the memory of two more people lying under the folds of a similar flag against a bloody pole at the capitol. His face changed, hardening with an iron resolve that matched that of the old woman.

Watching the change, she smiled. She knew it meant she had done her work well. She was content.

“I’ll remember, Granny. I’ll never forget who I am.”

She patted his hand one last time with a smile and rose to her feet. Gathering up her purse, she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “I know you won’t son. I know you won’t. It’ll be all right Frankie. I’ll pray for you.”

Frank took hope from that; he reckoned that, as stubborn and single-minded as Sarah Gore was, the Almighty might not have much choice but to listen. As he watched her leave, he thought that he’d never seen her as straight and steady on her feet. She seemed to have a glow about her, giving off a light that he could almost see.

That night, his dreams were filled with a procession of men and women; a long line of farmers, soldiers, and preachers, each of whom stopped by the foot of his bed as they passed in a line and expectantly looked him in the eye for a moment, then walked on after saying a single word.

“Honor.”

Encrypted Internet Chat

23 May, 9:32 PM

Spider61: Hello, angle. I guess you’ve heard.

rightangle: Yeah, I’ve heard. SONS OF BITCHES! I just got off the phone with her parents. How many are dead, and how many of them are ours?

Spider61: I don’t know – dozens I expect. Payback time’s coming; I want you to get with your people and have the crew move up to stage two, and begin preparing to put *Mosby* into effect ASAP. This is a priority one. I want to be able to go to stage 3 at a moment’s notice.

rightangle: It’s about damn time. Has the Council approved it already, then?

Spider61: No, but be ready anyway. Council or no Council, we’re not going to let this slide.

rightangle: We'll be ready – I'll notify the crew chiefs and start calling my people in.

Anonymous Phone Conversation
12:06 AM

“Perkins is a liar. I was there! They beat Bob to death and then that piece of shit nigger cop started shooting everybody.”

“Man, I just wish we had proof and could get it out there to the people.”

“It's already in the works.”

“Oh yeah? How you gonna to do it?”

“You think the news people are the only ones with video cameras? The pigs stole my camera for ‘evidence’ while I was trying to get out of there, but I'd already swapped the tapes.”

“Damn! You'd better do something with it soon. What if they come after it and you?”

“Then they're out of luck. I've already made copies and sent them to where they'll do some good.”

DAY 2

Chapter 3

Channel 13 News Offices: Columbia

Samantha Norris caught her panty hose on the corner of her office desk drawer before she had even set her purse down. Biting off a curse, she stood stock-still and made a slow ten count. Then, with careful deliberation, she placed the purse on her desk and slowly lowered herself into the chair, resisting the urge to simply drop in exasperation. Gazing down at the six-inch runner showing the lighter shade of skin from her shapely calf through the ruined stocking, she shook her head with a sigh and pulled open the drawer. Inside were three more pairs, still in their wrappers.

It was going to be one of those days.

Brushing back an errant strand of blonde hair, she reached over and pushed the intercom button.

“Mary?”

“Yes, Honey?” To her fifty-ish, motherly secretary Mary Wheeler, everyone was ‘Honey’; everyone she liked anyway.

“Could you keep everybody out of here for a while?”

“*That desk corner again?*”

Samantha smiled. The woman must be psychic. “That’s the one.”

“*I’ll do just that Honey. If one of these fools around here walks in and sees you changing your drawers, they won’t get anything done for the rest of the week.*”

She reflected, not for the first time, that tact was not one of Mary’s virtues. Still, she was right. Samantha had fended off the attentions of most of the men in the studio at one time or another. She was not a vain woman; however she was an honest one, honest enough to admit to herself that her rising career in the public eye had as much (*well, okay; more!*) to do with her pretty face and tall, shapely build as with her reporting abilities: a situation that rankled

her to no small degree. Instead of capitalizing on her notable skills and instincts, the studio preferred to show her off, counting on her high cheekbones, straight nose, full lips, and large breasts to bring the ratings that boosted what would normally be a lunchtime talk show filler into the highest rated news program in South Carolina. She liked herself the way she was, but she wondered how they'd react if she were to let herself go, stop exercising daily, and gain about fifty pounds.

Not a hard question to answer: in that case she still wouldn't get to be the journalist she had dreamed of, because they would simply fire her and bring in another looker to read the news.

She sighed in disgust. This was what she had always wanted to do, but now that she was doing it, she found that the dream was a long way from reality more often than not.

"One more thing," Mary's disembodied voice interrupted her, *"somebody left a tape for you – said it had something to do with the riot. I put it on your desk. Oh, and don't forget you're interviewing the chief of police at twelve."*

"Thanks." Looking down at the cluttered mess on her desktop, she could see a package the size of a VHS videocassette, wrapped in brown paper. She glanced at it, then looked again. There was no return address or postage, just her name, but it was neither written nor typed; instead, it was made of glued-on letters cut from magazines and painstakingly pieced together.

Picking up the package, she chuckled. "Oh Puh-lease!" This day is just getting better and better. It looked like a movie ransom note.

At that, she felt a touch of uneasiness. With all the terrorism and unrest these days, letter bombs were always a possibility, as was anthrax or poison; but the people in the mailroom were trained to spot such things. Still, this hadn't come through the mailroom – just her name, with no address and no postage: a drop-off.

Samantha knew that both standard procedure and common sense dictated her to send for security, but she was already irritated at her own indecision and decided to risk it. She carefully tore open the package, holding it away from her face to reveal a plain videocassette with no label. Ashamed at her relief, she got up and

crossed the room to the TV cart in the far corner. Like her desk, it was a hopeless jumble, wires hanging down in front that should have been in back; and tapes, disks, and empty cases scattered all over. She shook her head, mentally called herself a natural slob, and shoved in the tape and flipped on the TV before returning to her desk.

Um. Riot footage. The picture wasn't the best quality she had ever seen, but maybe there would be something useful. With one eye on the screen, she lifted her skirt to reveal a pair of long, well-turned legs and stripped off the torn pantyhose. She was in the midst of pulling on the other pair when she stopped and stood gaping at the TV for several minutes, unconscious that she was still holding her skirt hiked up around her waist.

As the tape abruptly turned to static at the end, Samantha yanked down her skirt.

"Mary!" she yelled into the intercom. "Get Phillip in here right now!"

Finished, the tape automatically rewound and ejected.

Phillip Silverstein stroked his broad face in a downward direction, beginning at his prominent, slightly hooked nose and ending at his short, graying beard.

"Well? Is it real?"

"Oh, it's real, all right," he muttered, nodding his head. "It's plenty real. I haven't seen anything like this since the Philippines."

"You do realize that this doesn't match the version that the police are telling?"

"No, Samantha, this...this is a whole different ball game." He paused for a moment, before continuing. "What are you going to do with it?"

"Well, let's just say, that I've got an interview with a certain police chief here very shortly. You know the one? The one who tried to get into my pants last year right after I interviewed him about the city's prostitution problem?"

"Samantha..."

“And let’s just say,” she continued, not letting him finish. “That, in the interest of fairness, I give him a chance to tell his side of the story, and then compare it to the footage of what actually happened and see how they stack up.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, ‘No’?”

“I mean no. You’re not going to do this. Not at this station.”

Her jaw dropped, “Phillip, this is the story of a life-time!” she shouted, her voice rising. “This is real news, the kind of story that every journalist dreams about!”

Silverstein heaved his six foot, three-hundred-pound bulk out of his chair and pointed a thick finger at her.

“This isn’t a dream – this is reality! This station is not going to be seen as pandering to a bunch of neo-Confederate assholes who still think it’s 1861!” He was shouting now too. “If we do this, we’ll be painted as racists by the NABP and our sponsors will bail!”

“What about the news! Isn’t that what we’re here for, to let the people know the *truth*?”

“*The truth is whatever we say it is!*”

Samantha suddenly became very quiet, “I can’t believe you said that.” she replied in a deceptively calm voice. “What about journalistic ethics? What about the truth? How much do we give up in order to be politically correct?”

Phillip blew out his breath audibly. “Look, Samantha, it’s time for you to wake up and smell the coffee. You can talk about journalistic ethics all you want, but it all comes down to this – no political correctness, as you put it, no sponsors; no sponsors, no money; no money, no newscast; no newscast, no job – *for any of us!* That’s just the way it is.”

“But...”

He stopped her with a raised hand.

“No buts, Samantha. Hear me out. There’s more. Even if I said to hell with the sponsors and did this anyway, we’d all be labeled as *racists*. Do you understand that? *Racists!* Like they say in Hollywood, we’d never work in this town again.” He shook his head. “I’m too old for that.”

She looked at him steadily.

“I seem to recall,” she began, “a journalist who was famous for going places and getting stories that no one else would dare – Asian riots, Latin American coups, exposing political corruption in high places – things like that. He even brought down a United States Senator once. He was the kind of person that I was proud to work for.” She paused to let that sink in, and then went on. “What ever happened to that man? Do you know?”

Phillip refused to meet her eyes.

“He grew up. Now give me the tape.”

“What did you say?”

“You heard me. Give me the tape.”

“Like *hell* I will! That tape is *mine*! It was delivered with *my* name on it; not yours and not the studio’s – *mine*!”

“I’m not going to argue legalities with you, Samantha, because I frankly don’t give a shit who’s right or wrong. I know you all too well to leave that tape here. Now either give it to me or I’ll have security come up here and take it!”

Samantha gasped. “You wouldn’t *dare*! I’ll sue you!”

“Sue all you want to – the tape will still be history and you’ll be out of a job on top of it. *Now give me that damned tape!*”

Tears welled up in her eyes and she quivered with rage.

“*Fine! Fine!*” she shouted as her hand swept a lamp off her desk to shatter on the carpet. Storming over to the TV rack she ejected the tape. “*You want the tape? I’ll give you the tape!*”

As she reached for it, however, her hand tangled in one of the dangling cords. “*Shit!*” In a rage, Samantha grabbed it with both hands and jerked violently, sending the TV set to follow the lamp in a loud explosion of glass and plastic. She let out an incoherent scream of rage and, as Mary threw the door open to see what was wrong, Samantha grabbed the tape and threw it at him back-handed. In shock at her actions, he barely caught it in time to prevent it from hitting him in the face.

“*Take it! Take it! Take your precious tape and stick it up your ass!*” She crossed her arms tightly and looked at the floor, sobbing

loudly. Mary rudely shouldered Silverstein out of the way and rushed to her side.

“You just settle down now, honey, you just settle down.” She murmured soothingly as she placed a ham-like arm around Samantha and glared accusingly at their boss.

“You made the right decision,” Silverstein said, smugly tapping the tape with his finger and turning to go. “We’ll discuss this later, after you’ve calmed down.”

Samantha looked up, tears streaming down her face. “One last thing, Phillip. You said you’d grown up.”

“Yes?”

“When other men grow up, do their spines deteriorate and their balls fall off too?”

Silverstein stiffened, then stomped out, slamming the door behind him. Mary followed his departure with a gaze that would melt steel.

“That’s telling him, Honey. I am sorry about your tape, though.” The secretary suddenly threw a hand to her mouth as she realized that she’d just admitted listening in.

“Don’t worry,” Samantha told her as she wiped furiously at her face, the tears and sobbing gone as if they had never been. “I know you were only looking out for me; in fact, I was counting on it.”

Mary was puzzled. “I don’t understand.”

“You didn’t really think that I’d let that kind of low-life scum upset me that badly did you? Why did you think I threw the TV in the floor and screamed?”

“I’ll bite.”

“I knew you’d come running. Between you, the TV and the tantrum that I threw in here, it provided me with the one thing I was looking for – a distraction!” Samantha unfolded her arms and Mary could clearly see the outline of the videotape against her belly inside her blouse. “Phillip is now the proud owner of some excellent footage of last year’s Memorial Day parade, if I’m not mistaken. I hope that fat Yankee jerk enjoys it!”

The older woman's mouth hung open in astonishment, then she clamped Samantha in a laughing hug that made the newscaster fear for the safety of her ribs.

“Put me down, Mary! We've got work to do and not much time to do it in. I need to get down to editing and you need to make some calls.”

The new Columbia Police Department building was a pork-barrel project only two years old and supposedly state-of-the-art; however it still looked and smelled just like what it was.

The project had run over budget towards the end and they had to finish with the paint the city had on hand, which explained the pale, vomitous green paint so favored by the military that covered most of the walls. Here and there, an awards plaque or the somber photo of some past member of Columbia's finest broke the monotony with more of the same, while the floor tiles were a plain, alternating checkerboard of black and white. Two years had also been plenty of time to develop the odor common only to police stations. The place smelled like a combination of sweat, cigarette smoke, and coffee grounds. The copious use of industrial cleaners did nothing to alleviate the slightly nauseating scent; on the contrary, the chemical smell seemed to enhance it.

Officer Frank Gore sat stiffly upright in his best dress uniform; partly because of personal pride, but, if the truth were known, as much because his tightly taped ribcage hurt like hell when he slouched. The hard, uncomfortable chair in the bare hallway where he waited wasn't helping matters any either.

They had released him from the hospital early this morning and he had just time enough to get down to the department; shower, shave, and dress for the occasion, then rush up here for his debriefing. Now here he sat, still outside the door an hour later than his scheduled appointment, staring into space at the bare hallway. Just like it was in the military – hurry up and wait.

He grimaced as much as his swollen jaw would comfortably allow. From his image in the mirror this morning, he knew that no uniform could make him look good. With his bruised face, slightly

darkened left eye, and stiffness, along with the persistent headache, he looked and felt like the morning after being on the losing end of a drunken brawl. Still, compared to what had happened to some yesterday, he supposed he was lucky.

Maybe. That depended on the outcome of this morning's proceedings. He had already made up his mind what he was going to do, but he still had no great confidence in what the outcome would be – or, on second thought, perhaps he did. Down deep, he had a disturbing certainty that it was not going to be good.

The door opened and he stood up when his name was called. Strangely aware of the weight of the tiny locket pressing against his chest beneath his uniform, Officer Franklin Gore marched into the meeting room.

“Samantha, I need to talk to you.”

Samantha sat absolutely still in the beautician's chair as the studio's frazzled and more than a little neurotic male make-up artist carefully put on her eye shadow. He shot an irritated look at their mutual boss for disrupting his routine, but remained silent. She never even let her eyes wander in Silverstein's direction as he pulled up a nearby folding chair and sat down beside her.

“What is it, Phillip?” she inquired tiredly, barely allowing her lips to part enough to answer.

“About what happened; I hope you understand my position...”

“Just drop it, will you? I don't want to talk about it right now.”

“But...”

“No buts – just like you said, remember? Now leave it alone or you're going to get me upset again.”

Phillip glared at her and shifted his considerable weight, making the chair creak in protest.

“Very well,” he said cautiously. “But I want you to understand *this*. The Reverend Bessant's personal secretary has contacted me. He wants to meet with me at noon in order to set up an exclusive, hour-long interview by this station that's sure to be picked up in turn by the major networks. We're talking real ratings here, Samantha, and national coverage.”

She remained silent and he looked at her closely, nonplussed by her lack of reaction.

“Look Samantha, I’ll give it to you this way; you play it straight with me on this interview with Chief Perkins, and I’ll see to it that you get the Bessant interview. Think of it, Samantha! National coverage!”

“Fine.” *Okay big boy, there’s the carrot; now where’s the stick?*

Silverstein skewered her with a hard glare. *Here it comes.*

“A word of warning – I’ll be with the Reverend arranging everything when you interview the chief. Bessant won’t deal with anyone but me. Don’t you screw me, Samantha. I mean it. You’re my best interviewer, but if you screw me on this, so help me, I won’t just fire you; I’ll destroy you! Do you understand me? I will utterly and completely *destroy you!*” You won’t be able to land a job slinging shit in a burger joint when I’m done with you! Do I make myself clear?”

“Loud and clear, Phillip.” The “*Your voice carries just fine, a-hole,*” in her thoughts went carefully un-hinted at.

“Good,” he said as he rose, somewhat mollified. “Good luck with the interview.

Careful to keep her face utterly expressionless, she smiled deep inside: a smile as expectant as that of a cat waiting for a particularly aggravating mouse. This was going to be *fun!*

The room was silent, but the tension crackled almost audibly between Frank Gore and the three men who sat across the scarred table from him, pinning him with gazes that ranged from disbelief to outright hostility. It took a supreme effort of will to keep from squirming like a bug on a pin.

“Do you realize what you have just told us here in this room?” Deputy Chief Trigg inquired in slow, controlled, and carefully measured tones. His bulging watery eyes, grotesquely enlarged by the thick lenses of his wire-rimmed glasses, blinked rapidly. It was easy to see why the other cops called him ‘Frog Eyes’ behind his back. With his squat build, broad, flattened, bald head, and wide, thick-lipped mouth, he actually resembled his amphibian namesake

rather closely. “Are you sure that you don’t want to...*rethink* your statement before this goes any further?”

“Sir,” Frank replied, inwardly cursing himself for being unable to fully control his voice, which was at least an octave higher than normal from the tension, “there is nothing to rethink. I’ve told you the truth – all of it.”

The short, slight Department Psychologist, an immigrant from New York named Jacob Cohen, looked at him pointedly. He didn’t speak for several seconds; just stared, playing with a pencil wedged between his hands, the point on the right palm and the eraser on the left.

With his nasal accent, long nose, pencil neck, and what little hair he had carefully arranged to look like it hadn’t been combed in days, he had ‘liberal horse’s ass’ written all over him and was the sort that Frank despised on sight.

Unwilling to be intimidated either by his superior airs or his mind games, the cop locked eyes with him, and counterattacked, using a little trick he had learned from one of his martial arts instructors. He summoned up his ‘war stare:’ a psychological ploy where he visualized himself as a tiger and the psychologist as a piece of raw meat. The attitude showed clearly in his eyes, and Cohen was the first to blink. He looked away for a moment, angry at being trumped in his own childish game, then turned the pencil into his right hand and pointed it at Gore.

“Officer Gore, you did say that you were injured in that melee, did you not?”

“Yes, sir.” Frank’s hackles raised. His instincts told him an attack was coming, despite Cohen’s innocent-sounding, professional tone of voice.

“What was the extent of those injuries again?”

“I was diagnosed with two and possibly three cracked ribs, a mild concussion, various abrasions, bruises, and contu –”

At this point, Cohen interrupted him with the upraised pencil. “So one of those injuries was to your head, is that not correct?”

“Yes, sir, that is correct.”

“In fact, Officer Gore, the paramedics report that your riot helmet was actually broken, front *and* back, and that you were in a state of unconsciousness when they found you. Is that not also correct?”

Uh-oh! He could see the way that this was going.

“Is that not also correct, Officer Gore?” Cohen persisted.

“That’s what I’m told, sir, but I have no recollection of being unconscious.” Even as he said it, he realized how ridiculous it sounded.

Cohen tapped the eraser on the table and looked around at the others. Nothing was said, but they seemed to come to an unspoken agreement.

“Officer Gore,” the psychologist continued, leveling the pencil point once again like a casually aimed gun; an impression reinforced by the triumphant smile he didn’t bother to suppress this time, “law enforcement is by its nature a very dangerous occupation. Sometimes officers are injured in the line of duty; a tragedy, but it happens. Head injuries are of particular concern, because they can cause hallucinations and they can affect an officer’s judgment – or even his memory of events.”

Frank finally lost his cool and leaned forward, almost shouting at Cohen before he could stop himself. “But I told you the truth! I was there, and I saw what happened!”

Cohen shook his head with mock sadness belied by the gleam in his eyes.

“Yes, Officer Gore, you did tell us the truth – what you *believe* to be the truth, at least as far as you could determine it in your severely traumatized state. In addition to the head injury which led to unconsciousness during at least part of the unfortunate events, I’m sure that you yourself will be forced to agree that due to the violent and stressful nature of the action, you are a prime candidate for post traumatic stress disorder.”

Taking his cue, the Deputy Chief immediately jumped in.

“Therefore, Officer Gore, due to the nature of your injuries and their potential for adverse long-term effects, I am removing you from active duty and placing you on indefinite paid medical leave,

until such time as the Department Psychologist declares you fit for duty, effective immediately. Please leave your weapon here before you go; my secretary will give you a receipt for it.”

Frank, furious, opened his mouth to protest, but Cohen abruptly cut him off.

“Please control yourself, Officer Gore. We understand that emotional outbursts and even ‘acting out’ are common in a man in your condition, but you must also understand that we are responsible for the safety of the public.

“As a police officer, you are highly trained in some very dangerous skills to enable you to do your job. You are even more highly trained than most, and your record shows that you have been involved in numerous violent encounters as part of your duties over the years. Such a highly trained officer known to be mentally unstable and having hallucinations of a violent nature who persists in exhibiting anti-social or abusive verbal behavior could well be considered to be a danger to himself and others. You do understand what our responsibilities would be in just such a case, do you not?”

Frank Gore closed his mouth with a snap. He understood all right – commitment to a psychiatric institution.

Cohen stared at him for several more seconds, that infuriating superior smile on his face. Frank imagined himself wiping that obnoxious expression away with a quick series of well-placed blows. He knew his capabilities, and, even in his weakened condition, he was confident he could rearrange the psychologist’s features permanently before anybody else could interfere.

He also knew that to do so was a one-way ticket to the nut house. Despite that, it took all the control he had to sit still, and settled for locking eyes with Cohen again until the grin faltered and the psychologist looked away one more time.

“Good,” Cohen muttered. “I’m glad that we understand each other.”

“Perfectly,” Frank said in a cold, clear voice as he stood, and before anyone saw his hand move, the pistol was in it. While the third man showed no reaction, the two desk jockeys paled – Cohen in particular – but Gore simply released the magazine, letting it

clatter to the table on top of his tormentor's papers. Racking the slide, he palmed the cartridge and tossed it to him. The psychologist spastically tried to catch it and fumbled it from hand to hand before dropping it in the floor, where it bounced once and rolled under the table.

Frank quickly spun the automatic around his index finger, cowboy-style, turned, and extended it, butt first, to Trigg. He was pleased to note that Frog Eyes' hand was shaking as he reached for it. It wasn't much of a victory, but at least it was something.

After handing over his Glock, Frank spun on his heel, turned his back on them and marched out as erect and straight as he had come in, his face as expressionless as a stone. He would rather have died than give them the satisfaction of anything else.

As soon as the door closed behind him, the Deputy Chief mopped his forehead with a handkerchief.

The psychologist, suddenly brought face to face with his own mortality, looked as though he were going to throw up. He gulped audibly before he could speak. "My God! That bastard's a psycho!"

"Very professional diagnosis," the third voice, speaking up for the first time, remarked sarcastically.

The third man, FEMA representative Ronald Peters sat as motionless and apparently unperturbed now as he had since the interview began; elbows propped on the table and hands and fingers pressed together as in prayer, and his indeterminately colored eyes behind the wire-rimmed glasses unblinking. There was nothing special about his appearance – everything about him: features, hair, build, gray suit – was plain and unremarkable, but for a single factor.

The man exuded power like an athlete exudes sweat. You could almost smell it.

After a moment, he lowered his hands and turned toward the others. "You did well. There was the *one* good move on your part, Cohen: the head injury ploy. That may be all that's required. Still," he said, glancing back toward the closed door, "keep an eye on him."

The other two nodded silently.

"Officer Gore is obviously a highly capable individual, and one with a lot of control."

Cohen's voice was loud and shrill. "*Control!* I thought he was going to shoot us!"

"Control," Peters repeated evenly, his voice never raising or altering its tone in any way. "Every thing he did was controlled and intentional, to prove a point. An uncontrolled individual with a weapon would have blown your smart ass all over this room for trying to mess with him like that for no purpose but your own gratification." His face showed its first real expression as he fixed Cohen with a stare not unlike Gore's – only far colder and more reptilian – and the psychologist began sweating even more. "Even an individual with full control might do the same; someone like me, for instance. He would have gotten by with it too, since you gave him the perfect alibi: you told him we could have him locked up in a psych-ward. In case you didn't know it, Cohen, you can't convict a crazy man. The worst part was you said it in this taped debriefing: a tape that would have been examined if he had gone on a shooting spree in here. His defense council would have loved that.

"Don't think it didn't occur to him either; I saw it in his eyes." He held up a thumb and a finger, barely half an inch apart. "You came that close to getting yourself killed, which would frankly be no great loss; however, I like to believe my own life is of considerably more value. If you ever pull a stunt like that around me again and put me at risk, I'll shoot you myself. Is that clear?"

Paling, the psychologist quickly nodded in the affirmative.

"Good. To continue; even more than controlled, Officer Gore strikes me as being an idealist, and idealists tend to be unpredictable people. That combination makes him potentially dangerous."

Half an hour later, Frank Gore was standing on the sidewalk in front of the Police Department in civilian clothes: jeans, black athletic shoes, a plain wine-colored pocket T shirt stretched tightly over his muscles, and a stormy expression on his face.

"That certainly went well!" he muttered to no one in particular. "At nine o'clock I was a cop – now I'm a certified lunatic and it's not even eleven yet! I wonder what the hell this fine day will bring next?"

Shaking his head in disgust over the whole situation, he strode off in no particular direction. Passersby who happened to notice his dark look quickly got out of his way.

Chapter 4

“I’m back, Honey.”

Samantha looked up from the pile of papers in front of her. “Oh, Mary! Did you get it all done?”

“Yep. The dubbed copies were made and mailed to your place and to that drop you wanted.” That had been one of Samantha's main concerns. Now, regardless of what happened to the copy here in the studio, she could pick the duplicates up at her leisure for later use. *Who knows; there might even be a book in this...*

“Great! How much do I owe you?”

“Well, let’s see...” she said, rummaging around in a huge handbag and finally fished out a piece of paper. Adjusting her glasses halfway down her nose, Mary studied it at arm’s length with the care of an archeologist with a newfound artifact. “Jimmy down in editing wouldn’t settle for anything less than a fifty to drop everything else and make those copies. It’s thirty- two-fifty for postage, and forty dollars to turn an out of work colored acquaintance into the Reverend Bessant’s per-r-r-r-sonal secretary...” They both snickered at the ploy. “Well, let’s just call it a hundred and make it even.”

The blonde news anchor glared at her and stuffed two bills into the voluminous depths of the other woman’s purse over Mary’s protests when she glimpsed the denominations.

“I’ve got a better idea – lets call it *two* hundred and I still don’t know if that will make it even. You’re taking a serious risk helping me with this. You could lose your job, Mary.”

“Pshaw!” the older woman snorted. “I was looking for a job when I found this one. What the hell, this place won’t be any fun without you here anyway. Besides, after this story, you can write your own ticket – you’re going places, and I think I know you well enough to know that you’ll take care of a fat old woman who helped you get there.

“You always were a good, honest girl, Samantha, the kind of girl I’d have been proud to have had for a daughter if Harry and I had been able.”

Much to Mary’s surprise, Samantha impulsively threw her arms around her neck and hugged her. Mary quickly disentangled herself.

“Now you stop that, you hear me? You’re getting your clothes all wrinkled up!” Her face contorted as she fought to hold back the tears, and she brushed ineffectively at Samantha’s blouse. “You just get in there and knock ’em dead!”

Samantha’s face hardened. “That’s just what I intend to do.”

Phillip Silverstein had never been so embarrassed in his life and, after thirty years in the news business, that was saying something.

He had walked into the South Carolina NABP headquarters with his business card in hand and his head held high, only to be met with the Reverend Bessant’s *real* personal secretary, who pointedly informed him that she not only had no earthly idea what he was talking about, but she didn’t know who the hell he was!

When he tried to explain, he was politely but very firmly and unceremoniously taken by both arms and escorted to the door by a pair of large and extraordinarily muscular Negro men who proceeded to place him on the sidewalk outside.

Shaking with rage, he stormed off toward his BMW, promising to have someone’s balls for this.

Chief Perkins fancied himself a ladies man, and, in fact, he ‘got a lot’ as he was fond of putting it; however, that was due much more to his political influence and his powerful position than to his greasy black comb-over, sagging jowls, and his two-hundred eighty-five pounds of weight. He sat in the sound stage’s guest chair while the technician fiddled with his lapel mike, and stole yet another glance at Samantha, already seated in the opposite chair, paying particular attention to her long, shapely legs. The point of his tongue involuntarily wet his lips as he allowed his eyes to slide up them, from her slender ankles to the point where her sleek thighs

disappeared into the dark, enticing mysteries of her short skirt. Glancing up, he realized that she was looking directly at him.

He blushed slightly. *Uh-oh; just like last time.*

Samantha's lips parted in one of the most lovely, most kissable smiles that Jim Perkins had ever seen. He sucked in his big gut a little tighter. Maybe she was coming around after all – unless he missed his guess that was a smile of hungry anticipation.

He was more right than he knew.

Phillip Silverstein locked the doors, started his car, and turned on the radio, tapping the first set button. It took him directly to Channel 13's audio broadcast. Throwing the car in gear with much more force than necessary, he attempted without success to pull out into the stream of passing traffic, slowed to a virtual standstill as two lanes funneled into one a few blocks ahead due to a breakdown.

"Shit!" He pounded on the wheel with his fist. It was noon and, even in the current fuel shortage, lunchtime traffic was still hell.

He looked toward the sky, in the direction of a god he didn't believe in and asked rhetorically, "So, what else can go wrong?"

The Grand Slam Bar and Grill was about a third full, typical for its usual lunch crowd. The place was sports-oriented, complete with autographed pictures on the walls and game balls on shelves behind the bar, but lacked just enough memorabilia to keep from being a full-fledged yuppie theme bar. Instead, it remained a dark, reasonably quiet watering hole – most of the time. The customers were all white and all male: there were a couple of local businessmen, but most of the patrons were either blue collar or, more often, part of the growing legion of the unemployed vainly trying to cut the dust and kill their feelings of desperation. Today, there was a steady buzz of conversation – mostly about yesterday's riot as far as Frank could tell. A few of the men had bruised faces and bandaged knuckles that hinted at their own participation.

Frank Gore sat alone at a corner table with his back to the wall, slowly nursing the only beer he would allow himself today. It would be too easy to fall into the trap of drinking to forget, until you

became like the people that he had to deal with on a regular basis as a police officer – those who drank and drank until they forgot everything, including life itself. Cops weren't immune to it by any means: if anything, they were more prone to it than most. He'd attended more than one funeral for another officer who'd looked for the answer in a bottle and ended up eating his gun late one night. Like the ancient maps used to say of dangerous territory, "There be monsters." Nutcase or not, that was one dark path Frank wasn't about to start down.

Still, he needed a drink – more, he deserved a drink right now, if anyone on the face of the earth did. So he sipped slowly at the beer, a dark, heavy German import he had splurged for, savoring the rich malty taste and making it last. Wiping the foam off his lips with the back of his hand, he smiled without humor, thinking of a phrase he had heard once: something about no good deed ever going unpunished.

Mulling over it, he supposed he might have been just a teensy bit out of line with that little demonstration of firearms handling during the interview; still, he didn't regret it one bit. Whatever his faults, Frank wasn't a hypocrite, and he could admit, to himself at least, that he had enjoyed making his judges in that kangaroo court see that they too were human, and very mortal. If there were repercussions, he would deal with those when they reared their heads – until then, to hell with it.

He took another sip. Feeling sorry for yourself was a bad habit, and accomplished nothing. As soon as he finished his beer, he determined to get up and go do something constructive.

Now, if he could just figure out what.

"Hey, guys, be still! It's Samantha!"

The exclamation from the bar was followed by a brief barrage of whistles and catcalls, Frank raised his eyes and looked at the door, assuming that some popular local girl had just come in, before realizing that the object of all the attention was on the big screen TV against the far wall. Like everyone else in the city, he recognized the pretty blonde newscaster immediately. She was very professional

and nice looking for a fact, but he idly wondered how she'd react if she knew that she was also a barroom icon.

“Good afternoon. This is Samantha Norris live at Channel 13 News with this exclusive. We have Columbia Police Chief Jim Perkins with us in the studio today to talk to us about the disturbance at the capitol.”

“Disturbance my ass! That was a damned riot, that’s what that was!” someone shouted, only to be silenced by a chorus of “shhh!” and a threatening “shut the hell up! I want to hear this!”

As noise subsided, the cameras cut to the bulk of the police chief overflowing the upholstered studio chair. Frank shook his head. He couldn’t get away from this crap, even here.

Gore’s face grew darker and darker as the Chief launched into the official explanation of the events. When he began talking about the snipers, Frank unconsciously began grinding his teeth audibly, which caused the man at the next table, after a glance at the cop’s stormy countenance, to take his own beer and carefully and unobtrusively move up to the bar.

Frank studied his half-empty mug morosely. In the background, he vaguely heard Samantha Norris’ voice, still sweet as sugar and still doing the usual puff interview. *Damn it!*

“So, Chief Perkins, you believe this to be a white supremacist plot to make a political statement by attacking both the NABP and the Columbia Police Department with automatic assault weapons, is that fair to say?”

“Well, Samantha, that appears to be about the size of it.”

“Chief, as you know, we have some footage of the riot here at the studio. I’d like to run it now and get your expert commentary on it, if you would.”

“I’d be happy to, Samantha.”

“Get that white bastard! Kill his ass!”

Frank, startled at the recording of Bessant’s voice, looked up just in time to see the late Officer Jackson deliberately step aside and let the crowd through.

“Did you see that?” roared a voice from the small crowd, a voice that was immediately drowned out by the others, and the noise

doubled when Jackson shot the young red-haired woman. Someone's chair fell backwards and hit the floor and glasses tumbled off tables, spilling their contents unheeded as the men shot to their feet. Cries of "*son of a bitch!*" and "*damned nigger bastard!*" filled the room. One of the patrons slammed a bottle down on the bar so hard the glass shattered, sending a wave of foam running down the polished wood.

As the unreal popping of gunfire filled the screen, Frank slowly rose to his feet. Over the heads of the crowd, he watched a miniature image of himself blow Jackson's leg out from under him.

By the time the tape had run its course, there was a half-empty mug abandoned on the corner table, and Frank Gore was nowhere in sight.

Two blocks away, drivers in the stalled line of traffic were startled by the sight of a heavy, bearded man in a silver BMW screaming at the top of his lungs and beating dents in the dashboard with his fists.

"So, Chief Perkins, after observing this video, would you care to revise your 'white supremacist- snipers theory'?"

Perkins sat absolutely still in his chair, his normally florid face a pasty white. That wasn't the tape the PD had released, and it definitely wasn't what he expected. For the first time in a life of successful political maneuvering, he was absolutely, positively, paralyzingly panicked. He knew that he should say something or do something, but for the life of him, he had no idea what.

Samantha pressed her attack. "Isn't it true, Chief Perkins, that this tape clearly shows that it was not white supremacists who precipitated this attack, but that it was incited by none other than the Reverend James Bessant, the head of the premiere African-American organization, the National Association of Black Persons, and one of your own officers facilitated it; an officer who was, in fact, also an African-American? And isn't it true that his action resulted in the beating death of a seventy-seven year old senior citizen who was armed with nothing more than a walking stick? And isn't it true, Chief Perkins, that this black officer proceeded to deliberately shoot

six completely unarmed civilians, two women and four men, one through the back of the head execution-style as he knelt on the ground, all of whom were white, and that this renegade officer had to be shot and wounded by another officer in order to stop his massacre, and that the individual who actually killed him was another black man?”

Samantha’s voice was a little too loud now, and she knew that she was over the top, but she didn’t care. Like a lioness after a wounded buffalo, she went right for the throat, pointing her polished fingernail at him like a bloody dagger.

“And isn’t it true, Chief Perkins, that it was these actions that produced a disgraceful panicked response among your other officers, and that they fired indiscriminately into an unarmed crowd turning the capitol grounds into a killing field? What’s the death toll from that, Chief Perkins?”

Perkins, panicked and gaping like a landed fish, finally found his feet and, heedless of the image that he presented, ran for the door of the sound stage. He hit it hard enough to rattle the flimsy walls, only to find it locked. Shaking the knob until it threatened to come off in his hand, he shouted, “Open this door! Damn it! You open this thing up right now!” He began cursing at the top of his lungs, forgetting that his mike was still live.

Samantha went in for the kill without ever leaving her seat.

“Finally, Chief Perkins, isn’t it true that the only racist actions were black on white, and the only snipers were officers of the Columbia Police Department? Isn’t that true, Chief Perkins?”

“Open this door!” Finally coming to his senses enough to realize that he was beating on the door of a three-walled façade of a room, the whole front of which was open, he hurried out past the cameras, at what, for him, was a significant rate of speed, with the sound technician in hot pursuit, shouting for him to return the wireless mike still clipped to his collar. The cameraman panned, following the chief’s broad backside until he disappeared, then cut back to Samantha.

“It would appear that Chief Perkins, head of Columbia’s finest, has left us for what was no doubt a pressing engagement elsewhere,”

she said sarcastically, “so I will sign off now, for my last time here at 13 News. It has been my pleasure to serve you to the best of my ability.

“I’d like for you all to remember this one thing – the truth is not what someone says happened; the truth is what actually did happen.

“This is Samantha Norris, Channel 13 News. Have a nice afternoon.”

All over Columbia, people stood aghast at what they had just seen – aghast, horrified, disbelieving – and then, they became angry.

Chapter 5

Samantha involuntarily slowed her brisk walk when she saw Phillip Silverstein leaning on her red Lexus, his BMW parked beside it.

“Good afternoon, Phillip. My resignation is on your desk.”

Silverstein’s bear-like body was rigid with tension.

“You did it.” His voice, normally hoarse from cigarettes, was strangely soft. “You actually did it.”

“Did what, Phillip?” she asked as she pulled her keys from her purse. “Did what? All I did was to tell the truth. I reported the *news*, Phillip, the *real* news, not the government line. That’s something you weren’t afraid to do once, or don’t you remember?”

“You do know that you played right into the hands of those murdering racists, don’t you?”

“I don’t know that at all. The only ‘murdering racists’ I saw, I pointed out in the interview: Bessant and Jackson, that black cop. You just can’t handle it because it’s not ‘politically correct’.”

“Samantha, the news media has a responsibility to advance civilization. The only way we can do that is through equality and unity, can’t you see that? We have to elevate the downtrodden, and we can’t do that by vindicating a bunch of stupid rednecks still fighting the damned Civil War!” Silverstein’s voice began to rise.

“Even if those ‘stupid rednecks’ were in the right? What about the truth?”

“The truth is subordinate to the greater good!”

She looked him up and down with the same disgust she would have had for dog manure on her shoe.

“You’re a disgrace to this profession and a waste of oxygen,” she said icily and brushed by him. “Now get off my car – I’ve got things to do!”

She was almost past when Silverstein grabbed her by the left arm, burying his sausage-like fingers painfully in her bicep, and jerked her back, savagely slamming her against the vehicle. He

reverted to shouting in Yiddish in his anger. “You stupid goy shiksa!”

Samantha instinctively struck back hard with her handful of keys, jolting his head to one side and opening a shallow cut from the outer corner of his left eye to his cheekbone. She followed through with a knee to the groin but he caught it on his massive thigh, blunting its impact, and drove a fist full-force into her solar plexus.

It felt like the punch had short-circuited every part of her body. With no control over her muscles, she collapsed in a heap, folding up like a dropped accordion. All the wind had been driven out of her lungs and her body silently screamed for air, but her paralyzed diaphragm refused to work. Unable to even make a sound, she fought the panic stealing over her as she struggled to breath – on her knees, bent over with her forehead touching the concrete.

Silverstein ran his hand across the injured side of his face and stared at the blood that smeared it.

“You dumb broad, did you think I learned nothing growing up on the streets of New York and reporting on every brushfire in every shit-hole around the world? What did you think, that I was just another fat Jew to be walked on by you and your kind, you blonde haired Nazi *bitch!*” His voice rose to a shriek and he drew back his right leg and kicked her with all his strength.

Samantha had just started to get the first whiff of much-needed air into her lungs when the kick drove it out again. The fact that she somehow managed to get her right arm against her side before his instep slammed into her was all that saved her ribs from being crushed. Still, the force lifted her entirely off the garage floor and lofted her nearly a yard away. Coming down hard on her left shoulder, her head bounced jarringly off the cement and she rolled limply onto her back.

Samantha couldn’t breath, couldn’t move, and could barely think. She was distantly aware that her right arm was a throbbing shaft of pain above her elbow and a numb nothingness below, that her head hurt, and that she needed air – badly. Still, there was nothing she could do about it, and in a way, from her suddenly detached viewpoint, it didn’t seem to matter.

Silverstein stalked slowly towards her as she watched helplessly. “Well, Samantha, you have ruined me to advance yourself and your filthy racist cause. I have news for you, little whore. You may have ruined this station with your propaganda, but remember how you make your living: with that pretty face of yours reading the news. No pretty face, no job. When I get done with you, you won’t be quite so pretty!”

She tried to speak, tried to move, tried to do something, *anything*, but her body refused to respond. She could only lie there and watch as Phillip raised his big foot above her face.

Frank Gore swore under his breath – this day was just getting better and better! Once he saw that someone else actually knew the truth, he had become instantly obsessed with the urge to go to her and give her his side of the story. With media confirmation of his story and the resulting public pressure, he could shoot down Cohen’s diagnosis and get back on the job. There would be some desk time while the shooting investigation was going on, of course, but with the video evidence, he would sail through that.

Fortunately his aimless wandering after he left the department had taken him in the right direction, and when he left the bar he was only four blocks away from the 13 News Building. It looked like his luck was finally about to change.

As the teen-agers say, “*Not!*” He got inside by flashing his Police ID, only to be told by her secretary that Samantha Norris had not only just left, but had left for good – she had resigned. Of course, if he’d run, he just might catch her in the parking garage.

So he ran; literally, even though every step sent needles of pain through his ribs and drove a big, fiery spike of agony through his temples. Rest and take it easy, the doctor had said. *Yeah, right!* The worst part was that he was sure that it was a fruitless race; the way things were going, he’d get there just in time to see the rear of a red Lexus disappear down the exit ramp. Still, he had to try. It’d be worth it to talk to someone else who would believe him.

Much to his surprise, he actually found Samantha Norris; much more to his surprise, he found her sailing out from between her red Lexus and a silver BMW when Silverstein kicked her.

Yes, this day was just getting better and better!

A blood-curdling yell cut through Samantha's fog and before Silverstein could stomp his heel down into her face, a figure ran forward at full speed and leapt at him, landing a flying sidekick just under the big man's ribs that sent him reeling into a support column several feet away. From Samantha's view, looking up from the ground, it was like watching a martial arts movie from the very front row – except in the Kung Fu flicks, the kickers landed gracefully on their feet after making contact, instead of falling flat on their ass!

Frank scrambled to his feet, cursing as the pain tore through his ribs and head. The distracting yell and the leaping kick was the only way he could think of on the spur of the moment to use his momentum to knock this fat clown away before he crushed the news anchor's face. At least it had seemed like a good idea at the time, but his beat-up condition had betrayed him, throwing off his coordination and taking the focus out of the kick. It felt like someone was rhythmically pounding his skull with a ball-peen hammer while simultaneously twisting a knife into his ribs, and to top it off, he was pretty sure he had just ripped the crotch out of his jeans. *What an entrance!*

Even worse, Silverstein hadn't had the fight knocked out of him by either the kick or his rather abrupt contact with the column – in fact, it seemed only to enrage him all the more. Frank had hardly gotten to his feet when the big man charged him with an inarticulate cry and a wild right roundhouse punch with all his considerable weight behind it that would have been the end of the fight and, most likely, of Frank Gore if it had landed.

With the instinct born of years of hard martial arts training and street experience with the department, Frank skipped to his left outside the larger man's potential grasp, parrying the wrist with his own right hand, then grabbing hold of it and jerking, adding impetuous to his attacker's forward momentum. As the off-balance

Silverstein slid past him, he slammed a hard right roundhouse shin kick into his gut that stopped the station manager in his tracks and doubled him over; then, quickly recoiling the same leg to a cocked position while still hanging on to the wrist, Frank stomped him in the side of the right knee. The knee was at slightly the wrong angle, so the leg twisted away and buckled instead of dislocating the joint as the cop had intended. Silverstein yelped and hopped back, twisting his thick, sweaty wrist out of the cop's grip.

Both of them regained their balance simultaneously, with the larger man clearly in pain and favoring his right leg. Frank figured his kick had torn some tendons at least, maybe worse – he hoped so anyway.

Not giving his opponent a chance to rest and regroup, the cop stepped quickly forward with his right foot and feinted a punch to the head, then skipped up on his left foot and snapped a fast right lead-leg roundhouse kick that sent his instep smacking crisply into the inside of Silverstein's already-injured knee. Silverstein yelled in pain and Frank felt like it; in his concussion-induced mental fog he had misjudged the angle again and he momentarily wondered if the kick hadn't broken a bone in the top of his foot.

The pain brought the station manager's guard down and, now unable to bear his weight, the knee began to collapse. Silverstein's head came forward just in time to meet the cop's classic southpaw one-two-three combination, delivered in less than a second; a leading right that broke his prominent nose, a left cross that landed on his chin, knocking him out, and, before he could fall, a particularly vicious right hook that Frank put everything he had into just to make sure. The last blow broke Silverstein's jaw, spun him a hundred and eighty degrees and dropped him face down on the concrete – hard.

Frank stood there for a moment, his chest heaving. Now not only did his head and ribs hurt, but his fists hurt, his foot hurt, and even his butt hurt where he had fallen on it. He was sure that more pains would rear their head once the adrenaline wore off – they always did.

He turned to face Samantha to find that she had dragged herself into a sitting position and was staring at him.

Samantha's thoughts began to coordinate as her ability to breathe returned, but everything still had an aura of unreality about it. One minute she was watching helplessly as Silverstein prepared to flatten her face, and the next this handsome stranger came out of nowhere to her rescue, just like in an old movie. *Well, OK, maybe he wasn't all that handsome – in fact, he looked pretty beat-up – but he sure was handy, even if he didn't have quite the style of James Bond.*

The next instant he was kneeling at her side, supporting her with an arm around her shoulders and a look of concern on his face. "Ma'am, are you all right?"

Ma'am: that was unusual these days, particularly since he looked to be her elder by at least a couple of years.

"I'm fine," she managed to wheeze. "I'll be OK in a minute, as soon as I get my breath back."

"You just sit right here, and I'll get you an ambulance."

Frank began fishing a cell phone from his belt, but she shook her head.

"I don't want an ambulance. I'll be all right."

"Now, ma'am," he said, looking her in the eye, "he kicked you hard. You could have broken ribs or even internal injuries. You really should get checked out." She shook her head again, and he sighed in exasperation. "It's your choice, but please, at *least* let me check you over before you get up and get to moving around. I'd sure feel a lot better about it."

Uh-huh – so this was where it was going.

"I'll just bet you would," she retorted, cocking an eyebrow at him.

He gave her a puzzled look and then, realizing what she meant, blushed to the roots of his hair. "Oh! I'm sorry," he sputtered and reached around to his back pocket. "Here – I'm a police officer, ma'am." He produced a wallet and flipped it open, revealing his badge and ID. "Frank Gore, Columbia PD. I'm also EMT qualified. I've got my certification card in here somewhere..."

Samantha couldn't help but smile. That the same man who had just mopped the parking garage with Phillip was now blushing like a gawky teenager touched her sense of humor. Not that she was so

easily bowled over, but she was at least convinced that he was sincere.

“All right, Officer Gore, if it’ll make you feel better, you can go ahead, but on one condition – don’t call me ma’am. It makes me feel like someone’s grandmother.”

“Yes Ma – er, Miss Norris.” He grinned, acknowledging his near faux pas.

Hmm. Miss, not Ms.; that was something else unusual in this day and age. Her reporter’s mind went to work, trying to classify his type.

“Try Samantha. That’s what my friends call me.” *Why did you add that last part? Watch yourself, Samantha!*

“OK, Samantha. Call me Frank. Now, where does it hurt?”

As she told him, he checked her, quickly and professionally, starting at her head, where he pronounced that the injury appeared minor, just an abrasion and a slight hematoma.

“A slight what?”

“A lump.”

“Oh.”

He took her pulse, felt around and decided that her arm wasn’t broken, but was severely bruised and should probably be in a sling for a few days. After that, Frank checked her skinned knees (*another pair of panty hose bites the dust!*) and gently manipulated the joints, sending her into uncontrollable giggling, as they were her most ticklish spot. That, he told her with an engaging smile, was a good sign.

“Now, Samantha,” he said as he maneuvered behind her. “I’m going to check your ribs. I’m going to have to lift your blouse, but if you’ll hold on to the front of it just below your breasts, I think we can keep your modesty intact in the process.”

She took his advice, quietly flabbergasted by his consideration. She had been around enough accident scenes to know that modesty generally was *not* a priority. He un-tucked her blouse and gently but thoroughly ran his hands over her back and ribs. As he reached around toward the front, she could feel his breath swirling on the back of her neck. Despite the pain when he touched her right side,

she felt a warm feeling stealing over her. Aggravated with herself, she snapped out at him with her legendary sarcasm.

“So Prince Valiant, where’d you park your white charger?” She immediately felt even worse; he had done nothing to deserve that; in fact, he deserved far better after what he had done for her.

Fortunately, Frank didn’t seem to notice her mean tone, or if he did, he gave no sign.

“Right now, Prince Valiant’s ‘charger’ is in the shop with a busted transmission,” he told her with a chuckle, “and his royal highness is riding ‘shank’s mare’.”

Good natured and quick on the uptake too. There’s more to this one than meets the eye. Damn it, Samantha!

“There you go.” He carefully tugged her blouse back down. “Professionally, I still think that you should go to the ER to get checked out. Personally, you seem pretty tough; I think you’ll be all right. Do you want to try to stand up?”

She nodded and started to rise; quickly one of his arms was around her waist and the other gently cradling her own wounded right arm, and he assisted her somewhat unsteadily to her feet. His arms were big and as hard as steel cables; he was obviously strong, but she felt the tight muscles shake and heard his breath hiss inward through his teeth.

“Am I *that* heavy?” she asked, somewhat miffed.

“No Ma – Samantha.” His voice sounded strained, and she thought there was a definite catch in it.

Through her own pains, Samantha noticed that his tanned face went several shades paler and his jaw clenched so tight it actually quivered slightly, as if he were in great pain.

“You’re hurt.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yeah, a little.”

“How little?”

“Some cracked ribs and a mild concussion.”

The reporter looked at him sharply.

“How could you know that? Anyway, I never saw him hit you.”

“He didn’t. I got hurt yesterday.”

She gave him a look of utter shock. “You mean to tell me that you came to *my* aid against a man twice your size, *and then* kicked his butt like Bruce Lee, all with broken ribs and a concussion?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He answered, matter-of-factly, his voice steadier and his color beginning to return.

Samantha was incredulous. This guy was like something out of King Arthur (*well, close enough*), and, through bitter experience, she knew that things that looked too good to be true usually were.

Still, she could see that he was in obvious pain, and now that she looked back, she recalled him favoring his left side during the fight.

“Does it hurt very bad?” She looked him straight in the eye as she asked and she sensed a hesitation as if he were about to deny it, then he looked away.

“Yeah, it hurts like the devil.”

“Frank,” she said in a quiet voice, “can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“I want an honest answer. Injured like you are, would you have jumped in the same way if I had been anyone else, say an old fat woman, for instance?”

She watched his face and could tell that he was as shocked by the question as he would have if she had asked him if he planned to keep on breathing.

“Of course – why wouldn’t I?” he asked, genuinely puzzled.

She couldn’t believe it. *He might actually be real.*

“Walk me to my car?”

“My pleasure.” He offered his arm and, surprising herself, she took it, and strolled the whole three steps to the Lexus.

“So, Frank, what brings you to the Channel 13 parking garage?”

“I came to see you.” He felt her tense, and he hurried on. “Relax, I’m not a stalker. I saw your interview with the chief today.”

“Okay,” she said carefully. That one wasn’t likely to win her any friends in the police department.

“I wanted to talk to you about it. I was there yesterday.”

“You were at the capitol?” she asked, and then, putting two and two together, she continued, “Is that where you got hurt?”

“Yeah. I was on your film. I’m the one who shot Officer Jackson.”

Her mouth hung open.

“You were that cop on the ground!”

“Yep.”

“Look, can I interview you?” she asked hungrily as only a reporter can.

“That’s what I came here for, to find someone who’ll believe what I’ve been saying.” He shook his head. “No one else has so far, but your tape may be the proof that will change that.” Without turning, he spoke to the figure of Silverstein still sprawled on the floor,

“I know you’ve been awake for a good five minutes, Mister. If you want to leave, then go ahead. But,” he added coldly, “if you make a move toward us or so much as open your mouth to say a single word, I’ll put you back down so hard they’ll have to scrape what’s left of you up with a spoon.”

The station manager got slowly to his feet, his face a mask of blood, and, without looking at them, limped painfully away.

“I’m sorry about your boyfriend,” Frank told her, “but I don’t abide men beating on ladies.”

Boyfriend? He thinks...

“No, he’s not my boyfriend! He’s my boss; well, ex-boss now, I guess.”

“Oh man!” He clamped his hand over his eyes in frustration. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to cost you your job!”

“You didn’t!” she exclaimed, laying a reassuring hand on his forearm. “I had just resigned.”

Even though he had heard the same thing from her secretary, he was unsure if she was telling the truth; still, Frank decided that it was more comfortable to accept it regardless.

“Well, at least that’s one good thing,” he said, then paused as a thoughtful and slightly fearful expression came over his features.

“What would his name be?”

“Phillip Silverstein – he’s the station manager.”

“For here? Channel 13, the biggest station in town?”

“Yes.”

Frank’s shoulders slumped as he heaved a sigh.

“I guess that this is just my lucky day,” he said with a sarcastic smile.

“I know it was mine,” she replied without thinking, mentally kicked herself, and then quickly continued. “Look, can we go somewhere and talk?” *Damn it!* “I mean, so I can interview you?”

“I think that sounds like a plan; I’d say I’ve already worn out our welcome around here. I’d offer to take you to dinner, but I don’t reckon either one of us is really dressed for it – no offence intended.”

She looked down at herself and shook her head. Her pantyhose hung in rags at her bloody knees, her un-tucked blouse had ripped along the right shoulder seam and was grimy with dirt. As a matter of fact, *she* was grimy with dirt and Heaven only knew what kind of mess her hair and make-up were in. Frank may have been dirty from the concrete and liberally splattered with Silverstein’s blood, but compared to her, he looked ready for a night on the town.

Samantha came to one of those spur-of-the-moment decisions that were rare for her and acted on it.

“Look,” she said before her good sense could intervene. “Why don’t we go to my place? We can both get cleaned up and I’ll fix us dinner. I’ll drive. It’s the least I can do.”

Her inner self recoiled. *Why don’t you just give him a lap-dance, while you’re at it?*

Frank looked both surprised and pleased.

“I’d be honored, Samantha, truly honored!”

You’ve done it now, girl!

They both paused for a moment before they got in the car, looking off into the distance with vague curiosity. Sirens were starting to echo from several different locations.

“I wonder what’s going on?” Samantha asked.

“Probably a fire,” Frank ventured. “I think I smell smoke.”

Chapter 6

Federal Emergency Management Agency Representative Ronald Peters leaned back in his chair and spoke smoothly into the phone in his steady, even voice.

“Mr. Silverstein, you did right to call me. You know we appreciate all the work you’ve done for us in the past, and I’ll take care of it for you.” He listened a moment without expression. “Yes, you go ahead to the hospital; just call an ambulance as soon as you get off the line with me. Better yet, we’ll call them. Can you make it back down to the area where Gore attacked you? Good, lie down and wait for them there. That’s right; you know what to do.

“I’ll have some people over there within the hour. Your staff does know that we will be running the show and to keep their mouths shut and do as they’re told? Good. We’ll have someone over to the hospital soon; until then, say nothing.

“Goodbye, Phillip.”

Hanging up, he swiveled his chair until it turned to face the Police Chief, who was hunched in his seat in front of the desk, fidgeting nervously and sweating even more than usual.

“Chief Perkins?”

“Yes sir?” he replied, fighting the urge to wring his hands. He hadn’t felt like this since being sent to the principal’s office in junior high after he was caught boring a peephole into the girls’ locker room.

“Obviously, your department needs some specialist help, so I am moving a squad of Federal operatives into your headquarters. They will choose an out of the way part of your building to set up an op center, and it will remain off limits to all of your personnel for the duration of their stay. They will have full access and full cooperation from you and your people. An order from them is an order from me; is that clear?”

The chief rapidly nodded in the affirmative.

“You *do* still have Officer Gore’s weapon, do you not?”

“No – I mean, well yeah. It’s still in Trigg’s desk, I think. He hasn’t had time to take it to the weapons locker yet, in all the confusion.”

“Excellent! Don’t – instead, I’d like you to take it to ballistics. Here’s what I want you to do.”

As Peters outlined the plan, the chief started to sweat even more. Peters’ parting advice didn’t help much either.

“After you take care of things over at the department this afternoon, I want you to stay out of the public eye for a few days until the people’s memory dies down – let Trigg do the talking for awhile. I needn’t tell you that, after seeing that melee here yesterday and especially after today’s little performance, you are currently on very thin ice. It’s only fair to tell you that if this doesn’t work, all this, *every last bit of it*, is going to come down right on your head. If I were you, I wouldn’t screw up again.”

Knowing the consequences full well, Big Jim Perkins had no intention of screwing up.

“Can’t you get any more cool outta that thing?” grumbled Police Sergeant Patterson. “I’m about to burn up in here.”

“Sorry, Pat,” the driver, a slender and extremely black cop with the unlikely last name of Starling replied. “I think this vehicle’s AC’s done lost its juice.” He wisely didn’t add the comment that, if the white sergeant would lay off the doughnuts and lose about fifty pounds of lard he likely wouldn’t be quite so miserable. “Might jus’ be too damned hot out there; maybe it can’t keep up.”

“Yeah, maybe, or maybe we ought to cut off the climate control to the city garage until the mechanics fix the damn cruisers right; then they might get on the stick.” He wiped away a trickle of sweat that had run into his left eye, glanced ahead and straightened up in his seat.

“Now what the devil is happening there?”

Starling’s eyes followed the direction of the sergeant’s pointing finger toward a small crowd gathered on the sidewalk. Several had bottles or mugs in their hands.

“Dunno. That’s the Grand Slam – it’s usually a pretty quiet place.”

As the police car glided to the curb, all eyes turned towards it, sullen and angry. Oblivious of the menacing stares, Patterson rolled down his window. The heat and his general irritability made his already coarse voice even harsher than normal.

“Now, just what in the hell is going on here? You know there ain’t no open containers allowed in the city!”

One of the men, a powerfully muscled construction worker, lunged forward without warning.

“Allow this, you fat son of a bitch!” he bellowed, and punched the startled sergeant in the face through the open window.

It was as if a dam had broken. Before either of the cops could reach for their door handles, a hailstorm of bottles slammed into their cruiser, smashing the rear passenger window and the windshield into crazed spider webs. The crowd swarmed the vehicle, pounding on it wildly with fists and beer mugs. Two ran around to the driver’s side, shattered the window with a kick from a steel-toed boot, and began ripping out the remaining shards of broken safety glass with their bare hands, heedless of sharp edges. Meanwhile, several others had reached in and grabbed Sergeant Patterson and were trying to drag him out through the passenger window, prevented only by the seat belt, whose shoulder harness was strangling him. As his attackers pulled him against it, his tongue bulged and his breath was completely cut off. Another man wrenched loose an eighteen inch length of broken curb and heaved it through the back glass with so much force it bounced off the Plexiglas partition separating the prisoner compartment from the front seat.

“*Help! Help!*” Starling screamed over and over again, panic overwhelming him as he fought the hands that reached for him. Caught by his own seat belt and unable to free a hand to either unfasten it or draw his gun, he had a flash of clarity and did the only thing that he could do to save himself – he mashed the gas pedal to the floor.

The powerful engine caught in a squeal of rubber as the heavy vehicle fishtailed, scattering the crowd both by fear and force. The tires bit and the traction finally sent it rocketing forward, bouncing one man onto the hood for an instant before he rolled off the driver's side fender into the road. Several men chased the car a short distance, bidding it goodbye with a final shower of bottles, curses, and shaking fists.

Patterson was gasping for breath, the fingernail marks on his face nearly invisible in its general redness. Starling was screaming into the radio.

Police cars across Columbia fared no better, coming under sporadic attack all across the city. At first, the cops attempted to respond decisively to their attackers, which only inflamed the situation. Many nearby residents witnessing the action, with Samantha's tape fresh in their minds, joined the attacks in their outrage. Rumors flew as fast as fists and bricks, and within an hour someone – no one ever knew if it was the police or the citizens – fired a shot in anger or desperation, and the situation on both sides escalated into total chaos. Before long gunshots from hidden positions shattered cruiser windows, as the rocks and bottles sailed from the mouths of alleys to smash glass and dent metal. One officer was crippled when a concrete block thrown from an overpass dropped through his windshield and crushed his pelvis.

Most terrifying from the cop's point of view, however, was the fire. Molotov cocktails – named for the Russian revolutionary who popularized their use – wreaked havoc all over the city. Glass bottles or light bulbs were filled with gasoline thickened with motor oil, a rag tied around their necks or simply stuffed inside as a plug, and then lit. Thrown from rooftops to give their wielders a chance to escape, they shattered into flaming puddles. Usually they were aimed at passing patrol cars. Several officers had to leave their burning vehicles and seek shelter in nearby buildings, protected only by their guns and the fact that the crowd could more easily and safely vent its anger on their cars than on them.

To further complicate matters, clashes began to erupt between blacks and whites, particularly throughout the city's poorer neighborhoods, resulting in a more or less constant stream of injuries. Screams, curses, and the popping of gunshots where the neighborhoods bordered one another were so regular as to be almost rhythmic, and smoke began to fill the streets as cars, homes, and apartments were set ablaze by one side or the other. The mini-race war's climax came when a twenty-year old skinhead, angry and humiliated after being attacked and beaten bloody by a gang of blacks, stole a two and a half ton truck and crashed it through the front wall of the local NABP headquarters. Once inside, he set it on fire by breaking a gasoline bomb against the side where a rag dangled from the fuel tank like a wick, before running out and barely escaping death when the resultant fireball singed his clothes and knocked him rolling on the sidewalk. Firemen battled the blaze for hours.

While that was going on, a righteously angry crowd was beginning to gather at what they believed to be the source of the problem.

Samantha felt the warm fingers of the shower massage begin to loosen her tight muscles, the tension flowing from her like the grime and dried blood. There was certainly enough tension from today to wash away; what with the interview, the story, the loss of her job, the beating.

Then there was Frank.

Yes, there was definitely Frank. She had left him in the living room to fend for himself while she cleaned up. She was still surprised at herself for feeling secure enough to allow a man she barely knew inside the townhouse while she showered, but she couldn't bring herself to see him as a potential threat – to her, anyway.

Silverstein might tell a different story!

As the water ran over her face, she smiled. *My hero is probably sitting straight-backed at nervous attention on the couch like 'Dudley Do-right', twiddling his thumbs.*

Frank was sitting straight-backed on the couch, alright, but he wasn't twiddling his thumbs. Instead, he was swiveling his head, looking around at the apartment done in 'modern condo': nice but at first glance, generic, almost like a rental unit at the beach. It was nearly as business-like as an office. Only on closer examination did he detect the subtle little personal touches that kept it from being completely sterile: a pair of framed pictures of a couple he took to be Samantha's parents, a handmade afghan, a few small knick-knacks here and there. He reflected that she must be highly dedicated to her career, since whatever outside life she had didn't seem to spill over into her home.

He was not only looking for clues about Samantha's personality through her belongings, but was also dealing with tensions of his own. Despite all he had on his mind, the faint sound of the running shower brought involuntary mental images of just what it was running over, which in turn brought unbidden fantasies that he'd *really* rather not deal with right now.

Listen, boy, you are a gentleman – a Southern gentleman at that – not some horny kid. Get a grip on yourself before you do or say something really stupid. That thought caused him to chuckle a little, which helped ease the tension. Considering how many stupid things he had done over the past day, he didn't know if one more would really make that much difference.

Yeah, it would in this case. He was hooked like a fish, and in just a damned hour, to boot!

Frank was not ignorant in the ways of women. He could sense that the attraction was mutual – at least he hoped he did. However, his common sense told him that well-off news anchors with long legs, perfect features, and rising careers, who lived in fancy townhouses like this didn't tend to form long-term relationships with street cops.

Thinking of Phillip Silverstein, he winced and corrected himself. In all likelihood, after beating the crap out of the most powerful media figure in the city, ex-cop would soon be the more accurate term. Oh well, what's done is done; he was looking for a job when

he found this one. To tell the truth, after what he'd seen lately, he didn't think he'd regret a career change. He glanced in the direction of the bathroom door.

Frank, ol' hoss, you're setting yourself up for a bad fall, and the odds are you won't like the way you hit.

He heard the shower cut off and smiled ruefully.

Yeah, but I expect that the trip down will sure be fun!

Samantha came out in a pair of comfortable jeans and a fresh white blouse. She had dried her hair and pulled it into a ponytail, and had carefully applied just enough make-up – a little base and a touch of subtle lipstick – to make it look like she hadn't

“Next!” She knew he'd want to get the dirt and especially Silverstein's blood off of him.

Frank started to stand up when he felt a draft and a look of recollection came over his face, followed by embarrassment.

“Samantha?”

“Yes?”

“Could I borrow a needle and thread?”

“Sure. What's the matter?” she asked, puzzled at the strange request.

“Well, uh,” he blushed. “When I kicked your boss that first time, the seam in my jeans wasn't quite up to the stretch, if you know what I mean.”

Samantha clamped her hand over her mouth too late to stop the giggle that caused his face to climb another notch on the red scale.

“I'm sorry! It's just that...well, it *is* funny!”

“I reckon it'd be a lot funnier if it were happening to someone else.”

“I suppose so,” she said, still snickering, then it hit her.

Samantha, if you want to find out exactly what you've got here, now's your chance.

“I'll tell you what; just pass them out the bathroom door to me when you get them off, and I'll take care of it for you.”

“I couldn't ask you to do that!”

“You didn’t ask me, I volunteered. Besides, I’ve seen men *try* to sew before; you’ll be in there all day and it’ll end up looking a mess anyway.”

Frank looked doubtful. “Well, if you’re sure you won’t mind...”

“If I minded, I wouldn’t have offered.”

“Well then, thank you much.”

Hearing the shower running in the background, Samantha laid the jeans out on the coffee table. *All right, Officer Frank Gore, let’s see if you’re for real.*

First the jeans: they were a regular brand name, not fancy but not a store brand either, and fairly clean, considering what they’d just been through. They were worn but not threadbare or torn, except for the crotch rip. The belt was of heavy brown leather and fairly wide with a full-sized but not oversized brass buckle, cast with a buck’s head and a gun company logo. *So far so good.*

She felt vaguely guilty about looking in his wallet. How would she feel if he walked in and saw her going through it? But then she rationalized that if he would be the type to walk in while she had his only pair of pants, his reaction over her snooping would be the least of her worries!

It was a cop’s wallet, black leather, complete with badge and ID. The official photo of him in uniform made him look a little severe, she thought. Of course, after seeing what he had done to Silverstein, along with his actions during the taped riot, it was obvious that he could be more than a little severe when the occasion called for it; something that might be worth keeping in mind.

Other than that, the wallet produced little else of interest; a South Carolina driver’s license with a bad picture that gave his date of birth as July 4, a VISA, a certificate of health insurance coverage, the Emergency Medical Technician certification he had mentioned earlier, a chain grocery favored customer card, and a video rental membership card, along with one-hundred seventy-six dollars in cash.

One thing that secretly pleased her was what was *not* in there. Unlike most men these days, there was not only a total absence of

condoms, but his wallet even lacked the telltale impression that she and her college friends had derisively referred to as ‘ring around the rubber’ that came from carrying one. Frank Gore was obviously not out on the hunt for a good time, unless he just didn’t care. Samantha was willing to bet that he wasn’t that type.

The left-hand pocket was a bit more interesting. There was a dollar-five in change, a Leatherman tool (practical, she thought as she opened and closed it) and a ring of keys attached with a swivel to a six-inch grooved aluminum stick. She recognized it as a weapon often carried by the police, but she was unsure of exactly how to use it.

There was only a single object in the right-hand pocket – a knife. Samantha gingerly picked it up. It was light but very business-like, with a black, checkered composition handle and a stainless steel blade. It was a one-handed opener, and when she put her thumb on the tiny button on the side of the blade and tried the action, it opened and locked in place like a well-oiled precision machine. With a needle point and an edge like a straight razor, it was obviously well maintained.

Samantha pursed her lips in thought, studying it before putting it away. The Leatherman in his left pocket was obviously a working knife; the lock-blade, however, was for a different purpose entirely.

Hmm. Maybe Officer Gore wasn’t all that much like Dudley Do-right after all.

Man, that hot water feels good! Frank swore to himself that, as soon as he got the chance, he was going to invest in a shower massage unit like this for his own apartment.

As he breathed in the steam-filled air, he couldn’t help but be aware of the faint smell of the room’s owner; an aroma of soaps, perfumes, and underlying it all the barest hint of femininity. His nostrils flared as he inhaled again, deeper this time, taking it all in and picturing in his mind’s eye the smooth white skin of that water-slick body that had occupied this space just minutes before...

Damn it! With a grimace, he reached down and turned the water to full cold.

The perky blonde with bobbed hair quickly brushed back a stray strand as the cameraman spoke.

“Okay, Sylvia; one, two, three – you’re on.”

“This is Sylvia Parker coming to you from the Columbia Police Department. We currently have what appears to be an impromptu demonstration in front of the building. I have one of the leaders of the protest, Dr. Andrew MacFie, of the organization Southern Majority, here with me now.

“Dr. MacFie, can you tell me what is going on?”

Andrew MacFie, a college professor with doctorates in literature and philosophy as well as being a genuine Southern ‘fire eater’, stood even straighter than his already stiff normal posture. His full beard and the narrow rim of hair surrounding the bald dome of his head were gray with nearly sixty years, yet he made an impressive figure by the sheer force of personality, despite his sizeable potbelly and five-foot six-inch height. Widely considered to be one of the founding members and factional leaders of the modern Southern Nationalist Movement, MacFie was nearly as well known for his ambition, plotting, infighting, and touchy disposition as for his actual accomplishments.

He was also known for recognizing opportunities and seizing them, which explained his presence here today.

“Yes, ma’am, I can.” He half-turned, raised an arm encased in the sleeve of an expensive Irish linen sport coat and pointed at the building behind him. “Everyone is here because of the actions of the Columbia police at the capitol yesterday.”

“Are you referring to alleged riot footage in the mysterious tape that was aired today on Channel 13?”

He nodded curtly, his beard bristling with anger.

“Yes, and there’s nothing ‘mysterious’ about it. It clearly shows anti-white and anti-Southern racist violence on the part of members of the Columbia Police Department, resulting in the murder of at least twenty-eight good Southern people and the wounding of countless others. Further, it clearly shows that this criminal action was incited by Reverend Bessant, who has proven himself to be

exactly what we've been saying he was for years – a virulent racist agitator.”

“Do you know anything about the tape? We've heard rumors that it's a fake?”

“It's no fake – it was taken by one of my own people and smuggled out of the riot zone, in spite of the fact that the Columbia Police Department was illegally and unconstitutionally confiscating every camera that they could get their hands on in an effort to cover up their own culpability and that of Reverend Bessant in the atrocity that took place. There was no time to doctor it; I had a copy in my possession within an hour of the tragedy.” MacFie didn't add that he wasn't at the capitol himself, having been making a speech at a battle reenactment at Fort Fisher, just over the border in North Carolina, or that he hadn't formulated an idea as to exactly what to do with the tape in question when it was dropped in his lap until public reaction to the broadcast gave him the type of opportunity that he was always on the lookout for.

“Dr. MacFie, there are those who would say that, based on the very tape in question, the violence was actually initiated by Robert Franklin, who was a member of your organization?”

The professor sighed in exasperation.

“Miss Parker, an old man, acting in the great Palmetto tradition of Congressman Preston Brooks, and taking out his righteous anger on a scalawag governor who considers himself immune from the desires of the people of the Great State of South Carolina, does not justify a bunch of animals beating him to death at the behest of a liar and professional racist like Bessant, and it *certainly* does not justify the actions of that black racist police officer, Jackson, in the cold-blooded murder of unarmed people!”

“What do you hope to accomplish here today?”

“We want answers and we want justice, and we are not leaving until we get them.” He began emphasizing his words by holding his right arm at waist level while jabbing his index finger repeatedly toward the ground, as if he were tapping on an invisible podium. “First, we *will* have a full accounting of what happened at the capitol; and second, we demand the arrest of *all* of the black

assailants who callously murdered Robert Franklin; the arrest of the man who incited the riot, James Bessant; and the arrest of every police officer who fired into that crowd. *We will not* settle for *anything* less. Justice for our people *will* be done, one way or another.”

“Dr. MacFie, there are those who would consider your words to be a threat, a call for vigilante action, or even terrorism. How do you respond to that?”

“They can consider it to be any damned thing they want.”

“What if the police attempt to move you by force?”

He glared at the camera with all the fire he was famous for.

“I’m putting the Columbia Police Department on notice right now – you’ve harmed your *last* Southerner with impunity! Any attempt to hurt these good people, these Southern patriots, will be at your *peril!*”

Samantha reached down and flipped off her recorder. It was amazing; everything the cop told her coincided with what she had gleaned from the tape, and his account filled in the missing details.

She was particularly struck by the abrupt placing of Frank on medical leave. This whole thing smacked of that magic word to a reporter’s ears – cover up! Stories like this were what careers were made of. Technically her career was temporarily on hold, so to speak, but she could take the fame from this story and go anywhere.

“This is almost too much, Frank,” she declared with a shake of her head that caused her ponytail to wiggle around and drop over her right shoulder. “Don’t get me wrong, I know you’re telling the truth because everything you’ve said fits the tape, but it’s just hard to picture this kind of thing happening here. I mean, this is America!”

He sat there quietly, staring straight ahead for so long she thought he wasn’t going to speak. “Is it?” he finally asked.

“Sometimes I wonder.”

“What do you mean?”

“Stuff like this happens all the time.” She looked shocked as he continued.

“Not usually on this scale of course, but it happens all over. I’m just in a position to see more of it than most people, I guess. Illegal searches, frame-ups, bribery, political favoritism, drug money, even murders covered up. Local, state, and federal – they all do it, and it gets bigger as it goes up the ladder. Whether I’ve done it or not myself, I’m as guilty as the rest, because I’m part of the system that carries it out.”

“No,” Samantha said, softly but firmly, reaching out and taking his hand, surprising both of them. “You’re not. If you were, you wouldn’t have shot Jackson to save those people, you wouldn’t be suspended, and you wouldn’t be here right now, helping me get the truth out.”

He squeezed her hand in return. “I don’t know if you’re right, but I do appreciate it. You might be a hard-nosed reporter, but you’re also a wonderful human being.”

She lowered her eyes and blushed, the corners of her mouth turning up in a slight but sincere smile that took years off her age. Something seemed to pass between them, each feeling it and wondering if the other did too. After a few seconds, their hands released as if by mutual consent, and she stood up.

“Do you like chicken?”

He grinned. “Does a bear live in the woods?”

“Good deal.” She returned a smile of her own as she rose. “I’ll get some breasts out of the fridge.

“Frank, turn it on thirteen, please.”

“Your old station?” he asked, reaching for the remote.

“Yes. I want to see if there are any updates on this story. Yell if anything comes up; I’ll be in the kitchen.”

“Will do.”

As Samantha reached for the refrigerator door, her mind was busily working in high gear. She had to get it out while the story was hot. That shouldn’t be a problem. Although Samantha was not a narcissist, she had seen the ratings and knew she was the most popular news anchor in South Carolina. That alone was enough to make her a shoo-in at another station. Most of them had already

made offers to her a time or two anyway, but bringing this story with her while it was still hot would let her write her own ticket. Regardless, she was sure that whichever one she chose would be only a temporary stop on her way to one of the big nation-wide channels. The only question was who to call first.

She had just set some chicken breasts on the table when Frank derailed her thoughts.

“Samantha! You’d better come in here!” It wasn’t a request.

Chapter 7

The black female newscaster looked directly into the camera as she spoke.

“This is Connie Mayo reporting. This evening we bring you a Channel 13 exclusive; a vast right-wing racist conspiracy whose tentacles extended from the Columbia Police Department and into our very own Channel 13 Newsroom. Our newest anchor, Dan Ames has the story for us. Dan?”

The image of the dark-haired anchor standing in front of a paneled office wall flashed on the screen, with his hand pressing his earpiece and a blank look on his face. As soon as he realized he was on the air, he became animated, as if someone had thrown a switch, and began speaking into the microphone in a carefully modulated voice that still couldn't hide a twinge of excitement.

“Connie, many people in the Columbia area saw the tape of yesterday's disturbance at the capitol that was aired during an interview with the chief of police during our midday broadcast, and the events that it purported to depict have upset a lot of people.

“This is very unfortunate, because that tape is, according to FBI experts, a fake.

“Here with me this evening is Federal Bureau of Investigation Agent Paul Ralston, a specialist in the field of photography. Agent Ralston, what can you tell us about this tape?”

The FBI agent was extremely thin, and half a head taller than the reporter whom he towered over. His voice was a cold, deadpan, and well-rehearsed delivery.

“Dan, to put it simply, this tape is a fake: pure disinformation, in other words. Our state of the art mobile laboratory facilities have examined this evidence closely, and we have discovered that, while the original was made at yesterday's unfortunate incident, it has been highly modified by digital computer enhancement technology. If we could see the stills, Dan...”

A series of clips from Samantha's riot footage began to run.

“Now if you will notice this distortion *here*, near Officer Jackson, you will notice that its size matches that of a human being. This is where something was digitally removed, presumably the individual or individuals who forced the officer back out of line, resulting in an opening being created. You will also notice a similar distortion around this individual, identified as Officer Frank Gore. There has been some modification to this area as well, although we are currently unable to determine exactly what.”

The reporter broke in. “Are you saying that it may have been Gore who broke the line to allow the pro-flag mob to attack the gathering of civil rights supporters?”

“We haven’t been able to determine that yet, but it is one of the possibilities we are looking at.

“Now on these images of the individuals allegedly injured by shots from Officer Jackson, you can see areas of distortion around the hands that indicates that something there was heavily retouched and probably removed on the film.”

“What would that be, Agent Ralston?”

“The available evidence seems to indicate firearms. All of the injured that appear to have been shot by Officer Jackson have been paraffin tested, and all have tested positive for gunpowder residue. Further, several semi-automatic assault weapons with high capacity magazines were found in their vicinity and are currently being checked for fingerprints.

“The killer of Officer Jackson was not an African-American as he appeared to be on the tape. He was actually a white Civil War re-enactor whose true skin color was concealed by a disguise of black face makeup. We’re searching our database in an attempt to identify him even as we speak.”

“It was also discovered that the Reverend James Bessant’s voice had been dubbed over, to make it appear that he was calling for violence when, according to reliable witnesses, he was actually begging for calm and urging his people to follow the example of the late Dr. Martin Luther King and not resist or fight back. Our FBI voice recognition experts have determined that the voice patterns

heard on the tape in question definitely do not match those of Reverend Bessant.”

“Thank you very much, Agent Ralston.

“Connie?”

“Thank you, Dan. Now we go live to Sylvia Parker at the Columbia Police Department. Sylvia, can you hear me?”

The shot cut to a blonde with a pointy chin standing beside ‘Frog Eyes’ Trigg. In front of them was a folding table completely covered with an impressive assortment of weaponry.

“Yes, Connie, I can. I’m here this afternoon with Deputy Police Chief Alan Trigg.

“Deputy Chief Trigg, are these the guns that were recovered from the riot?”

“Yes, Sylvia, everything on this table was recovered at the scene.”

“That certainly looks like a lot of firepower.”

“It is, Sylvia.” He began pointing at the various small arms.

“These weapons are mostly high capacity assault weapons, including Glocks and Tec 9’s, some of which have been illegally modified to fire fully automatic. Additionally, most of them were loaded with either the hollow-point “dumdum” rounds forbidden by the Geneva Convention, or with armor piercing bullets designed to penetrate bulletproof vests, which leads us to believe that police officers were the primary targets.”

Sylvia shook her head in the proper and expected show of shock at the statement.

“That’s scary stuff. Do you know which of the rioters these belonged to?”

“We’re still looking for fingerprints on the illegal weapons, but the BATF has verified that at least some of the legal guns here were registered in the names of some of those individuals shot by police during the rioting.”

“So they had guns there after all. I take it you have the report that we just aired concerning the faked videotape? Has the Department established what happened?”

“With the assistance of the FBI profilers, we believe that we have. As you know, many of those who support the continued flying of the Confederate flag despite the federal ban are members of racist and anti-government hate groups, including the Ku Klux Klan, the Confederate League, the Southern Majority, and several neo-Nazi and violent militia groups who are seeking to overthrow the government of the United States and either kill, expel, or enslave all who are not white. This is the type of people we’re dealing with, and we believe that the riot and the aftermath, including the altered videotape, were part of a large, closely-guarded white supremacist conspiracy designed to stir up hatred for the lawful government of the United States, while at the same time blame the black community for those actions.

“Perhaps the saddest part of this whole episode is that we believe two of the ringleaders to be Columbia Police Officer Franklin Gore and Channel 13 News anchor Samantha Norris.

“It is our opinion, along with that of the FBI, that the unprovoked attack by Robert Franklin on the governor and the house and senate leaders was intended as a signal. At this time, we believe that Gore pretended to be knocked to the ground, thus allowing the break in the barrier that his co-conspirators needed to attack the governor, the police officers, and the peaceful civil rights demonstrators who were there supporting the flag’s legal removal.

“The tape clearly shows Gore firing on Officer Jackson; however, from recovered bullets, preliminary ballistics tests indicate that Gore also shot at least two unarmed African-American men in the crowd, killing one and critically wounding a second.”

“Do you have any idea yet as to why he would shoot a brother officer?”

Frog Eyes summoned up his most disgusted look.

“We can only assume that he gunned down Officer Jackson because he was firing on Gore’s armed accomplices. He shot and wounded the officer, who was brutally finished off execution-style by another individual whom we believe to be an associate of Frank Gore.

“We have reason to believe that, following the riot, the tape in question was quickly carried from the scene and taken to Channel 13 News editing department here in Columbia, and secretly using those facilities, was altered to the form that your station aired today at noon by News Anchor Samantha Norris, a suspected co-conspirator and long-time *intimate* friend of Frank Gore.

“We believe that the tape was aired in order to inspire acts of violence against Columbia’s Police Department and the African-American community that they hoped would escalate into a general uprising, leading to an all-out race war.

“We know that Channel 13 station manager Phillip Silverstein suspected the tape’s authenticity and attempted to stop its playing. Because of this, he was viciously attacked by both Norris and Gore, who severely beat him before leaving him unconscious in the Channel 13 parking garage. Witnesses say that the pair kicked him several times while he was down, beat him with an iron pipe, and attempted to break his legs. The witnesses also reported that both individuals made anti-Semitic remarks during the attack, including derogatory comments about the Holocaust. Mr. Silverstein is currently in intensive care at Columbia General. His condition is reported to be critical.”

“This has been quite a shock to us here at 13 News, but it must be especially hard for the department, when one of your officers goes bad.”

“We at the Columbia Police Department are ashamed of the actions of this former officer; however, we take out our own trash. There is no place for violent conspiracies, corruption, and bigotry here. An all-points bulletin has been issued for Franklin Gore and Samantha Norris, and we expect an arrest shortly.”

“Deputy Chief Trigg, what do you plan to do about the crowd outside this building who disagree with you?”

“Some of these people were taken in by this fake tape; however, many of them are the same type of racists that support the Confederate Flag. This is the Columbia Police Department, and we will not be blockaded or intimidated by a bunch of extremists and white supremacists. We have just given them ten minutes to clear

this area and if they don't do it by the end of that time, our people will clear them out. Our riot squad and SWAT team are on the ground and ready to move in when we give the command. We also intend to issue warrants for the arrest of the ring-leaders of this illegal demonstration, and the FBI has already commenced a conspiracy investigation regarding the connection between this tape, the capitol grounds riot, and the current situation."

Frank and Samantha sat in shock, mouths wide open, staring at the TV.

No. This couldn't be happening.

Frank was the first to recover. He shot to his feet like a rocket. "Come on, Samantha," he said in a tone that was forcible, yet icily calm. "We need to get out of here!"

She just sat there. It was like when Phillip hit her – she couldn't move, and all she could think of was that this couldn't be real. It had to be a nightmare.

Frank took her by the arms and gently but firmly lifted her to her feet.

"We have to go, Samantha, and we have to go now. I don't know why they're not here yet, but they will be soon. We don't want to be here when that happens."

"But...but..."

His voice grew louder and uncharacteristically harsh. "Samantha, this is a frame-up, do you understand – a railroad job, one with all the power of the federal government behind it! I've seen them before. There's no getting out of it. If they catch you, assuming that they take you alive, you'll be in prison for the rest of your life, and I care too much about you to let that happen!"

Samantha looked up, startled, and Frank looked to be equally surprised by his admission. He quickly recovered and began guiding her by a solid grip on her upper arm.

"Come on. Let's go." He began taking her in the direction of the back door.

"The car..."

"Forget it; that's the first thing they'll be looking for."

Still dazed, she had just enough presence of mind to grab her purse in passing as he hurried her along.

SWAT Team Captain John Carter yelled into the radio, trying his best to be heard over the roar of the mob. "I'm sorry sir! We can't get through this crowd!"

While the captain's voice was loud from necessity, Perkins, inside Police Department headquarters, was screaming with anger and no small amount of fear, as he watched yet another situation going to Hell in a hand basket.

"Don't tell me you can't get through, Carter! You damn well get your ass over there right now! It's already gone out over the TV! You should've had them in custody an hour ago!"

"Sir, we've got a riot situation out here!" he explained patiently, flinching as proof of his statement sailed in and shattered at his feet in the form of an empty bottle from the direction of the crowd. Fortunately, this one wasn't filled with gasoline and topped with a blazing rag like several previous ones had been, as his scorched boots and pant legs attested. "When we tried to force a way through to go make the bust, the crowd went nuts, blocked the street and set about a dozen cars on fire! We can't get out to make the arrest even if we could spare the men to do it."

"Damn you, *do something!*"

Fed up with the petty B.S., he fired back at his superior, "Well, Chief, you figure out just exactly what it is you want me to do and then call me back. In the meantime, I've got work to do! Carter out!"

Ignoring the renewed outburst of profanity over the secure channel, the SWAT captain clambered on top of one of the nearby vehicles that was not on fire (at least not yet) and began shouting orders to his men through a bullhorn as yet another police car went up in flames. In response, a ragged wave of tear gas canisters sailed into the crowd. Some bounced off heads or bodies, bringing yelps of pain or even knocking people down. A few of the rioters had gas masks, but masks or not, people grabbed the containers with gloved or cloth-wrapped hands, despite the billowing irritant smoke, and

threw them back. Soon, the whole scene was wreathed in a stinging surrealistic haze.

The situation was a violent stalemate. The police had attempted to push the rioters back with shields and clubs, but the protestors fought back with their naked hands, bricks, and the stout dowels and 2 X 4's that they had stapled their signs to. Two men in the crowd sniped away with high-powered slingshots, complete with folding wrist braces, aiming at any exposed flesh, sending cops staggering and sometimes falling. The police drive forward was stopped when a group of women smashed the window of a hardware store a few blocks away and soon had a series of relays running supplies back to the crowd. The cops' momentum quickly ground to a halt when they found themselves faced with a line of axes, sledgehammers, heavy wrenches, and other tools-turned-weapons. Scythes and pitchforks waved like a scene from the late show of the peasants storming Frankenstein's castle. Some of the men began spraying the officers' transparent shields with aerosol paint or dousing them with thrown buckets of it, blocking their vision. One even charred their shields with a homemade flamethrower, made by igniting the spray from a can of starting fluid with a disposable lighter. As soon as they were forced to drop the shields to see, they were driven back out of self-preservation.

Finally a ragged gap appeared between the two groups and remained there as if by some unspoken agreement, and a lull occurred in the fighting as both sides tried to rest and regroup.

Dr. MacFie, astonished at how quickly the violence had escalated and beginning to wonder just what the hell he had gotten himself into, had climbed onto an upside down trash can and was shouting through his bullhorn for everyone to hold their positions but remain calm. Captain Carter was shouting much the same thing to his cops. Both independently realized that, if the battle continued, people – probably a lot of people – were going to die.

Unknown to those on either side, a squad of nine men and two women in black fatigues were quietly taking positions at the darkened second story windows of the station behind the police line. To a casual observer, they looked like ordinary riot cops; however,

none of the Columbia PD would have recognized them, even without their black ski masks, and no one, including Captain Carter and Chief Perkins, who was still in the building, knew they were there.

Windows were opened and M4's – a carbine designed for close range combat; essentially a flat-topped shorter and lighter version of the older surplus M16's the police used as a standard issue assault rifle – were rested on the sills. The darkness of the unlit rooms concealed the shadowy figures as their radios crackled.

“One in position. All units acknowledge.”

“Two in position.” And so the count went, until all of the squad were accounted for. A single command followed.

“Let's do it.”

The rifles opened up simultaneously in a roar of automatic fire directed just over the heads of the cops and into the crowd. Professionally controlled three round bursts of 5.56mm copper jacketed lead tore into human flesh like a threshing machine, sending bodies falling and people scrambling in an attempt to escape the rain of death. The cops, hearing the firing and the projectiles whistling past their ears, assumed that they were the ones being shot at and drew their own weapons. Several opened up on the most obvious target of the panicked crowd in a bloody repeat of the day before.

Unlike the riot at the capitol, however, many of the men in this crowd had come with both their anger and their arms, and since this demonstration wasn't planned in advance, the police metal detectors hadn't headed them off. In a frenzy of anger and fear, they pulled out a variety of automatics, revolvers, and at least two sawed-off shotguns and returned fire at point-blank range, tearing holes in the police line, which in turn engaged them with wholesale deadly force and overwhelming firepower.

Captain John Carter looked from the unauthorized muzzle flashes in the windows to the ever-increasing carnage before him and recoiled in horror.

“Cease fire!” he shouted, turning to face the building and waving his arms frantically. “Cease fire! Damn it, *cease fire now!*”

He never knew if his words had any affect. The leader of the group in the windows altered his aim, and the burst knocked the Captain from the car's roof.

The crowd, those who were not wounded or dead, were now in full flight with the enraged cops in hot pursuit. Overcome with anger at the events of the past two days, many of the officers continued firing, turning the chase into a slaughter. More than one prisoner or wounded man was executed on the spot; shot through the head as he lay on the ground after surrendering.

It was not all one sided, however. A few civilians returned fire on the run, sometimes getting a lucky hit. Three officers' overconfidence led them to foolishly chase a pair of men into an alley, where they ran headlong into an impromptu ambush hastily set up by a half dozen men and women. Two of them had lost sons to police gunfire at the previous day's riot, and another had lost a father to an execution-style head shot not five minutes before.

The cops' bodies weren't located until the next day. The ambushers had fully glutted their vengeance. Two of the corpses had to be identified by fingerprints, and the third by DNA analysis.

Still, massively out-gunned and without the body armor worn by the police, it was the crowd that got the worst of it by far. Seven policemen died that evening, but sixty-two additional bodies were carried off in the county meat wagons that night. Still more were wheeled in over the next few days after expiring in the overloaded hospitals or being discovered by the smell coming from the hiding places where the wounded had crawled to die. An extra temporary morgue was set up in a high school gym to help handle the load.

Chapter 8

“What are we going to do, Frank?”

“Well, we’ve already done the most important thing – we got out of your apartment before they got there,” he said as they strolled along an alley several blocks away, trying to look like just another couple out for an evening walk. They had left the residential district behind and were now entering a stretch of convenience stores and other small businesses. “Now we just need to find a place to hole up for a while without being seen in the process until we figure out what to do.”

“Is that all?” she asked, tiredly.

“That’s it. Do you know anybody you can trust? Most of my friends are cops, and you know how *they* are.”

She chuckled in spite of herself, and then suddenly perked up. “Mary!”

“Beg’ pardon?”

“Mary Wheeler – my secretary.”

Frank looked thoughtful. “Fifty-ish lady, red hair, heavy-set motherly type?”

“Yes! How did you know?”

“She’s the one who told me you were in the parking garage. How far do you trust her?”

“Farther than I trust anybody.”

He considered it for a few seconds. “It looks like the only choice we’ve got, so I guess we’ll have to chance it. There’s a pay phone over there by that bar.” Frank had dropped their cell phones on the way out of the townhouse, explaining to her surprise that they had chips in them that could be used as a beacon to locate them. “Have you got her number?”

The Long Neck carried a rough trade. It was typically constructed for a bar: a long brick building with a low roof. It had bright neon beer signs shining from its otherwise darkened windows, but something about it didn’t seem particularly friendly. Maybe it was the bits of broken glass glittering in the parking lot, or the

cigarette butts and other assorted trash blown in against the step and ignored. Perhaps it was the smell of stale smoke and sour beer. Of course, it could have been the suspicious, dark stains that spotted the pavement. The image was not wrong. If someone wanted to get drunk and blow off steam by way of a good fight or a bad lay, the Long Neck was the place to go.

Samantha hung up the battered pay phone on the outside wall halfway between the door and the corner of the building.

“All right; she’s on her way. She should be here in about half an hour.”

“Ok, now we just have to look inconspicuous for a little while,” Frank replied. He began looking around at the cars and trucks parked in the lot until he saw what he was looking for. He pulled out his wallet and slipped a bill out before putting it back in his pocket.

“Wait here,” he said, and began strolling nonchalantly in the direction of a beat up Ford pickup. As she watched, he casually scooped something out of the back, then paused an instant by the open driver’s window. He walked back to Samantha with a small bundle of stuff.

“That twenty I left in the seat ought to cover it.”

“I would say so!” she observed, looking at the items dubiously. “In fact, I’d say that they made a pretty good profit on this deal.”

Frank had a filthy plaid cotton shirt, with the sleeves torn off at the shoulder seams and half the buttons missing that was little more than a rag; a grease-soaked black cap advertising some kind of tractor; and a pair of cheap sunglasses with the lenses so dark they were almost opaque.

Frank quickly snatched off his own T-shirt. Despite her own fear, Samantha couldn’t help appreciatively noticing her companion’s muscular torso, or the occasional faint scars that spotted it here and there where it wasn’t covered with the tape that supported his ribs. He tossed his shirt in the can by the door, replacing it with the ratty, torn garment.

“Oh, yuck!” Samantha exclaimed when he clamped the filthy cap on his head backwards before slipping on the sunglasses. “You’ll probably get the cooties!”

“Needs must when the devil drives. Let’s step around by the dumpster for a minute.”

“Why?”

“Because now it’s your turn.”

As they walked around to the back of the bar, he explained what he wanted. “We need to change our appearance radically, and we’re going to have to fit in if we’re going to wait here. Do you have any makeup in your purse; some real bright stuff?”

“I think so.”

“Good. I want you to paint yourself up like a who...er, like a lady who would frequent this sort of establishment. We need to do it fast; squad cars cruise this alley a lot, and we’ll stand out and look suspicious if we’re seen back here.”

“Then why don’t I put it on out front?” she asked, puzzled.

“Because I’m going to work on your outfit. You need shorts – cut-offs. They’ll fit in just right here but won’t be what the police will expect you to be wearing.” He squatted down in front of her and opened a blade on the Leatherman tool. “Samantha, I’m going to have to touch you kind of personal, if you know what I’m saying. I don’t mean anything fresh by it, but we’ve got a better chance if I do it. You understand?” She nodded. “Now, I’m going to be using a knife near your skin, so spread your legs a little more and hold real still.”

Samantha held still, and in less than a minute Frank had carefully circled both legs with the razor-sharp blade and left the denim piled around her ankles, cut off, much to her humiliation, well above the crease at the bottom of her buttocks. He gently slipped the detached legs one at a time off over her feet and tossed them in the dumpster.

“Now, if you would, pull your panties up real tight – kind of give yourself a ‘wedgie’ – they’re sticking out of your shorts now.”

Samantha reached behind her and did as he asked, blushing to the tips of her ears, and was a little relieved to see that he was reddening too.

“Sammie,” he said, “I’m sorry to embarrass you like this, it’s just that...”

“I know, Frank. There’s nothing to be sorry about. You’re just doing what you have to do, and I’m grateful for it; but thank you for caring about how I feel, just the same.”

“Well,” he said, looking at the ground to hide a grin, “I’m glad to hear that, because now we have to do your blouse.”

Three minutes later, an elderly couple passing by the Long Neck noticed two people walking around the side of the building. A dirty man in an old plaid shirt was walking with a muscular arm around the bare midriff of some tramp with her sleeveless blouse tied tightly just below her obviously bra-less breasts, a pair of shorts cut so high that they exhibited part of her butt-cheeks, and a bright, tasteless makeup job. She was in the process of frizzing her hair up with the help of a brush.

“Damn white trash!” the old man muttered in disgust, and his wife agreed, although strangely, the sluttish-looking floozy looked somehow familiar. Couldn’t be; they certainly didn’t associate with *that* kind of people!

Frank stopped at the front corner of the building.

“Aren’t we going inside?”

Frank shook his head. “Not with the reputation that this place has. If any trouble starts, it’ll most likely be inside, and that’s where the cops will go. Besides, people know me in here; they should, anyway, because I’ve arrested about half of them at one time or another. Sometimes the best place to hide is in plain sight. Now, lean back against the wall and look seductive.”

Samantha complied, although she felt a little silly. Frank leaned forward, resting his left hand on the wall beside her head.

His face filled her vision, and she decided that, cap full of cooties or not, she didn’t mind a bit. She just wished she could see his eyes.

With his right hand he slipped the big lock-blade out of his pants and into his shirt pocket for an easier reach.

“Here’s the way we’ll play it. We’ll pretend that we’re just a couple of poor, white-trash barflies, come outside to do a little courting before we go back to my place. We’ll talk about anything you want to talk about, but we’ll do it up close and personal, like

we're whispering sweet nothings to each other. You're facing the street so you're the lookout. If a police car comes by, or even if someone seems to be looking, then kiss me, and do it like you mean it; our lives may depend on it. Not only will it hide our faces, but most people don't want to stare at somebody else doing that.

"Now, if it doesn't work and we're recognized and everything goes downhill fast, here's what you do. I want you to run into that bar – I'll keep them occupied here," He patted his shirt pocket with the knife in it. "And scream that there's a fight outside. That'll get the crowd clogging the front door to see what's happening, and they'll block the way in. Then you run for the back door and keep on running. Don't stop for anything, even if you hear shots. If that happens, you're on your own; be careful, and *think* before you do anything. Praying wouldn't hurt either."

"What's going to happen to *you*?" Inside she already knew the answer, but she had to ask.

"Don't worry about me. If I win, I'll come after you."

"Frank, you know you won't win! You've got a knife and they've got guns! You'll die!"

He started to deny it with a bluff, but changed his mind, and raised the dark glasses before looking her straight in the eyes.

"Yes, I reckon I will."

She was aghast.

"How can you be so calm about it?"

"Sammie, we all die sometime. Besides, I was a dead man walking as soon as they put the charges against me. I'll either disappear or else be put to sleep like a damned dog for federal hate crimes even *if* I was willing to be taken alive, which I'm not." His voice had gotten more intense than she had ever heard it; almost like the hissing of a boiler ready to blow.

"What do you mean you're not willing to be taken alive? *Why*?"

"Two reasons: one is that I know what will happen to a white cop charged with a hate crime in the federal prison system and I think you do too. I'm the last of my family line and I won't dishonor my name. I came into this world a man and as God is my witness, I intend to leave it the same way. If that means that I go down fighting

a little sooner than I'd have liked, then so be it. It's a price I'm willing to pay.

"The other reason is this; if we're spotted, two of us won't have a chance to get away, but one of us might, and that one is going to be you. God forbid it happens, but if it does, don't let me down, Sammie. Please."

She started to open her mouth, but he laid a single finger against her lips and shook his head with a sad smile.

"No more arguments; you know it has to be. Promise me, Sammie. Promise me you won't let it be for nothing. *Please.*"

She clamped her lips tight as her eyes filled with tears and, not trusting herself to speak, nodded affirmatively. She knew that this was no macho line or empty melodramatics – he meant exactly what he said. She knew instinctively, if the time came, Frank would calmly and deliberately sell his life right here in front of this stinking, seedy little bar in order to save hers.

He paused, then reached up and stroked the tears from her cheek with the backs of his fingers. Samantha wasn't at all sure if it was part of the act or not.

"I'm sorry to put you through this, Sammie, I really am."

"Frank," she said, resting her left hand on his shoulder, "stop saying you're sorry. Of all the men I've ever met in my entire life, you've got the *least* to feel sorry about! I've never met *anyone* like you."

"I'm nothing special; there are lots of fellows like me..."

"No there's not! You came in there wounded and hurting today and saved my life in that parking garage; then you got me out of my town house before the police got there, and now you just offered to give up your own life to save mine. If I have to kiss you to keep that from happening, then there's not a damned thing for either one of us to be sorry about!"

Her good sense screamed at her as she looked over Frank's shoulder at a set of oncoming headlights in the gathering twilight.

"Police car," she said, and pulled his head down to meet her lips. Slipping an arm around her bare midriff and unable to help noticing the enticing softness of her skin, Frank returned the kiss as

passionately, as deeply, and as sincerely as she could have wanted, and she responded enthusiastically as she clung to him.

Her good sense raged until Samantha told it to go to hell, and it left in a huff.

It took a long time for the police car to pass; at least, Samantha thought it was a police car. It looked like one – sort of.

Twenty-six long minutes later, Mary Wheeler rolled into the parking lot in her old pink Lincoln Continental. There was no sign of Samantha, just a couple of horny drunks slobbering all over each other against the wall. The woman of the pair pointed toward the car and they both hurried towards it.

“Oh-ho, I don’t think so!” Mary said to herself, reaching into the bowels of her ever-present gigantic purse.

“Mary! Oh!” Samantha gasped as she yanked the car door open only to find herself staring down the cavernous bore of an old military-issue Colt .45 Automatic.

“Samantha?” questioned Mary, adjusting her glasses. The pistol quickly disappeared. “I’m sorry, Honey! I didn’t recognize you. Well, don’t just stand there, get in.”

“In the back,” Frank directed from behind Samantha, pleased to see that the windows were heavily tinted.

Mary looked them over as they climbed into the back seat and ducked down low.

“Nice disguises,” she said, throwing the car in reverse. “They sure fooled me. I’ve just got one question.” She snickered. “Which one was wearing the lipstick first?”

Both of them blushed and Frank wiped furiously at his face as she put the big vehicle into drive and pulled out onto the street.

“We were just trying to be inconspicuous!” Samantha stammered unconvincingly.

“Uh-huh,” Mary said in a voice full of meaning. After a moment, she looked at Frank in the rearview mirror. “So, you must be the notorious Frank Gore, America’s most wanted fugitive.” Keeping one eye on the road, she twisted and stuck a pudgy, be-ringed hand

over the seat. “Mary Wheeler: secretary and part time getaway driver, at your service.”

Frank took her hand. “Franklin Gore, ma’am. I guess I’m getting right popular, huh?”

“Honey, you have no idea! I wasn’t kidding about America’s most wanted fugitive, either! It was all over the news – the FBI has already moved you both to the top of the list. To hear them tell it, you’re Ted Bundy, Timothy McVeigh, and Osama Bin Laden all rolled into one, and they’re looking for you harder than they looked for what’s-his-name...that ‘reindeer’ fellow who blew up all those abortion clinics back in the ‘90s.”

“She called you ‘Honey!’” Samantha whispered to Frank. “She only does that to people she likes.

“Of course I like him!” said Mary, her sharp ears missing nothing. “Anybody who whips that son of a bitch Silverstein’s fat Yankee ass like you did is alright in my book!”

“It was a pleasure to be of service, ma’am,” Frank said with a smile.

Mary guffawed.

“Well, Bonnie and Clyde, you two just sit still and relax back there. We’re going shopping!”

Samantha and Frank looked at each other.

Shopping?

Mary pulled into the giant, mega-store lot and parked at the end of the row – ‘out in East B.F.’ as she referred to it – several spaces from the nearest vehicle.

“There’s a blanket back there. Lay down and cover up; nobody will see you. Do you want to borrow my .45?”

“Yes, ma’am, I do, if you don’t mind,” Frank replied with relief in his voice, and Mary handed the big slab-sided pistol to him. His face and mood both brightened as he closed his right hand around the old man-stopper. Now he had at least a modicum of control over his own destiny again.

“Be careful with her. She’s cocked and locked, with a round in the chamber – jacketed hollow points.”

“Thank you, ma’am. Daddy used to carry his the same way. It sounds like you know your business.”

“You bet I do, Honey. Just you never forget it.”

As they pulled the covering over themselves, Mary got out of the car and tossed a parting remark. “You kids play nice back there!”

“*Mary!*” Samantha squealed.

The older woman slammed the door with a laugh.

In the back of the Lincoln, Samantha lay on the seat and Frank in the floorboard, hidden under the blanket. He began chuckling.

“What’s so funny?”

“I was just thinking that she might be right; we’re like a couple of sneaky kids hiding under a blanket.”

She didn’t know if he really saw the humor or if he was just trying to distract her from their plight. Either way, it wasn’t working; she was still scared to death.

“Frank,” she whispered, “what do we do if they show up here?”

“I don’t think they will.”

“But what if they do?”

“Same basic plan,” he said, patting the .45. “Only this time we’ll both have a better chance of coming out of it alive.”

“Will you shoot them: the men you used to work with?”

“I hope it doesn’t come to that, but if it does, then yes, I will.”

His voice was calm and matter-of-fact, and left no doubt in her mind that he meant it.

She was silent for a moment. “How can you do that? I don’t know if I could.”

“I wouldn’t like it, but I’d do it. I’ll do what I have to, to keep us alive and free. It’s not our fault – I don’t know, maybe it’s not their fault either. They’re just doing their job, but perhaps that’s the problem. Maybe we’ve all just done our jobs for way too long. We’ve been like little tin soldiers: robots, just obeying orders, whatever those orders might be, without regard as to whether they were against the Constitution or even against the laws of God. They tell us to do it and we do it, no matter what. ‘Take that guy’s car.’ or ‘Take that woman’s kids.’ Whatever it is, we do it without thought and without question like a good little trooper. Loyalty is everything

– but loyalty to what? Not to God, certainly. Not to the state, not to our principles, not even to the country. Tell me Sammie, just what have we been loyal to? We’ve replaced everything with a monolithic government. It says ‘Frog!’ and we all jump, or else you’re labeled a fanatic. Then they come after you, either by reputation, economically, or physically, just like they’re doing to us right now.

“The only one with guts enough to stand up to them and expose what they did was *you*, Sammie. It took a pretty young lady to have the courage to do what we men should have been doing years ago.”

“That’s not fair, Frank!” she protested. “*You* tried to expose it! *You* told the truth!”

“Yes I did, and the first time that they threatened me with a psych-ward, I backed down and shut up. You didn’t. You went right ahead.

“I admire you for that, Sammie; it was a brave thing to do.”

He was obviously sincere, and she didn’t know what to say. Since she had become a fugitive, she considered herself anything but brave.

“Thank you, Frank. By the way,” she asked with a teasing tone in her voice as she changed the subject, “what’s with this ‘Sammie’ thing?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know it bothered you.”

“It doesn’t *bother* me, really, it’s only that I’ve never been called that before.”

“It just comes natural. I’ll stop.”

“No, don’t stop. I...kind of like it.”

“Ok...Sammie.”

Their hands met under the quilt and clasped each other tight.

Mary pushed the cart up and down the aisles, loading in it something here, something else there. That was the only good thing you could say about these giant department stores – they had everything. She had already been through groceries and picked up a couple of things in sporting goods; now she was heading for the clothing section. Mary enjoyed shopping anytime, and this gave her a good excuse. The danger of playing secret agent was just the icing

on the cake. Of course, she looked forward to seeing their expressions when they saw what she'd bought, too.

Another woman her age would probably have wanted to engage her in a lengthy conversation over her purchases, who they were for, if someone was having a birthday, and so on, so she chose her checkout

line carefully. Her target was a bored pimply-faced eighteen-year-old boy with multiple rings in both ears, one of them connected by a chain to a silver stud in his nose, as if he were afraid it might run away. His next cigarette break was the only thing on his mind, and he never even bothered to look up as he ran her purchases through the scanner.

Although it didn't show in his voice, Peters was somewhat surprised by the governor's call – he didn't think Simms would be out of his hospital bed yet.

To say that Governor Simms was not in a good mood would have been a great understatement. When Bob Franklin laid into him with his cane, it not only crushed his nasal cartilage, but it broke the point of bone at the top of his nose as well, resulting in a small compound fracture where it had forced itself through his skin. Hairline fracturing continued into his orbital sockets, causing a small leakage of cerebrospinal fluid, a loss that brought on violent, nauseating headaches. To top it all off, both his eyes had blackened and they, along with the stainless steel brace on his crushed proboscis, made him look like an overgrown raccoon with its nose caught in a tin can.

“Governor, how are you?”

“I feel like shit, thanks for asking.” His voice was high-pitched and nasal from his plugged-off nostrils. *“I wanted to notify you that I'm calling out the National Guard.”*

“I wouldn't advise that.”

Simms was stunned. *“You wouldn't advise it? My God, man, we've got a war going on in the streets of Columbia right now!”*

Peters' voice never rose.

“We had a riot, not a war, and our side won. We have neutralized

the threat; I dare say that no one else will be anxious to start another confrontation with the lawful authorities for quite some time. However, a war is exactly what we'll have if the troops are called out. These militia-types have been insisting for years that we will end up using soldiers against the citizens; if we prove them right, we not only give them a credibility boost in the public eye, but, given the current situation, we also hand them the excuse that they've always wanted to move against us in a big way, not just piecemeal and spur of the moment crap as they have done so far. If they do that, then it will be a war of the United States military against United States citizens instead of a simple civil disturbance such as we had tonight; at least that's the way it will be portrayed. That's not going to look to good on either the country or the president, especially in an election year."

"To hell with the president! What about the people of this State? That's who I'm responsible to, and they're dying out there. Unless we can get an overwhelming force on the streets to restore order, it's going to continue. Besides," he added after a slight hesitation. *"It's an election year for me too."*

"People of this State? Don't get sanctimonious with me, Governor; you and I both know the only people of this State you ever gave a damn about are your campaign contributors and loyal special interest groups."

"How dare you! Do you know who you're talking to? I am the governor of the Great State of South Carolina, and no damned Federal bureaucrat is going to tell me what to do! I am using my authority and calling out the Guard, and there isn't a damn thing you can do about it!"

"Actually, there is," the FEMA chief said in his constant, irritatingly even tone. "I suggest you read the law, Governor. Under various Federal statutes, during a state of emergency the Federal Emergency Management Agency is in charge – that means me. I answer only to the power of the United States Government: a power that overrules yours, particularly under these circumstances. If you attempt to activate the National Guard contrary to my expressed instructions, I will simply federalize them and countermand your

order, then have you arrested on Federal charges. I'm sure the Lieutenant Governor will prove more malleable.”

There was silence on the line. Simms couldn't believe what he was hearing.

“You - you wouldn't dare...”

“Try me.” When Simms didn't answer, Peters continued. “Governor, my advice to you is to take it easy and recover from your injuries – in other words, do nothing. You're a career politician, so I'm sure you're very experienced in doing just that. I've got my own people on the ground here,” he said. Swiveling his chair, he looked meaningfully across the desk at the man in black fatigues who sat before him: Lieutenant Colonel Sedgeway, who had led the squad that had fired from the police station windows earlier in the evening. “And you can rest assured that the situation is now well under control.”

Chapter 9

“Mary, you’ve got to be kidding!” Samantha exclaimed, staring at the pile on the kitchen table that her secretary had poured out of the bag. “You’re not serious!”

Mary smiled enigmatically like a chubby Buddha and nodded in the affirmative.

Frank stared at the objects morosely and said nothing. The huge wing-like sport glasses and even the hair dyes he understood and approved of, but the spandex bicycle suits were going just too far! He just shook his head and sighed. Just when it looked like things were getting better...

“Bicycle shorts?”

“Yep, and I’ve got a couple of bicycles to go with them in the garage. A year before he died, my husband decided that nothing would do but for us to get a pair of mountain bikes. Mountain bikes in Columbia, imagine that! Must be a ‘man-thing.’ He thought we needed more exercise. Of course, after he started the chemo for the cancer he got from that damned Agent Orange, we didn’t ride anymore.” She abruptly looked down and busied herself with the pile, pulling out a box of hair color.

“Frank, why don’t you go into the living room and monitor the news: it’s your fifteen minutes of fame, so you might as well enjoy it. We’ve got some girl stuff to do in here!”

“I’d like to use your phone, if you don’t mind, ma’am.”

“Help yourself.”

Jenny May Summers was settled back in her recliner and was just getting interested in the movie of the week when the phone rang beside her on the end table, startling her and nearly causing her to spill her coffee into her lap.

“People just won’t give a body no peace!” she fussed angrily, but quickly stretched out her huge black arm for the receiver. Secretly, the old woman was glad that someone was calling her. Things just got so lonely out here in the country sometimes.

“Hello?”

“Aunt Jenny?”

No, it couldn't be!

“Frank? Is that you, baby?”

“Yes ma'am, it's me.”

“Oh sweet Jesus! Frank, I've seen the news – they're looking for you!” She fairly shouted into the phone and Frank winced, holding it slightly away from his ear.

“I know. Listen, Aunt Jenny, I want you to know I didn't do those things they're accusing me of. I swear...”

“Don't you worry about that!” she chided. “I know better than to believe all that foolishness! I've known you since you were a born; I even babysat you for your grandma. You grew up right here almost at my doorstep a' playin' with my own baby. I know what kind of a boy you were an' I know what kind of a man you are. When my Jim died, you snuck down there to the bank an' paid off that mortgage or I wouldn't even have a house to live in – an' you *knew* I'd never be able to pay you back so you never even told me! Hadn't been for that gossip Vera Jeffers working there, I'd never have found out.” She sniffed loudly and snatched a tissue out of the box she kept by the phone. “I know you, Franklin Gore, an' I don't believe all that TV bullshit for a minute!”

Her eyes opened wide as she realized she'd cussed, and she looked skyward and said a hasty silent prayer. Considering the circumstances, she was pretty sure the good Lord would understand.

Frank sighed. “Aunt Jenny, I need a favor bad.”

“You need a place to stay, baby?”

“No, ma'am, at least not yet. I'm safe for tonight, anyway.” *At least I hope so*, he thought silently. “If you wouldn't mind, could you take a message to Granny?”

“I'll call her just as soon as you get off here...”

“No, ma'am, please don't do that,” he said hastily. “As soon as they started looking for me, one of the first things that they would do would be to tap her phone. Is there any way that you could go over there and tell her? I'd surely appreciate it.”

“You jus’ believe I will.” Jenny was always anxious for an excuse to visit with her neighbors anyway. “I’ll do it tonight.”

“Thank you so much, ma’am. Will you just tell her what I told you, that I’m innocent, and that I love her. I may be gone for a long time, but I’ll contact her when I get the chance, and I’ll see her as soon as I can. Will you please tell her that for me?”

Jenny was wiping furiously at her eyes and blubbing all the while. “I’ll do that, I’ll do just that! You be careful, Frank. I love you, baby.”

“I love you too, Aunt Jenny. I’d better go now.”

“You be careful, you hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am, I’ll do that. Bye now.”

“God bless you, Frank.” She sobbed as she hung up the phone. Snatching another handful of tissues, she honked loudly into one and stuffed the remainder into her dress pocket as she heaved the recliner upright and strained for her shoes.

In the kitchen, Mary carefully hung up the extension.

“I can’t believe you did that!” hissed Samantha, angrily.

“Well, Honey, if you can’t believe that, then you sure aren’t going to believe this!” Mary said, with a knowing smile. “I’ve learned something mighty interesting about lover-boy out there.”

“I won’t listen!” the news anchor primly declared, crossing her arms.

But of course she did.

An hour and a half later, Mary and Samantha exited the kitchen, with Mary loudly humming the ‘Miss America Theme’, much to Samantha’s embarrassment.

Frank stood, attempting to keep the surprise out of his face, a little unsuccessfully. Samantha had been blonde with long layered hair when he had left her in the kitchen. The woman who stood before him now had dark chestnut tresses that hung in loose curls. Further, while the old Samantha had clear skin, the new version had a ‘beauty spot’ – a small dark mole just to the left of her upper lip on

skin that was now a couple of shades darker, thanks to an instant tanning fluid.

“Wow! That’s a good job. I wouldn’t have recognized you, Sammie. It’s very pretty.” He studied her for a moment, then inquired, “I can understand how you got the hair and the tan, but what about the mole?”

Mary produced a brown felt-tipped art marker and wiggled it at him. “Come on, big fellow-you’re next!”

Resigned, Frank followed her into the kitchen like a condemned man walking his last mile. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Samantha looking at him strangely.

In much less time than it took for Samantha, Frank reappeared and it was Samantha’s turn to try and conceal her surprise, equally without success. Frank’s hair was now a good deal shorter, practically a crew cut, and it had gone from brown to blonde. On closer observation, his late-evening shadow had been shaved except for the area surrounding his mouth, leaving him just a stylish hint of a moustache and goatee. Even though it was a less dramatic change than her appearance had been, it gave him a whole different look.

“Well?” he asked, self-consciously.

“Well...you don’t look like yourself anymore” she said, although she wasn’t certain if it was the changes that Mary had made or the hard, determined lines that seemed to have sprung up around his eyes and mouth since the six o’clock broadcast.

“That’s good, I guess; at least, it’s a start.”

“Whenever you two lovebirds finish admiring each other, would you like to eat?”

“Yes!” they both answered simultaneously. Both were famished, having not eaten since breakfast.

“Good. I called in a pizza a little while ago; I hope you like it with the works. It ought to be here at any time. While we’re waiting, why don’t you try on your new clothes?”

Frank looked like he’d rather have a root canal.

Minutes later, they both stood side-by-side clad from neck to mid-thigh in tight, form-fitting black and blue spandex, complete

with racy tear-drop cycling helmets and large, wrap-around mirrored glasses. Mary walked around them with a critical eye.

“Hmm. Here, put on these nylon shorts over top. That’s better – you’re both too good looking in just the spandex; you’ll attract all kinds of attention and probably cause wrecks. Looks good. Now try on the windbreakers. That’s even better. You might want to wear them as long as the heat will let you – it makes you less noticeable, and you’ll have a place to hide your pistol.”

“Ma’am, I don’t have a pistol anymore.”

“You do now. Keep the .45.”

“I can’t take your pistol!” Frank protested.

Mary spread her feet and cocked her fists on her hips, the very picture of determination. “Well, you’re going to take it and that’s just all there is to it. I’ve got most of a box of cartridges you can have too: good hollow points, not that military hardball crap. Just take care of it – my husband carried it in Viet Nam and snuck it back with him. It did him good service over there, and it’ll do the same for you two.”

“But it was your husband’s...”

“You still don’t get it, do you? Yes it was my husband’s, but he sure as hell doesn’t need it anymore, and I can always buy another gun. When it comes down to it, it’s just a *thing*, but Samantha is my *friend*, and since you’ve saved her life from that piece of Yankee garbage she worked for, that makes *you* my friend too. I’ve been around a long time and one thing I’ve learned out of life is that *friends* are always more important than things – *always!* You can always get new things, but friends come a whole lot dearer. This little girl right here,” she patted Samantha affectionately on the arm and fixed Frank with an intense stare, “is my friend. You’d do well to remember that.”

“I’ll never forget that, ma’am, and I’ll never forget what you’ve done for both of us either. You’re one of the kindest people I’ve ever met. Thank you”

Now it was Mary’s turn for flush-faced embarrassment, but she was saved from replying by the doorbell. “That’ll be the pizza, I

expect, so y'all get back in the kitchen. Just in case I'm wrong, though, you'd best keep that gun ready."

Frank nodded and they both ducked out of the room. Frank stepped around the corner of the door and, motioning Samantha behind him, raised the Colt, released the safety and waited, the barrel angled up and slightly forward.

He seemed to undergo a Jekyll and Hyde transformation. Fascinated, she watched his breathing slow and become deeper, and his muscles visibly relaxed into a state of readiness. His warm gray eyes lost all expression, and stared coldly at the doorway with no more humanity than a pair of flint chips. Strangely, she felt that she could almost *see* him listening.

Once she heard the door open and Mary began chatting with the deliveryman, Samantha began to relax, but noticed that Frank maintained the same attitude as before – ready. Only after the door closed and latched did his expression soften, and as he lowered the .45, clicking the safety back on, his looks, breathing and demeanor returned to normal. If she had any doubts before about Frank's willingness to kill if necessary, they disappeared after watching him. She knew in her heart that anyone but Mary entering that door would have died without either warning or question.

She wasn't exactly sure how she felt about that. It frightened her in one way and comforted her in another. He was a disturbing and at the same time intriguing puzzle; a complete, almost classic Southern gentleman, full of chivalry and gentleness on one hand, yet a fearless and remorseless war machine on the other, ready to kill or die to protect her.

Samantha suddenly recalled an old high school history lesson about chivalry; it derived from the word for horse, and referred to a horseman – a knight. She knew knights were expected to have an almost exaggerated concern for women, for the church and for the weak and defenseless. At the same time though, the code demanded they be utterly fearless, savage, and often merciless defenders of every one of those things that he revered. Samantha suddenly realized that a knight was like his sword – two-edged.

She looked at Frank standing with the cold parkerized steel in his hand. Frank fit into that category very well and both edges were honed to near perfection.

The pizza had been reduced to little more than a bit of crust and a few crumbs when Mary turned to the younger woman and spoke up. “Samantha, how far do you trust this man?”

Samantha looked at Frank instead of Mary. “Totally.”

“That’s good, because you’re going to be sleeping together tonight.” Stilling their startled protests with a raised hand, she continued, “look, I have one spare bedroom – it’s in the back and its window opens on the back yard towards the alley in case you have to leave in a hurry. More importantly, it’s separated from the living room. I need to make sure I have some privacy, because I’ve got some calls of my own to make, and I can’t chance any eavesdropping by you two, even by accident. I know some people, some old friends of Harry’s and mine who might be able to help. These people trust me, and I won’t let them down any more than I would you. I’m going to try to get them to accept you; if they do, then you’ll have a place to go tomorrow, because they’ll get around to looking for you here before too long. If they don’t accept you, then the less you know about them, the better.

“You two need to get some rest; you’ve got a long day tomorrow. Samantha, I’ve got a spare nightgown for you, and I think I’ve still got some of Harry’s pajamas. Now, Frank, I know more about you than you think I do. Will you give me your word of honor not to take advantage of Samantha under my roof?” Ignoring Samantha’s look of speechless embarrassment, she continued, “I just won’t allow it. Do I have your word?”

“Yes, ma’am, you have my word,” Frank replied without hesitation, “but no pajamas or gowns. We’ll sleep in our clothes and keep our shoes handy in case we have to run.”

“Good idea,” she replied. “You two are adults, not a couple of teenaged hormones with feet; you can handle it.”

“Mary, I can’t *believe* you did that!” Samantha said for the second time that evening. Frank was in the bathroom and out of earshot.

“You mean the bicycle shorts?” Mary asked innocently. “I’m sorry, Honey, but that’s the only color they had.”

“You know good and well I don’t mean the *bicycle shorts*! I’m going to have to *sleep* with him!”

“Yep, you’re going to have to sleep with him – *sleep* being the keyword here, not *screw*. That’s not something that you have to do to win a man like that, but even if you did, he’d be worth it.” Mary reached out and took her by both shoulders. “Samantha, do you still trust me?”

“You know I do.”

“Alright, then listen to me and trust me now. If I had any doubts, *any at all* that Frank wouldn’t keep his word on this, I’d figure out something else. He’ll do as he promised, Samantha. You’ll both be out of here in the morning – you’ll have to be; I’m too close to you for you to be safe here. I’ll probably never see you again. You and Frank are all each other have. There’s nothing and no one else you two can depend on besides each other. We’re talking about your life here, Honey. If either of you fail, you’ll both die – *die*, do you understand me? Either that, or you’ll spend the rest of your life in prison. Think of this as a test. If you can’t trust him, you’d better be finding out now, don’t you think, so you can make other plans?”

“It’s just so... I don’t know, improper, embarrassing – it just doesn’t seem right.”

“It’d be easier if you didn’t love him, wouldn’t it?” Mary asked casually.

“Yes, it would...*wait a minute!*” Samantha looked at her friend in outrage. “I never said I loved him!”

“Actually, Honey, I think you just did.”

“B-but I haven’t even known him a day.”

“What’s that got to do with anything? So you’re saying that you don’t love him?” Mary persisted.

Samantha hesitated, nervously biting her lip. “I didn’t say that either. I guess I’m just not ready to admit it to myself yet. It’s *way* too quick; it hasn’t even been a day!”

“Don’t wait too long, Honey. *Damn it*, I hate to say this, but considering the circumstances, there’s no telling how much time you two will have, especially together, if you know what I mean. It might be years, but it could just as well be hours. One thing about it, he sure loves you.”

“Do you really think so?”

“No, I really *know so*. I’ve seen him look at you. Everyone has one great love in their life, and I think that yours is right in there. Do what you have to do to keep him, for whatever time you two have left, or you’ll regret it the rest of your life.”

“Hello?”

“Sam, this is Mary – Mary Wheeler.”

“Mary? How are you? It’s sure been a long time!”

“Yes, it has. Listen, Sam, I’ve got trouble and I need some help.”

“What kind of trouble?” A pause, then, “Is your line secure?”

“Who knows, these days?”

“I think it’ll be okay if you don’t use any keywords. Can you talk around it?”

“I’ll try. Have you been watching the news? You know that pair of little birds that Aunt Columbia wants so bad that she’s been advertising for them on TV? One of them sounds like a piggy.”

The voice on the other end was cautious. “I think I get your drift.”

“Well if you listen close, you can probably hear them cheeping in the background.”

“They’re *there with you*?”

“Big as life; you want to pick them up and take care of them for me? They’ve got to be out of here by morning at the latest. I’ve got a nosy old Yankee buzzard for a neighbor and she watches every move I make.”

“She didn’t see them come in, did she?”

“No, I got more sense than that! It was nearly dark when we came in through the garage with them laying down in the back seat.”

“Ease up there a minute. That’s way past my authority. Listen, let me make some calls and I’ll see what we can do for you.”

“Do it quick, Sam, and don’t tell them where they’re at. I don’t trust all of them.”

“Smart move – neither do I! You ought to hear from me shortly. Bye now.”

“Bye, Sam.”

“I am going to kill Mary,” Samantha said. “I am simply going to kill her.”

They stood there looking at their bed. It was twin size.

“Well, I can sleep here on the floor...” Frank offered.

“You most certainly will not sleep on the floor! You’ve got broken ribs. Don’t worry, we’ll manage,” she muttered gruffly, angry not so much at either Frank or Mary, but rather at the part of herself that was excited by the prospect of sharing the narrow bed.

Samantha got in first and scooted towards the wall, and Frank reached for the light switch and flipped it off. Carefully, he climbed in beside her and pulled up the covers. By necessity, they huddled against each other, with Frank turning his back to hers and hanging half over the side of the bed in order to give her as much space in the uncomfortable situation as he could. He thought that he should make some small talk, or say something, but for the life of him he couldn’t figure out what would be appropriate under the circumstances.

Gradually, he became aware that she was shaking.

“Sammie? What’s wrong?”

“N-nothing...” a small voice sobbed out of the darkness.

“It’s not ‘nothing’,” he said, turning towards her onto his right side and laying his left hand on her arm. “Talk to me.”

“It’s just that – so much – so quick – I – I...”

“Come here,” he said, and, not knowing if he was making a mistake or not, he reached out to her. “Come here, Sammie.”

In an instant, she rolled into his arms, buried her face in his chest, and cried like her heart would break. Frank held her tight,

gently rocking her and stroking her hair. “Let it out, Sammie. It’ll be all right. You just let it out.”

Let it out she did, hysterically, in an almost incoherent stream of words and sobs. As her tears soaked his shirt, her pent-up fears over the day’s events and what the future would bring came pouring out. He kept murmuring little comforts, and once, unable to help himself, leaned down, buried his face in her hair and gently kissed the top of her head.

Completely out of control, she dug her fingers painfully into his muscles and couldn’t stop herself and didn’t try. “And I love you, Frank – and it’s so quick – so quick – and I can’t help it, but I’m so afraid – what are we going to do...”

The confession, coming in the throws of such an unlikely passion for it, was so unexpected that, at first, Frank nearly missed it. Stunned, he quickly recovered as the sudden realization swept over him like a warm ocean wave.

“I love you too, Sammie! I love you too.” At this, she clung even tighter and cried all the harder.

After a few minutes, the crying gradually subsided and her breathing slowed. She lay so still in his arms with her head resting on his chest, Frank thought she had cried herself to sleep until she suddenly spoke up.

“Frank?”

“Yeah, Sammie?”

“Did you mean what you said, back at that bar, that you cared?”

“Yes, I did. I still do.”

“And a few minutes ago, when you said that you...” she hesitated, “that you love me?”

Well, here it comes, he thought. Here’s the part where she tells me that she was just upset, and didn’t realize what she was saying, sorry about that.

Carefully keeping his disappointment and the expectation of the coming hurt out of his voice, he answered her the only way he knew how – honestly.

“Yes, I meant it and I mean it.” He choked slightly himself. “I love you, Sammie. I’ve loved you since the first time I set eyes on you.”

He felt her starting to sob again, and cursed himself for a fool. “Look, I’m sorry if I upset you. I didn’t mean to.”

“No, no Frank! You didn’t upset me; in fact, you’ve made me happier than I’ve ever been in my life!” She raised her head and peered at him through the darkness. “I’m in love, Officer Frank Gore. For the first time in my life, I’m really, truly in love with someone who loves me back.”

Neither could say who moved first, but their lips met just the same.

After a few minutes, Frank pushed her gently away.

“I think that we better take a breather for a minute, before – well, you know, considering the circumstances...”

“Frank, I know you made that promise to Mary, but I also know what kind of a strain you’ve got to be under. I...” He heard her suck in her breath between her clenched teeth, and the fearful uneasiness in her voice. “If it will help you, I’m willing to.”

“Shh.” He gently laid a finger across her lips. “Don’t make me an offer I might not have the strength to refuse.”

“But...”

“No buts, Sammie. I won’t take advantage of you. I care too much about you for that.”

“I’m willing to let you.”

“I know you are, and that’s just it – there’s a big difference between ‘willing to let me’ and wanting me to, isn’t there?”

“Yes.” Her voice sounded very tiny.

“Look up here at me. I want you, Sammie. I want you so bad I can taste it and I’m not lying, but there’s a time and a place for everything. You’re vulnerable right now, whether you want to admit it or not. Your whole world has come apart in a day and you’ve been thrown in the middle of something that’s *way* over your head – hell, way over *anybody’s* head. You’ve lost your job, got beat half to death, and started running for your life, all in about seven or eight hours. I’m not about to make things any worse for you.”

She was quiet for so long that he thought he had offended her. Finally, she spoke. “I was right.”

“’Bout what?”

“There’s nobody else like you. You’re like someone from a storybook that every little girl dreams about, only to have those dreams knocked out of her when she grows up. I can’t believe you’re real. You’re like...like...”

“Prince Valiant?” he asked mischievously.

“Don’t bring that up again!” she said in mock anger. “I didn’t know you then like I do now.”

Soberly, he observed, “it’s amazing how much difference a few hours can make, isn’t it?”

“Isn’t it, though? It doesn’t seem possible that things can happen so fast. I’ve heard of love at first sight, but I thought it was a lot of B.S. Just hours, and it’s like a lifetime. I only hope that – that *we’ll* last, and what we have with each other will last.”

“Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, but bears it out even to the edge of doom.”

“Very appropriate. That’s Shakespeare, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. I’m a fan of classic literature – a closet fan, anyway. My friends on the Columbia PD just wouldn’t understand.”

She chortled. “I’ll bet not. “You’re an interesting man, Frank Gore. Tell me about yourself.”

“Not much to tell. I’m 32. I was born and brought up on a little farm not too far from Columbia. My parents died in a car wreck when I was nine, and my grandmother brought me up after that. I paid my way through college in the Reserves and I’ve been with the Columbia PD for better than ten years. That’s about it.”

“Have you ever been married?” *Oh no! What if he IS married?*

“Was once, for about three years. It didn’t work out. She didn’t like being a cop’s wife and was pretty obvious about it. Finally, one night I was on patrol and went over to roust a couple in a parked car and ask them to move along, when lo and behold, who should it be but my loving little wife; only she was loving a local high school teacher.”

“Frank, that’s *horrible!*”

“Well, it was an interesting moment for all concerned, to say the least. I’ve been bacheloring it ever since. In a way, I guess she did me a favor and gave me the excuse I needed to get rid of her.”

“She was an idiot!”

He nodded affirmatively. “I always thought so, but then again, I’m prejudiced; I lived with her.

“Enough about me – what about you? You ever tie the knot?”

“No. I came close a couple of times, but fortunately, no cigar. I was always too wrapped up in my career, and anyway, most of the people you meet in media circles leave a little something to be desired in the personality department.”

“You mean like Phil?”

“Yes, like Phil. You know, I really respected Phil – idolized him, to be honest. He was a journalist’s journalist; he had reported out of places that even soldiers were afraid to go, risking his life to ferret out corruption in high places. I always thought of him as a crusader, and a seeker after truth – only to find out that the only ‘truth’ he was interested in was the kind that fit his liberal views and advanced his, quote-unquote, ‘progressive agenda’.”

“You’re a conservative then?”

“I’m the same kind of conservative that you are a Shakespeare fan – the closet kind, and for the same reason. The people that I worked with wouldn’t understand either.” She paused a moment. “I never realized until today how much that bothered me, having to hide who I was. It seems like I’ve been doing that my whole life.”

“I’ve noticed that your accent seems to slip every once in a while. Are you from around here originally?”

“Up in Charlotte. To get a job in the media, I had to go to special classes to have my Southern accent ‘scrubbed’ because it doesn’t sound good on TV.”

“Did your mother have a pretty voice?”

“Oh yes. I still remember her singing – *Oh!* I see what you’re getting at.”

“It’s racism, Sammie, pure and simple. The same people who’d raise cane six ways from Sunday if you asked a colored man to bleach his skin so he wouldn’t be too black for TV don’t think twice

about telling you to ‘bleach’ your voice so you won’t be too Southern. It’s discrimination, and even worse than that, it’s hypocrisy.”

“I never really thought about it that way. Is ‘Southern’ a race?”

“It’s an ethnic group, anyway. Think about it; isn’t an Irishman different from an Englishman, who’s different from a German who’s different from a Frenchman, even though they all look pretty much alike and their countries are fairly close to each other?”

“I guess so.”

“All right, now what makes them different? Like I said, they look alike and a lot of them had similar ancestry, Celtic and Germanic, but each and every one of them is a unique blend of all that, and they’ve all got different blood, different ways of speaking, different cultures, different views on religion, and even eat different kinds of foods – they’re entirely different peoples because of those things. Now look at our own life-ways, and then look at those of the North and the West coast. Do you see where I’m going with this?”

“Yes! Yes, I do! Frank, you are absolutely right. I’ve worked in New York and I was working for a New Yorker here, and I know exactly what you mean. Deep down inside I knew that something was wrong, but it never occurred to me exactly what it was.”

“It never occurs to most people, because it’s never intended to. That’s a dangerous thought to those who control the government, the media and the publishing houses – mainly liberal or neo-conservative Yankees and Jews in the North and out on the ‘left coast’ – because their power, the power of their agendas, is threatened whenever someone different has a voice. I’m not talking about just different as in race, per se, but different in outlook from what they demand to be the ‘*accepted norm*’, the so-called ‘*modern*’ status quo. That’s people like us, Sammie. We meet all the definitions of an ethnic group, and to top it off, we’re an ethnic group whose ancestors rebelled against the control of this very same government less than a century and a half ago.”

“So all those Southern groups that we put down in the media were right all along!”

“Yes! I’m beginning to realize that myself, just now. *They were right!*” He shook his head at the sudden realization, as stunned by it as she was. “I think that, in my heart, I’ve always known it. ‘Bred in the bone,’ like Granny said.”

“Whew!” She blew out her breath. “This is a lot to take in, on top of everything else.”

“It’s too much to take in right now. I suspect that we better get some sleep – morning tends to roll around awful early.”

“Ooh! I hate to think about that! I guess you’re right.”

“Are you comfortable?”

“Yeah,” she said, snuggling a little deeper against his chest.

“You? I’m not on your bad ribs am I?”

He smiled in the darkness.

“I’m more comfortable than I’ve ever been in my life.”

Encrypted Internet Chat

11:04 PM

Spider61: What have you got?

rightangle: I’ve got the two people that Columbia would most like to have.

Greyrider124: Both the cop and the reporter? Who the hell are you anyway?

rightangle: Yes, and never mind – not relevant. Spider will vouch for me. Both subjects are in a safe place tonight, but they’ll have to be moved out tomorrow morning. Do we want them?

Spider61: They could be useful, particularly since they’ve got no one else to turn to. To snatch them right out from under Uncle Sugar’s nose would be a propaganda coup, and since they’re better known than any of us, they’d make a perfect rallying point.

Greyrider124: That's crazy! It'll bring the heat right down on us.

Spider61: Not unless we're caught. Besides, they're already shooting us; what else are they going to do – eat us?

Greyrider124: I don't like it – too dangerous. The others wouldn't like it either if they were here.

Spider61: Well, they're not here. I'll take full responsibility for it.

Greyrider124: You don't have the authority!

Spider61: I'm doing it anyway. It needs to be done and it needs to be done now. File a complaint with the council if you've got a problem with it.

Greyrider124: That's always your answer to everything! I think maybe I'll do just that...I'M SICK OF YOUR SHIT!

Spider61: If you can't do anything useful besides gripe and complain, then get off my computer.

Greyrider124 has left chat.

rightangle: Did you just kick him off chat?

Spider61: Yep

rightangle: We'll never hear the end of that one.

Spider61: We'd never have heard the end of it anyway. Maybe now we can get something done for a change.

rightangle: Yeeeaah, could be! So, what do you want to do about the unhappy couple?

Spider61: Can you make arrangements to bring them to the farm tomorrow?

rightangle: Can do. I'll get my people to help; a couple of them have been chomping at the bit, and this'll give them something concrete to do to keep them out of trouble. Idle hands and all that, you know.

Spider61: I know I can count on you. Anything else you need?

rightangle: One thing: a question answered. What if it's a set up and they're informers?

Spider61: Well, they're already listed as 'missing' ... in that case, we'll make their status permanent. The farm's the perfect place to make that happen. Those hogs of yours have got to eat.

rightangle: (SHUDDER!) I reckon so! Are you sure you'll be able to do that if the time comes?

Spider61: I'll hold up my end. Just be sure that NOBODY knows where they're going except the people involved. No other members of the council and ESPECIALLY not Greyrider. Once you get them there, keep them there, one way or another – they don't leave until I say so. Don't tell them any more than you have to.

rightangle: Will you be in tomorrow?

Spider61: Maybe tomorrow night or the next day. I need to gather some equipment and I've got some other stuff going on. Get with your contact and arrange the pick up. I'll see you as soon as I can. Bye now.

Sarah Gore lay quietly in the darkness of her bedroom, thinking. Jenny Mae Summers, had left her just an hour before after excitedly delivering the news from Frank. Like her neighbor, she

knew that her grandson was innocent; after all, she had the story first-hand from his own lips. That wasn't what was bothering her.

He had done exactly what she had told him to do. It was no more than what he had to do, of course. It was the only right thing to do, it was what the honor of the family name required, and it was exactly what she had demanded of him. So Frank had listened to her and done the right thing, and now it would very likely cost him his life.

Sighing deeply, she sought refuge in the only source that she could depend on to listen and understand. Folding her hands upon her bony chest, she began to pray.

“Lord, this is a hard thing that’s come upon my grandson; a mighty hard thing – Thou knowest it. I know that all things happen according to Thy holy will, Lord, and I know that whatever Thy will is, that it is perfect and right. We don’t have to understand it, Lord, but we do have to trust in Thy mercy and accept it. I’m trying, Lord; I really am trying. Help me, Lord!

“Still, Almighty God, if there’s any way that you can see clear to deliver my grandson from this evil that has come upon him, please consider it, Lord! *Please!* He’s all I’ve got, Lord, and he’s the last of this family. Have mercy on him, Lord, I pray.

“Nevertheless,” she continued, the last words torn from her heart, but no less sincere for all that. “Thy will, not mine be done. In Jesus’ name I pray.

“Amen.”

Mary sat down her coffee cup and grabbed the phone before the second ring.

“Hello?”

“Kind of quick on the trigger – you must’ve been waiting on me.” Sam chuckled.

“You better believe it. I’m as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs!” She paused a moment. “Well, don’t keep me waiting. Can you do something or not?”

“Yes, ma’am, we can take ’em off your hands tomorrow morning. Your place?”

“No; like I told you, I’ve got nosy neighbors. Can they meet you some place far enough away to keep the powers that be from linking them with me? I don’t dare take them there myself, because I figure by tomorrow they’ll be looking for me to see if I know anything. All we need is for the cops to pull me over when they’re with me.”

He remained silent a moment, considering. “What kind of transportation do they have then?”

“Bicycles.”

“Okay, hang on for a minute; I’ve got to check my map...let’s see...here it is. Perfect! Okay, Mary, have you got a pencil and paper? Good deal. Now, if you would, write this down for them...”

She scribbled furiously as Sam gave her the directions.

“One more thing; is he armed?”

She was immediately cautious. “Why?”

“Because I’m risking my men’s lives sending them in after someone I never heard of until today, and that I still don’t know anything about. If we’re going to do this, I need to know what they’re going to be facing.”

Mary hesitated before deciding to go on. “Alright, Sam; he has Harry’s old .45 and Samantha mentioned he has a knife of some kind.”

“You *gave* him Harry’s pistol?” The shock was evident in his voice at the idea of her giving up something with that much sentimental value. Either she was losing her mind, or else it spoke volumes as to how much trust she put in the fugitives. Knowing Mary pretty well, his own estimation of the couple went up several notches – not enough to make him careless, of course, but enough to give him at least a little hope.

“It’s my gun and I reckon I’ll give it to anybody I damn well please!”

“Okay, okay; I didn’t mean nothing – just asking. What about her?”

“All she’s armed with are some killer good looks. Look Sam, I don’t want these people hurt, especially not Samantha!”

“Neither do I – they’re no good to us dead, for one thing. How long have you known them?”

“I’ve known Samantha about four years, and she’s not only my boss, but also my good friend. I just met Frank today.”

“How long has she known him?”

“They just met today too.”

Sam’s red flags immediately went back up. “So neither of you really know *anything* about him, then?”

“No, but he’s a good man, I can tell,” she said stubbornly.

“Woman’s intuition?”

“Call it the voice of experience. Does this change anything?”

“No, it’s still on; it just gives me some things to think about.”

Sam’s brain kicked into high gear. It’s still on, all right.

Regardless whether his suspicions were true or not, he wouldn’t miss this for the world. One way or another, he was finally going to strike a blow against the enemy.

For the first time in years, Sarah Gore dreamed of her husband. There stood Jake, right beside the bed in his dress blues that he was so proud of, looking just like he did when he came home back in ’45.

“Jake?” she murmured.

He smiled at her, a little sadly she thought, and nodded. Then he reached down and patted her tenderly on the shoulder.

“It’ll be all right, Sarah.” His voice sounded distant, like it was coming from somewhere very far away. She reached up and grasped his hand, and he returned the grip. A feeling of comfort swept over her.

Then her eyes popped open.

Half weeping with frustration at the shattered dream, she pounded her fist against the mattress in fury. Outside she could hear her little dog, Biscuit, raising cane, barking his fool head off.

“You infernal animal!” she grumbled angrily. “What’s wrong with you now?”

As if in answer, there was a sharp coughing sound and Biscuit’s bark rose to a high-pitched yip, then cut off abruptly to dead silence.

“What...”

She could hear sounds outside her house – the sounds of stealthily moving feet! Sarah didn’t waste time wondering; instead,

she rolled over and reached under her bed, retrieving an Ithaca Model 37 20 gauge pump shotgun that Frank had bought her to protect her property and herself from varmints: four-legged or two-legged. Quickly she stood up, her arthritic joints protesting at the sudden movement. She didn't know who or what was out there, but she knew that whatever it was, it wasn't good. The loose board on the front porch that she was going to ask Frank to fix on his next visit creaked under the weight of a boot.

Moving to the doorway between her bedroom and the living room, she clicked the trigger-guard safety off with her index finger and raised the shotgun to her shoulder, pointing it at the middle of the front door. She hadn't taken time to pick up her glasses so everything was blurry, but she could see good enough for the job at hand.

There was no warning. The door exploded inward under a kick that tore loose both latch and hinges, sending it slamming back against the wall hard enough for the knob to knock a hole in the plaster before falling to the floor. A dark form, solid black like a living shadow filled the frame and started through, shouting something, and Sarah, startled, jerked the trigger instead of pulling it, inadvertently causing the muzzle to rise slightly as sound of the blast filled the room.

The barrel was long and fully choked, and the room was only twelve feet across. The shot had hardly begun to spread at that close distance, so it hit the masked and night vision-goggled Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms agent directly on the tip of the nose in a nearly solid mass and promptly bored a two-inch wide tunnel through his cranium. The agent's head rocked back and blood and bits of bone sprayed over the others crowding behind him. As he collapsed, the man to his rear fired past the falling body with two short, quick bursts from his silenced 9 millimeter MP5 submachine gun that tore apart the bedroom door facing and sent a pair of copper-jacketed slugs through Sarah's skull.

DAY 3

Chapter 10

“Let me get this straight, Lieutenant Blakely,” Ronald Peters said carefully into the phone, doing his best to contain his irritation. He was tired, as he hadn’t left his office, preferring to remain on top of things until after the fugitives were finally captured or, preferably, killed. “As a result of your raid, no weapons were found except for a legally-purchased shotgun, an eighty-year old woman is dead *after* killing a BATF agent, and Franklin Gore and Samantha Norris are still at large. Is that an accurate summation of the results of your actions tonight?”

“Sir, the information that we had...”

“Is that an accurate summation of the results of your actions tonight or not, damn it?”

Lieutenant Blakely sighed. “Yes sir, that is accurate.” He knew enough of Peters’ reputation not to want to mess with him.

“So, in other words, you BATF clowns screwed up *again*, and now *all our asses* are on the line unless someone cleans up the mess. Is that also accurate?”

A pause, then, “yes, sir, that’s...pretty much it.”

“Marvelous, just freaking marvelous. You people are a wonder, Lieutenant. Tell me this, at least – there weren’t any witnesses, were there?”

“No sir. The house is fairly isolated, with the nearest dwelling several hundred yards away. No civilians have any knowledge of the action whatsoever.”

“Good. Maybe we can salvage something from this fiasco of yours after all.”

Lisa Poole, the re-enactor in the hoop skirt shot by Jackson at the capitol riot, was sick and hurting, in no particular order. The renegade cop’s bullet had totally destroyed her right shoulder joint,

ruining both the ball and the rotator cuff as it expanded on its journey, and no matter how many times she pushed the self-medicating button that fed morphine into her IV, the best she could do was a dull but very apparent agony. To top it off, the additional Demerol they gave her in tablet form made her nauseous, and she was weak from throwing up. Feeling strung out from the opiates and the fact that it was three in the morning, she looked up with only a vague interest as the door to her room opened.

A very tall and homely black woman with close-cropped hair and large, popping eyes stepped crisply inside. She wore a nurse's outfit but none of the hospital staff would have recognized her, although her commander, Lieutenant Colonel Sedgeway, knew her quite well.

"How' you feeling this morning?" she asked, picking up the clipboard at the end of the bed and looking at it carefully. "You' Lisa Poole?"

"Yes I am, and I'm feeling pretty rough right now," she confirmed hoarsely. "The pain medicine makes me sick."

"The doctor was 'fraid of that; lot of people have that kind of reaction to Demerol. Still, with a traumatic injury like yours, you need to take it. You won't be able to stand the pain otherwise." She produced a hypodermic and uncapped it. "I've got a little somethin' here that's gonna take all that sickness away."

Lisa was skeptical.

"I hope it works."

As she inserted the needle into the IV, the nurse who was not a nurse at all grinned back at her. "Don't you worry, girlfriend; ol' Nurse Beauchamp's gonna fix you right up! This stuff never fails."

Pushing the plunger, she injected a massive overdose of morphine into the drip.

Chapter 11

Inside the older white frame house next door to Mary's, a curtain moved ever so slightly when Frank and Samantha pedaled out of the drive and down the street. Once they had passed out of sight, Susan Kennedy dropped her bony index finger, letting the lacy hangings fall back into place. The pair had piqued the Bostonian immigrant's curiosity.

Strange goings-on were nothing new at *that* house, to be sure, but they had settled down since Mary's husband had died. That death came as a relief to Mrs. Kennedy, and she didn't mind admitting it. The man was obviously a dangerous redneck, carrying guns and flying that damned Confederate flag right beside his front door. Once he had even punched her husband in the nose for very reasonably demanding that he take it down – right out there on the public sidewalk! And that Mary wasn't any better; she had offered to do the same to Susan when she complained about it! Between those two right-wing nuts and the unsavory characters who used to frequent the place, Susan Kennedy considered it no more than her civic duty to keep track of what went on over there.

There was something familiar about those two cyclists (*Weren't those that woman's bikes?*) that tugged at the edges of her memory, something important, but she just couldn't put her finger on it. She leaned forward and peeked out the curtain again.

She wasn't too worried – it would come to her eventually, if she thought about it long enough.

It felt as if all the eyes in Columbia were on Samantha and Frank as they bicycled west down the street where suburbia began to give way to the main business district, or such as it now was since the depression began. Fortunately, it was early morning and a Saturday, so the traffic was lighter even than the depression oil shortage-reduced flow that had become the norm; however, that did nothing for their paranoia. Frank in particular suffered from it due to self-consciousness, as he would not be caught dead wearing spandex if

there was any other choice. In his logical mind, he knew that very factor was an advantage in keeping his identity concealed, but it embarrassed the hell out of him all the same.

Samantha, on the other hand, seemed to be taking it all in stride, pumping the pedals with the same rhythmic motion that she worked the exercise bike in her townhouse every day and looking very good doing it. Outwardly she was almost unnaturally calm, but when the light hit her right, Frank could make out the lines on her face formed by the tight set of her jaw.

To the public, they were just two more bicyclists of the number that was ever growing in this day of skyrocketing gas prices and rationing. Other than a few men taking an appreciative second glance at Samantha's legs, along with a couple of women doing the same to Frank, there was as little attention paid to them as to any of the other people on the street, which suited both of them just fine.

There was one bad moment, when a Columbia Police cruiser stopped in the lane beside them as they waited out a red light. The cop in the passenger seat looked at them through the opaque lenses of his sunglasses, then nudged his partner and pointed. Frank began dropping into his combat relaxation mode, emptying his mind as he prepared himself to kill both of them. He didn't have the faintest idea what they would do after that. He kept his face straight ahead while monitoring them peripherally from behind his own shades. After a moment, it became obvious that they weren't interested in them as fugitives, but in the length and curvature of Samantha's legs. Samantha, in character, pretended to ignore them, but Frank could make out a faint flush climbing to her cheeks as the officers became more obvious in their attention, the driver making exaggerated masturbation gestures and snickering at some ribald comment by his passenger, unheard behind the glass. The car remained when the light changed, then pulled into the lane behind them and followed them slowly for a block, gleefully watching Samantha's shapely butt-cheeks churn in time to her pedaling.

"Steady," Frank murmured, his voice low and his lips barely moving. "Just keep pedaling and don't look back." He knew that, despite the seemingly humorous situation, something in either of

them could strike a chord of recognition in the officers, and someone would die – probably a couple of ‘someones’ wearing spandex and riding bicycles.

What a hell of a way to go!

Finally, after what had to be the longest block in either of their lives, the car made a right turn and headed off down a side street. Pent-up breath whooshed out of both of them.

“Now I know why they call them *pigs!*” Samantha muttered, seething with anger and humiliation. “Are they *all* like that?”

“No,” he answered in a carefully neutral voice, still looking straight ahead. “Not all.”

Realizing what she had just said as well as who she had just said it to, Samantha was aghast. “I’m sorry, Frank! I didn’t mean you! I...”

“Don’t worry about it, Sammie. If that’s the worst you’ve got to say after that little episode, I reckon I’ll feel right popular.” After a moment, he smiled.

“I’ll tell you one thing though – if we ever do this again, I’m buying you the baggiest, ugliest pair of sweatpants that I can find!”

Six blocks later and two streets over, Frank nodded his head in the direction of an alleyway between a rundown flower shop and an empty, boarded-up bar.

“There it is,” he called out, turning into it, followed by Samantha.

“What now?”

“Now,” he said, stopping his bike, “we walk. We’re too disadvantaged straddling these things in this alley if something goes wrong.”

“Do you really think it might? Go wrong, I mean?”

Frank studied the fairly wide, garbage-littered way. Old wooden garage doors and rusty barred windows looked blindly out on the broken, jumbled pavement with weeds growing in the cracks and graffiti covered dumpsters pushed haphazardly against the sides. The brick walls of the buildings permanently shaded the place, adding to the general sense of urban gloom. There was no sign of life except

for the smell of stale urine and rotting garbage that wafted out at them.

“I don’t know, but I can’t think of a better place for it.”

Sam Wirtz pulled his head back from the cracked-open garage door and spoke quickly to the two men with him.

“Here they come. Everybody in your places. Remember, if *anything* happens, *anything at all*, shoot the man first and make it count – he’s the most dangerous. Do the woman if you have too, but just be sure you nail him hard. Remember, Billy, let Tommy go first – we need to keep this quiet if we can. You’re backup.”

“I got you,” Billy Sprouse replied, carrying his Remington Model 870 12 gauge shotgun in his right hand as he rapidly strode to the rear of a large refrigerator box on a skid in the back corner of the room. Opening a flap of cardboard on the rear side of the empty box, he slipped inside, pulling it closed after him. The shotgun, with its barrel sawn off just ahead of the five-round magazine and the stock cut down to a pistol grip was short enough to manipulate inside, and a two-and-a-half inch hole ‘accidentally’ torn in the front was adequate to see and shoot out of.

“Ready,” Tommy Richardson’s voice sounded hollowly from beneath the beat-up stake bed truck parked inside. Tommy had brought an AR7 takedown semiautomatic .22 rifle with the barrel modified into a full-length silencer. Sam had seen Tommy shoot the business-like little piece, and had no doubt that he would hit what he aimed at if the need arose.

Sam, holding his old Smith & Wesson Model 19 .357 magnum in his left hand, concealed it unobtrusively behind his leg and waited.

The pair looked with trepidation at the battered wooden ‘swing-open’ garage doors and the entrance door beside, with its iron bar-protected pane replaced with a rotten, delaminating piece of plywood.

“Nice place. Do we just walk in?” Samantha asked.

“I think we’d better knock first. I don’t want to surprise anybody in there; something tells me that would *not* be good!”

Frank’s knuckles rapped the wood, sending scales of peeling white paint floating to the ground in a miniature blizzard.

“Come in – door’s open.”

Frank turned the knob and had to lift up on the sagging portal in order to gain access. The overpowering stench of garbage hit him like a wave, making his gorge rise. Samantha paled and gagged. Pulling off his sunglasses, he noticed the large, rusty red truck inside, with its piled-up bed – the apparent source of the odor – covered with an old canvas tarp. A foul liquid dripped from beneath the wooden side rails. At the other end of the garage, a short, heavy-set man in his fifties with close cut reddish hair running to gray poking from under a well-used cap, a white t-shirt and a pair of well-worn jeans regarded them coolly.

“What can I do for you?” Frank noticed the man’s left hand was concealed behind his leg, and he had been a cop long enough to have a pretty good idea as to why. The hand he could see was encased in a surgical glove – no prints would be left here. *Great.*

“I’m looking for Sam.”

“And who might you be?”

Frank took a deep breath. “This is Samantha Norris behind me, and I’m Frank Gore.”

“You all come on inside and bring the bikes with you.” The man instructed, unmoving. “Just put ’em against the wall there.”

“Come this way, please,” the man instructed after they had complied and closed the door. Frank didn’t like it; with all the junk around the walls, there could be a small army concealed in here and the thought made his skin crawl, but they had little choice. When they were halfway between the rear of the truck and their contact, the man raised his right hand.

“That’s close enough. Officer Gore, Miss Norris, please stay right where you are and *do not* make any sudden moves. Keep your hands where we can see them. Right now, you’re both standing in the center of an overlapping field of fire – a killing field. There are

two guns aimed at you right now. If you move, or if I give the word, you *will* die. Do you understand me?”

Frank understood all right. He could drop, roll and draw, and probably kill Sam, and maybe even escape – and Samantha would die in the process. His mind raced for a solution that would prevent that.

“Yes,” replied Frank in a voice as hard and cold as a granite tombstone. “I understand.”

“I don’t know if you really do. We ain’t cops, Officer Gore, or we’d already have taken you down. We’re rebels – revolutionaries, I guess, now that the shit has finally hit the fan.” He nodded slightly at Samantha. “Sorry, ma’am, pardon the language; just stress.”

“That’s ok,” she said, struck by the surreal situation. “I know what you mean.” The tension inside her was so tight it felt as though her shoulder blades were pulling apart, and she had an almost uncontrollable desire to urinate.

“Thank you, ma’am. Now, like I was saying, we’re not your enemy *if* you are who you say you are; in fact, we’re the only friends that you’ve got in that case. The trouble is that we don’t have any way of knowing just exactly what you are yet, other than the word of the widow of an old friend, who hasn’t known you all that long herself. I have people of my own to protect, and I can’t jeopardize them by taking you at face value. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Frank relaxed slightly. He couldn’t fault the man’s logic. “Yeah, I understand, but I don’t have to like it.”

Sam’s mouth stretched into a tense parody of a smile that never reached his eyes. “Good. I wouldn’t like it either, if I were in your shoes. Now, are you carrying, Officer Gore?”

Something in the man’s voice told him that he’d better be honest. “Yeah, I have a .45 under the jacket.”

“Any other weapons?”

“A knife, right jacket pocket.”

“Electronic devices – any kind, watches, radios, whatever?”

Frank declared a watch as did Samantha, along with a small tape recorder in her purse. Sam picked up a cardboard box from the

bench behind him and extended it toward Samantha with his right hand, keeping his left still concealed behind his thigh and carefully out of reach. “I need you two to put all that stuff in here, along with your jackets, helmets, shoes, jewelry – everything including the spandex. We brought some coveralls; I’m not going to leave you running around like a couple of streakers. If everything’s upfront, you can have it all back as soon as we check it for bugs and transponders.”

Samantha looked at Frank for guidance and he sighed. He was going to have to trust these people if he wanted either of them to live.

“It doesn’t look like we have much of a choice, Samantha. Even if they let us live, we won’t likely get far on our own, pedaling our bicycles through the middle of Columbia, what with everybody hunting us.

“One thing, though,” he said, looking at Sam. “It’s not right for this lady to have to strip naked in front of a bunch of men. If that’s part of the deal, then forget it.”

Sam scratched his chin in frustration, not only because he hadn’t thought of that, but also because he could tell that Frank wouldn’t bend on the issue. Suddenly, he snapped his fingers as the answer came to him.

“How about this? You change on this side of the truck and Tommy will accompany the lady to the other – he’s a certified paramedic and works for the rescue squad. He’s a professional, he’s seen it all, and he’ll preserve her modesty all he can.”

Frank opened his mouth to protest again, but Samantha laid her hand on his arm.

“Frank, a very good man told me just last night that we’d do what we had to, to stay alive and free. You remember that, don’t you?” Frank looked away. “Well, this is just another thing that we’ll have to do. Now, let’s get it over with so we can go someplace safe, okay?” she said gently. To her relief, he nodded in agreement.

“Great,” Sam told them. “Now, if you’ll be so kind as to drop your gun in the box, Officer Gore, I’ll bring my people out and we can get this show on the road.”

Straining at the unavoidable risk that he was taking, Frank slowly drew the .45, holding it between his thumb and two fingers, and placed it inside. Sam heaved a sigh of relief.

“Okay, boys, come on out.”

As Billy stepped out from behind the box and Tommy squirmed out from under the truck, swearing at the filthy liquid that had dripped on him from the bed, it relieved Frank to see that they were obviously not cops. In fact, they were a couple of bikers who looked vaguely familiar.

“I know you!” Frank exclaimed suddenly, finally recognizing the pair. “You were at the riot. As a matter of fact, *you*,” he pointed first at Billy, then at Tommy, “hit me with *him*!”

Recognition dawned on the big biker’s face. “That was *you*?” he chuckled. “Hell, it’s a small world, ain’t it? Hey bro, it wasn’t nothin’ personal – no hard feelings? I hope you didn’t get hurt too bad.”

“That’s okay – shoot, it was an experience. I’ve never had one man hit me with another one before.”

“It’s not okay with me!” Tommy growled, aiming a half-hearted kick toward the big man that was never meant to connect. “This four hundred pound pile of crap like to killed me, throwing me around like a sack of potatoes. You big dumb ass! You’re so stupid it’s a wonder that you can remember to breathe!”

Bill faked a hurt look. “Now come on, Tommy, you know you still love me! Come here and give me a kiss.” Winking at the others he puckered his hairy lips and made loud smacking sounds.

“I’ll kiss you with this rifle-butt, you queer actin’ – ”

“Boys, would you mind stopping the grab-ass, at least until we get these folks searched? Would that be too much to ask?” Turning to Frank and Samantha, he shook his head in embarrassment. “I can’t take these two anywhere. What was it that S.O.B. General Grant said, something about good help being hard to find?”

“All right,” Tommy said, “Ma’am, if you’ll accompany me to the other side of this fine piece of Detroit machinery, we’ll get this over with.” He walked to the bench and picked up a small electronic device.

“What’s that?” asked Frank.

“Bug sweeper: electronic bugs, not the crawly kind,” he added in exasperation after Billy snickered. “We’ll check your clothes and such by hand, but we need to see if either of you are carryin’ a ‘legionnaire’.”

Samantha looked puzzled. “What’s a ‘legionnaire’?”

“An implanted miniature electronic device that broadcasts your location; it’s about the size of a grain of rice and can be planted under the skin. It’s read by satellite and can pinpoint your location and vital signs virtually anywhere. The government’s been usin’ them for years with military personnel.”

“You mean an ‘angel on your shoulder’ like they use for kids?”

“I wouldn’t call it an angel, ma’am – devil’s angel, maybe! We took to calling it a ‘legionnaire’ after the demons that Jesus cast out into the swine: ‘Legion, for we are many’. I reckon that it’s the mark of the beast, myself.” He gave them a hard look. Although a long-time outlaw biker, Tommy was also the son of a Baptist preacher and took the subject of Christianity dead serious, even if he was sometimes known to stray from the path on occasion himself. “Either of you have one?”

Samantha shook her head, and Frank told him, “not me; I always figured it that way too.”

Tommy curtly nodded his approval, gestured toward the truck, and said, “Ma’am?” Samantha complied and they disappeared on the other side.

“Be true to me back there, Tommy!” Billy called out. “You know how jealous I get!”

“You big dumb ass!” they heard Tommy mutter.

“Okay, Officer Gore,” Sam interjected, “go ahead and strip and let’s get you taken care of. And don’t worry about Billy – he just likes to aggravate. He’s not really a queer.”

“Nope, but I do play one on TV,” the big man said, hooting loudly at his own joke while Sam rolled his eyes and muttered a mild obscenity.

Frank undressed, handing over his clothing a piece at a time as it came off, until he was naked but for the bandages around his ribs.

“What’s the tape for?”

“Busted ribs – ask your big buddy here how I got them.”

“I hate to do this to you, but I’ll have to have the bandage too – Tommy can take it off and re-tape you after he checks out your lady friend. We’ll need that necklace as well.”

Frank fingered the old brass locket, and then spoke, his voice even and quiet. “I understand why you need it, but this has been in my family for generations. There are only two things I really insist on having back out of this stuff – this locket and that .45. Both of them came from very special people. I want your word of honor that I’ll have them both back in one piece when you’re done checking them.”

“I know about the .45 from Mary, but what’s so special about the locket?”

Frank told them the story, and Sam was visibly impressed. Even Billy stopped clowning at the gravity of the tale.

“You’ve got my word on it. If you are who you say you are, then you’ll have them back; if you’re not, then you also have my word that this stuff will be the least of your worries.” Sam twisted so the .357 in his left hand was out of reach and extended his right. “Deal?”

“Deal.” They shook on it.

On the other side of the truck, Samantha tried not to think about it as she stood nude in front of the smaller biker, her clothes piled in a box of their own. Thankfully, he kept his part of the bargain and was thoroughly professional about the whole thing.

“Now, ma’am,” he instructed, holding the sweeper, “I need you to lift your arms straight out and spread your legs a little, enough that I can run this scanner over you. Good. It may be cold when it touches you, so bear with me.” Quickly but very thoroughly, he ran the sweeper over every square inch of her skin, even having her lift up her breasts so he could scan beneath them, and then her feet so he could run it over their soles.

“Okay, ma’am, it looks like you’re clean.” He picked up the box of clothes and gestured toward the bench. “Your coveralls are over there. We didn’t know what size you took, so we brought several;

take whichever one fits. I'll let you get dressed while I go check out your boyfriend." With that, he turned and walked around the rear of the truck, taking his rifle with him.

Thankful for that little privacy, Samantha quickly grabbed a dark blue, one-piece garment and was in the process of slipping it on when she noticed a small wooden box sitting under the bench.

After Tommy had swept him all over except for his bandaged ribs, he allowed Frank to don the coveralls to his waist, then produced a pair of sheers out of a cargo pocket and cut the tape. Loosening an end, the biker-paramedic took hold of it. "Okay, partner, get ready, because this is goin' to...*hurt!*" He punctuated the last word with a jerk that ripped the tape over halfway around Frank's body, bringing a hissing grunt from between the cop's clenched teeth and causing Sam and Billy to cringe. "Damn lazy nurses; they should've shaved you first!" A few more equally agonizing yanks and Tommy stood looking at the hair-studded bandage dangling from his fist.

Fighting to regain his breath, Frank gasped out, "I hate a man who's always right!"

"All right," Tommy said cheerfully as he discarded the old tape and picked up the sweeper while producing a fresh roll of tape from another pocket. "Let's get your ribs swept, then we'll tape you up again!"

Frank glared at him.

"Let me ask you something, Tommy. When Billy threw you into me, did it hurt much?"

"Yeah, it did."

"Good!"

"You've got to be kidding!" Samantha said, looking at the place where they were supposed to ride. After the tarp was pulled back, they could see the back of the truck was piled high with garbage, and at Sam's direction, they all climbed on top of it. Billy used a rake to pull aside a layer of the reeking mass at the very front, and lifted out a partial sheet of plywood beneath, revealing the inside of a

shortened single-hole outhouse, sitting upright on the truck bed against the wooden rack that separated the bed from the cab.

“Now darn it, ma’am, we didn’t have much notice,” Sam protested almost plaintively. “Mary didn’t call me till late last night and I had to get approval after that, then come up with a plan. I didn’t have time to build a good box, so we just cut the top of the old outhouse down to height with a circular saw so it would fit under the slop without sticking out. Since we’ve got a contract with some restaurants down here to haul away their edible garbage for hog feed, it seemed a natural. It was either use the outhouse or bury you up directly under the goop!”

Frank looked doubtful. “Can we breathe under there?”

“Oh, yeah! While we had the saw out, we cut a big section out of the back wall underneath the privy seat, and plenty of air will blow up from the hole through the stake bed.” He was obviously pleased with himself.

“Now what we’ll do is put you all inside, put the plywood on, and pile the garbage back on, pull the tarp up, and away we go. If we’re stopped, keep quiet and don’t panic. I don’t think anybody’s going to dig through this stinking mess; hell, who’d be underneath it?”

“Probably a couple of idiots!” Samantha told him glumly.

Billy, ever one to look on the bright side, cheerfully remarked, “it could be worse, ma’am. Just be glad he’s haulin’ garbage for his hogs instead of bein’ in the sewage pumpin’ business. We’d have to haul you in scuba gear.”

“You big dumb ass!” Tommy told him again.

Once inside, they both managed to squeeze onto the plank seat as the men recovered the top and piled the garbage back on top. They heard the muffled sound of the garage door being opened, then the truck started with a roar and they began to move, bouncing as Sam jockeyed back and forth until he could maneuver the vehicle out into the confines of the alley. In the darkness of the outhouse, Samantha suddenly began to giggle, then to laugh uncontrollably, almost hysterically, somewhat alarming Frank.

“Sammie, are you okay? I didn’t know you were claustrophobic.”

Fighting for control, she finally managed to get out, “I’m not; I was just...*thinking!*”

“About what?”

“Well, it’s just that...” She paused for another paroxysm of laughter. “You’re such a *unique* date, Frank. I never pictured you being the type to take me for a romantic chauffer-driven ride to a hog farm in an old outhouse under a pile of garbage!”

As she resumed squealing and chortling, Frank shook his head in bewilderment. Women could be mighty strange sometimes!

Chapter 12

While Billy went after the pickup, Tommy began packing. Taking the two boxes of clothes, he carefully placed all the items taken from the fugitive pair inside two separate copper pots lined with aluminum foil, their outsides painted with several coats of old lead-based paint that he had found in his father's garage, and taped the lids down on them securely after wrapping their seams in foil as well. If he was right, the copper should be enough to stop any electronic signals from penetrating, especially if they were low powered, such as any bugs inside that might operate intermittently. The foil and paint were just fail-safe extras. Tommy Richardson was a perfectionist who didn't believe in leaving things to chance. By the time he finished, Billy, looking thoroughly uncomfortable crammed into even the full-sized pickup, was honking outside for him to open the door.

As soon as he backed the rusty, multi-colored Ford F150 inside, Tommy pulled the doors closed behind them.

"Let's get this area policed up."

"Yeah, just a minute," Billy grunted, working his massive bulk out of the truck. Meanwhile, Tommy carried the two pots over and carefully set them in the back in such a way that it looked like they had been tossed carelessly in amongst the other junk that filled the bed. Bags of aluminum cans vied for space with greasy car parts, pieces of defunct lawnmowers and other less-identifiable items. The old pots looked like they belonged.

"What'll we do with the bikes?" Tommy queried.

Billy picked up one in each hand and easily lifted them into the back with the other junk.

"Let's take 'em a few blocks an' park 'em in an alley near the public housing; they'll be gone in ten minutes. We can get rid of that loose end and make a couple of theivin' little crumb snatchers happy at the same time."

"Sounds like a plan," the smaller man said, disassembling his rifle while his friend loaded the bikes.

Seeing Tommy detaching the barrel of his AR7, Billy was intrigued. "I haven't seen your new toy there. When'd you get that one?"

"It's the same one I've always had; I just bought a new barrel and silenced it."

"How'd you do it?"

Tommy detached the thick cylinder by turning a knurled ring at the base of the barrel and stuck the assembly in Billy's meaty paw. "I cut off the front sight, put it on the lathe and turned it down full-length, starting about six inches ahead of the chamber, to muzzle thickness. Then I put it in the drill press and drilled little holes all along the turned-down part. I silver-soldered a pair of inch-and-a-half diameter washers on it, one where I started turning it down and another at the muzzle, and then I wrapped the barrel in screen-wire out to the edge of the washers. Finally, I put a piece of inch-and-a-half aluminum conduit over the whole works, and viola! Instant silencer."

"Nice and light," Billy said, handing it back to him. "Does it work good?"

"It makes a noise no louder than a cough and it don't sound anything like a gunshot, so it does pretty well. By lightening the barrel and drilling the holes, I give up a little accuracy, but it's fine for a job like this." Tommy secreted the rifle parts in various places amongst the junk and then looked at Billy.

"So, do you think they're legit?"

The big man thoughtfully scratched at his beard. "I don't know; I think so – well, I hope so, anyway. The girl's mighty pretty, and I like that cop too. At least he's got a lot better sense of humor about a few bruises than some little wussies I know."

Tommy fixed him with a glare and repeated himself once again.

"You big dumb-ass!"

A half-hour later, the bikers, still bickering good-naturedly, turned into an alley in a residential neighborhood, and pulled into a rear driveway behind a smallish single-story brick house. By the time Billy had extricated himself from the confines of the front seat,

Tommy had walked up the wooden wheelchair ramp and pushed a button below a speaker mounted in a white metal grill on the wall.

A tinny-sounding voice responded. "Yes?"

Tommy could feel the eye of the tiny unseen camera that he knew was watching him.

"Hey, Mike! It's Tommy. Open up."

"*Here you go, man!*" There was a loud click as a remotely operated electronic bolt on the door snapped open. "*Come on in, and bring 'King Kong' with you. I'm in the basement.*"

The pair returned to the truck for the pots, then entered onto a landing with stairs going both directions. Billy closed the door behind them and the bolt immediately snapped in place. He shivered slightly, "Damn! It's like jail."

Tommy showed a mouthful of white teeth through his black beard. "I reckon so," he said as they started down the basement steps to their left. "The only difference is that the jail cell doors are to keep people in; this one is to keep 'em out."

There was a louder click that was almost a bang as a series of larger bolts on the door at the bottom of the steps simultaneously popped open, and an electric motor whirred as the featureless steel portal trundled to the right, riding on metal wheels inside channel iron tracks. The door was highly secure; two pieces of quarter-inch sheet metal welded on either side of a framework of square steel tubing. The bikers knew that nothing short of cutting torches or high explosives could budge it when it was closed. They knew because they were the ones who had built it.

On the other side of the door, a wheelchair rolled rapidly forward.

"Man, I'm glad to see you guys!"

The chair's occupant, Mike Dayton, was unique, to say the least. He was short, even considering his atrophied legs, but the massive development that constant workouts had brought to his arms and upper body compounded the effect, making him look almost freakish. He wore thick glasses, and his dark hair was cut to an even three-quarter-inch length all over. He looked like the comic book stereotype of a slightly mad genius, and in fact he was exactly that.

His relationship with the bikers was, if anything, even more unusual. He and Tommy had been neighbors and friends since junior high, mainly because of their single mutual interest – books in general, and science fiction in particular. They had often spent hours in spirited arguments over the merits of how the works of Drake or Gould stacked up against the classics of Asimov and Norton. Their friendship was of mutual benefit; Mike had a unique talent for explaining complicated subjects of a scientific nature in an understandable fashion, helping Tommy through algebra and physics, while Tommy protected his less physical friend from those who wanted to “get the nerd.” A natural athlete despite being barely of average size and a long-time student of the martial arts, Tommy had made more than one bully very sorry that he had chosen to pick on his buddy. After they graduated high school, Mike went to college and Tommy went to Fort Bragg with the Special Forces. Mike wasn’t crippled then.

Tommy had just returned from a three-day field exercise when he received the message from his mother that, with no one there to protect him, a pair of college jocks had finally ‘got the nerd’. For no real reason, other than being drunk and mean and having a handy target, two members of the football team decided to pound Mike Dayton. Pound him they did: when they left him in the dormitory hallway, he had a broken back and permanent paralysis.

The college took no action beyond a cursory investigation; the witnesses claimed that Mike had started the fight with the two much larger men, both of whom were black, and had, according to the official statement, “used the ‘N’ word” in the process. The NAABP threatened and the investigators caved. The community backed the decision; after all, those two were star players and it looked like the team might make the play-offs this year. A single boisterous indiscretion couldn’t be allowed to interfere with football and the money it made. Boys will be boys, after all.

As soon as he could get leave, Tommy made a brief stop at the college town before going home to visit his buddy. When he walked into Mike’s hospital room two days later, he dropped a newspaper on his bed. Mike stared at the headlines; it seemed that his old alma

mater wouldn't be making the play-offs after all. Two of their star players had been found shot to death in one of their cars in the parking lot of a local bar. A quantity of crack cocaine was found at the scene where a bag had broken open inside the vehicle, along with some twenties scattered around. Obviously it was a drug deal gone bad: such a tragedy for those fine young men with their whole careers before them. The college was in mourning and thousands were expected to attend the funeral.

Mike could only grab Tommy's hand, a look of gratitude in his eyes. The summary justice that had been dealt was necessary, but also melancholy. It settled the score in spades, but it still couldn't give Mike back his lower half.

The two remained close after Tommy's discharge, and when he took to riding with Billy, Mike and the giant took to one another as well, surprising all of them. Billy, a big country boy from up near Cheraw, wasn't always the sharpest tool in the shed, but he had an abundance of common sense and practicality; besides, his inherent good humor was infectious. The pair badgered Mike into building himself up physically to prevent the health problems of a sedentary existence, and did whatever work he couldn't manage from his chair. Mike in turn had delved ever deeper into his scientific interests, becoming a computer expert and an excellent hacker in the process, and he handled anything that they needed of a chemical, electronic or cyber nature. They helped him construct the lab and security system in the house he had inherited from his parents. Advanced computers and related hardware lined the walls, along with various other devices, software, and assorted parts – much of it 'liberated' from government sources or from stores that supported anti-Southern causes by the bikers during midnight requisitions. An elevator gave him access to his subterranean den. Naturally gravitating toward the Southern Independence Movement along with his friends, his skills soon made him extremely valuable. Sam Wirtz, the only man other than Tommy and Billy to know of Mike's existence, quickly recognized his potential, and gave him plenty to do, while carefully keeping the knowledge of him away from certain other activists he didn't fully trust...which included all of them.

Glad to be useful, Mike invented and made repairs, hacked and cracked his cause's enemies for fun and profit, and supported the effort with the occasional discreet cyber-raid on some enemy's accounts. With the help of a state-of-the-art commercial laser printer (courtesy of another quiet after-hours visit by Tommy and Billy to a business owned by a big NABP contributor), he even ran a small-scale counterfeiting operation, making one's from scratch and bleaching five's and printing ten's, twenty's, and occasionally fifty's on the paper while preserving the insert, which, while it still had 'five' written on it, virtually no one paid attention to other than to see that it was there. Mike had determinedly experimented with the ink for two years until the bills were nearly impossible to detect.

He grabbed Tommy's hand and pumped it furiously.

"Damn, I'm glad to see you!" He turned to Billy and repeated the procedure. "And you too, you big lummo!"

"What's gotten into you?" Billy asked, puzzled. "We were just here three or four days ago. Did you miss me that much?"

"Hah! You wish, 'Bigfoot'! I was worried about you two. I saw you in the riot footage – a class act, by the way; you two should take up professional wrestling – and I couldn't get any more information about you. I was afraid you might have been among the ones who didn't make it." He paused, then went into his imitation of a 'Jewish mother' that used to send Tommy into paroxysms back in school, largely because the nasal quality he put into it sounded more like the singer Bob Dylan than anything remotely feminine. "You nevah call, you nevah write; vat kind of a son are you, anyvay?"

"We're the bad kind," Tommy said with a grin, full of bravado. "Too bad to be killed by the likes of niggers, whiggers and piggers!"

"So, Dexter," Billy boomed, hefting the sealed pot as he changed the subject. "How's the laboratory workin' today?"

"Very funny; who thought it up for you? Come on, let's see what kind of junk you brought me this time."

Chapter 13

As they rolled on and the heat and the all-pervasive stench inside their cramped space began to increase, and it soon became obvious to the fugitives that, with both of them crowded together on the outhouse seat, they were blocking what little airflow there might be. Frank turned sideways and scrunched down into the floor, grimacing as he felt the garbage-juice that had run in under and around the door soaking through his coveralls. Samantha arranged herself in a similar position on the seat, facing the opposite way with her knees bent to expose the hole beneath them. A tiny amount of light crept in along with the air, turning the pitch-black into a dark gray gloom where they could at least make out each other's forms in the darkness.

“Frank?”

“Yeah?”

“I've got something that you may be able to use. Here.”

He reached for her extended hand, and she placed two objects into his. One was a rusty three-eighths-inch bolt, six inches long, and the other was a battered, hawkbill-bladed linoleum knife with a taped wooden handle.

Frank gaped at her in surprise. “Where did you get these?”

“When Tommy left me to get dressed, I saw an old box of rags and stuff under a workbench over there and I got curious. Until we know what's going to happen, I figured having a knife might come in handy, and that old bolt is about the size of the stick on your key chain. Did I do right?”

“Honey, you did more than right – you did great!” He grabbed her hand and chuckled.

“What's so funny?”

“I was just thinking of something I heard once. It was supposed to be an old Chinese curse – ‘May you live in interesting times’. I don't reckon that it gets much more interesting than these past two days have been.”

“I would hope not!” she said with great sincerity.

Of course, they were wrong.

“Hello?” Sam spoke into a cheap-looking hands-free unit as he rolled up I-77. In actuality, it was a black market top of the line government model with a completely non-stock scrambling device added, and the whole works placed in a stripped-out dime store case, bracket and charger, complements of whiz-kid Mike Dayton.

“Mary? This is Sam. I just wanted you to know that we’ve got them.”

“*Were there any problems?*”

“Not a one – everything went like clockwork.”

“*That’s great. I couldn’t help but worry.*” The relief was evident in her voice.

“Look, I need to ask you something – all he had with him was the .45 and the pocket knife, right?”

“*Yes, and one of those key chain thingamabobs.*”

“A yawara stick – we got that. Did either of them leave the house at any time last night?”

“*No, they were both here all night.*”

“Did they make any calls?”

“*Frank did. He called one of his grandmother’s neighbors and asked if she would take a message to her.*”

“Were you in the room?”

“*No, I listened on the extension.*”

Sam grunted his approval.

“Good work. Did she do it?”

“*I guess so – at least she said that she’d head right over there.*”

“What time was this?”

“*I don’t know. It wasn’t very late, probably a couple of hours before I called you. Why? Has something happened?*”

“Did you listen to the news this morning?”

“*No.*”

“It just came over the radio a few minutes ago. His grandmother’s dead, Mary. The BATF raided the place last night looking for him, and they claim that they found her dead – shot – when they got there. They say that he’s the one who did it and that he carried off a big stash of guns, bombs, and cocaine when he left.”

“He didn't have any more than the clothes on his back when I picked them up. But...wait a minute, wouldn't her neighbor have found her, or at least noticed something?”

“That's what I'm wondering. There's something fishy here.”

“I would say so!”

“You didn't happen to catch this neighbor's name, did you?”

“Frank called her ‘Aunt Jenny’ – she was an older colored lady, from the sound of it: a long-time friend of the family...damn it, hang on for just a minute. There's someone at the front door.”

“You want me to go ahead and get off?”

“No, just hang on. It's probably another blasted salesman or a panhandler. I'll get rid of them and be right back.”

In the background, Sam could hear Mary's footsteps heading across the room and the sound of a door opening, followed by a muffled cry. The sound of louder steps moved back toward the phone, followed by a click and a dial tone.

Sam immediately punched ‘redial’, only to hear a recorded voice telling him that the line was out of service.

“Shit!” He frantically began punching in a second number.

Encrypted Internet Voice Chat

9:06 AM

“Spider, what the hell is going on up there?”

“I saw an opportunity and I took it – that's all there is to it. I got hold of who I could and that turned out to be Greyrider, so it wasn't much. However, it is ample evidence that I played it according to the rules and made a good faith effort to contact the entire Council. It's not my fault you were unavailable.”

“Damn it, you know why we weren't available! As soon as that riot happened, we went straight to code orange and got our act together while you were out there playing spy. You'd be advised to do the same next time.”

Spider61 knew very well about condition orange: get it together to move out quick, have cash on hand, the car gassed up, a safe house notified, and all your ducks in a row. His reply was icy.

“I went orange before the first demonstration happened, Pinetree. Just in case it hit the fan, *which it obviously did*, I knew that someone had better be ready to deal with whatever came up while everyone else was busy covering their own butts. From what we got out of it, it looks like a good thing I did. Why don’t you ask Greyrider why he wasn’t playing C.Y.A.? You think maybe he didn’t *need* to?”

“Let’s not start that again,” Pinetree’s exasperation could be picked up easily even over the poor connection. “You know you don’t have any proof.”

“I have proof enough to suit me. He’s a proven liar and thief, and a scalawag Fed to boot! You *know* he’s been working for the government since before he joined the movement. I hired an investigator who proved it to my satisfaction, along with yours if you’d open your eyes. Trouble follows that bastard like stink follows shit! He’s been a millstone around our necks since day one.”

Pinetree was startled; Spider61 almost never used profanity.

“Look, between you and me, I agree, okay? The thing is, that ‘millstone’ has a strong following...”

“A *minority* composed of a bunch of whiners, compromisers, and anti-secessionist malcontents who are too cowardly to get out from behind an internet keyboard – that doesn’t sound very strong to me.” Spider61 was on a roll.

“They’re strong in this sense; they could split the movement, and we can’t afford that right now. We just can’t! The reality is that if they leave, they’ll screw us. You know it and I know it. They’ll rat us out to the Feds in a heartbeat, they know enough to destroy us, and what they don’t know, they’ll make up. Then they’ll take this movement over simply because there’ll be no one *left* to stand in their way, and God only knows what they’ll do with it then. We’re stuck with them, Spider. That’s just the way it is.”

Spider’s voice grew very quiet. “There *is* another option.”

“What are you talking about? What kind of option?”

“The final kind.”

“*No!* I can’t believe you! What is wrong with you?”

“All that’s wrong with me is that I’m a patriot, and I love my country enough to die for it – or to kill for it, if need be.”

“Damn it, can’t you get it through your head that this is *not* a war?”

“Then what do you call it? Tell me that, just what the flaming hell do you call it? You go call up Bob Franklin’s widow, or Lisa Poole’s husband, or maybe that little girl’s parents, the one who died holding our flag – you know, the one *we* should have been there holding? God Almighty knows how many were hurt or killed when that goofball MacFie and his bunch blocked the Columbia PD this evening. You go call them up and tell them it’s not a war, and see what they tell you! I *hate* MacFie with a passion and I’ll admit it, but he’s still one of ours and at least he *did* something for a change. They’re killing our people with impunity out there and I’ll be damned if I sit on my butt and let that happen!”

“And just what *are* you going to do about it? What *can* you do about it?”

“I can and will do *whatever* I have to. For a start, I just saved two potentially very useful people’s lives, and screwed the powers that be in the process. That’s not bad for a day’s work, and it’s more concrete than anything anyone else has done here lately. The fact that I could also piss-off Greyrider in the process was just icing on the cake.”

“You’ve not only jeopardized the integrity of this council by starting another fight with that bastard, but you’ve also put all of us at extreme risk by taking those two in! Can’t you see that?”

“In what way? *I’m* the one who set up the operation, using *my* people and *my* resources. I did it. Y’all knew nothing about it beforehand and you don’t know anything about it now, except what I choose to tell you. Anything that goes wrong is on *my* head, and my people’s heads. There’s no way it can be connected to the council. If it worries you that much, if I’m caught, then disavow me and condemn my actions. I won’t take it personal.”

“And what are you going to do with them if it turns out to be a federal sting? Answer me that?”

“What do you think? They’re already listed as missing; if they’re plants, that status will simply become permanent.”

Pinetree sighed heavily, “Did anybody ever tell you that you’re one cold-blooded son of a bitch? You fight too hard.”

“There is no such thing as fighting too hard. I fight to win – if I didn’t, I wouldn’t be fighting at all.”

“Greyrider has called for an emergency council meeting tonight at seven: the usual encrypted voice chat. I strongly suggest that you be there – your ass is the main course.”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

Chapter 14

“All right, folks, the limo ride’s over. You all can come out now.”

Frank and Samantha squinted at the light pouring in on them as the plywood was pulled away, and gasped at the fresh air rushing in to the cut-down outhouse. Their coveralls were completely saturated with sweat and stinking seepage from the garbage, and their hair was plastered to their heads. Gratefully, Samantha accepted Sam’s hand up as Frank boosted her from beneath before following suit.

Reveling in the fresh air after their two-hour confinement, Samantha’s expression suddenly changed as she took a deep breath.

“Yuck!” she exclaimed, surprised that her nostrils hadn’t been cauterized by the trip in the slop truck. “What’s that smell?”

“That’s pigs. You’ll get used to it after a while.” Sam assured her unconvincingly.

The truck had parked inside a big barn. They could hear dozens of the animals grunting and squealing, and the roar of the huge fans at either end of the building that did little to dissipate the overpowering odor.

As she took in the big white interior that surrounded them, Frank looked down at the men who were standing by the truck. There were four of them, all white, and all carrying big autos or revolvers on their belts or, in one case, in a shoulder holster, worn over a gray T-shirt. One of them also had a sawn-off 12 gauge auto with the stock removed and the receiver mounted on a steel bracket below the barrel of the M16A2 cradled in his arms. The biggest white pit bull Frank had ever seen sat there at their feet, looking up expectantly. He couldn’t decide who looked more dangerous – the dog or its owners.

“Good looking bulldog,” Frank commented.

One of the men – tall and lanky with short, dark hair and carrying the long hybrid weapon – reached down and patted the animal’s pumpkin-sized head. Its tail hammered against the ground audibly, raising a small cloud of dust.

“This is ol’ Thumper. He’s a good dog, ain’t you boy?” As the man continued his petting, the dog’s mouth split in an immense toothy grin, complete with lolling tongue, and his tail worked that much faster.

“He’s not likely to take my leg off when I come down, is he?”

“Nah! As long as you don’t hit somebody he likes or we don’t tell him to, he’s just like an over-grown pup.”

“That’s good to hear,” Frank grunted as he clambered down off the truck and reached up to help Samantha. “He must go close to a hundred pounds.”

“A hundred and nine. He’s our hog-catcher and all around watch dog.”

Frank extended his hand, palm-up. “Come here, Thumper! Come here, boy!”

The huge canine frightened Samantha as it rose and approached the proffered hand, sniffing it gravely. She had heard all the stories about pit bulls and, having no direct experience of her own in that regard, had of course believed them.

Either Thumper approved or else he simply liked the smell of the liquid garbage that coated Frank’s hand; soon the cop was squatting and scratching him behind the ears, and within a few seconds the dog had turned over for him to rub its belly. Frank complied, which threw Thumper into a state of ecstasy and he squirmed and whined in delight, making a peculiar sound reminiscent of a chimpanzee.

The owner of the combination gun scratched his head. “He doesn’t make up with most people like that.”

“I’ve always liked dogs. I had one like him when I was a kid, only not nearly this big.”

The man glanced at Sam and shifted the gun to his left hand before sticking out his right first to Samantha and then to Frank.

“Nice to meet you – I’m Jim Reynolds.”

One by one, the rest of the armed men stepped up, still wary and on guard, to introduce themselves. The one with the shoulder holster containing a customized Colt .38 Super was of medium height, had carrot-red hair, and a pug nose dotted with freckles. His enlarged muscles spoke of a lot of time spent with the weights. He introduced

himself as Mark Topping, “That was a good shot you made there at the capitol,” he told Frank.

“Ben Harrington,” the next man said. He was Frank’s height but lacked a lot of the muscle mass of the ex-cop, having more of a lean and hungry look, aggravated by his mop of shaggy blonde hair. Looking at his scarred face that could have been either twenty-five or forty-five, and particularly the squashed, out-of-kilter nose, he quickly saw Harrington had obviously taken a battering or two in his life from something. It didn’t seem to affect his jovial mood, however, and he smiled, treating them to the sight of several missing teeth. As the remaining ones were nice and white, Frank was reasonably certain they had been lost less to poor hygiene than to poor judgment.

Frank reflected that he had good judgment in guns, though; a vintage .44 Magnum Smith and Wesson Model 29 with a six inch barrel was dangling low in a worn holster with a leg tie-down and a swivel at its belt loop to allow him to sit down without poking the muzzle into the furniture.

The last man was in his forties, complete with a bald head and a potbelly, quiet and soft-spoken. His armament looked as worn and conservative as he did – a military-issue Berretta 9mm in a stock holster. “Jeff Smith – glad to meet you.”

“Well, now that we all know each other,” Sam broke in, “would you fellows mind taking these folks over to the hose so they can wash some of that trash off of them before we go inside so they can get a proper bath?” he grinned. “Nothing personal, but you all do have a certain ‘air’ about you!”

As Frank and Samantha took turns hosing the accumulated filth from one another, the electronic tones of ‘*Dixie*’ suddenly began coming from the holster on Sam’s belt. Other than a disinterested glance from Ben who was standing closest to him, the others paid no attention. Still, Sam walked well away from the group before answering his cell phone.

“Hello?”

“*Sam?*”

“Billy? What’s happening?”

“It’s bad news, man. We grabbed some hardware and went over there, but we had to just drive on by. The place is crawling with cops, and they got barrier tape and TV cameras everywhere. I sent my nephew over and he couldn’t find out for sure, but he hears that Mary is dead – murdered – and that them two did it!”

In a few brief seconds, Sam ran through a series of emotions, from shock to grief to anger. “Damn it! Now wait just a minute here, that can’t be right. I talked to her on the phone *after* we picked ’em up.”

“You sure?”

“Of course I’m sure! I don’t have the Alzheimer’s yet; they were in the truck when I made the call!”

“Well, hell! Then who killed her?”

“That’s just what I intend to find out.” Sam disconnected and, cursing under his breath, quickly began dialing again.

Chapter 15

“Ma’am, are you Jenny May Summers?”

The old colored woman Frank had referred to as ‘Aunt Jenny’ regarded the visitors at her door through eyes that were red and swollen with crying. The speaker – the same powerfully built black man who had carried the flag away from the riot – was accompanied by an average-sized but very tough-looking white man with a dark blonde crew cut. Both were wearing white shirts with ties, but somehow they didn’t look like the Mormons who occasionally came around.

“Yes, sir, I am. Are you more police?”

The two exchanged a knowing look. “You’ve already been interviewed, then?” the white man asked.

“Yes, and you still ain’t answered my question.”

“Sorry, Mrs. Summers. No, we’re not the police – we’re friends of Frank’s.”

She wanted to believe it, but still wary “Do you know where that boy is?”

“Yes, ma’am, but all I can tell you is that he’s safe.”

“Well, thank God for that!” she cried in a voice filled with relief. “Would you two like to come in? I got a fresh pitcher of iced tea in the ’frigerator.”

“We’d appreciate it, Mrs. Summers,” the black man said. “If you’re sure it’s no trouble.”

“It ain’t no trouble at all. Any friend of Frank’s is welcome in this house.” As she opened the door wider, she continued, “From the looks of things, he needs all the friends he can get!”

Jenny led them in, and noticed that they seemed unusually alert, particularly the white man. When he removed his sunglasses, his eyes rapidly took in the interior of the house and she felt that he was somehow filing away the information as he gathered it. As she poured them tea, they both perched tensely on the edge of the couch. Jenny poured a glass for herself and settled back into her old recliner, making it creak under her weight.

“Ma’am, did you talk to Frank Friday night?”

Jenny eyed them suspiciously. “If you’re his friends, I reckon he’d have told you, if he wanted you to know.”

The black man sighed. “Ma’am, when I said friends, maybe I stretched things a little. However, we’re all that stands between Frank and the police right now. We’ve got him in a safe place, but we need to make sure just *what* we’ve got.”

“First, what do you mean by ‘we got him’ and second, just who is ‘we’?”

“Frank needed some place to hide and a friend sent him to us. We gave him that place. As to who we are, it would probably be best if you didn’t know that.”

“Well,” Jenny said, her curiosity aroused. “If you was gov’ment men, you wouldn’t be hidin’ ’im from the police. What are you, one of them militias or something like that?”

The white man spoke up for the first time. “Yes ma’am, something like that.”

“Okay then, what do you want from me?”

“Did Frank call you Friday night, Mrs. Summers?” The black man asked again.

“Yes, he called and asked me to check on his granny.”

“Did you?”

“Yes, sir I did! What do you take me for?”

“No offence intended, ma’am; I just needed to ask. About what time was that?”

“Lessee, he called around seven or eight, and I was over there with her until after ten.”

“Was she alright when you left?”

“Other than bein’ all tore up over her grandson, she was fine.”

Both men looked relieved. “We can account for his whereabouts during the rest of the evening, so now at least we know he didn’t kill her.”

Jenny let out a great wailing and began sobbing like her heart would break, much to the men’s surprise. The white man reacted by becoming even more alert, his head swiveling about like a rooster’s.

“That boy loved that woman! She was the only family he ever had since his parents died! How could they think he’d kill her? Listen, won’t this help clear his name, you having an alibi for ’im an’ all?”

The black man looked at the floor. “Ma’am,” he said, “they already know he didn’t kill her – they’re the ones who did it. Then they killed a woman who gave him a place to stay, over in Columbia this morning. We suspected as much, but we didn’t know for sure until we talked to you.”

She shook her head numbly. “Oh, dear Lord! I wish I’d never lived to see such a thing.”

“There’s more, Mrs. Summers. You could be in danger too.”

“Why would they wanna hurt me?”

“Because you’re a ‘loose-end’ – you know that Frank didn’t kill his grandma, and since they’ve already talked to you, they know that you know it.”

“I don’t believe...”

“Car!” The white man cut her off. “He’s slowing down to turn in!”

“Are you expecting somebody, ma’am?” the black man asked urgently.

“No, nobody’d be comin’ here now.”

A motor turned off in front of the house and the white man glanced out the window and said two words. “It’s them.

He turned to Jenny Summers.

“Okay, ma’am, you’d better go to the back of the house. We’ll take these fellows here when they start in the door!”

“No!”

“What do you mean, ‘no’?”

“I mean *no*! You don’t know fo’ sure they’re tryin’ to kill me! I’m a good Christian woman an’ I ain’t a’gonna’ have you a’shootin’ people in my livin’ room!”

“Ma’am...”

“No! Now y’all go on back there an’ hide in the back part of the house. Now git!”

The black man hesitated, uncertain as to what to do, but as the car door slammed outside, his partner grabbed his arm, hissing, “Come on!” and despite the size difference, dragged him back toward the kitchen, whispering furiously.

At the very business-like knock, Jenny rose and shuffled to the door. Opening it a crack, she was confronted by another mixed pair of men, one black and one white, their eyes hidden behind sunglasses. They raised their identification for her inspection.

“FBI. Are you Jenny May Summers?”

“Yes, but...”

“May we come in, Mrs. Summers?” Without waiting for an answer, they walked forward, pushing on the door and forcing it open, giving Jenny no choice except to back up. The white one closed the door behind him.

“Is there anyone else in the house?” the black agent inquired.

“No, there’s just me. What are you doin’ with that gun?”

The second man had produced a 9mm Glock from a waist holster and began casually threading a long silencer onto the barrel. The black man stepped aside to give him a clear line of fire and drew his own gun, a twin of the other.

Jenny couldn’t believe it. They were going to shoot her and she was going to die. Falling back on her refuge that had never failed her, she cried out, “Dear Lord, help me!”

In answer to her prayer, the kitchen door banged closed and footsteps pounded across the back porch as someone ran from the house.

“Shit!” the Negro yelled, then took off for the back of the house. “Watch her!”

“I got her,” the other calmly replied, dropping into a Weaver stance and raising the pistol. Jenny watched the muzzle in horrified fascination; for some reason, its cold, hollow bore reminded her of a close-up of a shark’s eye she had seen on TV once – empty and merciless.

In the kitchen the roar of gunfire drowned out the sound of the man running.

In accordance with their hastily formed plan, Rob sprinted out the kitchen door, allowing it to loudly bang shut behind him. He made no attempt to conceal the sound as he darted across the back porch as though he intended to flee straight across the back yard. Once on the ground, however, he cut to the left and quickly and quietly ran back around the house towards the front, moving in a low crouch to avoid being seen through the windows.

Brian had squeezed himself under the kitchen table with his pistol at the ready, or as ready as he could be, since he was shaking like a leaf and scared half out of his wits. He was a high school history teacher and, unlike his partner, was unused to combat. He was also fighting his own personal demons following his killing of a fellow black man, in the form of Officer Martin L. Jackson, during the Columbia capitol riot just days ago. The guilt over something akin to fratricide, accidental or not, was eating him alive.

“I didn’t learn this in school,” he muttered to himself, just as the man from the living room tore through so quickly that he was nearly to the back door before Brian could react. He snapped off a hasty shot that struck the man in the right buttock and shattered his hip joint, sending him crashing face down at the threshold, his feet toward Brian. With the instinct of hard training, the agent whipped the Glock back one-handed and triggered off a rapid series of shots blindly in the direction of his attacker. The rounds sprayed the kitchen, slamming into the oven door with a loud *clang!*, chipping a table leg, and one passing so close to Brian’s head that it clipped a kinky lock of his hair. In a panic, his mouth opened in a scream of fear.

Brian emptied his own Glock towards the only parts of his opponent he could see from this angle: the crotch, legs, and butt. Half the shots missed, chewing up the linoleum floor, the wall, and the door-frame, but the rest of the copper-jacketed bullets hammered into the man, one cutting the femoral artery in his left thigh and the others tearing through his body cavity from bottom to top, making hash out of his intestines and liver as they passed. The man’s nerves quivered for a moment before shutting down for good.

Reacting instantly to the sound of his partner's ambush, the surviving agent in the living room grabbed Jenny by the arm and roughly spun her around, clamping his left arm around her neck. He pulled her close and pressed the muzzle against her right temple.

"All right!" he shouted. "I've got the old woman right here! Any bastard so much as sticks his nose out of that kitchen, and I'll blow this nigger's brains all over the room!" She pulled ineffectually at the arm across her throat, wheezing as she fought for breath. He began backing toward the front door, dragging her along. "I'm leaving and she's going with me. Anybody tries anything and she dies first! You got me?" Reaching the door, he lowered the pistol long enough to reach down and twist the knob with the last two fingers of his gun hand, and pull the door open.

Jenny May Summers' world exploded. There was a loud report by her head and she felt the blood droplets spray against her face so hard they stung like sleet. So this was what it was like to die. *Well, here I am, Jesus.* Strangely, she didn't fall, didn't feel any pain – in fact, she felt nothing until Rob laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Ma'am, are you all right?"

"I...I been shot..."

"No, ma'am. That's his blood. I got him when he opened the door."

Numbly, she looked down at the agent's body on the floor. He had crumpled in a heap, facedown. She could see the neat round hole in the base of his skull with a perfect circle of singed hair ringing it where the pistol had been almost against his head when it discharged. A growing puddle of blood was spreading around the spot where the destroyed remains of his face rested on the floor and had nearly reached the edge of her shoe. She stepped back quickly.

"Brian!" he called out. "Brian! Are you okay?"

When he didn't get an answer, he released the woman's arm and raised his pistol.

"Wait here."

Making his way around her, he eased to the kitchen entrance and paused, listening intently. Carefully, he lowered himself belly-down to the floor, took a deep breath, and suddenly extended his pistol and

one eye around the corner, pointing into the room. From his vantage point, he could see Brian still crouched beneath the table surrounded by spent casings, the muzzle of the Glock resting on the floor, and across the room the legs of the agent lying motionless in a pool of blood. He rose up and cautiously entered the room, his nose curling involuntarily at the familiar stench of blood, burned powder and the contents of torn intestines. It took no more than a glance to see that Brian's opponent wouldn't be getting up again. Just to be safe, Rob kicked the gun away from his hand and checked his pulse. He didn't believe in leaving things to chance. Then he looked at Brian, still unmoving, his jaw hanging slack, and his eyes riveted to the dead man.

"You okay, Brian? Are you hit?" When he got no response, Rob knelt down at the edge of the table and carefully extended his left hand underneath, laying it on the slide of Brian's pistol. Gently, he took it out of his unresisting hands and laid it on the tabletop. Reaching back under, he shook Brian's shoulder. "Come on, damn it, snap out of it – we've still got work to do." He shook harder. "*Come on!*"

Brian's head snapped around, wide eyes on Rob for two seconds, then he abruptly lunged to his feet, overturning the table and sending both the chairs and his partner crashing to the floor. An instant later, he was at the sink, throwing up everything in his stomach.

Jenny came rushing in at the noise and clamped her hand over her mouth in shock at the sight and the smell. With a woman's intuition, she assessed the situation quickly and turned to Rob.

"Let's git a bed sheet and throw over that fellow, so's he don't have to look at him. I 'spect it'll be a little easier on him that way."

"I expect you're right, ma'am."

Jenny hurried out and came back in less than a minute with an old light blue sheet. Brian was still heaving when they covered the body, after Rob gave it a quick search, taking the holster and the wallet from it and picking up the pistol from the floor.

"You'd better go wash your that blood off your face and grab a few things quick, ma'am. You're going to have to come with us, I guess. You can see that you can't stay here."

As she hurried out, Brian groped for the faucet and turned it on, washing out the sink and splashing water over his face. Finally, he turned and pulled down the dishtowel hanging on the wall and wiped his dripping face, which was an ashen color. “Sorry,” he murmured.

“For what? That’s a normal reaction, especially for a hard kill like that. Hell, you’re a civilian – a teacher! You’re not trained for this stuff.” He shook his head in resignation. “I just wish it still bothered me, but it doesn’t. I’ve killed so many people in so many places for the damned government that it’s just a job anymore, like driving a nail. That’s not normal. Sometimes I’m afraid of what I’ve become.”

Brian stared at him as he hung the towel back up. Rob never used two words when one would do, and Brian found his sudden eloquence disturbing.

“I knew you were in a special operations unit at one time, but I didn’t know it was that bad. Was that what caused you to quit?”

“Yeah.” Back to the monosyllables again.

“Well,” said Brian, sensing that it was useless to try to draw him out any farther, “if it bothers you that you don’t feel anything, at least that’s something.”

“Maybe.”

Chapter 16

Samantha sank down further into the tub of hot water. She never thought that a bath could feel so good. The tub was an heirloom, an old, claw-footed cast iron number that was long enough to stretch out in and nearly deep enough to drown your self. *If I ever get out of this, I'm going to have one of these in our house.* She paused at the thought. *Uh-oh...not mine, but 'our'?* She closed her eyes and smiled. As ridiculous as it was at a time like this, somehow the thought didn't bother her.

Sam's housekeeper, a short, matronly and utterly silent woman introduced only as Mrs. Hill had shown her the way and brought her some fresh coveralls. As soon as Samantha undressed, the older woman wrinkled her nose and hurriedly sealed the soaked garment that still stank of sweat and garbage despite its hosing-down into a trash bag and took it away, all in total silence. Samantha was finally left to her own devices, which she was very thankful for. As much as she felt for Frank, after being crowded in the outhouse with him and especially after standing naked in a garage while a stranger ran a probe over every square inch of her body, she was really beginning to appreciate the value of privacy.

She wondered how Frank was doing.

"Would you like a good cold beer?" Sam offered.

They sat in rocking chairs in the shade of the wrap-around porch. Two of the armed men had sauntered away toward the back of the house, and the other pair – Reynolds and Harrington – sat on the hood of a white Chevy pickup on jack stands in the shade of a big oak tree in the front yard. They were about 50 feet away, talking quietly and trying very hard to look casual.

Frank grinned at him, hair still dripping from the shower he had taken in the plain, utilitarian facilities that Sam had built in the barn to keep as much of the farm dirt out of the sprawling two-story house as possible.

“After the last few days, I reckon I could use one. Thank you kindly.” He took the proffered long-necked bottle, feeling the cool condensation under his hand, and took a long, appreciative pull. Looking at the bottle, he noticed that there was no label. “This is mighty good. What brand is it?”

“That is Sam’s Special.”

“Sam Adams?” Frank asked, thinking of one of the few domestic beers he had ever considered to be worth drinking.

“Hell no!” his rescuer/captor exclaimed, offended. “Sam Wirtz! I make it myself; I don’t need any damned Yankee beer!”

“Sorry. This is really good, and I reckon you’re right. With this around, I guess maybe you *don’t* need any Yankee beer!”

“Thanks,” said Sam, somewhat mollified by the compliment, “I appreciate it.”

“You seem to know what you’re doing. I’ve drank homebrew before, and it’s never been anything like this. You must make it from scratch.”

“Yep. I grow everything right here – hops, grain and all. I even grow my own yeast cultures,” he added proudly.

Frank took another drink, swirling it around in his mouth before swallowing. “You can sure tell it. This tastes better than any I’ve ever had, even imported, I can tell you that. You can’t beat hand crafting on anything, I reckon.”

Sam studied him. “You’re a strange bird, Officer Gore, no offence intended.”

“Call me Frank, Mr. Wirtz; I’m not a cop anymore. Anyway, I’ve heard that before, but what makes you say so?”

“Sam – Mr. Wirtz was my daddy. Well, for one thing, your reaction to this whole mess.” He paused to take a drink. “Most people would have been bouncing questions off me left and right, wanting to know why I took you in, what I’m going to do with you, that kind of thing, but I haven’t heard a peep like that out of you. I’m wondering just why that is.”

“Granny always told me never to look a gift horse in the mouth, just take it and say ‘thanks’. I do owe you. You helped us out when no one else could, and went to a lot of trouble doing it. I might like

to think that you're a good Samaritan who did it out of the kindness of your heart, or just to help out Mary since she's an old friend of yours, but I've been a cop too long to believe in fairy tales. Most folks wouldn't go through that much bother and risk unless someone could be of use to them. Whatever that use is, I didn't figure that you'd tell me until you were good and ready, so there wasn't any point in asking." Frank gestured at him with his bottle. "As to what are you going to do with us, I reckon that if you were going to kill us or turn us in, you wouldn't have had to haul us to a hog farm under a couple of tons of garbage to do it."

Sam looked out across the yard, watching Thumper as the dog worried a makeshift chew toy in the form of an old motorcycle tire. "I don't want that to happen, and that's a fact. I like you two. I'll do what I have to, but I do like you. You've both got a certain style about you. If you're an honest victim of this thing, you ain't got anything to worry about; not from us, anyway."

Frank studied him carefully. "There's something you're dying to tell me, isn't there?"

"No," Sam said, turning back towards him. "There's something I hate like hell to tell you, but I reckon I'm going to have to." He heaved a sigh. "Damn it!"

"I always figured that the cleanest way to give bad news was just to go ahead and get it over with." Frank's voice was carefully neutral. Still holding his beer in his left hand, he scratched at his leg, then nonchalantly eased his right hand into his pocket, closing it around the greasy handle of the linoleum knife he had secreted there. He thought he knew what was coming; we hate to kill you, but...we hate to turn you in, but...At the first 'but', Frank thought that there was a chance, not a good chance but *a* chance just the same, that he could wing the bottle across the five feet of space between them and into the side of Sam's head, then close the distance and get the blade against his throat as a hostage before the others could grab their weapons and bring them to bear. What would happen after that, he would just have to see. He began consciously relaxing into combat mode, in preparation for making his move.

Sam's next words completely derailed that particular train of thought.

"Your grandmother's named Sarah Gore." It wasn't really a question.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, Frank. She's dead."

Frank suddenly felt a cold rush of unreality, like he was standing outside himself looking in. "How?" he heard himself ask, distantly amazed at the calmness in his own voice.

Sam looked away again. "The damned BATF raided her house in the middle of last night. They kicked in the door and she took one of 'em down before the others shot her. They're blaming you for it: saying you killed her and left behind a trap to kill anyone finding her. Sons of bitches!"

From somewhere far away, Frank heard the sound of breaking glass and saw Sam leap to his feet faster than he would have thought him capable. At this, the two men jumped from the truck hood and turned toward the house, clawing for their guns, but Sam quickly waved them back. Frank felt something on his left leg, and looked down. Foaming beer streaked with blood was running down the chair arm from the bottle that had shattered in his grip.

"I cut my hand," he said, matter-of-factly. Slowly, he rose to his feet. "If you don't mind, I'd like to go back to the barn shower to clean this up. I'm sorry about the mess."

"To hell with the mess! Are you alright?"

"Yeah. I'd like to be alone for a few minutes though, if you don't mind."

"That ain't no problem, but you need to hear the rest of it first."

Frank just stared at him. *There's more?*

Sam nodded as if he had heard his thoughts.

"Yeah. Mary's dead too. They killed her right after we picked you up. That worthless Yankee bitch that lives next door was spying on her, and called the cops when she saw you two leave – rest assured I'll deal with her later. They sent somebody over, we don't know who yet, and they murdered her. From what we hear, they

tortured her first.” He kicked at a speck of peeling paint on the porch boards. “Y’all are getting the blame for that one, too.”

The breath went completely out of Frank and he had to grab a post for support. “They were looking for me, and I led them to everybody I cared about...”

“*No!*” Sam said sharply. “Don’t you even start that shit, because that’s all it is: *shit!*” The farmer jabbed his finger at the younger man. “You didn’t kill them – *they* killed them, not you! Just like they killed that little kid and his mama up in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, and just like they burned up better than eighty people down in Waco. *They* did it! The same damn, sons-a-bitching *they* that’s turned this country into a cesspool!

“Don’t start blaming yourself and don’t go off on a guilt trip. You need to live, to see that things are put right and justice is done. Like in the Bible, blood cries out from the ground; Mary’s blood and your grandma’s blood, the blood of all those poor people at the riots and the blood of every other innocent person they’ve killed to consolidate their damned power, from 1861 on, they’re *all* crying out for justice! They’re all crying out, every last one of them; and as God Almighty is my witness, some of us are finally listening.”

“I’m listening too,” Frank told him, his own unheeded blood dripping slowly onto the porch. “You’d better believe *I’m listening!*” The last two words came out a hiss. “I just need a few minutes, okay? You know, for my hand...”

“Sure, partner, I know...for your hand. First aide kit’s in the blue box on the wall right by the shower. You go on over and take care of it, and come on out when you’re ready. Take as long as you need; ain’t nobody going’ to bother you.” After a moment, he asked, “you want me to tell the girl? Mary and her were pretty close.”

Frank shook his head. “No. She’s my responsibility. I’ll take care of it.” With that, he turned and headed toward the barn. The two men started to follow him from a distance, but Sam motioned them toward the porch.

“Leave him be. He needs a little time.”

“I reckon so,” Jim said, as he tilted the rifle/shotgun over his shoulder at an angle. Sam had already informed them of what had happened. “Hell of a thing. You reckon he’ll be okay?”

“Yeah, he’s a pretty well together individual. I think he’s alright, but just in case, you two get to where you can watch the exits kind of unobtrusively-like, you know.” They nodded and moved off. From upstairs, he faintly heard the bathroom door open.

Chapter 17

Samantha looked out the front door, saw Sam sitting there, and wandered out onto the porch.

“Mr. Wirtz, have you seen Frank?”

“Sam. Yes, ma’am. He had a little accident with his beer,” he said, nodding at the broken glass and spilled liquid on the porch and down the arm of the rocker, “and spilled it on himself. He went over to the barn again to clean up. He should be back in a few minutes.” He gestured at the clean chair on the opposite side of him. “Join me while you wait?”

Samantha flashed him one of her award-winning smiles. “I’d be happy to, Sam.” She lowered herself into the rocker after checking the seat for stray splinters of glass, and was amazed at how comfortable it was. “This is a nice place you have here.”

Sam grinned. “Especially for a pig farm, huh?” Samantha covered her mouth to suppress a chuckle and Sam held out a beer, which she accepted gratefully.

“Umm!” she said, taking the bottle down from her lips. “That’s good.” After a moment, she looked at him. “Can I ask you something?”

He showed his large teeth. “You *are* a reporter, aren’t you?”

“Sorry. Actually, I *was* a reporter. I resigned from my last job a little...abruptly.”

“So I hear. Tell you what: we’ll make a trade, tit for tat. You ask me a question, and if I answer, then I’ll ask you one that you have to answer. Fair enough?”

“Not really, but it’s probably the best offer I’m going to get.” Looking at his shrewd smile, she said, “just remind me never to buy a used car off of you!

“Okay, what group is it that you represent?”

Uh-oh! She’s going to make them count. I’ll have to be careful with this one.

“Well, the best description is that I am part of a faction in the Confederate movement.”

“You’re one of the neo-Confederates that they’re always talking about, then?”

“Yes and no. We have a faction of neo-Confederates, but that’s not me. I’m a full, old-time Confederate, with no compromises and no apologies.”

“So you’re seeking a complete return to the South as its own nation?”

“Exactly, only the South is already a nation, at least in the Biblical sense: that is, it’s made up of a particular ethnic group – the Southern Race, a unique blend of mostly Anglo-Celtic people that makes up the founding and traditionally dominant portion of our population. What we, or at least my faction, are trying to regain is the return of the Confederacy as the Southerners’ country, a geopolitical entity.”

She looked at him in surprise, even as she realized that his words were an expanded echo of the basic concept she and Frank had discussed the night before. He was a lot smarter than he looked or had acted thus far, and was certainly not what she expected from a pig farmer. There were some deep waters here.

“I’m...impressed, Sam. Did you major in political science?”

“My major,” he replied with a grin, “was hard knocks. I’m just a high school grad who’s spent the rest of his years since then educating himself in reality.”

“My turn now; what happened between you, Frank, and ‘what’s-his-name’, your station manager?”

“To make a long story short, Frank saved me from having my face crushed. Philip went berserk when I played that tape against his orders, and he decided that stomping my face into jelly would be an appropriate payback for this ‘blonde-haired Nazi bitch’ doing what he called ‘advancing my filthy racist cause’. If Frank hadn’t gotten there when he did, I wouldn’t be much to look at right now, even if I was still alive.”

She was surprised at the intensity of the expression on Sam’s face. He was obviously angered by her account, yet at the same time she had the unnerving impression that he was filing the information

away for later action. Whatever that action was, she had the feeling that it did not bode well for Philip Silverstein.

“So, how bad did Frank whip-up on him?”

She smiled despite herself. “He ‘whipped-up’ on him pretty thoroughly, in my opinion, but after he came to, Philip got up and hobbled off.”

“So he wasn’t ‘left for dead’ in the parking garage, as the press put it then?”

“No! He left before we did.”

As Sam paused, stroking his chin in thought, Samantha asked the question that she had been putting off.

“What are you going to do with us?” She noticed that her normally carefully controlled voice had involuntarily tightened and risen an octave or two, but she couldn’t help it.

Sam flashed her a big grin. “Well, to start off with, I think I’ll do something real hideous and painful, like sit on a shady porch and drink cold beer with you. Then I’ll probably force-feed you a big Southern supper...”

“You know what I mean.”

He heaved a sigh, all seriousness now. “Yeah, I reckon I do. It’s like I told your boyfriend: if you all are what you say you are, you’ve got nothing to fear from us. We’ll give you sanctuary. You can go underground with us for a while, to give you time to make up your minds as to what you want to do.”

Samantha stared down at the porch for so long that he thought she wasn’t going to respond. Finally she quietly inquired, “What *can* we do, Sam?”

“Well,” he began, still in a deadly serious tone, “here’s your choices as I see them. One, you can turn yourself in. Of course, you won’t have a snowball’s chance in hell; the evidence has already been fabricated. At best you’ll never see the light of day again; more likely you’ll be tried and executed, maybe by military tribunal or maybe you’ll just disappear. Happens all the time.

“Two, you can try running on your own. You’ve had a little taste of that already, so you know what it’s like. If you’re lucky – *damned* lucky – you might make it a week, but probably not. Eventually, one

or both of you will get caught. They want you too bad and have too many people looking for you for that not to happen.

“Three is your best chance, for what little that’s worth; make yourself a place with us. *If* you are who you say you are, we’ll be glad to have you. The odds are still against you, I must admit, but at least here you’ll be doing something. No other country can be trusted to shelter you – they’ll give you up under either extradition treaties or U.S. pressure or foreign aide bribes. After all, you all are terrorists, drug dealers, and racist anti-Semites to hear them tell it; they’ve covered all the bases. Your *only* chance is to help us build a country of our own. That’s the only way any of us will ever be either safe or free!”

Samantha looked directly into his eyes and saw them lit with the fire of a zealot. “I know you’re sincere in this, Sam, but do you really think that’s going to happen? I mean really? It sounds so far-fetched; we’re not talking about a coup in some little banana republic – this is America.”

“Is it?” he asked evenly, taking another pull off his beer. “Since when?”

She sat in silence for a while, still unsure of how to answer that all-important question she had heard asked before.

“There’s something else you need to know. Frank will tell you part of it himself, but you need to hear this before he gets back. He ever tell you about his grandma?”

“Oh yeah!” She smiled. “She raised him. He thinks the world of her.”

“She’s dead; the Feds shot her last night.”

“That’s not possible!” she exclaimed. “I mean...she's just an old lady!”

Sam snorted. “You think that makes a difference to them? A BATF team hit her house looking for Frank, and machine-gunned her right in her own bedroom.”

“My God! What about Frank? Does he know yet?”

“Yeah, I just told him. That, more than the spilled beer, is why he's out there. “He gestured toward the nearest barn. “He needed some space for himself.”

Tears formed in the corners of her eyes. The thought of Frank hurting cut her deeper than she would ever have thought.

"I've never even met the lady. How did he take it?"

"He took it real hard, but I'll tell you this; I reckon the ones that killed her will be taking it a lot harder by the time he's done with 'em." He tilted his head back and drained the last yeasty dregs from the bottom of the bottle. "One *hell* of a lot harder!"

Frank Gore knelt on the cement floor of the small bathroom. The first tears were gone, washed away in the sink faucet's stream, whose watery remnants now dripped from his forehead, but new ones were still being wrung from him. His head was bowed and his hands were clasped between his knees with their fingers interlocked and quivering with the strain of emotion as he prayed. Ignoring the pain in his knees on the hard surface, he petitioned God for an answer, and he wasn't about to stop until he got one.

"Here comes Frank now," Sam said, gesturing at the barn. Samantha looked in the direction that he indicated and saw him, but immediately noticed that something was wrong. No, not wrong, but...*different*. Frank was not one to shuffle along, but his gait now was unusually direct and purposeful, almost like a military march. As he closed the distance, she could see that his eyes were unnaturally bright and his face had the look of a decision made. From the set of his jaw, she recognized that it was a decision that wouldn't be changed, and she was afraid that she already knew what it was.

So, what are you going to do now?

Sam rose to his feet. "How's the hand?"

Frank stopped at the porch step and looked at the appendage with the neatly-wrapped white bandage around it as if he had forgotten about it. Sam figured that he had.

"It's fine."

"What happened?" asked Samantha, a note of worry in her voice as she flashed an accusatory glare at Sam. "How did you get hurt?"

“I’ll let you fill in the details, Frank. I’ve got to go make some phone calls. Why don’t the two of you go around to the swing on the other side of the house? I know you’ve got some things to talk over, and nobody’ll be going in and out to bother you there.” He turned toward the door, and then glanced back over his shoulder. “I’ll holler when supper’s ready.” They heard the door bang behind him.

Frank reached out for her with his uninjured right hand.

“I think that we’d better take his advice. Come on Sammie; we need to talk.”

She allowed him to help her out of the rocker. Upset over what she knew in her heart he was going to tell her – that he was joining this hopeless cause – she determined not to maintain the physical contact, but found herself unable to let go of his hand until they had strolled around the corner and sat down in the swing. Frank started a gentle swaying, and she crossed her arms over her breasts and looked out across the yard at nothing in particular.

“Sam told me about your grandmother.”

“Sam’s got a big mouth. Still, he was probably right to do it.”

“You’ve decided to join them, haven’t you?” she asked in a tone that was as much a statement as a question.

Taken slightly aback by her sudden coolness, Frank answered her honestly.

“Yes, I have.”

Tears began forming again and she opened her mouth to speak, but he gently laid a finger across her lips.

“Sammie, there’s something you need to know before we go on.” As gently as he could, with both of them staring straight ahead, he told her.

No sooner than they left the side porch, their two armed shadows casually sauntered over, one taking one side of the house and one the other; carefully out of sight of the pair in the swing, but with a good enough view to cover the front yard more than fifty feet from the porch in a crossfire. Sam’s voice broke over the radio.

“You two got it covered?”

“In position. Is everything alright out there?”

“Yeah, I can see them from inside the house. He must be breaking the news to her; looks like she’s taking it pretty hard.”

“They must be for real then.”

“Probably, but watch them all the same just in case I’m wrong.”

“Anybody ever tell you that you're paranoid?”

“Huh! I’m so paranoid, I don’t even trust myself. Besides, just because you’re paranoid, it does’t mean that they’re not out to get you!”

“I reckon so.”

“Let me know if something happens. One clear.”

Chapter 18

“No,” the voice of Spider61, AKA Jonathon Edge, told him from the phone earpiece.

Sam’s anger was apparent in his voice. “She was my friend; she was the widow of a fellow Southern Nationalist, and she was betrayed by a damned Yankee! I’m not going to let that slide.”

“Look, I’m going to have enough problems with the Council just for taking those two in. My bargaining position is barely tenable now; it’s not likely to survive doing an informant too – not yet anyway. Besides which, you’re not the only game in town; I have other networks in other states to think about, and I’m not certain how they would react to that, especially during this early stage of the game. We’ll at least have to wait awhile.”

“Damn your bargaining position! She was *my* friend!”

Edge’s irritation was beginning to show. “I don’t care if she was the queen of England! I am ordering you to leave it alone for now, do you understand? That is an order!” Silence. “Do you hear me?”

Sam blew out his breath. “Yeah, I hear you.”

“Good,” Edge carefully kept the relief out of his voice; he hadn’t been at all sure that Sam would comply. “I have your word on it, then?”

“Yeah, I won’t touch her...”

“Or have your men do it!”

Sam clenched a fist at his side. *That bastard knows me too well.* “I won’t let them go near her either.”

“Thank you; I hope you understand my position – ”

“I understand it just fine. I also don’t want to hear any more about it or I just might change my mind. Do you understand that?”

“All right, all right! I’ve got to go now and get up with some of the others. Goodbye.”

“Bye,” Sam muttered as he clicked the ‘OFF’ button.

He immediately began thumbing through the contents of a note card box sitting beside him on the end table with a grim smile. Sam

always kept his word to the letter. Neither he nor his men would go near the woman.

Finding what he was looking for, he began dialing the number.

Of course, just as Edge had said, they weren't the only game in town!

"Hello?"

"Are you on a clean line, Neil?" Sam asked him, recognizing Larson's voice despite the length of time since they'd last spoken.

Neil Larson and Sam went way back to the farmer's militia days in the early nineties, and not everything between them had been good. The two had been on opposite sides of a major philosophical split in the Southern movement several years back, over the subject of race. Larson saw the opposition to Southern nationalism in almost entirely racial terms, while Sam, along with Jonathon Edge and the rest of the Confederate Council, adopted a view based, at least publicly, more on a cultural, political, or even religious conflict, rather than a genetic one. Over the years, and particularly after the recent fiasco at the Capitol Riot, Sam had come to see a lot of practical merit in Larson's arguments, even if he wasn't quite ready to admit he was right...at least not yet.

Socially cut off from what passed for the 'mainstream' of the chaotically fragmented movement, Neil Larson's own attitudes had hardened even further. He had distanced himself from the Council-controlled groups and quietly collected a team of serious hard-cases that included not only some of the tougher militiamen that the tribulations of the day had handily separated from the hobbyists and wannabes, but also several former Klansmen and skinheads with no place to go following a massive Federal infiltration and break-up of their own groups during a big sting operation two years ago. They were a tough and very dangerous bunch, particularly with a paranoid, motivated, ambitious, and extremely intelligent man like Larson at their head.

"Clean as can be. What can I do you for?"

"This is--"

Neil Larson cut him off. *"I know who this is. I thought you just might get around to calling me after I heard what happened in town."*

I'm real sorry to hear about Mary; I know you all were pretty close. I knew her husband, but I only met her once or twice. She seemed like a nice lady." A pause, then, *"You want an example made, right?"*

"Yeah."

"You know, you've got a lot of damned gall. You never wanted anything to do with me before. I'm a dangerous radical, remember, and a bad ol' racist. I think you've got me pegged as a psycho."

"You just said the key word – 'before'. And yes, I do have you pegged as a psycho; that's why I called you."

Larson chuckled dryly. *"I never took you for chicken shit; I'm surprised you're not doing it yourself. Your boss?"*

"Yeah, orders."

"Figured. Nothing personal, bud, but you're hanging out with the wrong crowd. I know you, and they're too lightweight for the likes of you. I've yet to see a one of them that would do squat other than talk."

"Well," Sam said carefully, *"if that's the case, I think that you might be pleasantly surprised before too long."*

"Sounds great. I sure hope so; it gets lonely out here on the lunatic fringe."

Sam doubted that, but he wisely kept his opinion to himself.

"This example; you want it to be the permanent kind, or just something real memorable?"

"Memorable will probably do it," Sam said, somewhat reluctantly. *"As much as she deserves it, we've got to think about how it'll look, her being an old woman and all. I think a major property job will do the trick and give her and everyone else who might be thinking about doing the same thing a damned good scare."*

"Something like General Sherman would have done to her if she was Southern," he said, before adding a not uncommon Southern sentiment concerning the Northern master burner, *"may Satan gnaw his Yankee soul in hell."*

"That's pretty much what I had in mind."

“Yeah, well, I’ll do it, and I’ll probably even enjoy it, considering what she did, but you still owe me, Sam. You owe me big-time!”

“I know. Thanks.”

“I don’t know if you’re welcome or not. I’ll let you know when the time comes to collect.”

Sam put down the receiver, sat back in his chair, and sighed. Deep down, he guessed he had always known that it would come to this once the struggle finally began, but it still didn’t make it any easier.

Samantha’s tears dampened the shoulder of Frank’s shirt as she sobbed in his arms. Gently, he stroked her hair in time with the swing’s creaking. “I’m sorry, Sammie. God knows, I’m so sorry.”

“They killed her! She’s dead and all she wanted to do was help.”

“She did help. She saved both of our lives.” He sighed. “I guess that the best we can do is try to be worthy of that.”

“How? How can we do that?”

“She believed in this cause of hers and her husband’s –believed in it enough to die for, it turns out. I can’t think of any better way to honor her memory than to take it up ourselves. That’s just the way I feel.” He paused. “And that is just what I intend to do.” He knew Samantha was an intelligent woman, so he didn’t bother adding that they had little else in the way of choices.

Blue eyes blazing through their curtain of tears, she raised her head. “That’s the way I feel too,” she said in a voice full of fury. “I had doubts before, but not now. They and that son of a bitch Silverstein not only framed us for something that we didn’t do and hunted us like animals, but now they’ve killed the best friend I’ve ever had. I won’t forget that and I’ll never forgive it! Damn them! Damn them all to hell! I’ll bring them down – all of them! I’ll see them dead!”

Frank nodded in agreement. “Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord.” He quoted the Biblical doctrine and then added, “But justice; justice belongs to us!”

Sam poked his head out the door to their right. "I've got some good news for you, for a change."

Frank, one arm around Samantha's shoulders, blew out his breath. "I could use some good news right about now. What's up?"

"I just got a call from some of my people. You'll be glad to know that Jenny May Summers is alive and well."

Frank gave him a puzzled look. "I didn't know you knew the lady; anyway, why shouldn't she be?"

"A pair of Feds tried to assassinate her this afternoon."

The former cop leapt to his feet in a rage, causing the swing to bounce so hard that the startled Samantha would have fallen out if she hadn't grabbed the armrest for balance.

"What the hell for? What danger was a poor old colored lady?" He was shouting now, in anger and frustration. "Good God! They've killed everybody else I ever cared about; now why her?"

"Simmer down, partner; she's okay and my boys are taking her to a safe place now. She was a loose end, Frank. She was the last one to see your grandmother alive after you sent her over there with the message that you were all right. She knew you didn't kill her, and she tried to tell the investigators that. Since she had the information, they saw her as a threat and sent some people to eliminate her."

He sat down hard in the swing. "So I nearly got her killed too..."

"I told you once to stop that shit!" the smaller man barked, then glanced at Samantha before turning back to Frank. "Sorry, ma'am. Anyway, like I told you, and you need to get it through your head once and for all, *you* didn't do anything; *they* did! You did what you should've done, what you were supposed to, and they took advantage of it – *end of story*. You have nothing to feel guilty about."

"I know you're right up here," he said, tapping his head with his index finger. "But in here," he paused and rapped his chest, "in here, it's hard to be convinced of that."

"How did she get away from them, anyway?"

Sam looked away from them, and out across the fields at something distant, that no one else could see and pursed his lips.

"That's something else we can thank Mary for. She told us you had

called a colored lady – you called her ‘Aunt Jenny’ she said – and that she lived close to your grandma. It wasn’t too hard to track her down from that in a rural area. We sent two people over to check *you* out, to make sure that she had actually seen your grandma alive *after* you had talked to her. We had to know if you were the murderer or not. After talking with her, and some of my sources in officialdom, I’m satisfied that you’re on the level.

“Well, while they were with her, as near as I can gather so far, this pair of federal killers showed up and actually had the gun to her head when my boys ambushed the bastards and blew both of ‘em away right there inside the house.

“Of course,” he said with a grin, “you two will get blamed for that too, but I don’t see that it really makes much difference at this point. Do you?”

“Not really. I owe you and your folks for a lot, Sam. I’ve known that old lady for a long time: all my life, I reckon. She was colored, but we were neighbors for most of my life, and she was almost like family.”

Sam shook his head, a serious look on his face. “You don’t owe us anything, Frank. Anything you owe is to the movement, not to us. That’s where your loyalty has to lie: with the movement, not with men.”

Sam twisted his hairy arm and glanced at his watch. “Supper will be ready in about ten minutes. I’ll holler for you.” He retreated and the door closed.

“Well,” said Frank, “it looks like Mary came through for us again.” He looked at the woman sitting beside him. “What’s wrong, Sammie?”

Samantha’s head was hanging, and she was flushed bright red with embarrassment. She shook as she fought to keep from crying again. She knew Frank was an intelligent man and more than capable of putting two and two together. She also knew he had a strong sense of honor, and she had no idea how he would react upon finding that his privacy had been violated, particularly in his current emotional state. She was suddenly terrified that she might lose him.

“Frank, I have a confession to make.”

It was that small, little girl voice he had heard before, at Mary's house when she offered herself to him. It touched him deep inside.

"About listening in on the phone conversation?"

"Yeah," she gulped. "That was Mary, but I should have stopped her."

"No, you shouldn't have."

Her eyes opened wide in surprise, not only at his words, but also at their warm, understanding tone.

"What..."

"Come on, Sammie; your whole world was coming apart around you, you were being hunted by the law, and you were stuck with a man accused of every crime in the book, who you had known for only a few hours. Mary wouldn't have been much of a friend if she hadn't tried to find out all she could about me, would she?"

"Besides," he admitted with a grin, "bless her heart, but Mary wasn't quite as slick as she thought she was; I heard the click when she lifted the receiver. So don't fret over it; no harm done."

"But Frank, there's more. Before that, when I was fixing your pants..."

He ran the fingers of his right hand softly down her cheek in a gentle, loving caress.

"You went through my wallet. I knew that."

"B-but how?"

"You *are* a woman *and* a reporter. Anyway, you put my driver's license back in the wrong section."

She was genuinely puzzled. "So you knew it all along; but you never said anything. Weren't you angry?"

"Sammie," he said, a sly mischievous smile spreading across his face, "did you ever think to wonder *why* I was so careless to have left my wallet in my pants where a stranger would have access to it?"

The sudden realization dawned on her. "You *knew* I would look through it! You planned it all along!"

"Well, not really planned it," he admitted. "When you offered to fix my jeans, I saw the opportunity and took it." He shrugged.

"Simple as that."

“But why?”

He looked directly into her eyes. “Because I wanted to get to know you. Ever since the parking garage, you were all I could think about. I thought I sensed a mutual attraction on your part, but I couldn’t be sure; after all, the odds of someone like you becoming interested in someone like me were mighty slim. We come from two different worlds, and I didn’t know exactly how to approach you. It occurred to me that maybe by giving you a trusting, honest, even intimate picture of myself, a chance to see me as a real human being rather than just a story, something might pique your curiosity, and might make you want to look into it further. At least I hoped it would; it seemed like a good idea at the time. After all, there’s nothing much more personal to a man than his pants.”

Samantha sat back, stunned and open-mouthed at his subtlety. “I don’t believe it! I have been had! Here I was all this time feeling guilty and apologizing for being sneaky, and meanwhile you were putting bait on your hook and I took it without even knowing it!”

“Do you mind?”

It was her turn to smile. She took both his hands in hers and kissed him on the mouth.

“No, not really.”

Just west of Tabor City, North Carolina a small hobby farm was nestled amidst the pines growing from the sandy soil of the coastal plain. Its occupants, a retired car salesman and his wife, had been pestering Sam for a long time for the chance to get more involved. Now they had that opportunity, and readily agreed to host an ‘unofficial fugitive’ as Sam put it. The fact that Jenny May Summers was black was a considerable surprise, but if it bothered them, they didn’t let it show. Sam said it was necessary, and that was good enough for them. They opened their small guesthouse for her that the salesman had the good sense to build after they made the move to within an hour of the coast, to take care of visiting relatives without having them directly underfoot.

After they had gotten Jenny settled in, Brian remained behind as Rob went to the car.

“It’s a nice little place,” she said, running her hands over the furniture, “an’ I really ’preciate it, but I’m shore gonna miss home.”

“Maybe we can get you back there once this is over.”

She gave him a sad look. “By the time this mess is over, one way or ’nother, this ol’ woman’ll be long dead an’ in the groun’. But thank you for tryin’ t’ cheer me up jus’ the same.”

“Mrs. Summers, can I talk to you?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Why sure, Honey. Y’all just saved my life; I ain’t like to say no. What’s on your mind?”

Brian was silent for a time, trying to find the words. Finally he spoke. “I’m scared, ma’am.”

She looked surprised. “Land sakes, child!” she exclaimed. “That ain’t no wonder, with people tryin’ t’ kill you. They like t’ scared me to death my own self.”

“That’s not what I’m scared of...them, I mean – not so much, anyway. I’m more afraid of where this whole thing’s leading.”

“I don’t git your meanin’.”

“It’s just that...I don’t know.” He was struggling for words again. “That man I killed in your kitchen; he was the second man I killed this week.”

She laid a comforting hand on his shoulder. “I reckon that’s enough t’ bother anybody.”

Brian shook his head. “It’s not just the killing that bothers me, although that’s bad enough. I guess both of them had it coming, but...”

“Both of ’em was colored, wasn’t they?” she queried, “jus’ like you an’ me.”

“Yeah, both of them were black.” He sighed, and then continued, “Up to now, I’ve been convinced that I’m fighting on the right side, where the truth is, and I know some of my own ancestors went off to war with the same army as the grandfathers of these boys, but damn it! I’m killing my own people, and I think it’s going to get worse.

“Ma’am, I’m afraid this is going to become a race war between whites and blacks, and I don’t know if I’ll be on the right side!”

Jenny Summers stared out the window so long he thought she wasn't going to answer. "Son," she finally began, not looking at him, "I don't know. I think you're prob'ly right. There will finally be a war between the races, an' it'll be an awful sight. I'm an old woman, but I've heard people talk, white an' colored both, as long as I been alive, an' we all knowed it would come to pass someday – had to be, I reckon, what with two different peoples a'livin' on the same piece of land, though nobody in his right mind would ever want such a thing. I reckon that it's finally fixin' t' happen after all these years." She shook her head, still staring through the glass. "Lord knows I never hoped t' live t' see it!"

"What do we do? As African-Americans, I mean?"

"Don' know; I just know what Jenny Mae Summers is gonna do. I'm gonna stay as far away from it as I can git."

Brian gave her a skeptical look. "I don't know how you'll manage to do that."

"I don' know how I'll manage to do that either, but I sure aim to try."

Abruptly she asked him, "Did I ever tell you about my son?"

"No, ma'am."

"My George was a good boy; got along with ever'body. Made good grades an' sung in the church choir. Played basketball at the high school. I brought that boy up right. He was our only child, an' I was bound and determined that he was gonna grow up to be a proper educated colored man instead o' some worthless nigger like most roun' here grows up to be.

"I remember one time he wanted this pair of fancy tennis shoes to play basketball with – cost way over a hundred dollars. There weren't no way I was gonna pay that kinda' money for a pair of shoes, an' he never asked me. He worked; cut grass, split wood, did any job he could make a dollar at. He worked for months, Mr. Hurt, just like I taught him to do when he wanted somethin', till he saved up enough money to buy them shoes.

"He wore 'em the first time on a trip t' Columbia; his team made it to the state championships down there." Her face twisted with grief and tears gathered in the corners of her eyes and began

streaming down her old black cheeks. “While he was there, some street nigger his own age killed him; shot him down for them damned shoes.”

Reaching into her pocket, she fished out a tissue and began dabbing at her face. “They throwed me outta my own church after that, ’cause I was demandin’ justice. That was my own boy he killed, but they called me an’ my husband Jim ‘house niggers’ for wanting to punish that devil ’stead o’ understandin’ him. I ain’t nobody’s house nigger, an’ I’ll tell you this; I’ve lived a long time. I lived back in the old days, when the Klan used to run the whole county. Ever’body was scared t’ death of ‘em, but there’s one thing they never done. They never killed no seventeen-year old boy for a pair of fancy tennis shoes, an’ they wouldn’t o’ put up with nobody that did, no sir!

“You know who stood by me, through it all? The white folks, ’specially Sarah Gore an’ her grandson Frank. When Jim had his first heart attack and couldn’t work, it was nigh on to a year afore he got his disability. It was the Gores an’ them white men and women from their church who saw to it we had food on the table and the place was fixed up. There was a color line there for sure – I was neighbors with Frank an’ his granny, but a lotta them white folks wouldn’t have let me in their doors an’ I wouldn’t have dare tried; but when I needed help, they sure brought a lot o’ blessin’s to my door at the same time the other colored folks was a’ cussin’ me for a ‘Tom’ ever’ time I went out it. After Jim died, I wouldn’t even have had a roof over my head if it hadn’t been for Frank Gore.

“I’m a colored lady an’ that’s somethin’ I ain’t never been ashamed of. With all they done to me, I still ain’t gonna stand agin’ my own people, but I ain’t gonna stand agin’ them folks who helped me neither. I reckon I’ll jus’ step aside an’ let God’s will be done. He knows more ’bout it than we do anyway.”

Brian let out his breath and shook his head sadly. “I just wish I had your faith.”

“I wish you did too, boy,” she said, fixing him with a disturbing and knowing look, “’cause you’re gonna need it. You asked me if you was gonna be on the right side; well I ain’t none too sure there’s

gonna be a right side, but I *am* sure there's gonna' be a whole lotta killin' 'fore this is through. You done put yourself in a mighty hard place, an' I figger you're gonna have to make some hard choices to git out of it. I don't envy you one bit."

Unbeknownst to either of them, Rob was not in the car. Piqued by the same sixth sense that had saved his life more than once, he had quietly returned to the house and stood near the window where he could hear their conversation. Whatever he thought of it never showed on his weathered face.

Chapter 19

Even distracted by their mutual sorrows, both Frank and Samantha had to admit that supper was the best they'd had for a long time. Following grace by Sam, they had fried chicken, mountains of mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans and black-eyed peas, with coleslaw to start and homemade vanilla ice cream on top of blackberry cobbler to finish it off. Samantha thought she would burst, and Frank wasn't altogether certain he could stand up if he wanted to. Gingerly, he scooted his chair back a few inches and rubbed his stomach.

"If I'd known that being on the run fed this well, I'd have taken it up sooner. I'll tell you what, Sam; that was good."

"I'll say," Samantha told them. "If we stay here very long, I'll have the perfect disguise – I'll weigh five-hundred pounds!"

There was chuckling all around the table.

Sam said, "don't thank me. I can cook like a son of a gun, but unless it's barbecuing, I can't hold a candle to Mrs. Hill."

The lady in question was not present. Sam had explained that she preferred to take her meals alone. He also told them that she wasn't much for conversation, which they could already tell: neither Samantha nor Frank had heard her say a word.

"Aren't you afraid to have a housekeeper?" Frank nodded toward the kitchen. "That's a potential security breach, isn't it?"

"For anyone else, it would be, but not for her." He went on to tell them how her husband had been a doctor, falsely accused by the DEA of writing improper prescriptions for pain medications and for Medicaid fraud.

"Wasn't guilty, of course, but that didn't matter. They took down his office with a SWAT team and hauled him out in cuffs in front of all the patients he'd known for years. They threw him in a hardcore Federal cellblock full of niggers. First they slit the sphincter muscle in his rectum with a razor blade for 'easy access'; then they gang-raped him. He came out HIV positive and hooked up to a colostomy bag.

“Turned out their paid informant was some junkie he’d refused to give drugs to – didn’t matter. His case never came to trial—they didn’t want the expense, and didn’t need to anyway. Instead, the just confiscated everything he owned – office, house, car, bank accounts, everything – under the RICO statutes. Left him with nothing: not even the money to hire a lawyer to try to get it back. They left him and his wife on the street. I took ’em in, but he couldn’t handle it.

“First night he was here, he blew his brains out sitting right there in that porch swing where y’all were a few minutes ago. I don’t reckon I can blame him too much, considering.

“His missus had a total breakdown – ain’t spoke a word since.”

He turned his head and looked at the closed kitchen door. “He was my brother-in-law. Mrs. Hill is my older sister.”

Turning back, he saw them looking at him uncomfortably, trying to figure out what to say.

“Here,” he said, rising and flipping on a portable TV that perched on the counter. “Let’s watch the news, an’ see what you two have been up to today. I figure by now they’ll be blaming you for El Nino!”

“First, Channel 3 News has the latest this evening concerning fugitive, former Columbia Police Officer Franklin Gore.

“A late-night raid at the home of Gore’s grandmother by agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms led to tragedy and a grisly discovery. After there was no answer to their knocking, the agents forced the front door open, apparently setting off a shotgun trap that discharged into the face of an agent at point-blank range, killing him instantly.

“Once inside the home, the agents discovered the body of Sarah Gore, Franklin Gore’s grandmother. The official cause of death has not been confirmed, but officers at the scene stated that she appeared to have died of multiple gunshot wounds. They speculate that Franklin Gore may have shot his grandmother in order to prevent her from giving information to the police about a large cache of firearms, ammunition, explosives, and illegal drugs they believe he had stored there. The agents found a hiding place

containing loose cartridges, ammunition boxes, and traces of explosives and crack cocaine, which they believe that Gore was selling in order to finance his massive illegal arms purchases. Unfortunately, the bulk of the deadly hardware had apparently been removed, possibly by Gore, before the raid occurred. The agents also recovered a large quantity of racist hate literature and bomb making manuals from the scene.

“Sarah Gore is scheduled for autopsy on Tuesday. The slain BATF officer’s name has not been released, pending notification of his family.

“These discoveries parallel those made when Gore’s apartment was raided earlier this evening, where similar illegal and destructive items were discovered, including military grade plastic explosives, detonators, a large stash of illegal drugs, and still more racist and anti-Semitic material.

“Law enforcement officials are pleading that anyone with information on the whereabouts of fugitive Franklin Gore or his companion, Samantha Norris, to contact the nearest law enforcement office immediately. They stress, however, that under no circumstances should you take any action or approach the suspect himself. He is a noted martial arts expert and an expert shot, and is thought to be heavily armed, possibly with automatic weapons and explosives. He is considered to be extremely dangerous.

“This just in: the trail of death left behind by fugitive Columbia Police Officer Franklin Gore and his accomplice, former Channel 13 news anchor Samantha Norris, has apparently grown even longer. The body of Norris’ personal secretary, Mary Wheeler, was found by police in her home while they were investigating a report from a neighbor that the two fugitives were seen leaving her house this morning.

“We have a pre-recorded interview at the scene with the neighbor who first notified police, Mrs. Susan Kennedy.

“Mrs. Kennedy, what first made you suspicious that something might be going on in Mary Wheeler’s house?”

“There have always been strange goings-on in that house! She and her late husband were involved with extremist white supremacist

groups. They even flew a Confederate flag on their front porch, and had a bunch of vicious rednecks over there constantly. Hiding a pair of racist killers is exactly the kind of thing that she would do!”

“You told police that the fugitives were in disguise when they left. How did you recognize them?”

“I watch the TV news and always look for ways to help make this country a better place to live. It’s every American’s duty to be alert and help out law enforcement whenever we get the chance. Like I said, I expected something like that from her, and it takes more than some hair dye and sunglasses to fool me.”

“Do you believe that the pair killed her?”

“Who else? As far as I’m concerned, she reaped exactly what she sowed! She stood with a bunch of right-wing terrorists against America and now she’s paid the price for it.”

“She’s a brave woman to come forward like that.

“The coroner hasn’t released the cause of death yet, pending the autopsy, but sources tell us that Mary Wheeler’s body shows signs of being brutally tortured before being shot in the back of the head, execution style.

“Thank you, Connie. We have just received word that still more casualties have been left behind by fugitives Gore and Norris as their killing spree continues. In this case the victims were from the law enforcement community. Two FBI agents were ambushed and killed this afternoon at the home of Jenny May Summers, less than a quarter of a mile from the home of Franklin Gore’s late grandmother, Sarah Gore, whose body was found by BATF agents last night. Mrs. Summers, a widow and senior citizen, is missing, and is believed to have been kidnapped.

“Due to the location and the fact that she was an acquaintance of the Gore family, Franklin Gore is a prime suspect in the disappearance. As Gore is known to be a white supremacist, the race of the missing woman, who was an African-American, may also have been a factor in the attack. The FBI considers her kidnapping to have all the marks of a hate crime.

“Again, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division, and the Columbia Police Department have all issued warnings to any surviving family and associates of Franklin Gore and Samantha Norris to avoid any contact with them whatsoever, as they are considered armed and extremely dangerous. Further, police theorize that there may be a method behind these murders, in that the two may be attempting to eliminate anyone who knows them and might be able to give information about them to the authorities. If they knock at your door, do not open it, but contact police immediately. The life you save could very well be your own.

“On a related subject, Lisa Marie Poole, one of the shooting victims from the Capitol Grounds Riot, died at Columbia General Hospital this morning of complications from the injuries that she received during the disturbance. She was a long-time Civil War period re-enactor there to protest the removal of the Confederate Flag, and, like Gore and Norris, was reportedly associated with one or more white supremacist groups. A native of Columbia, Mrs. Poole was forty-nine years old and is survived by a husband, three children, and two grandchildren. Funeral arrangements have not yet been set...”

Both of them stared dumbly at the TV. They knew what was happening and had thought they were prepared for it, but actually seeing it proved them wrong. The others looked at them with sympathy. It was Frank who finally spoke.

“That’s quite a case they’ve built up. They’ve covered all their bases and, by issuing that warning, effectively cut us off from any shelter. Shoot, even though it’s about me, I can almost believe it.”

“I’m sorry, you two. Truthfully I am,” Sam told them. The others muttered vague expressions of solace as well, although no one really knew what to say. Finally, Sam broke the uncomfortable atmosphere by changing the subject.

“Frank, if you’re with us, then we could use your intel. What can you tell us about the Columbia PD?”

“What do you want to know?”

“Well, for instance, do you know any officers – white if possible, since they’re more vulnerable as they don’t have the race card to fall back on – who have a weakness. I don’t know, maybe a doper, or something in the sexual department let’s say: somebody who’s woman crazy, maybe likes them a little younger than legal if you know what I mean? Likes young boys, maybe; hell I don’t know, anything like that.”

Frank snorted in disgust. “Willie Duckett.”

“You didn’t have to think about that very long.”

“I’d rather not think about him at all,” he responded, his lip curling in disgust. “He’s a disgrace to the human race, let alone to law enforcement.”

Sam leaned forward with interest, resting his elbows on the table.

“Tell me about him.”

“He’s white, average build, late thirties...”

“I mean, what’s his angle?”

“Plain and simple, he likes little girls – young teenagers. I can’t prove it, but I know for a fact he’s extorted sex from teenaged runaways and petty criminals to let them go. I know other officers who’ve seen him going into motels with teenaged prostitutes.” His face darkened with anger. “Little girls, some of them – sometimes not more than twelve or thirteen.”

“That’s horrible,” Samantha broke in. “Why didn’t someone do something about it?”

He shook his head. “You’re a reporter, so I’m sure you know all about the ‘code of silence’ that’s in every police department. It’s like the mafia. No matter what he does, you never betray a brother officer. Do it and your days are numbered. Your superiors will have it in for you for rocking the boat and making the department look bad, and your ‘brother officers’ will mess things up for you every way possible. Eventually, if you don’t quit or get fired over some trumped-up charge, you’ll suddenly find yourself without backup when it all hits the fan – a fight, an armed robbery, something like that – and you’ll get hurt or maybe die. I’ve seen it happen more than once. Then the hypocrites who set you up will all come to your funeral and march for the cameras.”

Samantha touched his hand. "I knew it existed, of course, but hearing it from you makes it much more real."

"So much for 'protect and serve', huh?" Sam chuckled without humor.

"More like us and them," the ex-cop responded, "although now, it seems as if I'm definitely in the 'them' camp."

Sam spread his hands with a smile. "Think of it as being part of a different 'us'.

"If you could help our cause and get this sorry son of a —" He glanced at Samantha and changed in mid-phrase to "— gun off the street, would you do it?"

"Sure, in a heartbeat."

The older man smiled with satisfaction. He already knew all about Willie Duckett from his own sources inside the PD, but he wanted to know a little more about the way his guest thought. Frank didn't know it, but he had just passed another test.

"We'll talk more on that later on. Do you have any questions about this 'different us' I mentioned?"

They did, and many of the answers brought still more questions. Sam, with interjections from the other men, explained the history of their movement, from its origins during the War for Southern Independence until the present day. Social, political, religious, and economic philosophies were bandied about, with Samantha making the most inquiries. Frank's main interest, now that he had made his decision, was the immediate military situation, and what they could expect.

It soon became as clear as it could be in two hours that the Confederate movement, though largely traditional and more or less conservative, was divided by racial ideals into two main factions, and the '*officially*' race-neutral side of which Sam was at least nominally a member, was further separated into three main factions, with dozens of sub-factions, divided by political or religious ideals, or by just plain, old-fashioned 'cussedness'. One of these sub-factions — the largest — was lead mainly by Andrew MacFie of Mississippi, a college professor and president of the Southern Majority, and by quasi-successful businessman William Herdman

out of Alabama, head of the smaller but influential rival organization called Dixie Resurrection. They sought secession by ‘peaceful and honorable means only’ (“Whatever the hell that means!” Sam exclaimed in disgust.). A second, headed by Richard Jameson (of whom Sam informed them that he wouldn’t piss on if he were on fire, and “Pardon my French, ma’am!”) of Florida, opposed the concept of independence and secession entirely and hoped to bring about a sort of autonomous home-based rule within the current system under his organization, Loyal Southern America United.

Sam’s particular group believed that both were impossible and insisted the latter was unacceptable even if it were possible.

“They’ll never just let us go, nor will they let us govern ourselves within the system,” he said, pointing out that was what the War Between the States was over in the first place, and that the government had become even more tyrannical since then. The type of ‘permitted self-rule’ as once practiced by the early 20th Century Irish Free State was rejected out of hand, at least as a long-term solution, since they had it once in the form of States’ rights before the conflict, and it had still been ignored by the Federal Government in that body’s lust for power. In other words, according to Sam, they’d eventually have to fight anyway. Besides which, many of the members of the movement were as violently opposed to the concept as were those early 20th Century Irish, who fought their own civil war over it and assassinated their former revolutionary hero, Michael Collins, in large part for agreeing to submit to it.

Frank noticed that even though most of the members seemed to be mainly ethnic Scots or Anglo-Saxons, the Irish model kept coming up. Sam’s faction (a secretive group as much militia as political known as The Confederate Army, Provisional, or by its acronym of CAP.) under the leadership of a retired Naval officer Jonathon Edge of Virginia and his vice chairman, a one-legged former coal miner in Kentucky named Wayne Boggess, was roughly analogous to the early Irish Republican Army. Originally they had formed under another name as part of the peaceful secession faction. Following a continuous series of government crackdowns that began with the burning of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas

and continued through the incursions on liberty following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, they had come to the conclusion that the only way to achieve the liberty guaranteed by the Constitution was by the formation of an independent South, a resurrected Confederacy. The only way to do that was through armed revolution. They were now armed, militant, and (Sam claimed) ready, willing and able to fight.

In between CAP and the other groups philosophically was a small but powerful organization geared towards seeking secession through the courts. Its head was the late attorney Bob Franklin, who had finally had enough and had taken his cane to the governor in Columbia and died at the base of the flagpole, so the future of that particular branch was in doubt.

Like many church denominations, most of these men had been members of at least one of the other organizations at one time or another, but had some falling-outs for a variety of reasons. All of these diverse groups were more or less held together by the precarious glue of a fractious Confederate Council headed by a Georgia car salesman and movement middle-of-the-roader named Roger Nash, who had the unenviable job of trying to keep the whole mess together and to prevent the movement from totally fragmenting as it had done so many times in the past, over personality as often as politics.

“Ol’ Roger is a rare breed,” Sam said with a laugh. “It ain’t often you find somebody that can herd cats.”

Sam pointed out that his and now their defacto leader, Edge, also happened to be Sam’s best friend. They’d probably be meeting him tomorrow.

Frank and Samantha looked at each other despairingly. Heads swimming with all the accounts of rivalry and infighting, they knew that their already-slim chances for survival had just gone on a crash diet. Recognizing their fear, Sam attempted to put them at ease.

“Don’t worry too much about it; Southerners have always been that way. It’s all that Celtic blood in us, by my reckoning. I expect, now that things are happening, most of them will get on board. Even if they don’t, it’ll keep happening and they’ll get dragged into it

anyway – they won't have a choice." He fixed them with a humorless smile. "Hell, I don't reckon any of us have much of a choice anymore, do we?"

Frank shook his head in resignation, and looked at Samantha. "I reckon not."

"Well then, Mr. Gore," Sam said, slapping his own thigh, "are you willing to join the Confederate Army, Provisional?"

There was no hesitation before Frank answered. "Yeah. I thought you'd never ask."

"Well," said Sam, pushing back his chair, "let's go swear you in."

Chapter 20

The sound of scooting chairs filled the room as the entire group rose and filed into the large parlor. It was obviously a man's room, with the dark paneled walls lined with bookshelves, military paintings and memorabilia, a trophy boar's head on one end and that of a 12-point buck on the other. A large gun cabinet stood in one corner, and polished walnut and blue steel gleamed through its etched glass door.

Although there was plenty of furniture, no one made a move to sit down. Sam excused himself, but returned momentarily carrying a wooden box, which he placed on the sofa and opened. He carefully removed its contents, first revealing a Confederate Battle Flag, covered with dark stains. Reverently, he unfolded it and draped it over a tall side table, centering the middle star. Next out was an ancient-looking long bladed knife with a single edge and no guard, its handle intricately carved of dark oak. As Sam slipped it from its sheath and laid it across the central star, Frank recognized it as a Scottish dirk: a centuries-old original from the look of it. Finally their host picked up a worn old King James Bible from the coffee table and laid it on top of the blade, leaving the handle and an inch of the point exposed.

“What you see here, Franklin Gore, is symbolic of everything sacred to the Southern people; Bible, blade, and banner.

“This Bible, the infallible Word of God, is first and foremost, because it symbolizes the faith of our Christian nation and our submission in all things to the will of God; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

“This blade symbolizes our race, ever ready to defend our faith and our people. Swearing upon the dirk was the most binding oath our ancestors could make.

“This banner, this glorious Southern Cross, is the most recognized symbol of our country and our nation: of the Confederate States of America and the Southern people. This particular one is

even more special to us. These stains are the sacred blood of the martyred heroes, shed before your own eyes at Columbia.

“Franklin Gore, would you join us?”

“Yes, sir, I would join you.” His voice was strong and unwavering, and his eyes flashed in the lamplight. The light itself took on a peculiar quality as if he was looking through a sparkling mist and he imagined he could hear the voices of his ancestors calling out their approbation. What he was doing now had a sense of rightness to it, more than anything he had ever done before.

Hurriedly, before her battered and beleaguered good sense could attempt to change her mind from following her man, Samantha spoke up. “I would join too.”

Sam managed to look pleasantly surprised, relieved, and triumphant all at the same time.

“So be it. Place your right hands on the Bible.

“Franklin Gore and Samantha Norris, do you swear to stand firm in the faith and submission to Jesus Christ above all things?”

“I do.” They both intoned, almost shuddering with the enormity of it.

“Place your hands on the blade’s hilt.”

The wood was strangely warm to the touch.

“Franklin Gore and Samantha Norris, do you swear to defend our faith, our people, our cause, and our country against any enemy within or without, with peace when possible and with the sword when necessary, and to stand to the death if called upon to do so?”

“I do.”

“Place your hands on the banner.

“Franklin Gore and Samantha Norris, do you swear, in the presence of God, and the spirits of those patriot martyrs whose blood has hallowed this cloth and this symbol, past and present, to uphold this flag and the Confederate States of America that it represents, in peace and in war?”

Tears welled in their eyes as they felt the hard, crusted bloodstains beneath their fingertips. A shiver went through them both, as if unseen ghostly eyes looked on. “I do.”

“Do you swear to never betray the trust placed in you, and to uphold the oaths that you have taken here today as long as you shall live?”

“I do.”

“Welcome to the Provisional Army of the Confederate States of America. A toast.” Reaching out, he plucked a glass off a tray that one of the men had already prepared in anticipation. The others followed suit. Sam lifted his glass, and the aged single malt whiskey that their ancestors had called *uisge breatha* in the old Gaelic tongue: ‘the water of life,’ swirled in the lamplight like liquid gold.

“I give you the adjuration of the ladies of Fredericksburg: Fear God, love the South, and live to avenge her!

“God save the South!”

Chapter 21

Encrypted Voice Conference

9:00 PM

“Alright,” Pinetree, AKA Roger Nash said. “Roll call. Greyrider? Spider61? Southspeak? Mountaineer? Legaleagle?”

All of them – Jameson, Edge, Herdman, and Boggess - answered in the affirmative. The only one missing was Legaleagle, publicly known as Bob Franklin.

“Bob’s deceased.” Mountaineer told him.

Spider61 broke in. “You mean he was murdered at that flagpole in Columbia.”

“You’re out of order,” Pinetree said. “Highlander? Highlander? Is Highlander here?”

“If I’m not *‘out of order’* by saying so,” Spider61 said dryly, “we won’t be seeing Highlander for a long time; probably never.”

“Why not?”

“He’s missing in action following the second day’s rioting; he was last seen standing on a garbage can with a bullhorn when the police began firing and overran the crowd. We hear he’s been captured, but we can’t verify it yet. Nothing’s being said publicly.”

Greyrider spoke up. “That’s what happens when you break the law.”

The conference immediately broke into accusations and name-calling. Pinetree yelled in an attempt to restore order. Failing that, he grabbed an aerosol-powered boat horn that he kept nearby for just such situations (and for the occasional unfortunate telemarketer who bypassed his zapper) and blasted it into the microphone.

“Now that I have your attention, maybe we can get down to the business at hand and get this over with. I believe that Greyrider has some charges to make.”

“Yes, I do. Gentlemen, I charge Spider61 with endangering both the Southern Council and the entire Southern Movement by conspiracy to harbor fugitives from justice. These fugitives are

accused of multiple violations of federal, state, and local laws, including hate crimes and multiple murders. The fugitives that I speak of are Franklin Gore and Samantha Norris.”

There was stunned silence on the line that was finally broken by Mountaineer. “Damn, Spider,” he said admiringly around the mouthful of gum he always made sure to chew during voice conferences just so he could smack it loudly since he knew it irritated Greyrider. “How in the hell did you manage that?”

“Order!” demanded Pinetree before things could get out of hand again. “Spider61, how do you respond to these charges?”

“If you’re talking about endangering the Council and the movement, not guilty.”

“You know what I mean. Do you have Gore and Norris or not.”

“Well, not here in my pocket, but I do know where they are. My people have them.”

“See!” shouted Greyrider triumphantly. “See! I told you.”

“Why?” asked Southspeak. “Why do you have them? Why did you do this?”

“I saw an opportunity and I took it. Those two are already becoming folk heroes in South Carolina after what happened in Columbia. We need people like that for symbols to rally around, we need willing hands with no choice but to fight and plenty of motivation to do it for us, and we also need any information they might have, now that the whole thing has finally started.”

“Wait-wait-wait. Now that *what* whole thing has started?”

“The war; don’t you watch the news?”

Pinetree had to use his horn again before order was restored. Once he had silence, he sighed with frustration.

“Spider, as much as you want to think otherwise, a couple of riots doesn’t add up to a war.”

“No? Tell that to the people in Columbia. They’ve got a total of better than a hundred dead at last count. Protestors executed by the police, and police cars under such regular attack that they have to travel in convoys; buildings burned and bombs being tossed around like softballs. Shots are being fired day and night. It’s like the West Bank down there. Not just in Columbia or even South Carolina

either; you've got sporadic armed resistance cropping up all across Dixie, everywhere people have seen the footage. There've been guerrilla actions in both Virginias, in Texas, and in Alabama over what happened in Columbia already. You've got people fighting battles with agencies of the Federal and scalawag State Governments under the Confederate flag again, for God's sake! How can you say it's not a war?"

"That's just it," Greyrider broke in. "We are not about violence. Read our charter; it says that we support advancing the South by *peaceful and honorable* means; honorable means does not include racism, blowing up things and killing innocent police officers!"

"Innocent police officers? Innocent police officers do not execute people they disagree with, nor do they violate their oaths; you know the ones, to support and defend the Constitution?" His voice was hard. "Innocent police officers don't shoot a twenty year-old girl in cold blood for holding up a flag!"

"They were only doing their jobs!"

"So was Stalin's secret police; what's your point?"

"The point is that we can't afford to be seen as anti-government or racist!"

"How about bootlicking cowards? Can we afford to be seen as that?"

"I'm no coward!" Greyrider shouted. "I served my country!"

"You served the USA as a desk jockey in the Air Force," an infuriated Mountaineer broke in, unable to contain his ire. "You claimed to be serving the Confederacy too, and took an oath to that effect as I recall, but when that bunch of rag-heads attacked New York on nine-one-one, you forgot all about the things you'd promised, turned your back on our banner that you swore to defend, hiked your damned petticoats and ran back to your masters in Washington like a scalded dog!" His voice grew steadily louder, ignoring Pinetree's frantic calls for order. "You not only denied our nation and our flag, you tried to get everybody else to deny it, too!"

"I did what was right! Those terrorists were a threat to us all –"

Mountaineer still wouldn't let him finish.

“Those terrorists weren’t a threat to shit! They were never anything more than a dangerous nuisance in the larger scheme of things. What were they going to do – invade us? Hell, man, that pack of savages couldn’t even cobble together a real weapon, let alone an army! Yes, they killed some people, but how many of our freedoms did they take away, huh? Did those bastards take down our flag? Did they take our guns and our homes and limit what we could say and what we could hear? Did they take money and food out of our children’s mouths to give it away to a bunch of foreign shit-heads to get them to support their overseas adventures? Did they teach our children to despise their own heritage and hate their own fathers, and then send them off to die in every hellhole around the world? No – that was the United States that did that, under that damned candy-striped rag you’re so fond of.”

“People didn’t want to hear secession talk! I kept them onboard the movement!” Greyrider was shouting now too.

“You kept nothing! You thought you could steal a few members out of the rest of our organizations so you could get their dues money while you sold Dixie out for a profit! It didn’t work too well, did it? Our people stayed the course and kept their word and their allegiance, and left you out there in the cold.

“Besides, it doesn’t matter what people want to hear; there’s things that they need to hear. Looks to me like they’re listening right well down in Columbia, doesn’t it, you treasonous, cowardly son of a bitch?”

The whole thing degenerated yet again, with Southspeak jumping in on the side of Greyrider, telling Mountaineer that his profanity and name-calling were a disgrace to the South. Mountaineer, being from the Kentucky/West Virginia border area along the Tug Fork and having little patience with what he considered to be the over-emphasized manners of the deeper South, promptly and graphically suggested to Southspeak that he go and commit an unnatural and probably anatomically impossible act with himself.

Pinetree had to lay on the horn again several times to break up the resulting verbal melee. “Alright, I can see that this conversation

is going nowhere fast. Let's just get the basic facts down so we can vote on this.

"Spider, do you have these people?"

"Indirectly; they're in the custody of some associates of mine."

"What associates?" Greyrider broke in.

"That, along with their location, is irrelevant to this vote." The unsaid *'and none of your damned business,'* was nevertheless evident in his tone.

"Okay," Pinetree said with relief. "Now at least we're getting somewhere. Will these 'associates' of yours do what you tell them in regard to the couple in question?"

"Yes, they will." Knowing Sam, he wasn't actually certain they would do that at all, but he wasn't about to weaken his bargaining position by admitting it.

"What will be your response if the vote goes against you, and we order you to give them up?"

"That's not relevant," said Greyrider.

"On the contrary," Pinetree assured him. "I believe that it will be found to be *very* relevant. Spider?"

"I will respectfully refuse the council's request. I will not turn them over to the authorities."

Greyrider started to interrupt, only to be told that he was out of order.

"You do know," Pinetree addressed Spider again, "that if you refuse an lawfully voted on directive from the council that you will be expelled from it? That's one of the provisions we agreed to when we formed it."

"I am well aware of that – I was there, remember? I would regret it of course, but I would accept it. Please bear in mind, however, that it would leave me entirely free to pursue whatever course of action I deem necessary without any further interference from the Council."

"That's a damned scary thought," Pinetree muttered. "Okay, I'm cutting off debate and we will vote. Will this Confederate Council vote to order Spider61 to turn over the fugitives Gore and Norris to the proper legal authorities? Greyrider?"

"Yes. We can't be seen as lawbreakers and-

“Fine; your vote is thus recorded; now shut up. Mountaineer?”

“Hell no! This is the first *real* action I’ve seen since I joined this movement.”

“Southspeak?”

There was such a lengthy hesitation that Pinetree thought at first he hadn’t heard, and was about to prompt him a second time when he finally answered, “Yes. If we don’t, it will put us in an open state of war against the Federal Government, and I’m just not ready for that yet.” A pause, then, “I don’t think Dixie’s ready for it either.”

“Two yea’s and two nay’s; the deciding vote falls to me. I can’t tell you how much I wish to God it were otherwise.

“Whatever course of action we take here today concerning the fate of these two people will burn a bridge behind the Confederate movement. On one hand, if we refuse to order them to be given up, we will do much more than split the movement irrevocably between the militant and moderate factions. We will be, for all intents and purposes, declaring the will of the Federal Government to be null and void. This will mean war; since we don’t yet have conventional forces, it will mean the South being turned into Beirut, Belfast, or Palestine. Blood will run in our streets.

“On the other hand, if we vote to surrender them, the pair in question still won’t be surrendered, we will all be blamed for it regardless of how we voted, and the movement will still be split, losing its most activist, if most militant faction, who have determined to carry on hostilities independently if need be. Either way, it will be war, and we will all end up in it before it’s over.

“Yet when I review the tapes and reports of our people being slaughtered during those two days of violence, their blood cries out for justice, and it tells me that, like it or not, the war has already begun. If that is the case, then to give in is to surrender and make their sacrifices for nothing.

“If it is war, then never let it be said that Southerners shirked their duty. Our Colonial ancestors fought the First American Revolution to abolish tyranny, and our Confederate ancestors fought the Second Revolution to protect themselves from the same species of oppression; therefore, it is the decision of this council that we in

the South shall fight the Third Revolution, and take up arms against the forces of tyranny yet again. I vote yes.

“Does the opposition accept the will of the majority of council in this matter? Southspeak?”

“Yes,” he sighed, and his voice was trembling with fear like that of a condemned man on his way to the scaffold. “I don’t like it, but I accept it. I’ll stand with my people whatever comes, and God save us all.”

“Greyrider? Greyrider?”

The lines were suddenly filled with crashing sounds and shouted orders in the background, along with the rapid popping of gunfire. It was a simultaneous Federal raid on the entire Confederate Council who, by the laws of the government that had occupied their nation for a century and a half, had just committed themselves to a violent terrorist conspiracy. Their network had been hacked and totally compromised a month ago by one of their own, and all of their conversations had been secretly bugged and recorded in anticipation, their locations pin-pointed, and teams of Federal law enforcement officers from several agencies made ready. All the Council members were caught in one fell swoop...almost all.

As the door to Spider61’s point of transmission burst inward from the concrete-filled steel battering ram, he quickly pressed a numerical code on the keypad of his phone. The FBI agents poured into the room, only to find it empty of life: just a computer sitting on a plain desk. By the time they realized that this was not the call’s point of origin at all, but only a decoy, an encrypted routing station to conceal the true location of the caller, it was too late. The final button was pushed and the line that had carried the conversation back and forth through the computer relay now carried a signal that caused the machine to send out an electronic pulse. Instead of going to a printer, scanner, or other peripheral device, it sped through the molecules of insulated copper wire into a false plug in the wall, where it, in turn, tripped a tiny switch.

A few days ago, before the riots, the switch would have simply triggered a small homemade thermite device inside the computer case, which would have melted the hard drive far beyond recovery

without doing any other major damage as long as the fire was put out. Once the death reports began coming in from Columbia, however, Edge had altered the system considerably.

Inside a pair of large boxes sitting on either side of the computer desk, two five gallon carboys of gasoline, each wrapped in a duct tape bandoleer of twenty sticks of dynamite, detonated simultaneously.

The entire second floor of the two-story flat-roofed brick building shattered in the blast that broke windows for blocks around as the fireball lit up the night sky. The black-clad bodies of agents were blown out of windows to fall to earth like flaming comets, blown down the stairwell like human cannonballs, or simply blown apart. Those close to the building were pelted with a hail of falling bricks and broken glass, leaving them bleeding and half-buried in the street. The echoes of the blast had hardly died away when Jonathon Edge, AKA Spider61, stepped out of another building three blocks away and into a late-model Ford Escort.

After they arrived, the fire department would be forced to watch helplessly, unable to get near the building. The same signal that set off the initial explosion had also triggered a battery-powered timer that fed jolts of electricity to a sequential relay, both concealed in the basement. The timer interval was two minutes; then the timer would send the power, the relay would advance one contact, and another incendiary explosion, half the size of the initial one, would occur at a different location within the structure. There were five fiery blasts in all, occurring like clockwork. Long before the final one, which was set directly beneath the timer and relay assembly, emergency personnel had pulled well back, where they waited until the structure collapsed, and everything in it was reduced to charcoal and ash.

It would take them a while to sort that out.

‘Greyrider’, AKA Federal Bureau of Investigation Agent Richard Jameson was beside himself with the excitement of a well-laid plan coming together. A tall blonde man of slender, almost wiry build, his aquiline, clean-shaven features had been called ‘handsome’ by some and ‘sneaking’ by others. Right now they were

split in an irrepressible toothy grin of anticipation as he watched the phone that sat on his desk like a cat watching a mouse hole. He had infiltrated the movement years before, slowing and sabotaging it whenever possible. He had planned this particular operation himself – with Peters’ approval, of course – and used his own code that allowed him to participate in the encrypted Council meetings to hack into the system and trace the others. Edge didn’t know it, but he had walked right into his trap by harboring Gore and Norris. Jameson, watching for a chance like this, couldn’t have asked for a better situation. With the agents ready and the others committing themselves to treason, it was all open and shut. It had been years of work, but it was all worth it. Now, as the sole remaining member of the Council, he could shut down the entire Southern Nationalist Movement with no opposition. This was the stuff promotions were made of. Visions of agency directorships and presidential appointments danced in his head.

The phone finally jingled and he grabbed it before the first ring died away. “Jameson,” he identified himself with a hopeful tone.

The voice on the other end was neutral with no emotional inflection.

“Jameson? Peters here.”

Yes!

“Mr. Peters! I...I trust everything went well?”

There was silence for several seconds, then, “Not exactly.”

Jameson was flabbergasted, and not a little fearful. If anyone had escaped the raid, he was a dead man as soon as they put out the word – hundreds of angry Southerners would be after his head. Maybe even worse, there was Peters...

“I don’t understand, sir.” There was a quivering in his voice as he sensed his moment of triumph fading away into something else entirely. “I’ve been working on this case for a long time. What...went wrong?”

“Don’t piss in your pants, Jameson: we got them all. None of them are going to be paying you a visit in the middle of the night.”

A wave of relief swept over him. “Then what’s the problem?”

“The problem is, dumb ass, your intelligence was faulty.”

“But I thought you said you got them...”

“Oh, we got them alright; you just didn’t bother to find out their security arrangements. That Boggess nutcase in Kentucky fought back, and he, his wife, and his eight year-old daughter, along with a member of the BATF entry team, are all on morgue slabs right now. Then, *then*,” his voice became harsher, “your Mr. Jonathon Edge blew himself and at least a dozen of your fellow FBI agents all to hell, along with an entire building in Roanoke, Virginia. All because you couldn’t bother to correctly assess their threat level.”

The agent started to protest, but Peters cut him off.

“Shut up Jameson; just shut up. In case you didn’t know it, we can cover the rest- just the usual disappearances or, in the Boggess case, as a domestic murder-suicide with an accompanying house fire, but we can’t cover up something like that mess in Virginia with any degree of success. We’re going to have to spin it the right way, and make some modifications to the original plan. Now listen close, and God help you if you screw this up too...”

Chapter 22

The bottle was empty and its passing had left a warm glow upon the company. They were talking, sharing stories and generally unwinding. For both Frank and Samantha, it was the most relaxed they had been in days.

“Something I’ve been wondering, Sam,” Frank said as he sat on the couch beside Samantha, comforted by the closeness of her thigh against his. “If the flag we took the oath on is from the capitol, then that black re-enactor must have been one of your people. I’m curious; I’ve never heard of a colored Confederate before.”

“That’s because there’s not many, then or now. There were a lot of blacks in and around the Confederate Armies of course, but the vast majority of them were personal servants or hired teamsters, cooks, camp followers, and the like. For the most part, they weren’t combat soldiers, or even officially soldiers at all, if you get my drift. There were probably a few, but it was against regulations and just not the way things were done.

“A few years back, when the movement was trying to appeal to the masses by being ‘politically correct’, the leadership played up the black Confederate angle real heavy, and ended up blowing it all out of proportion.

“The whole thing was an exaggeration and a stupid idea from the start. You’ve got black friends, so you know what I’m talking about. Blacks and whites are two different peoples, and just because they live in the same place, it doesn’t follow that they’re the same. They’re not; everything about them as groups is different, including their socio-political outlook and agendas. It didn’t take too many years for those on both sides to see that, especially since you can’t separate the Cause from race: God knows we’ve tried but you just can’t. The divide was there for all to see at the capitol riot: plain as...well, black and white, with a tiny sprinkling of exceptions to the rule. That’s where Brian comes in.

“Brian ain’t your ordinary colored man; for one thing, he’s educated, and is, or at least was, a school teacher. He managed to

find that one of his ancestors had been with Jackson's men in some capacity, and he used that to enter the movement, where he became something of a fixture, probably because of the novelty of it all."

Samantha looked at him quizzically. "Why? I mean it seems obvious that he wouldn't exactly... 'fit in' is the phrase I'm looking for, I guess."

"He doesn't – not really. He's been valuable and trustworthy in the various associations, and we didn't treat him any different from any other man, but at the same time no one can deny the fact that he's different, and that difference is that he's a Negro. He's a smart man, so I'm sure he knows it as much as we do, and I know for a fact it bothers him some, especially since the natural racial divisions are beginning to take hold and come out into the open once again.

"He wasn't even supposed to be here as part of the military arm – no way we would trust him that much, considering the conflict of interest he's sure to have and the trouble the presence of a colored man this deep inside would cause with some of the other men. The problem is that, when he got carried away and accidentally killed that cop you shot during the riot, he bit off more than he could chew. He was on the run with no place to go and a probable death sentence hanging over his head when he called, scared and begging for help. I suspect I might have been wrong to let him come so close to the inner circle, but I just couldn't bring myself to leave him out there to hang; now we're both stuck." He shook his head. "To minimize any possible damage, I didn't bring him here; instead I put him under the wing of one of my best men: a real hard-case who'll train him and more importantly, watch him. Brian doesn't know about the farm, and I intend to keep it that way. He could be useful at times just by the fact of being black, but I don't see how this'll ever work in the long run."

"I'm surprised he stays," she said. Sam pursed his lips and Frank looked the other way. "What? What did I say?"

"You're a perceptive man, Frank; you want to tell her, or do you want me to?"

"Thanks," the ex-cop muttered sarcastically before turning back towards Samantha. "Basically, in a situation like this, even more

than a conventional war, desertion can't be allowed to become an option for *anyone*, particularly anyone close to the inside, as this Brian is, and as we are now. Am I right?" he asked, looking at Sam as the farmer-cum-guerrilla chieftain nodded his agreement. "Once in, there's no getting out – everyone's here till the end: Brian, Sam...and us. Of course, with us I suppose it doesn't matter so much; I mean, where else can we go?"

"So what happens to deserters?" she persisted, even though she already had a pretty good idea of the answer.

"One way or another, they'll be executed. If the Feds don't get them, we will," Sam told her.

"Oh."

Someone looked at the clock on the wall, muttered something about the eleven o'clock news, and got up and switched on the big screen TV in the corner. An image of roaring flames filled the screen.

Conversation ceased and they sat in stunned silence listening to the news bulletin. A female reporter with dark hair was standing in front of a fire truck, while behind it, a blazing inferno lit up the night sky. The crackling of radios and the flashing red lights lent their own bizarre atmosphere to the scene of destruction.

"An FBI raid ended in disaster in Roanoke tonight, as a suspected terrorist apparently blew himself up to escape capture. The resulting explosion took the lives of at least five agents and critically wounded several others. Seven are still reported missing, but the Bureau doesn't hold out much hope for their safe recovery. They are thought to be trapped in the ruins of the building that you see burning behind me, along with the body of white supremacist and neo-confederate terrorist, Jonathon Edge, who authorities say initiated the explosion.

Someone in the room swore.

The FBI spokesman told us that Edge, a member of the most militant branch of the neo-confederates, was suspected of having been one of the main instigators of the Columbia riots and of making bombs to commit future acts of terrorism. When the agents raided the bomb factory, it is believed that Edge detonated at least one

explosive device, which may have set off a chain reaction, destroying the entire structure. The explosions continued for nearly an hour, preventing emergency personnel from approaching the building until it was totally engulfed.

Fire officials tell us that, due to the massive level of destruction, it may take days or weeks to determine the exact number and identities of the dead...

“Good Lord,” Sam murmured quietly, as the others looked on, mute with shock. “Oh, good Lord!”

It was Frank who spoke first. “I’m sorry, Sam. I’m really sorry.”

The others offered similar expressions of sympathy. Finally Jim asked the question that was on all their minds. “So, where does that leave us, then?”

Sam looked around, seeing all their eyes on him. They looked lost and on the verge of panic. Realizing that the situation was hanging by a thread, he immediately took charge.

“Where that leaves us is ready for bed; too much has happened in too short of a time to make sense of it right now, as tired as everyone is. As of now, we are in condition red. All alcohol is cut off, period – on duty and off. All personnel not involved in today’s mission are on guard duty: half on watch and half asleep, four hours on and four off. First watch gas up the vehicles in case we have to bug out.

“People, the good news is that, as far as I know, nobody but John knew about this location, and it doesn’t look like he’s going to be talking about it much. *Damn it!*” His voice caught in his throat and his fists clenched for an instant as he fought for control before continuing. “The bad news is that I don’t know that for sure, so we stay prepared. Anything out of the ordinary, and I mean *anything*, you sound the alarm.”

“Which watch do you want us to take?” Samantha asked, and Frank’s eyes shone with pride. He had been unsure how she was going to take his and Sam’s blunt assessment of their situation. “We’ve taken the oath, so we’re as much a part of this as anyone else here. Maybe more; they’re hunting us a lot harder.”

Sam shook his head. “Neither; you two have been through the grind and you’re dead on your feet; hell, so am I.”

“I can handle it.” Frank told him.

“Not to my satisfaction, you can’t. You both look like hell, not to put too fine a point on it, and I won’t jeopardize us all by putting someone that tired to watch over us at a time like this.” Sam raised his hand to forestall any argument. “You’re part of the Confederate Army Provisional now, and I’m your immediate superior. Right now, I’m giving you two your first order: go to bed. The guest rooms are at the top of the stairs, first two doors on the right. There’s a pair of full-sized beds in both of them, so y’all just make your own arrangements and help yourselves; I’ve got other things to do.” He pointed a thick finger at the steps. “Now, soldiers!”

Frank saw he wasn’t going to win, so he threw an intentionally sloppy salute, took Samantha’s arm, and headed upstairs.

Once they reached the top, he turned to her. “Which would you like; left or right?”

“You pick.”

“Well, I’ve always tended to lean toward the right; at least that’s what they tell me.”

“Good. Right’s where *we’ll* stay then.” With that, she opened the door and led the way in, leaving a startled Frank following behind. She turned to face him as he entered, and noted his somewhat bewildered look.

“You don’t mind sharing a room again, do you? At least this time, with two beds it won’t be as crowded.”

“No,” he answered hurriedly, “not at all. I was just...pleasantly surprised, I guess.”

She smiled and opened her arms, and he embraced her, burying his face in her hair and reveling in the smell of her.

“Can I tell you something, Frank? Promise you won’t laugh at me.”

He kissed her on the forehead. “I promise. What is it?”

“I’m scared to be alone, away from you. I know it’s silly, but I’m afraid if I let you out of my sight, I may never see you again. I love you, but it’s more than that. It’s like I’m a ship and you’re like my anchor; you’re all that keeps me from going adrift in this chaos around us.”

“Let’s sit down,” he said, guiding her to the bed where they perched side by side on the edge, his right arm around her slender waist and her hands holding his left. He looked into her eyes as he spoke.

“Sammie, I’m scared too, just the same way you are. Other than this Cause we now serve, we have nothing besides each other. I’ve known you for two days, and it’s like I’ve loved you forever. I can’t imagine life without you now.

“I won’t lie to you, honey; we’ve got good reason to be scared, especially considering the circumstances with everything falling apart no sooner than we get here. I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

She returned his stare searchingly. “You said you wouldn’t lie to me, and now I want you to tell me the truth; how long do you think we have before they catch us and kill us?”

He frantically searched for something optimistic to tell her, something that might have a glint of hope, but found nothing. His shoulders slumped.

“A week if we’re lucky; maybe – just *maybe* – a month or two if we’re exceptionally fortunate. It’s more likely to be hours or days, considering that the people in this movement seem to be more interested in fighting each other than for their independence. And after this thing tonight with Edge, I just don’t know. To be honest, I’m surprised they haven’t caught up with us already. It sure hasn’t been for want of trying on their part.”

“We’re not going to have much time together before...are we?”

“No, honey, not likely.”

“*Damn* this craziness!” She was almost shouting in frustration. “I find the first good thing in my life, the first *real* thing, and I can’t even have the time to enjoy it! All those dreams every little girl has of white gowns and big churches and honeymoons with Mr. Right, only now that he’s here, that’s never going to happen! *Shit!*” She pounded her fist hard on the bed. “It’s not fair!”

Staring at the floor, he said, “You’re right; it’s not fair. I would have loved to have been able to give you all that.”

She leaned her head on his shoulder. "I know you would have." Sighing, she said, "Just listen to me. It's almost funny, the way the world has been turned upside down. If anyone had told me that I would have fallen in love in hours and been talking about a wedding in days, I'd have laughed them out of the room before...before all this. Now it's like a time-warp or something, where the rest of our lives are being compressed into a few days." When Frank didn't answer, she raised her head to see him regarding her oddly. It was almost as if she could hear the wheels turning in his mind. "What's wrong? Why are you looking at me that way?"

"Nothing..."

"Don't 'nothing' me, Franklin Gore! What are you up to?"

"You'll think I'm crazy."

"I've *known* you were crazy," she said with a smile, "ever since the first time I saw you in action in a certain parking garage. We're both crazy; the whole world's gone crazy from where I sit. Now tell me!"

"What does crazy mean, Sammie?" he asked breathlessly.

"Doesn't it mean that normality is suspended, and the rules don't work anymore, isn't that right?"

She nodded, still wondering what he was getting at.

"Alright, if the world's crazy and everything and everybody is crazy, then let's be crazy too!" In an instant he had slid off the bed and onto one knee on the floor before her, grasping both her hands in his. "Sammie, I love you. I love you like I've never loved anyone before, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you, however long that might be.

"Will you marry me? Will you be my wife?"

Samantha gaped, gulped, and gaped again as she fought for an answer. The trouble was that it was difficult to find words when she couldn't even get hold of her thoughts that swirled around inside her head like autumn leaves in a whirlwind. This was the most insane idea she'd ever heard of during the most insane time she could imagine. Frank was still staring up at her expectantly. She had to say something. Yes, it was an insane idea and an insane time...time; *that* was the key word, and the one thing that they didn't have to waste.

A beautiful smile spread across her face. “Yes, Frank,” she said softly. “I will marry you. You’re right, this is crazy, but I guess then we’ll be crazy together. All I know is that I love you, and there’s no sense wasting time we don’t have. I’m yours; till death do us part, be it tomorrow or in a hundred years.” A single tear trickled down her cheek, and she flung her arms around him where he knelt and pulled him to her, pressing his head into her bosom and lowering her cheek to his hair. “I love you! Oh, God, how I love you!”

With his ear pressed into the softness of her breast, he could hear her heart beating, and he thought it was the most wonderful and amazing sound.

DAY 4

Chapter 23

Sam squeezed his eyes tight as if to block out the phone's ringing. When it wouldn't stop, he rolled over out of a deep sleep and fumbled for the receiver. Squinting at the clock, he could barely make out the red LED numbers registering 3:04 am.

"Hello?" he mumbled.

"Sorry to wake you, but we've got a little problem. It's our board of directors."

It was Edge. Sam was wide-awake now.

"I thought you were..." he began, then stopped himself, lest he trigger ECHALON by using the wrong keyword. "*Son of a bitch!* What happened?" Sam cackled with joy, then added, "or, knowing you, maybe I should ask where you're calling from?"

"There's been a successful hostile takeover, I'm afraid. I was the only hold-out, so they're keeping the others while I'm out on the street."

As he realized the import of the message, Sam cursed wholeheartedly. "Can I do anything to help?"

"Yes, you can. I need some transportation; I've taken mine as far as I dare. Nothing first class; I prefer to travel coach."

"Tell me where to meet you."

The first streaks of dawn began to paint the eastern sky above the tall pines and hardwoods, but the sun was not yet visible on the horizon when a blue Jeep Wrangler pulled into the North Carolina rest area along Interstate 77. Its driver bypassed the line of idling semi's, where the waking truckers were preparing to get back on the road, and headed for the auto parking lot. Only a handful of cars were there, and their occupants, either homeless and living out of their vehicles or strung out from night driving and pausing for a bathroom break, gave the newcomer no more than a cursory glance.

A slender young woman with long dark hair, a sweatshirt, and faded jeans, and looking really too young to be behind the wheel, got out and walked to the restroom. Exiting a few moments later, she seemed to decide to stretch her legs, and walked casually around the brick building, across the lot, and into the thin ring of trees on this side of the woven wire fence that separated out the state-owned area from the rest of the forest. Following an unobtrusive glance to see that no one was behind her, she puckered her lips and whistled the first line of *'Dixie'*.

Immediately from the darkness beneath the trees on the outside of the fence came an answering whistle, sounding the notes of the second line. Jonathon Edge stepped out of the woods and climbed over the short fence.

"Mr. Edge?" said the girl. "It's an honor to meet you. I'm Donna Waddell. Sam sent me."

He took her proffered hand.

"The honor is all mine, ma'am."

Back in the parking lot, no one paid any attention to what looked to be a father and his teenaged daughter as they climbed into the Wrangler.

Samantha and Frank came down stairs to the smell of frying jowl bacon to find Sam quietly singing along to *'Stonewall Jackson's Way'* as it played on the CD.

"You seem to be in a good mood this morning," Samantha observed as the source of the impromptu musical entertainment was looking out one of the windows in front of the house with a broad grin on his face.

"Yes, ma'am," he agreed. "I truly am. And the reason why is pulling up the drive right now." He motioned for them to follow him. "Come on. There's somebody I want you two to meet."

They stepped out onto the porch just as the blue Jeep came to a stop next to the house. A very young-looking girl who somehow seemed familiar to Frank, although he was reasonably certain he'd never seen her before, exited the driver's seat. A tall, fifty-something man with iron gray hair and a matching, neatly trimmed military

moustache climbed out of the passenger side. As he walked toward them, it was obvious from both his form and his movement that he was in excellent physical shape.

The girl, her eyes still concealed by the over-sized sunglasses that had been fighting the rising sun's glare, approached them, her lower lip trembling. "U-uncle Sam..."

Sam spread his powerful arms.

"Come here, honey."

She flew to him and he enfolded her slight form. Burying her face in his white T-shirt, she sobbed violently.

"It's okay, baby. It's okay."

"Th-they...they..."

"I know," he reassured her, "I know. Let's go in and talk about it." Gently, an arm still around her, he led her back inside, leaving the others on the porch. After watching them leave, her passenger removed his own sunglasses revealing a pair of cold, calculating blue eyes, and extended his hand toward Samantha.

"Miss Norris, you're even lovelier in person than you are on TV."

"And you are...?" she inquired politely, taking his hand.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. Where are my manners? I'm Jonathon Edge."

As he released her hand to reach for Frank's, the stunning revelation that she was talking to a dead man left Samantha slightly weak in the knees.

"And you must be the infamous Frank Gore."

Frank nodded as he shook hands. "Pleased to meet you. I see that the reports of your demise have been greatly exaggerated."

"Something that pleases me to no end, I can assure you. Shall we go inside?"

When they entered, Sam was holding the girl's hands in both of his. Her crying had stopped, but she was visibly shaken and her eyes, where she had removed the dark glasses, were red and bloodshot. Sam released her hands and gave her a final pat on the shoulder as she wiped at her face with the back of her hand.

“Samantha, Frank; I’d like you to meet my Goddaughter, Donna Wadell. Donna, this is Samantha Norris and Frank Gore. And this son of a gun,” he said, voice rising as he turned toward Jonathon Edge, “you’ve already met.

“How the hell are you, John? Leave it to you to show up just in time for breakfast!”

As the two men clasped hands and pounded each other on the back exuberantly, the girl extended her own hand shyly towards Frank.

“It’s an honor to meet you, Officer Gore.”

“Just plain Frank, please ma’am – I’m not an officer anymore – and the honor is all mine.” He looked at her quizzically. “If you don’t mind me asking, have we met? There’s something about you that looks familiar, like maybe you favor someone I’ve seen.”

The girl made a choking sound, but her eyes never left his. “I’m told I look like my sister in the face, and you saw her once. Her name was Linda Wadell. She d-died at the capitol.”

The realization hit Frank like a hammer. “She was the girl who saved the colors.” Donna nodded agreement, and Frank’s lips tightened as he blinked away the moisture that had suddenly welled up in his own eyes.

“I’m sorry, Donna. For what it’s worth, your sister was one courageous lady. I’ve never seen anything like what she did. If there’s some kind of Valhalla, a special hall for heroes in Heaven, she’s sitting at the head of the table right now.”

“Coming from someone like you, that means a lot.” She turned to Samantha. “It is truly an honor to meet you too, Miss Norris. You stood up and told the truth about what happened to my sister, and I won’t ever forget that.”

The tears were already flowing down Sammie’s face as she ignored the girl’s hand and hugged her tightly, and Donna responded in kind.

“Please,” the reporter insisted through her tears, “call me Samantha.” She turned to Frank. “Would you mind if we excuse ourselves for a while? I think that we both need some woman to woman talk.”

“No, of course not,” he assured her as the pair turned towards the parlor. “I’ll holler when they put breakfast out.”

Frank turned his attention back towards the two men, only to find them already arguing.

“Where the hell do you get off recruiting that little girl?” Sam was red in the face. “Damn it, she’s not old enough for this!”

“She’s free, white and eighteen,” Edge replied coolly, “and she asked to join up. I won’t turn down anybody who’s ready and willing. If you didn’t want her recruited, you should’ve ordered her not to join.”

“Do you think I *haven’t* ordered her? I’ve told her time and time again. Her family’s already lost one girl, and that’s one too many, but she’s too hard-headed to listen to reason!”

“Then you shouldn’t have sent her after me! She asked me and I gave her my word she could join; and I won’t back down on my word.”

“She’s *my* Goddaughter!”

“By the time this thing is over, it’ll take more than Godchildren in the ranks; *everybody*, like the sailors say about women in port; eight to eighty, blind, crippled or crazy; *everybody* is going to be needed to fill our ranks if we’re going to win this thing. If we’re not ready to do that, let’s just call up the Feds and surrender right now, and avoid all the bloodshed.”

“But she’s just a girl,” Sam said lamely, defeat in his voice.

Edge snorted in derision. “Huh! I noticed that Samantha Norris is female enough, and you were wanting to recruit her.” He looked searchingly at Sam. “As a matter of fact, knowing you like I do, I’ll bet you a hundred-dollar bill that you went ahead and recruited them both and swore them in, in spite of me telling you to wait until I checked them out first.”

Sam spread his hands innocently. “Hey, I thought you were dead, remember? What was I supposed to do, go buy a Ouija board so I could get your approval first?”

Frank noticed that Sam didn’t mention the fact that he had sworn them in *before* he had heard of Edge’s alleged death.

Edge wasn't done yet. "Let me ask you this then, as if I didn't already know the answer: what flag did you use to swear them in with?"

"The Battle Flag that was recovered following the Capitol Riot." Edge's face began coloring this time, and Sam cut him off before he could speak. "I know, I know; everything has to be the official 3rd National Confederate Flag now, but damn it, this one's special, considering whose blood stains are on it."

"That's just it: it's special all right, especially to you. You're bound and determined to view this struggle individually instead of collectively. This is not a feud; this is a war for the independence and re-establishment of the Confederate States of America as its own nation. We have to think like nationalists ourselves and make our people think like nationalists. We have to eat, drink, and breathe nationalism. The only way to do that is to use our nation's flag – the 3rd National adopted by act of the last sitting Confederate Congress – as the main rallying point."

He waved a hand at the farmer, refusing to allow him to interrupt. "I already know what you're going to say, and there's not a blasted thing wrong with the Battle Flag as a symbol of the South in general and of defiance toward Federal authority, but this thing is bigger than that. The 3rd National is the official Flag of the CSA, and that's the one we need to get the people rallying around!"

"Damn it, John! You know the Battle Flag has become the defacto symbol of Dixie..."

As the argument continued, Frank began to expect that such spirited 'discussions' over what seemed, at least to him, to be trivialities, and the regular taking of uncoordinated, independent actions were normal for these two, and probably for the movement as a whole, which would go a long way toward explaining its fragmented state. The lack of teamwork, and the readiness and willingness to go after each other on the slightest pretext not only disappointed him, but it also made him recall his uneasiness on the subject from the night before. How they would survive, let alone win with this kind of disorganized infighting, was beyond him. He shook

his head, and then his keen ears caught the rumble of a motor with a bad exhaust in the distance.

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” he interrupted with a practiced authoritative voice while pointing in the direction of the window towards the drive, “but you might want to consider continuing the bull session another time. I think we’re about to have some more visitors.”

Both men looked up, startled by his voice and somewhat embarrassed by the faintest hint of sarcasm in it, and allowed their gazes to follow the direction of his pointing finger.

Billy raised his nose and sniffed the air like a dog as he squeezed himself out of the truck and set his scuffed size-fourteen steel-toed boots on Sam’s gravel drive.

“My, my, my! I can smell breakfast cookin’ all the way out here.”

“Is eating the only thing you ever think about?” Tommy grumbled back as he climbed out the other side. “The only thing I ever smell out here is hog shit; you plan on eating that too? Not that it would surprise me a whole lot!”

Billy attempted a superior, snotty glare, looking thoroughly ridiculous in the process. “You, little man, are simply jealous of my amazin’ olfactory abilities. Besides, I’ve been around you long enough to learn to ignore the smell of shit when there’s hog jowls a’ cookin’!”

“Well,” Sam declared in a loud voice as he stepped out onto the porch, followed by Edge and Frank, “it’ll take more than hog jowls to feed you, boy. Since you’re here, I reckon I’ll drive about a dozen head around to the kitchen so Mrs. Hill can butcher them out to feed you!”

“Ahh!” Billy exclaimed, rubbing his enormous gut. “Now you’re talkin’ my language!”

Spotting the ex-cop, the giant waved an old gym bag in his direction. “Well, if it ain’t the infamous ‘Ossifer’ Gore, the notorious renegade of Columbia! If it’s all right with ‘Uncle Sam’ there, we’ve

got somethin' for you. Looks like you're clean – welcome to the club!”

Once Frank had tucked the .45 into one of his coverall pockets, deposited his knives in the other, and hung the old locket around his neck once again, he felt much more comfortable. At least he had a little more control over his destiny now; he suspected that, somewhere along the line, he might need it.

Knowing the reaction it would provoke, he turned to Sam and produced the linoleum knife and the bolt. “Here; I think these belong to you.”

Sam looked down at the blade in his hand with total shock, and not a little horror to think his prisoner had been running around armed all this time.

“How in the hell –”

Frank winked broadly and went inside without saying a word, and Sam stood silently, looking after him. Gore had just gone up another notch in his estimation.

I've got the feeling that son of a gun will go far...if he lives long enough.

Chapter 24

Samantha and Donna sat on the same sofa where she and Frank had listened to Sam the evening before. Their tears had dried and, united by the same events that had brought her and Frank together, they now sat chatting familiarly as if they'd known each other for years. In the back of her mind, Sammie reflected that it was curious how quickly people could take to one another when driven by stress, danger and necessity. They almost seemed more like sisters than merely first acquaintances. The fact that Donna was confiding in the older woman as she would have her sister, had she been alive, reinforced the impression. However, considering the abnormal mental maturity of the girl, at least in the matter of the present conflict, Sammie wondered which of them was really the elder.

"So," Donna asked, "Uncle Sam swore you in too?"

"Last night; but what's this 'too' stuff? Did he swear you in as...uh..."

"Young as I am?" the girl completed the sentence. "I *am* eighteen, although," she said, looking down at herself as she spoke with resignation heavy in her voice, "a lot of people don't think so because of how I look. It's hard to be taken seriously when you've got the body of a thirteen year old."

The pain in that matter-of-fact tone brought back uncomfortable memories of a certain reporter's high school days as a gangling collection of skinny arms and legs and a mouth full of braces. Samantha squirmed uncomfortably.

"I know how you feel," Samantha reassured her. "I was a late bloomer myself."

"Really?"

"Really. But never mind about that. Did he swear you in?"

Donna chuckled. "Uncle Sam wouldn't hear of it; he thinks I'm made of eggshells, and he's been scared to death especially since my sister... was killed, you know. He only asks me to run low-risk ops once in a while, like when I picked up Mr. Edge this morning, because he's afraid I'll go off and do something on my own if he

doesn't keep me occupied. So, while I was alone with my passenger on the way here, I got him to promise me that they'd swear me in as a full-time soldier in the Confederate Army Provisional. You know how Southern men are when it comes to giving their word."

"You know, that's something I've been wondering about. From what I know of traditional Southern men, I'd think they wouldn't want us 'weak females' anywhere near the action, let alone accept us as guerrilla soldiers."

"Normally they wouldn't," she answered, her voice growing hot with anger. "They'd have a hemorrhage at the thought of it, if they didn't need the extra hands so badly. If the majority of Southern men had the guts to do their own fighting, instead of being reduced to nutless, spineless pantywaists, women wouldn't have to step in and fight in their places. How many men down here today have got the...the plain, raw, old-fashioned *manhood* of Uncle Sam and your Frank, and those others out there?"

Samantha blew out her breath. "Not many, I'm afraid. Frank tried to tell me once that he wasn't anything special, and that there were a lot of men like him around, but he was wrong. I've seen men, or what *passes* for men around me all my life, and I know how shallow, selfish, cowardly, and sometimes downright *effeminate* they can be. I've met very few people anyways near like Frank, at least until I got involved in this thing. The men around me now seem like something out of an ancient history book or a fairy tale. It's such a change, I suppose, because these men are not afraid to *be* men."

After a huge breakfast, Frank made the announcement.

"Sam, can you possibly get a preacher out here without endangering the whole works?"

"Sure," he answered, sipping a cup of coffee. "I could probably do that. What do you need one for, if you don't mind me asking? I figured you were already saved."

Frank looked over at Samantha, who smiled, knowing as well as he did the reaction they were about to provoke. He turned back to Sam. "We want to get married. Today, if possible."

Sam choked on his coffee, coughed, and sprayed it across the table where it splattered the two bikers, eliciting a stream of curses from the ever-irascible Tommy.

Once Sam recovered his breath, he said, “You two are *crazy!*”

“You’re right; we both decided that last night,” Samantha said, smiling at seeing him so disconcerted. “We thought it made us a perfect match.”

“Well, I think it’s wonderful!” Donna exclaimed, ignoring her Godfather’s sputtering. “Congratulations Samantha!”

“What would you know about it?” snapped Sam. “Look, we’re in a war, for God’s sake...”

“Congratulations, bro’!” Billy roared, clapping Frank on the shoulder nearly hard enough to knock him out of his chair.

Instantly, the two bikers and all three of the guards at the table – Jim, Mark, and Ben were pounding the ex-cop’s back and wringing his hand. Samantha had turned to Donna.

“Donna, would you be my maid of honor?”

“Oh, I’d love to!” she squealed, clapping her hands in excitement. “But who’s going to give you away?”

Samantha looked at Sam, who was still sputtering.

“I’m hoping your Godfather will do it. How about it, Sam; will you do me the honor of standing in for my father?” She fixed him with her most irresistible smile. “Please?”

Sam froze with his mouth still open in the middle of another complaint. Red faced, he sat there gaping, trying to think of something to say as the bikers grinned and elbowed one another, his Goddaughter gave him her best angelic ‘gotcha’ look, and his own men’s faces twisted in amusement as they fought hard not to laugh at his predicament. He blinked rapidly; the fact that he suddenly seemed to have dust or something in his eyes wasn’t helping matters much either.

In desperation, he turned to Jonathon Edge for help; only to see that his commander seemed to be as amused by the situation as all the others. His usual coolness gone, Edge spread his hands in a helpless gesture and smiled.

“I think you’ve already lost this fight. You might as well send one of your boys for the preacher.” Edge didn’t mention either the immediate morale boost or the tremendous propaganda value of such an event, but he was already dissecting the possibilities in his mind. This couldn’t be better if he had planned it.

Sam blew out his breath, defeated. “Alright, alright!” he growled. “Evidently I’m surrounded by a bunch of nuts, so I guess I’ll have to humor you along.

“Samantha, I’d be honored to stand in for your father. I see you don’t have a wedding dress packed, so would you do me the honor, in turn, of wearing the dress my late wife wore when she married me? We never had children, and I think that, since I’m going to be standing in for your father, she would have wanted you to wear it.”

“Oh Sam,” Samantha said, her voice quivering with emotion, “I’d be honored. Thank you so much.”

Donna spoke up in a quiet voice. “Frank; do you have a ring for this lady?”

“No, I’m afraid I don’t.” He sighed. “Do you have any suggestions?”

“Yes, I do. Here.” She slipped off a narrow gold band with a tiny diamond in the center, and placed it in his hand. “It’s not exactly a wedding ring, but it belonged to my sister, Linda. You two are the ones who stood up and told the truth about her, and I’d like you to have it.”

Samantha was on the verge of crying out loud at the gesture, and many of the men in the room were misty-eyed as well. Frank looked at the ring a moment, then took Donna’s hands in his.

“This means more to me than I can ever say. A gift from the heart is the greatest gift of all. As horrible as what happened at the capitol was, in a way it was your Linda’s act of courage that ultimately brought Sammie and I together. It’s only fitting that she be a part of this ceremony, because I promise you that she will always be a part of us. Thank you, Donna.”

Donna began to cry, and first hugged Frank, and then Samantha, who also embraced Frank, before both women turned on Sam and hugged him too.

Billy turned to Tommy, raised an eyebrow, grinned, and spread his arms towards his smaller companion.

“Don’t even think about it you big dumb ass!” the little biker hissed under his breath, grabbing his fork and brandishing it threateningly.

The day had been a madhouse. Other than the regular guard watching the monitors, the war seemed forgotten, with everyone running this way and that making preparations. Samantha immediately disappeared under Donna’s ministrations, the silent Mrs. Hill began cooking furiously, the bikers took off back toward Columbia after the preacher, and Sam, wanting everything to be just right, shouted orders to all and sundry until he saw that no one was paying any attention to him. In a huff, he grabbed Frank, who was very accurately playing the part of the bewildered groom, and Jonathon Edge, along with a trio of beers (“Special occasion and anyway, I need one!” he declared.), and led the party to the porch on the shady side of the house.

“At least we’ll be out of the damned way!”

Frank thought the scene on the front lawn seemed surreal; the dappled sunshine was patterning through the branches of the giant oaks as their leaves waved gently in the breeze that seemed to start just for the occasion, taking the edge off the afternoon heat. Sam had rounded up a suit and tie for him that more or less fit, and he stood fidgeting on the green lawn. Edge stood beside him playing the role of the best man, in borrowed clothes just like the groom. The other men stood talking quietly, except for Billy, who was doing his best to give Frank a hard way to go.

“Last chance, man,” he said with exaggerated excitement as he dangled the keys to the pickup in front of the groom’s nose. “Take my keys; take my truck! Run while you can! It’s still not too late!”

“Shut up!” Tommy whispered urgently. “Here they come.”

The screen door opened, and the old preacher in his worn black suit came out, led by his prominent nose. Reverend John Gibson, an old friend of Sam’s, was nearly eighty, a tall string-bean of a man

with a surprisingly full head of white hair combed straight back. His weathered complexion and calloused hands spoke eloquently of the years he had spent in the fields under the hot Southern sun. Bible firmly in hand, he strode across the yard and took his place before the wedding party. No sooner had he settled, than the door opened again. Sam, done up in his Sunday best, stepped onto the porch and held the door open.

The sunlight made the white wedding gown seem to glow...or maybe it was just the woman within it. Either way, Frank's heart skipped a beat. The other men unconsciously straightened up to attention.

With the long train dragging behind her, Samantha made her way down the steps and across the lawn on Sam's arm. The journey seemed to take forever, and as she looked out through the lace, she had trouble convincing herself that this whole thing wasn't a dream. Everything seemed strange, from the beautiful pattern of the light to the mixture of clothes worn by the guests: everything from suits to biker's denim, with the occasional butt of a pistol sticking out here and there.

From inside the house, the music from the stereo echoed softly across the yard. They didn't have a copy of the wedding march, so they settled for a slow rendition of *'Dixie'*.

No one complained.

As she stopped beside him, Frank stared in love-struck awe at Sammie's profile through the filter of her veil. Conscious of his attention she looked back at him for a moment, then shyly dropped her gaze.

Frank's heart melted; then the preacher cleared his throat. Reluctantly, the ex-cop tore his eyes from his bride to face the man of the cloth.

In a practiced voice that was strong for his obvious age, the old man began what seemed to be a standard wedding ceremony, asking who gives this woman and explaining the sanctity of the covenant of marriage, when he stopped briefly and looked around.

"Today is a special day, in more ways than one. We have here before us a woman and a man who, in a time of violence and moral

depravity, have chosen to bind themselves lawfully in the inviolate bonds of matrimony, according to the Word of Almighty God. In a time of war, and of blood and dying, they have demonstrated to us today that love, truly, does conquer all.

“Samantha Norris; do you take Frank Gore to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, to love, honor, and obey, in sickness and in health, all the days of your lives, until death do you part?”

Sammie looked into Frank’s expectant eyes. “I do.”

“Franklin Gore, do you take Samantha Norris to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, to love, honor, and cherish, in sickness and in health, all the days of your lives, until death do you part?”

“I do.”

“Then, by the power vested in me as a humble servant of Jesus Christ, by the State of South Carolina,” he paused, and looked at Sam with a smile, “and by the Confederate Army, Provisional, I hereby pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Gently Frank lifted her veil and lowered his face to meet her upturned lips. He had never tasted anything so sweet.

The air was split by a loud *pop*.

In a single motion, Frank whipped a startled Samantha behind him and drew his .45, pointing it at the source of the sound. Several other pistols followed him, lagging only by the slightest margin.

Staring down the barrels, a sheepish Billy was without his smile for once. The champagne from the bottle whose opening had been the source of the noise was foaming unnoticed over his hairy hand.

The multiple intake of breath was audible as the men holstered their weapons. The festivities resumed, subdued despite the forced laughter. A cloud crossed the sun.

Somehow, they all knew that something had gone out of the day.

Neil Larson put gentle pressure on the electric drill as he made a small hole in the lid of the one-gallon gasoline can while resting the work on a scrap piece of 2 X 4. He’d made sure of that; his wife would throw a real hissy if he inadvertently drilled into her new

kitchen table, as he had learned the hard way from a previous project or two. Still, it beat the devil out of working in the garage until he had to, which had no air conditioning to neuter the stifling heat.

Larson had often been described, uncharitably if accurately, as looking as starved and mean as a junkyard rat. At first glance, he gave the appearance of being unusually slender, but looks were deceiving. The lean, rosy muscles that plainly showed under his skin were hard and surprisingly strong, and he worked at keeping them that way. He kept the dark hair that receded into a sparse widow's peak cut short and his sideburns neatly trimmed. His face was long and weathered, and bore the hard-earned scars of a lifetime of not backing down from anything. His most striking feature was his eyes, as blue and hot as gas flames. Very few people who looked deeply into them ever forgot Neil Larson.

In one way, he was a lot like Jonathon Edge, and even Ronald Peters, truth be told: he had power, understood it, and was not in the least afraid to use it.

He also understood responsibility; that's why he was going to do this one himself rather than risking one of his men. Launching an attack on the strength of a phone call from an old friend was definitely not standard operating procedure for Larson. This was his call, so it was his risk. Well, not entirely; he had given one of his best men Sam's name so, if it turned out to be a set-up, his old buddy wouldn't survive him by very long.

If it was legit, however, it would put Neil in a great bargaining position, and he had already begun to develop an idea of what he wanted in return.

Finishing a second hole, he set the drill aside, and picked up a woodscrew with his surgically gloved hands, then started it through one of the holes until the point protruded from the inside of the lid. He reached over and grabbed a short piece of half-inch PVC pipe he had previously assembled.

The pipe had caps cemented on each end to contain the gunpowder it was filled with. Before sealing completely, he had inserted a large, homemade firecracker down into the explosive, whose long fuse was glued in place and now protruded from one of

two holes in one end cap that he had drilled before gluing it down, making a small plastic pipe bomb. He picked up a tube of silicone and ran a bead around the top of the PVC cap that held the fuse, which he then threaded through the hole in the gas cap from beneath. Lining up the second hole with the point of the screw, he tightened it with the screwdriver, pulling the glued surface firmly to the underside of the lid. Turning the construction upside down, he ran an additional bead of silicone around the glued joint for sealing and reinforcement.

He set the whole works on a piece of waxed paper and left it to cure while he braved the heat and headed for the garage. Once there, he left the door and windows open to ventilate the fumes and slipped on a pair of safety goggles. This was the most dangerous part.

Turning on the propane burner of a turkey fryer, he placed a large pot of water on top. While it was coming to a boil, he took a second, smaller vessel that held a quart of soap chips; the result of shaving several bars of Ivory soap into thin strips. He sat this on a workbench on the opposite side of the garage from the fire, and placed a full can of gasoline beside it. Ever frugal, he had “liberated” the gas by siphoning it from a large gasoline-powered welder at a nearby state road construction site. He could have afforded to buy it even though the \$7.50 per gallon price would have set him back some, but there was a certain satisfaction in making the enemy pay for his own destruction. The fact that he took enough so they were also keeping a few gallons in his truck was just icing on the cake.

Once the water was boiling merrily, Neil slipped on a pair of oven mitts, turned off the fire, and carried the scalding water to the other side of the room. It didn't do to have materials that gave off flammable vapors near a source of direct heat. Setting it on the bench, he quickly placed the container of soap chips inside it, making a double boiler. Carefully, he poured an equal volume of gasoline over the soap chips, and stirred it for several minutes with a wooden spoon until the soap melted and the mixture was nearly the consistency of blackberry jam. He spooned as much as poured the thick napalm mixture into the gas can, filling it about half-way, then dropped in a large handful of charcoal pieces and stirred it in with a

wooden stick before putting on a second, temporary cap to keep the concoction at maximum freshness. Feeling a little hungry, he returned to the house for a bite. The only thing to do now was wait until the silicone sealant in the cap assembly thoroughly cured.

Carrying the lid and its explosive attachment, he returned to the garage after a few hours, and slipped the pair of surgical gloves back on. Neil took a rag soaked in alcohol and wiped down every surface of both the lid assembly and the can. He didn't recall touching anything with his bare hands, but then one couldn't be too careful about these things. Sometimes stuff happened, and it wouldn't do to leave fingerprints behind in case it didn't go off, although he figured that there wasn't much chance of that. Gently, he placed the lid on it, inserting the explosive tube inside, and tightening the top down to get a good seal. Finally he pushed the fuse down flat on top of the cap and put a large round price sticker over it to conceal it

Satisfied that they were clean, he took up a second, disreputable-looking rag covered with filth, and proceeded to wipe grease and dirt back onto the can and lid, then rubbed it with some dried lawn clippings, much of which adhered to it. Not only did it make the can look well-used, which was necessary for his cover, but the greasy surface also meant that no one not wanting to get his hands dirty was likely to take the lid off to look inside.

Now he was ready.

He was naturally a little nervous, but as he examined his handiwork, he couldn't suppress a smile of satisfaction. It was truly amazing what a handyman could build in the privacy of his own home.

Their initial passion spent, the two lay together on top of the tangled sheets, a trail of discarded clothes marking the path they'd taken across the room to the bed. Frank was on his back and Samantha lay beside him, her head on his shoulder and one long leg thrown across his thighs. Toying with his chest hair, she twisted her head up to look at him. "Penny for your thoughts."

“I was just thinking how happy I am,” he said, bending his neck to kiss her. “In spite of everything else that’s happening, I am really, truthfully happy.”

“Umm,” she purred, snuggling tighter and treating him to a mischievous smile, “me too. Where did you learn to do that to a woman – wait! Never mind; I don’t really want to know, and as honest as you are, you’d probably tell me.”

“I’ve heard it said love is the best aphrodisiac.”

“How very diplomatic,” she admitted teasingly, just before engaging him in a playful tickling fight by attacking his belly. “But true! But true!” she was squealing when he returned her frolicsome attentions in kind.

He finally released her with a smile and she rolled onto her stomach and propped herself on her elbows. She gave him a mock glare, the long, tangled tresses falling about her face adding to the exaggerated look’s absurdity. Frank laughed despite himself, and Samantha laughed along with him.

“Frank Gore, you’re a lot of fun, you know that?”

“I was just thinking the same thing about you, Sammie.” He looked past her face and let his gaze slide down along the clean white slope of her back and come to rest on the twin, upturned globes of her pert buttocks, which he treated to an appraising smile. “Yep, a whole lot of fun.”

“That’s not what I meant, you devil!” She attacked him again, and he let her climb on top and pin him to the bed, her slim fingers interlocked with his muscular ones, palm to palm.

“Okay, you win,” he said with a grin, “you’ve got me right where I want you.”

“You ornery man! Haven’t you had enough?”

“No.” Frank smiled, full of meaning. “Not nearly enough.”

Slowly, still maintaining their finger lock, he began spreading his arms, bringing her face inexorably nearer his own until their lips met once again.

DAY 5

Chapter 25

“I am Richard Jameson, and I’d like to make a statement on behalf of the Confederate Council.

“As some of you are no doubt aware, I represent the mainstream faction of the Southern Movement. We do not seek secession, only our rights within this great, eternal Union of the United States of America. We do not support the Battle Flag, since we know that many Southerners, black and white alike, find it offensive. And we do not and never have supported violence in any way connected to our precious Southern heritage.

“These firmly held beliefs put us at odds with a handful of radicals, militia-types, racists, and terrorists who were determined to hijack the Confederate Council and use it to ferment violence, terrorism, insurrection, and treason against the United States of America. The late Jonathon Edge, the terrorist who died in his own bomb blast in Roanoke and took so many brave law enforcement officers with him, personified these twisted ideals.

“I want you good people out there to know today that, as far as the Confederate Council is concerned, those violent ideas died with him. We disavow and condemn both him and his actions, by unanimous vote. We also urge that all misguided Southerners immediately lay down their arms and cease all disobedience of Federal, State, or local authorities, and that they turn over the ringleaders, the real terrorists – murderers like Frank Gore and Samantha Norris – to law enforcement at once.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the Cause of the Confederacy is lost; it always has been. It is over. We are all one people in one Union, the United States of America, and it is time that the people of Dixie accept that we are, in fact, one nation, indivisible.

“To help facilitate our new cooperation and submission to the lawful authorities over us, the Confederate Council has elected me

chairman by a unanimous vote. I will lead the South back into the union, where it has always belonged, and work to erase this sectional factionalism that has divided us for far, far too long."

Everyone in the room looked uneasily at Jonathon Edge, waiting for the explosion. He sat there in the chair, staring at Jameson's image on the television screen. He hadn't moved, hadn't said a word, but his features were like a stone, and his fingers dug deeply into the upholstered arms. It took him several seconds to speak.

"Son of a bitch!" he exclaimed in a rare loss of control, his voice rising. "Son of a *bitch!* That bastard betrayed us; set every one of us up, put us in a position where we all had to decide whether we would make a commitment, eliminated everyone who would, and then put himself in as Council Chairman. They think I'm history; all the rest must either be prisoners held secretly or else they're dead. There's nobody left to gainsay him and no one to know the difference!" He shook his head in sad exasperation. "I tried to tell them that bastard was still working undercover for the Feds, and now he's finally sold the movement to them!" He shook his head in disgust. "It's been a Fed plan all along."

"I'm the newbie here, so maybe I'm out of line by jumping in," Frank interrupted, and Edge indicated he should go ahead, "but it stands to reason that most people are followers, and they'll listen to him, both because his way is easier and more importantly because he is the only leader left as far as they know. It seems to me that we need to let people know that he's full of crap and you're still alive, before it completely undermines morale."

Sam broke in. "Yeah, but how do we do it? John can't exactly go in and give an interview to CNN now, can he? Even if we sent them a tape, the media is under government control; they won't publicize it."

"You're both right," Edge acknowledged as he stood and began pacing the floor in fury. "We *have* to get that information out, but how do we do it? And, if we do it, how do we prove it? It'll be my word against his, and for some reason, a lot of people love that slick-talking bastard."

Samantha held up her hand for recognition. “I’ll work on it, and I’ll come up with something. I may not know much about war, but I know how the media works. If I’m not overstepping myself,” she said, looking around and finding no objections, “I’d like to take over this project. I’m not good for much else, revolution-wise, but this is *me*; it’s what I do. I’ll find a way.”

Sam scratched his head. “It sounds like good sense to me, unless anyone has something better? John?”

The CAP leader shook his head. “That’s the best idea I’ve heard today. All right, Samantha, you’re in charge. In fact, I’m using the power vested in me as your commander to appoint you Chief Information Officer of the Press Agency for the Confederate Army, Provisional, effective immediately. All statements, propaganda, and dealings with the media are in your bailiwick now. Folks, anything in that regard, take it to her.”

Seizing his opportunity while Samantha was still stunned by the magnitude of what had just been thrust on her, Sam Wirtz made his move.

“Donna, you’ve had journalistic experience, haven’t you?”

“Well, I was on the school paper...”

“Good. With John’s okay, I’m assigning you to be Samantha’s assistant, effective as of now.”

“But...”

“No ‘buts’,” he chided. “This job’s too big for one person, and you’re the only other one with experience. We have to utilize the talents you’ve got.”

Her face darkened in anger as she realized what he had just done. “You’re only trying to keep me out of the field and safe! I enlisted to fight!”

“You also enlisted to obey orders,” Edge broke in, deciding it might be prudent to mollify the hard feelings between Sam and himself on the subject. “Rest assured, you’ll have all the fighting you want before this is over – we *all* will, and then some. Right now, though, the most important fight is right here, for the hearts and minds of the Southern people.”

“Alright,” she conceded, hanging her head, “I’ll do it, but I’m telling you here and now, up front, after what they did to my sister, I won’t sit out this war behind a desk.”

Edge looked at her grimly.

“I think it’s safe to say that *no one* will do that!”

Chapter 26

It was just dark when Neil Larson saw the orange cones and flickering blue lights that marked one of the ubiquitous random roadblocks just ahead. As the traffic crept forward, he mentally put himself into what he referred to as his “dumb ass mode”; breathing through a slightly opened mouth, and keeping his usually piercing eyes vacant. It was an old trick he had learned in the army; if people thought you were too stupid to mess with, they generally wouldn’t; it simply wasn’t worth the hassle. That particular talent had gotten him out of both work and trouble more than once.

Finally, the car ahead of him moved and it was his turn. The light shone in his eyes, blinding him.

Blinking dully, he squinted at the silhouette that he could barely see behind the glare. He could, however, make out enough to tell that the figure’s right hand was resting on the holstered pistol.

“Yes sir?”

“I need to see your license, registration, and proof of insurance.” No ‘please’; it had been some time since that was common practice at roadblocks.

“Yes sir,” he said in a servile, eager-to-please voice, reaching overhead for the driver’s side visor, “got ’em right here.” Retrieving the documents, he handed them out the window.

The light left his eyes for a few seconds and shone on the paperwork. “What’s your name?”

“Neil Larson, officer.”

“Is this address and the other information correct?”

“Yes sir.”

“What are you doing out here this evening?”

“Headin’ home, sir.” He gestured toward the truck bed. “I do yard work for folks, pick up a little bit of extra money, you know.” Neil found that frequently saying ‘you know’ had a tendency to cause other people to want to make conversations brief.

The cop shone the light slowly over the mower, weed eater, rake, and other equipment and assorted junk lying in the rusted-out bed. It

paused on the two greasy, grass-covered cans before flashing back in Neil's eyes just as his vision was starting to straighten out.

"Why do you have *two* gas cans?"

Good grief! How stupid could this guy be?

"Well sir," he responded, not allowing his feelings about the obvious apartment dweller to reach his voice, "that there big 'un is my reg'lar gas; you know, like for the lawn mower an' such. I use that little 'un to mix up gas for the weed eater. It's a two stroke, you know."

The cop obviously didn't know, but he lost interest anyway, asked Neil if he had been drinking and was apparently satisfied at the negative response. He handed the paperwork back and indicated with a hand motion and a grunt that Neil should go on, which he was entirely happy to do. He reflected that law enforcement had certainly gone down hill during his lifetime.

No wonder the damned country is going to hell!

He turned onto a side street and drove a few blocks before pulling over. Leaving the engine running, he walked to the back long enough to get the smaller can and transfer it to the front before taking off again.

After two more blocks he made a left turn, then a second left into a graveled alley. Driving slowly, he spotted the house he wanted and slowed to a crawl. Taking the gas can in his hand, he pitched it out the truck window as gently as possible into a forsythia bush next to the alley as he passed the property. When he hit the end of the alley, he turned again and headed for home.

Neil didn't like to take chances, and leaving a truck registered to him anywhere near an arson definitely fell into that category. He'd return later by bicycle.

The night was a muggy one; a cold front was supposed to be moving in with a line of thunderstorms, but it had stalled somewhere to the west and there wasn't a sign of relief. The humidity was like an oppressive blanket of invisible fog that dampened clothes and coated every surface, including skin, with an unpleasant layer of greasy moisture. Between the wet air and the city lights, even the sky

was a featureless gray-black canvas that the unseen stars sulked behind. At 3:00 in the morning the temperature was still in the eighties. In one little piece of Columbia, however, it was about to get a lot hotter.

Neal had stashed his bicycle in a thick hedge bordering the alley over half a block away from his target and walked quietly but steadily along the grass strip dividing the two gravel-covered tracks. The grass made his footsteps nearly inaudible so he didn't have to obviously sneak; something that was certain to catch the eye of anyone who might see him. Instead, by walking openly, a casual observer would write him off as an insomniac transient out for a stroll despite the citywide curfew.

Passing the yellow police tape barring a back gate of the home that had been the property of the late Mary Wheeler, he turned into the next back yard. After stooping to retrieve the can from under the bush, he straightened and headed for the house, feeling the wet grass soaking his socks through his tennis shoes.

He slipped between Mary's hedge and the Kennedy home, since there was no one in at least one of the places to hear any noise he might make. The Kennedy bathroom window was small and set too high for his purposes, so he passed it by in favor of a larger, lower opening that he assumed served the living room, not that it really mattered; it would do. Neal peeled the price tag gently off the can's cap with his gloved hand, being careful not to damage the fuse underneath.

Pulling a disposable lighter out of his pants pocket, he flicked it twice to get a flame and touched it to the end of the fuse. Satisfied with the hissing spark, he shattered the window with the piece of brick he had scooped from a flowerbed, heaving it all the way through. He immediately reached the can through the broken pane and dropped it on the floor inside. Although he was reasonably sure of the integrity of his handiwork, he didn't want to take the risk of breaking the detonator tube loose and maybe tearing the fuse out by indiscriminately throwing the container.

By the time the startled "what the hell?" came from inside, Neil barely heard it; he was already halfway through the back yard and

sprinting back towards the alley. As soon as he reached his goal, however, he turned to his right and began walking toward his bike at the same purposeful but unhurried pace by which he had made his initial trip. He could hear someone in the house yelling something, but he couldn't make out the words. They evidently weren't too important; at least he hoped not, because they were suddenly drowned out by the loud roar of an explosion that sent glass flying, pushed along by the fireball that drove at every opening as it sought to escape the confines of the room.

Neil had left the can half-empty for a purpose. Since gasoline fumes are what ignite and explode when confined, he had used the half-gallon of empty volume filled with nothing but fumes to increase the explosive force of the homemade detonator. The resulting blast was terrific, and it threw the gelatinous napalm all over the room and through its open interior door, carrying with it bits of flaming charcoal to add to the conflagration. The globs of burning gel adhered to the walls and dripped from the ceiling in great droplets of fire. The thickened substance concentrated the heat far more than straight gasoline would have done, and in moments the fire took hold on the wooden structure, and began to devour it.

He was three houses away when a porch light was turned on and a fat, middle-aged man stumbled out onto the back porch of a nearby dwelling in a pair of baggy boxer shorts, his hair mussed from bed. Before he could say anything, Neil shouted at him, putting a note of panic in his voice.

"Call 9-1-1 quick! There's a fire down there!" He gestured in the direction he had come from.

The man strained to focus, and managed to make out the glow.

"Oh shit!" He turned and stumbled back inside, headed for the phone.

Neil passed his bicycle in the hedge, his return transportation home, entered the yard instead and crawled under the back porch. Secreting himself behind a stack of scrap lumber stored there, he settled in to wait until the lifting of the curfew at six o'clock. He lifted a piece of board and scooped out a shallow hole beneath it,

then peeled off the rubber gloves. Dropping them in, he brushed the dirt back over them and replaced the wood.

In the distance, he could hear the sirens.

DAY 6

Chapter 27

“This is Cindy Jordan at Channel 13 News, coming to you live from Columbia where the fire department has just finished putting out a single family dwelling fire.

“Flames lit up the sky in the early hours of morning as a suspected arson destroyed the home of John and Susan Kennedy. The couple managed to escape with minor injuries by climbing through a window, but their house was a total loss.

“Police sources tell us that, according to statements by the victims, they heard glass breaking, followed by an explosion that sent flames throughout their house. Fire Department officials report strong evidence of an accelerant present in the living room, where the fire is believed to have started.

“As some of you may recall, Susan Kennedy was the vigilant citizen who reported the presence of fugitive terrorists Franklin Gore and Samantha Norris in the house next door to theirs; a report that led to the discovery of the body of Mary Wheeler, a friend of Norris whom the couple is alleged to have brutally murdered.

“Police theorize that either Gore or some of his sympathizers may have started the fire in retaliation for the Kennedy’s having alerted the authorities to his presence, adding arson and two more attempted murders to the long list of crimes he and Norris are charged with. They include racial intimidation, hate crimes, felonious assault, conspiracy, illegal weapons and explosives possession, drug trafficking, kidnapping, terrorism, incitement to riot, attempted murder, and four counts of murder, including that of two Federal law enforcement agents, Mary Wheeler, and Sarah Gore, Frank Gore’s own grandmother. The police believe that it may be fear that is preventing more witnesses from coming forward, and they worry that this latest act may re-enforce that reluctance, making their job of catching these suspected terrorists even more

difficult.”

“Mr. Silverstein,” his secretary’s voice came over the intercom. “A Mr. Ronald Peters is on the line for you.”

Startled, Phil looked at his watch. It was not even 7:00 am. The only reason he and his secretary were in the office at all, after they had burned the midnight oil last night, was because the station was short-handed as hell. First that deal with Samantha, then Mary, then, *then* to top it off, another reporter, a cameraman, and the office gopher had all walked out on him when FEMA took over and started calling the shots. Everyone else was working almost around the clock in order to take up the slack.

What the hell could Peters want this time in the morning? Didn’t the guy ever sleep?

He picked up the phone. “Silverstein.”

“Good morning, Phil.”

“Good morning, Mr. Peters. What can I do for you today?”

“For starters, you can look around and tell me what you see.”

“What?” Silverstein asked him, puzzled by the request. Met with silence on the other end of the line, he did as he was bidden. “I don’t know; my desk, the coffee machine, the...

“You do see the inside of your office then?”

“Why, yes...of course.” He was thoroughly confused now.

“I thought maybe you were looking at the inside of your intestines, considering you evidently have your head up your ass.”

Phil stared at the phone in stunned amazement. The deadpan delivery made the rebuke all the more surprising.

“Is this...a joke? I don’t understand...”

“Have you watched your own morning news report today, by any chance? Was that approved by my people?”

“Yes, I watched it, of course, but your advisors didn’t get here in time for the airing.”

“Then why did you air it at all until they got there to give their approval?”

“Sir, the news is a competitive business, and timing is everything. If we are to survive, we have to run the stories when they’re fresh and up-to-the-minute.”

“Since you chose not to wait and get approval first as I asked you to, did you happen to notice anything out of place in your report on that Kennedy fire?”

Silverstein’s brow furrowed. He hadn’t seen anything amiss, but he was so tired lately, maybe something *was* wrong.

“No, I didn’t see anything unusual. We blamed Gore, just as we were supposed to.”

“No, not just as you were supposed to. Your people just cut our chances of getting information on him in half. By stressing the retaliation angle, you just made everybody with half a brain too scared shitless to cooperate with us on anything to do with him.”

“Come on. It’s not that bad...”

“Don’t ‘come on’ me! You have screwed up big-time. I’m giving you one warning, and one only: don’t do it again. If you run anything out of that station – and I mean anything – without prior approval, I will literally have your ass. I will shut down your station and lock you up on Federal charges! Do you understand me?”

“Yes, but...” Suddenly Silverstein was talking to a dial tone.

Sam Wirtz and Jonathon Edge stood nose-to-nose on the porch, fists clenched and leaning forward, in all appearances ready to fight.

“Damn it!” Edge hissed, pointing a finger at Sam’s broad chest, but still having the presence of mind not to actually poke him with it. “I told you not to touch that woman!”

“I didn’t! And neither did my men! Most of them were right here with you, if you can bother yourself to recall!”

“Then who burned that house?”

“Neil Larson, I expect, or maybe one of his people.”

Edge’s eyes widened with recognition. “Larson! Why would you think that?”

“Because I asked him to and he agreed,” Sam told him, matter-of-factly.

The CAP leader's jaw dropped at the admission. "You *asked* him to?"

"That's what I just said; did I stutter or do you need a Q-tip?"

"You gave me your word!"

"I gave you my word that we – *specifically my men and myself* – wouldn't bother her, and I kept my word to the letter. We never went near her."

"You knew what I meant!"

"Yep, and I also know what I gave my word to do: two entirely different things."

"Of all the..." Edge slid his left hand down his face in frustration, as if trying to wipe away his own features. "Why Larson? Will you tell me that at least? Why did you have to bring that bunch into it?"

"Because I knew they would be willing to do it. Somebody had to, and seeing as how you tied my hands from up there in Virginia as to how I was going to take care of my own problems here in South Carolina, you didn't leave me much choice in the matter."

"You could have left her *alone!*"

Sam shook his head. "After she was responsible for the death of a good friend's widow, that was not an option. You're lucky I didn't have her killed, because I damn sure considered it!"

"Look, you're not seeing the big picture..."

"Maybe not, but I can see the picture that's right in front of my face, and that's the one I'm concerned with. Now, you've been telling me for a long time how it's going to be, and now I'm going to tell you how it *is*." He raised a hand between them and began counting on his fingers.

"First off, if someone hurts one of my people, they're going to pay a price for it, and I don't give a hoot in hell who they are, what it looks like, or what you or anybody else has to say about it.

"Second: that Council you're trying to impress is now either dead or locked up and probably having everyone of our names beaten out of them even as we speak. What they think of you is the last thing on their minds right now.

“Third is this: you know as well as I do that Larson and people like him were going to have to be brought on board sooner or later if we’re ever to have any hope of winning this thing. Looking around, I don’t see so many willing recruits that we can turn up our noses at someone just because we don’t like his politics, his methods, or his racial philosophy, or in your case because you see his power as a potential threat to your own!” Sam saw Edge wince slightly and knew he’d struck home with that one. “I don’t give a tinker’s damn if Osama Bin Laden comes rolling in here driving Adolph Hitler and Charles Manson in Joseph Stalin’s staff car; if they’re here to help, I’ll take it.”

Edge glared at him, seething with anger. “What kind of government are we going to form with that sort of people?”

“In case you haven’t noticed, we’re a long damn ways from forming a government, and there’ll be plenty of time to worry about dividing up the spoils after we win the war – *if* we win it, and I wouldn’t give odds on that one.

“Besides, what’s done is done, and there ain’t no changing it now. Excuse me.” With that, Sam spun on his heel and stalked back into the house, leaving Edge standing there looking after him.

Upstairs, Frank turned away from the window screen. A natural early riser, he had taken the time to indulge himself in studying the still-sleeping Sammie when the loud argument caught his attention and brought him to the window. He puffed his cheeks and exhaled in a whistling stream. He was rapidly losing confidence in the movement’s leaders’ ability to ever manage to go in a single direction, and that did not bode well for him or, more importantly, for Samantha and their chances for survival, let alone the cause they were fighting for.

He crossed back to their bed, sat down beside her and touched her face. Still asleep, she smiled and murmured something unintelligible but sweet nonetheless, reflexively taking hold of his hand and snuggling it up to her cheek. Not for the first time, he marveled at her beauty and at the depth of his feelings for her.

He would keep his oath and do his duty, of course; there was no other choice that either his upbringing or his blood would allow.

With the almost fatalistic trust in God that had sustained his people through the centuries, he had taken whatever life could throw at him and had never met a fear he couldn't master. That hadn't been nearly as hard when it was just Frank Gore to look after. Now, as he looked at the woman holding his hand in her sleep and considered the grim and likely possibilities of what could, and probably would happen to her, he wasn't so sure of that mastery anymore. He had never been so afraid in his life.

With the rays of the morning sun pouring in through the panes, he began to pray as fervently as if it were the darkest night.

“What have you got for me?”

Bruce Eisner didn't look up at the sound of Peters' voice from the doorway, but instead kept his eyes on his computer screen. The FEMA boss was certainly not a model of genteel personality, but he admired efficiency more than ass kissing.

Not that his secretary would have minded that either; the slender twenty five year-old in the dark suit thought Peters was extremely sexy. He would never have let on; that kind of familiarity would be more than his job was worth. He had no idea if his boss was straight or a homosexual like himself. Peters had never given any indication either way, although the young man was certain that Peters knew of his own proclivities. Personally, Bruce suspected him to be one of those truly rare asexual individuals, with little interest in the act in any form, but who instead got his rocks off on nothing but pure power.

“I began the investigation as you requested, sir, and I think I've come up with a strong possibility.” The secretary's voice was smooth and a bit high, but lacked the cultivated lisp that many gays affected. Affectations were not high on the list of things tolerated by Mr. Peters. “If Gore and Norris are in the Neo-Confederate underground as we are now reasonably certain, this,” he said, waving a well-manicured finger at the monitor, “is who's most likely to be hiding them, based on the information that we have available to us at the present time.”

Peters moved in beside his secretary, leaned a fist on the desk, and studied the image and information on the screen.

“How did you come up with this guy?”

“I was cross-referencing the names on the known associates of members of the Southern Council with the names Jameson gave us and those that have been...*extracted* so far from the Council prisoners, as well as those arrested in the two days of rioting. I found several names in common from those sources, but after eliminating those in custody or deceased, it left only six, and four of those live too far away to be likely prospects; one's in South Florida, one's in Missouri, and two are in Texas. Just in case, I verified the retail purchase check and credit card data base information and the phone company records, and had calls made to them where our agent pretended to be a telemarketer. All evidence indicates that they are in the vicinity of their homes and have been for weeks; however, if you want me to verify it further, I can use field agents or local law enforcement resources.”

“I don't think that will be necessary, unless the most likely subject doesn't pan out.”

“Yes, sir. That left me with two in this area, and one of those has been hospitalized with West Nile Encephalitis since before the riots, so I think we can eliminate him as well, which brings us to our final subject.

“We received a little information on this individual from Mr. Jameson. His name was also mentioned by Andrew MacFie, and William Herdman while they were under interrogation, and it was obtained the same way from seven of the jailed rioters. Further, his first name followed by his phone number was found written in Mary Wheeler's address book, who was hiding Gore and Norris as we now know. Unfortunately, she expired before she could give any direct information.”

Peters pursed his lips in thought. “What do we know about him?”

“Not much, really. Fifty-three years old, a native of South Carolina, he's a high school graduate and did a single hitch in Army Intelligence. His rank on discharge was E4; nothing outstanding in his military record. He's a widower, no children; owns his own

home, and is a self-employed farmer. He has no criminal record and no debts.”

“What about his spending habits?”

“That’s hard to say. He uses his checking account only for bill paying; apparently, all his other acquisitions are made through cash or possibly barter – there’s no way to tell.

“Tax-wise, he pays everything on time, all the time – county, state, and federal. He’s never been late, which is a bit unusual in itself.”

“What about guns?”

Bruce clicked his mouse and a document appeared. “He has three that we know of: a Remington Model 700BDL in .30-’06, an Ithaca Model 37 12 gauge, and a Smith & Wesson Model 19 .357 magnum. All were bought over the counter, the paper-work was filled out, and when the law was passed requiring registration, he complied well before the deadline.”

“Not a very impressive arsenal.”

“That’s just what we know of, Mr. Peters. I thought it was strange too, considering the type he appears to be, so I called the BATF and they confirmed that they had noted his vehicle plates during their monitoring activities at several gun shows before those events became illegal. They also suggested I contact the Defenders of the Jewish People. I did, but since they’re a non-governmental organization, I can’t vouch for the accuracy of their intelligence.” He looked at his boss, who indicated for him to continue. “They had the same gun show information as the BATF, but they also have him listed as a suspected militia member and neo-Confederate, due to some of his associations. Something about him piqued their curiosity, and upon further investigation using their local resources, they seem to think, although they can’t confirm, that his farm is just a cover for some sort of money laundering operation. Since he does his business in cash it’s virtually impossible to trace, but the DJP insist that he spends a lot more money than he should have.

“Sir, may I ask you something? How can they have so much more information than the U.S. Government?”

Peters flashed him a cold smile. “They’re not a U.S. government agency but a quasi-private organization, so they’re not bound by the same rules that we have to at least give lip-service to, and they’re not subject to public and media investigation like we are. People are scared to say anything about them, because they’ll immediately brand them an anti-Semite, and the media, which is owned by their people, will back it up to the hilt. Even the politicians are scared of them –maybe especially the politicians, because you get accused of being a racist in today’s world and your career is over. That’s how they get by with being one of the biggest spy agencies in the country. Everything they get, they funnel to Israel and Mossad, and you better believe that everything we have, they have. They’ve got sympathizers in every business and government office – federal, state and local – who keep them abreast of everything that’s going on. Nobody’s going to hunt too hard for them, because that would be an ‘anti-Semitic’ campaign. Then they’ll trot out the Holocaust comparisons, and it’s all over but the shouting.”

Bruce whistled. “I knew they had influence, but man!”

“Welcome to the real world. Still, they can be useful at times. Now back to the subject at hand.” He tapped the screen with the knuckle of an index finger.

“I think it’s time we pay a visit to Mr. Samuel Wirtz.”

The rockers creaked as Frank, Sam, and Jonathon Edge sat on the front porch, wreathed in a cloud of cigar smoke. The two bikers had somehow managed to acquire a whole box of handmade Cuban maduras on the black market, and had thoughtfully brought a handful up to the pig farm. Sam didn’t know the details of just how they had gotten them, and considering who was involved, he figured that was probably just as well.

Frank puffed at his, amazed at the mildness. “This,” he said, pulling the dark-chocolate colored cylinder of tobacco out of his mouth and holding it up in admiration, “is a seriously good smoke.”

“Mmm,” Sam groaned with pleasure, “I reckon so.” Changing the subject, he said, “Frank, you remember that dirty cop we talked about the other day?”

“Willie Duckett? Sure.” He chuckled without humor. “He’s hard to forget.”

Sam grinned “I expect he is. We need your help; we’d like to take you on a little mission.”

“Concerning Duckett?”

“Yeah; we want to recruit him.”

“Duckett?! What do you want with that pervert?” Frank leaned forward, his chair protesting slightly under the abrupt shift of weight, and stared at Wirtz, genuinely puzzled and a little angry that he might be associated with that child molester again.

Jonathon Edge broke in. “One reason, and one only – because he’s expendable. If something happens to him, it’s no great loss to either the movement or to the human race in general.”

Bewildered, the ex-cop scratched his head. “Gentlemen, I’m afraid you’ve lost me here. I’d think we’d want somebody *dependable* instead of *expendable*.”

“Look at it this way, Frank; would it surprise you to learn that we have sympathizers, a few of them active agents, in the Columbia Police Department? It shouldn’t, knowing what you know now. The Feds haven’t had your ‘guided tour’, so it’ll take them a while, but they will eventually figure that out – they’re not stupid people. Once that happens, they’re going to go on a serious mole hunt. We want to make certain that the mole they find is one that we can do without; in other words, when the time comes, we’ll feed them Duckett to satisfy them and keep them from looking any deeper.”

Frank pursed his lips and nodded, the answer satisfying one question but leading to another.

“That sounds like a plan, but there’s one problem; how do you intend to recruit him? As much as I hate to admit it, he’s not stupid either, as evidenced by the fact that he’s not in prison and is still working as a cop. He’s a sneaking, conniving little scoundrel.

“Besides, I’ve never heard him showing any interest in anything like what we’re doing here”

Edge smiled a cold smile. “I haven’t told you how I plan to recruit him, Frank. Think of this as an old-time naval ship. Some sailors are volunteers, but others are shanghaied. I’ve got a plan, and

we'll have a briefing shortly.”

DAY 7

Chapter 28

“I don’t want you to go,” Samantha said, snuggling against him as they lay in their bed. It was early enough that no trace of daylight showed in the darkened sky.

Frank held her tightly, enjoying the feel of her skin next to his. “Believe me, I don’t want to go either, but...”

“But duty calls; yes, I know. That still doesn’t make it any easier, or make me worry any less.”

“If the Lord’s willing and everything goes right, at least I should be home by sometime tonight or tomorrow at the latest. It’s a simple operation.”

“And if the Lord’s not willing and everything goes wrong? I don’t want to be a widow this soon after marriage. I – I don’t think I could go on without you now.”

He put his curled index finger under her chin and lifted it, forcing her to look into his eyes. “You’ll do whatever you have to. You’re a strong, brave girl, Sammie. That’s one of the reasons I love you so much.”

“I love you too, but...”

“Shh. You wouldn’t love me if I were the kind to go back on my oath and shirk my duty. I’m finally beginning to understand that if we want a better world for us and for our children, we can’t just sit back and wait for it to happen. We’re going to have to build it ourselves.

“Besides, God is in control of all things. He has a plan, and every one of us already has our time written down in it. Until that time comes, I’m as safe one place as another, and when it comes it won’t matter if I’m on the battlefield or in bed. You just have to trust Him, Sammie.”

She sighed. “I try, Frank, I really try, but I still can’t help but worry.”

“You want to know a deep, dark secret?” he asked her with a smile. “Sometimes, neither can I.”

“Oh, you!” she said, playfully slapping at him, her mood improved for the moment.

“And what’s with that remark about ‘our children’ anyway?”

There was a tapping on their door and Tommy’s voice echoed through the panel.

“Time to get up; we leave in an hour.”

“Okay, thanks,” he called before turning back to his wife, his mischievous grin widening. “Don’t worry, Sammie; when I get back, I’ll get right on it!” He kissed her deeply on her shocked, open mouth.

Looking over the teen-aged girl sitting on the motel bed, Officer Willie Duckett thought that he must have died and gone to heaven. This was definitely going to be a good day.

He’d first noticed her standing outside not far from where they now were, dressed in a tiny pair of black shorts and a narrow tube top that barely covered her, emphasizing the lean curves of her immature body. Strutting along on a pair of tall spike heels, she walked with an exaggerated twist and sway, her pelvis thrust slightly forward. She wasn’t going anywhere, but just hanging around, taking a few steps one way, then a few the other, showing off what she had and waiting for a buyer. Still, there was a certain vulnerability about her that showed through the clothes and make-up that was different from that of most of the already-calloused prostitutes, teen-aged and otherwise, who thronged the Columbia streets in record numbers since the economic crash, marking her as a newbie. That vulnerability attracted Willie like a moth to a flame.

Willie Duckett didn’t usually do too well with women. He wasn’t ugly, exactly, although he wore glasses and his blonde hair was thinning quite a bit. There was just something about the combination of features – a long nose, pointy chin, wispy moustache, and toothy smile – that all added up to an impression described by more than one woman as, well, *cheesy*.

The fact that his normal personality matched that impression to a T didn't help matters much either.

The rejection and general disrespect that he faced in the civilian world led him to take up law enforcement. The badge commanded the respect that he was certain in his heart of hearts he deserved, and he had a club, a gun and the whole Columbia PD to back him up.

The job also came with certain, if not perks, at least opportunities that were unavailable or very risky in civilian life, like young girls for instance. If a man were unfortunate enough to be less than entirely self-confident, women would manipulate you, use you, hurt you, and generally mess with your head. Most girls, on the other hand, particularly the troubled ones, hadn't learned to do that effectively because their own self-confidence was even less than that of Officer Willie Duckett.

The rest was easy; after all, he had done it many times before. Pulling his cruiser up to the curb, he climbed out, straightened his belt, and walked around to where the girl stood. From the start, he approached her in his hardest, most authoritarian manner, seizing full control of the situation, and interspersing a drill instructor-style lecture with threats of arrest and what was going to happen to her in jail. As he expected, the verbal assault rapidly reduced her to tears and begging. Admitting that she was a teen-aged runaway, she offered to do anything to keep from being taken to jail or sent back home – *anything*. That was just what Willie was waiting for.

Fortunately she had a room to accommodate her johns in a nearby motel, a little rat-hole of a place with peeling paint and worn, spliced carpet that reeked of mildew and neglect. Willie radioed in that he was answering a citizen's complaint at that address. He allowed her to enter first, following several yards behind so he could keep her in sight without appearing to be with her to anyone who might see them and care. In this particular seedy establishment, the odds of that were somewhere between slim and none; the Hindu clerk never even bothered to look up from the grainy picture on his TV when they walked by.

She opened the door with her key, and he entered the room right behind her. Folding his arms, he observed her long enough to make her even more uncomfortable and unsure.

“Okay, little girl,” he barked, “strip those clothes off right now!”

With surprising shyness, her lower lip trembling, she slipped off the brief top and shorts and dropped them on the faded bedspread. She stood there naked, her hands twitching, obviously fighting the urge to cover her slender body. Willie felt an enormous pressure in his crotch as he let his eyes slowly roam over her.

Extending his right arm, he made a circular motion with his index finger.

“Hold your arms over your head and turn all the way around in a circle – real slow. I want to take a good look at what I’m getting.”

“N-now what?” Her voice was quivering by the time she finished the revealing maneuver.

Taking his time answering, he savored the moment as he took off his equipment belt and dropped it in the chair and then slipped his leather pants belt out of its loops. He folded it once, then took an end of the loop in each hand and jerked it tight with a sharp *crack!* that made her cringe.

“First, for a warm-up,” he said, running his tongue over his lips, “I’m going to whip your naked little ass.” He pointed at her. “Turn around and bend over.” An afterthought brought his infamous cheesy grin back full-force. “And spread your legs real wide!”

“Then are you going to...do me?”

“‘Do you’? Then baby, I’m going to ‘do you’ six ways from Sunday!”

At his admission, the door slammed open with enough force to tear the hinges completely loose and send the smeared glass of the framed motel rules flying off to shatter against the wall. A flood of armed, black-clad men spilled inside. Instinctively, Willie spun and desperately reached for the chair that held his gun, but the men were already on him. A shotgun butt hammered him in the gut, doubling him over, a combat boot swept his feet from under him, and gloved hands drove him face down onto the filthy carpet. A knee dropped hard on the back of his neck, leaving him stunned as his hands were

wrenched painfully behind him. Feeling cold steel on his wrists, he heard the familiar ratcheting click as the cuffs closed. Brutally yanked back to his feet, he found himself in a room full of Kevlar helmets, ski masks, black uniforms, weapons, and heavy bulletproof vests with three letters stenciled on them -- '*F.B.I.*'

One of the agents, an anonymous pair of eyes staring out of the slit in a mask, tapped him on the chest with the muzzle of an MP5 submachine gun.

"Officer Duckett, you're under arrest."

One of the other masked agents slammed Willie down in the chair that sat in front of the motel room's dresser-cum-desk, his gun and belt having already been secured and tossed on the bed.

"Sit down, you sick son of a bitch!" he roared as he drove the cop into the seat so hard that the chair legs nearly gave way.

"Come on, man," Willie whined, his voice going high-pitched from the stress. "Cut me some slack. I'm a brother office..."

His begging was cut off when the black-gloved hand rocked his head back with a hard slap, and then grabbed him by the face. As the fingers and thumb dug painfully into his cheeks and forced his head back, its owner's face shoved so close to him that the Kevlar brim of the coalscuttle helmet rested against Willie's forehead. A pair of blue eyes blazed out from the mask's slit.

"Listen good, asshole, because I'm only gonna to say this once; I ain't your brother! If you ever say you're a brother of mine again, so help me, I'll rip your head off your shoulders and shit right down your freaking neck!"

"Give me a little space," one of the other men ordered.

Before releasing his grip at the command, the agent gave Willie's face a final shove before letting go, almost upsetting the chair. He stepped back, still muttering obscenities. Another agent brought in a video camera and began connecting it to the battered TV.

The one who had given the order hoisted himself up into a sitting position onto the desk in front of Willie, pulling out a drawer and propping one boot upon it. He unhurriedly released the catch on his

helmet and removed it, placing it beside him. Peeling off his ski mask, he revealed the washed-out blonde crew cut over the hard, leathery face of Rob Johnson.

“Officer Duckett,” he said conversationally. “You are in a lot of trouble.”

“Why me?” he managed to squeak.

The CAP guerrilla chuckled, playing his role to the hilt.

“Funny thing about that – we weren’t after you. This was a sting operation to bust an interstate white slavery ring that we believe to be financing acts of terrorism. You were unfortunate enough to stumble into the trap. A hassle for us, really; this wasn’t particularly easy to set up, and now your presence has probably ruined the whole thing for us.”

“So, what happens now?”

“Well, let’s see; you hadn’t broken federal statutes until you grabbed for that gun. That’s attempted assault with a deadly weapon on a Federal officer during a terrorism investigation. You could even be construed by your actions to be a terrorist and an enemy combatant yourself, in which case you would be tried by secret military tribunal under the terrorism act, and you’ll simply disappear. Poof!” he said, snapping his fingers.

Willie’s eyes widened.

“Then again,” he said, motioning to the agent with the camera, who pushed *‘PLAY’* and flipped on the TV, “you may have broken some state laws here that would interest the good folks from SLED. Lets take a look.

“That girl, by the way,” he added conversationally, “was only thirteen years old.”

Horried, Willie watched the screen as it replayed every word and action that had taken place in the room.

“...*I’m going to whip your naked little ass.*”

“A little sadism; very stimulating,” the agent interjected conversationally.

“...*Then baby, I’m going to ‘do you’ six ways from Sunday!*”

“Here, you clearly stated your ultimate intentions, making this an open and shut case. What do you think a South Carolina jury would do, upon viewing this tape, Officer Duckett?”

“But...but I didn’t know she...”

“Didn’t know she was under-age? Willie, Willie, Willie! Please don’t insult our intelligence. Our long-range mikes picked it up when she told you she was a runaway, and by obvious extension, a juvenile. You yourself repeatedly used the word ‘little’ to describe her, along with ‘baby,’ not to mention your treating her like a child throughout this incident, all of which make it very obvious that you were well aware that she was quite young.” Reaching over, he pushed the rewind button. “Let’s look at this video again. Do you really think that the jury will buy it, when they see that immature body, that *vulnerability*; why, look at that quivering lip.” He mashed ‘PLAY’ again.

“Then are you going to...do me?”

He turned the TV off, then shook his head and whistled.

“Officer Duckett; what do you think that a South Carolina jury will do to you when they hear that scared little girl, hmm? A whole jury box full of Bible-thumping rednecks with daughters of their own?”

Sweat beaded Willie’s head even before the agent who had slapped him stepped forward and spoke up again.

“I’ll tell you what they’ll do; they’ll lock you so far back in prison that they’ll have to pipe sunlight in to you. And that’s just the start. What do you think those jailhouse ‘brothers’ are gonna do to a white cop behind bars? You’re a short-eyed child molester *and* a cop. The white prison gangs won’t want any part of you; hell, they’ll be after you too. I’ll give you a month, and even if they don’t kill you, I guarantee you’ll have a dose of AIDS and a size fourteen and a half double-wide asshole!” He leaned closer. “How about it, scumbag? How do you like the idea of spending the next twenty years taking it up the butt over a prison toilet? I can hear you now,” he said, raising his tone into a sotto voice. “Are you going to...do me?”

Willie's head hung as tears began streaming down his face. He knew all too well what happened in the prison systems. Suicide...yes, that was the only answer. He just wasn't sure he had the guts.

"However, Officer Duckett," the commander broke in, "there may be a way out of this that will leave your *virtue*, such as it is, reasonably intact."

Like a drowning man grasping at a straw, his head shot up at the ray of hope. "You mean I won't go to prison?"

"I mean that if you play ball with us, no one will ever know that this unfortunate indiscretion of yours ever took place; it'll be our little secret. In fact, you might even come out of this ahead, career-wise."

"Yes! I mean, I'll do it – whatever you want!"

"That's the spirit, Officer Duckett. Now what I'm about to tell you is a matter of national security. I told you we were involved in a terrorism investigation; thus, any information relating to our activities is classified. Any unauthorized disclosures are subject to a life term in Federal prison under the anti-terrorism laws, and I can assure you that, if you ever violate our trust in this matter, you will never see the light of day again. Ever. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir!" He nodded enthusiastically. "I understand."

"Good. We have solid evidence that the Columbia Police Department has been infiltrated at high levels by elements of a terrorist group: a secret alliance of both right-wing extremists and Islamic radicals, probably Al Qaida. We have reason to believe that the Columbia PD is also acting as a conduit for supplying information, money, and arms to these groups. What we need is hard proof. That's where you come in.

"We are going to use you as an undercover Federal agent. You will be our eyes and ears within the department, where you will gather information as we direct, and relay it to us, and to us only. At no time will you give any inkling of what you are doing to anyone else. You will not tell anyone, including any member of law enforcement, regardless of rank – and that includes any FBI, BATF, or FEMA agents – unless explicitly instructed to do so by me. We believe that some of them may be compromised as well."

Willie whistled, suitably impressed. “Wow! This is really big then.”

The agent looked at him evenly. “Yes, Officer Duckett, it is big, and there’s a lot of important people and a lot of money involved – enough to kill for. Rest assured, if any of *them* even suspect what you are doing, you’ll never live to see prison. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.” A moment’s hesitation, then, “you mentioned something about my...career?”

“Ah, yes. How would you like to move up to the FBI?”

“You’re kidding!”

“Kidding is not one of my vices. If you work for us, there will be a place waiting for you at Quantico when this operation is over. Think about it: a federal pension and benefits, plus double your present salary. Then of course, there’s a certain amount of prestige, power, and even immunity for certain actions as a Federal agent, as long as you exercise discretion.”

“That’s great, but...uh, what happens if I get caught?”

“If you get caught, keep your mouth shut. Don’t say a word, no matter what you are told or what they do. Even if they lock you up, ride it out and we’ll take care of you with our contacts on the inside; then, when this is over, we’ll get you out, your conviction will be overturned and you’ll have a new FBI career waiting for you when you get out, along with back pay for the time that you were inside.

“It would, of course, be easiest on both of us, though, if you don’t get caught. Understand?”

Willie nodded vigorously.

“One last thing: if you compromise us, no matter to who or how much pressure is put on you, remember that we have this tape. Rest assured that you will be charged with everything on it, plus with distribution of classified information related to this investigation.”

“Yes sir; I understand. I won’t let you down.”

The agent smiled for the first time.

“I know you won’t, *Agent Duckett*. We’ll contact you soon with what we want. In the meantime, welcome to the Bureau.”

He gestured at the others. “Take off these cuffs. It looks like he’s a brother officer after all.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that,” Sam said. He was dressed in government-issue black and sitting on the motel bed as Donna pulled on a pair of jeans in the bathroom. In the next room, they could barely make out the hum of voices as the rest of their team talked to Duckett. “I didn’t think it would go that far.”

That was the truth. Sam had expected Duckett to commit himself earlier, and had to be physically restrained at Edge’s order to prevent him from rushing in when Donna started taking her clothes off.

“I’m not,” her voice came through the closed door, “and don’t you be mad at Mr. Edge about it either. You know good and well he had to wait until that guy either said the words or made an actual move, or it wouldn’t have worked.”

He shook his head. “But doesn’t it bother you, girl? The Lord knows, honey, it sure bothers me.”

“Of course it *bothers* me. I’m not some kind of a perv, but if it’s the price we pay for freedom, then so be it. I’ll pay it, whatever it is.”

“I don’t understand.”

The girl took a moment to gather her thoughts. “It would bother me to get shot like...well, you know, but I’d do it. Patriots give their bodies for their country all the time. You should know; *you’re* the one who taught me that. Some of them get shot and some of them do...other things.” She sighed as she pulled her zipper up. “I guess the point is that we all do what we have to do. I know I will. I’ll do anything that I have to – *anything!* If that meant I had to take a beating so he could get his rocks off, I would have. Even if I had to sleep with that sick bastard, I’d have done it.”

Sam’s mouth hung open in shock. “We never would have let you do that! *I* never would have let you! I didn’t even want you to go this far; that was John’s idea. Good Lord!” he exclaimed, shaking his head. “I feel like a pimp for my own Goddaughter.” He paused, gathering his thoughts. “I just don’t see how this could be right!”

“I know, but if you had asked and it was necessary, I would have. I knew what it meant when I volunteered. I’m in this all the way, Uncle Sam. Besides,” she looked down at her slender body

ruefully, “I am eighteen, even if I don’t look like it. I’ll do what I need to for my country.” Her voice caught for a just split second. “I don’t know that right and wrong even enter into it.”

“I still don’t understand you.”

A tear finally showed in the voice from the other side of the wall. “You couldn’t understand me, because you didn’t see *your* big sister lying dead under a flag at the capitol building. Would you take me somewhere that I can get a decent shower, please?” She looked around in disgust. “I feel dirty all of a sudden, and I’d hate to think what I might catch taking one in a place like this.

Once the fake agents were seated on the floor in the back of the windowless cargo van (leased by a corporation that existed only on paper) and rolling, Tommy peeled off his mask and shook his head, letting his long black hair fall over his shoulders in a definitely un-FBI-like manner.

“I’d have liked nothing better than to have castrated that sorry son of a bitch!” he complained loudly. “Piece of shit!”

“I agree,” Frank muttered as he unmasked. “I despise people like that. It was always the high point of my day to take one of them off the street.” Frank was in a particularly foul mood; even recognizing the necessity of using Donna as they had, it bothered him nearly as much as it did Sam. He had no say in the matter, but he felt the guilt gnawing at him all the same.

There were grunts of assent all the way through the van as Brian Hurt and Jonathon Edge pulled their own masks off.

“Now boys,” Rob declared, fishing a pack of Camels out of his pocket, “he’s going to be useful. If you’re going to infiltrate a toilet, sometimes you have to use a turd.”

Tommy was still grumbling. Even though he’d never admit it, what Donna went through rubbed him the wrong way as well. Impulsively, he reached up to the passenger seat and patted her on the shoulder. She smiled back tiredly, and squeezed his hand.

“I know, I know. I still hate to think of Duckett getting off scot-free!” the biker told him.

Rob placed a cigarette between his lips. "What makes you think Duckett is getting off?" he inquired with a smile that never reached his eyes. "He'll be useful for a time, but he'll eventually cease to be useful." He put away the pack. "Sooner or later, they're going to catch on that we've got people on the inside. Once that happens, our *real* people on the inside will see that all the evidence suddenly points to Willie Duckett, who will take the fall."

Frank's brow furrowed. "You do know he can identify you? You took your mask off."

"One of us had to do it. We couldn't afford to compromise Sam, and you and John are too well known. Tommy's too shaggy, and Brian doesn't have the experience for it.

"I had to lose the mask for psychological reasons. We were playing good cop/bad cop – Tommy, good job by the way; you just about scared me – and the good cop was the only one with a human face that he could relate to. Everyone else was a menacing shadow behind a black mask. Up here," he said, tapping his temple, "I was the only other human being in the room. He had no choice except to grab onto me like a lifeline.

"He's only seen me once, and only for a few minutes, and I don't have too many outstanding features. Besides, 'can identify me' and 'will identify me' are two different things, and I don't think he can do either unless they put me right in front of him. They can squeeze him all they want, but he simply hasn't got that much to give them, and they'll never buy the real story. Assuming he makes it to prison, he'll keep his mouth shut, just like we told him; after all, he thinks he's an FBI agent now, in deep cover." He felt around in his pockets. "Anybody got a light?"

"How long do you think he'll hold out before he talks?" Tommy ventured.

Instead of looking at the biker, his eyes went to Edge, who smiled coldly, indicating for Rob to go ahead.

"It doesn't have to be very long; things are dangerous for a cop in prison. They'll be especially dangerous when someone puts out the word that our boy Willie is in the slam working as an undercover DEA informant on the inside, to bust a prison drug ring."

Smiling at the startled looks, Rob continued. “You see, I hate sons of bitches like that just as much as you all do. I served under a captain once, in a ‘peace-keeping’ force in the Balkans. He liked little girls too, and took advantage of his situation every chance he got, just like Duckett.”

Sam, sitting at the wheel beside an unusually subdued Donna, pulled out the van’s cigarette lighter and handed it back to him.

“Must’ve been pretty tough, having to take orders from someone like that everyday.”

Rob shrugged. “It didn’t last long,” he said, pausing to light his cigarette. “The first fire fight we got into, I waited until nobody was looking and shot the bastard.” He passed the light back. “It was the only thing I did in that God-forsaken place that I’ve ever been proud of.”

While the others talked, Frank kept a surreptitious eye on Brian. Ever since the ‘farm boys’ as Sam called them, had crawled out of their hollowed-out hiding place in a truck load of lumber after their trip and met up with him and Rob in the same seedy garage where he and Sammie had been picked up, he had been comfortable with the obvious capability of the former soldier and was thus unconcerned with his formerly taciturn attitude, but there was something about the black man raised red flags in the ex-cop’s mind. He seemed like he was elsewhere mentally, and had done little more than offer grunts or monosyllabic responses to anything addressed to him. He had done his job, but it struck Frank that he seemed more to be going through the motions than actually being into it. There was something not quite right about him, and Frank’s cop instinct picked up on it. He had seen that look too many times on people he had arrested; the unpredictable ones who might stay tractable, or might explode without warning.

Castig a final glance at him, Frank mentally shook his head. Whatever troubles Brian had, he would have to work them out on his own.

Chapter 29

Jim Reynolds idly looked up at the sound of the ringing phone. Reaching over, he muted the laid-back Leonard Skynard ballad *Curtis Lowe* that he had been singing along with under his breath, before he reached for the receiver.

“Hello?”

“*This is an emergency,*” the frantic male voice shouted into his ear. “*I need to talk to Sam – now!*”

“I’m sorry, but he ain’t here. He left me in charge until he gets back. Is there anything I can help you with?”

“*Look! This is...a friend of his from the police department. You need to get the hell out of there right now! They’re coming!*”

Jim threw his long legs off the desk and rocked the chair up straight. “What do you mean, ‘they’re coming’,” he demanded. “Who’s coming?”

“*Damn it, the Feds, who the hell do you think?*” the voice yelled back. “*They used the department for a staging area, and left a little while ago! They’ll be there anytime now! This was as quick as I could get to a phone without blowing my cover!*”

“Thanks,” Jim said in acknowledgement as he slammed down the phone. With his right index finger, he stabbed a button on the desk, and an ear-splitting siren began to sound throughout the property, sending the men on farm duty pouring out of the pig barns. Frantically, he scanned the four screens monitoring whatever the closed circuit cameras were seeing outside: so far, nothing.

He caught Billy and Samantha in the hall.

“What’s going on?” she inquired, more than a little dismayed at the sudden commotion. The siren had shaken her out of her own media duties she had thrown herself into in an effort to counteract her worry over Frank.

“We’re bugging out!” he yelled. “Feds’ll be here any second!” He pointed at the big biker. “Billy! Take Samantha, take your truck, and get out of here! Head South – standard rendezvous instructions!”

“But wha-” was all she managed before she was nearly yanked off her feet. She stumbled frantically in an attempt to keep up as Billy snatched her arm and dragged her toward the door at a dead run.

Jim was still shouting orders as the door slammed behind them.

“Everybody goes in a different direction so they can’t get us all! Mark – take Mrs. Hill and the slop truck and head North! Ben – take the dirt bike to the west, cross-country! Jeff, you’re with me on the four-wheeler! Move your asses, damn it! Let’s go!”

Before the motors fired up, they could hear the distant helicopters.

Mrs. Hill wasn’t going. She’d made that very clear to Mark Topping when he tried to force her to come with him by pointing an old Smith and Wesson .38 Chief’s Special at the end of his nose. Wisely, he took the hint and left the house without her.

Due to fooling with the old woman, he was the last one out. He hit the porch running, his M14 in his hand, and promptly stepped on a braided rug that went sliding out from under him, sending him crashing down flat on his back. The painful fall saved him; a burst of government-issue 9mm rounds passed through the space his head had occupied a split second before, and tore into the siding just left of the door, turning the wood into a hail of splinters.

He rolled to the side and brought the old rifle to bear on the direction the shots had come from, took hasty aim on a black-clad figure just rounding the nearest shed, and squeezed off two fast rounds.

The Fed, part of the ground force which had preceded the choppers but hadn’t arrived in time to block the other fugitives, had made a fatal mistake. He thought that it was the 9mm rounds from his MP5 that had knocked the CAP guerrilla down, and had paused to examine his handiwork from a distance when the first .308 bullet slammed into his solar plexus. His twenty-five pounds of military body armor – a PASGT vest coupled with an ISAPO over-vest – barely managed to stop the projectile, but the massive shock sent him gasping and staggering right into the path of the second round,

which cut through the side of his neck and severed his carotid artery. He was already dying when he hit the ground.

Mark rolled again as the agent's buddy fired a long burst of his own in an effort to keep his head down. The would-be rescuer grabbed his partner's vest and dragged him toward the cover of the building's corner. He wasn't quite quick enough; Mark's shot caught him in the side of the face an instant before he could pull it out of sight. The bullet shattered his upper jaw and both cheekbones, exploding his face into a giant enlarged mouth, red and grinning hideously.

Despite the *thump-thump-thump* of the rotors overhead, the guerrilla attempted to take advantage of the hole he had made in what was certain to be a closing circle, and sprinted toward the two fallen agents. The ground seemed to come alive with tiny explosions that threw up dust all around him as the door gunner opened up with his pintle-mounted M60. One round punched through the instep of Mark's right foot just as he set it down, and before he could fall, a second one caught his left leg at the knee and jerked it backwards, like it had been snagged by a passing freight train. He fell hard on the ground, face-down this time, but managed to roll to his back, and in a last act of defiance, put a quick pair of rounds through the chopper, one through the sheet metal and the other through the glass that grazed the pilot's bicep, before a hail of descending lead pinned him fatally to the earth.

Three more agents arrived and cautiously approached the fallen man, weapons pointed, while others stayed in the cover of the barns and trees, covering the house. They reached Mark's body and one of them, in an effort to see if there were any signs of life, kicked it.

In an instant, an outraged Thumper charged from the barn, leaped into the air and caught the hapless kicker's right arm at the elbow, his massive jaws closing as he swung his full weight and momentum from the appendage, yanking the man off his feet and dislocating his shoulder before coming down on top of him.

The crippling sound of the bones snapping could be heard by the nearer agents even over the roar of the chopper and their companion's screams as Thumper jerked his head back and forth,

violently shaking his prize and ripping the muscles and tendons apart.

Unable to shoot without taking a chance on hitting their buddy underneath, one of the standing men ran up and kicked the dog in the head, causing him to immediately let go and attack his tormentor. Before the agent could get his leg down, Thumper lunged past it and bit down hard on his groin and gave another series of hard shakes. The agent's eyes rolled back and he passed out from the pain and shock.

Another of his comrades saw an opening, took careful aim, and a single 9 mm round slammed into Thumper's shoulder, knocking him loose. He fled, right in the direction of the remaining agent who had left cover. The man, deathly afraid of dogs in the first place and particularly afraid of this one, panicked, squeezed the trigger and held it down. As is usual when firing on uncontrolled full-auto, he missed completely as Thumper, anxious to get away from the pain and noise, slammed into his legs on the way by and knocked him off his feet. His finger still locked on the trigger, he flailed the MP5 as he fell, emptying the remainder of the magazine in all directions, causing his companions to throw themselves down and take cover in fear of their lives.

By the time the magazine emptied and they raised their heads, Thumper was gone.

Ben Harrington, .44 at his waist and a Chinese-made SKS rifle slung across his back, tore along the fencerow bordering the field like the proverbial bat out of hell. With the throttle wide open, the old blue and white Bultaco 360 was very nearly out of control, with every bump or clod passing under the knobby tires a potentially fatal obstacle. Not, however, as potentially fatal as the thumping black death coming right behind him.

He didn't look back. He didn't need to; he could hear the chopper's rotors even over the noise of his own screaming engine. He was tempted to fire at it, but he would have to slow down to do it, and he doubted that would be a good idea. Right now, his only real chance lay in a creek bed that passed beneath the wire at the end of

this fence. It was little more than a half-dry run, but its sides were overgrown with brush. If he could get into it, he could run along its length, partially concealed by the overhanging bushes, to where it disappeared into several acres of woods, and the helicopter would be hard-pressed to follow him there. With a lot of luck, he might be able to slip away in the coming darkness.

Although he had no way of knowing it, the chopper pilot realized what Ben was up to, and shouted an order to his door gunner. Leaning out into the wind while he hung by his safety strap, the agent sent a deadly rain down all around the fleeing motorcycle.

Ben gritted his teeth and leaned forward, cursing and cajoling, trying to get more speed out of the wound-out machine.

“C’mon, baby,” he muttered. C’mon baby! We’re almost there!”

He was only a hundred yards from the creek when the 7.62mm bullets finally found him. One hit his right side, tore a six inch gash as it passed through just beneath the muscle and carried away a piece of bone from his sixth rib. A second projectile passed through his right wrist, shattering the joint and knocking his hand off the throttle. In an instant the wheel cut to one side and the motorcycle flipped, hurling the already-wounded Ben cart-wheeling through the air and into the barbed wire fence, where he caught and hung by his arms like a man crucified, head dangling limply and blood dripping from his wounds in steady streams.

The ATV had nearly made the woods before being spotted by one of the choppers, which immediately gave chase, shouting orders over a PA system for them to stop and surrender. Jeff Smith, in the rear, hung on for dear life with one hand, Jim’s combination military-issue M16A2 and 12 gauge clutched in the other, as Reynolds gunned the engine even harder, running the tachometer all the way to the red line. Only feet away from cover, the chopper’s door gunner still hadn’t opened up, to the pleasant surprise of the two men. Just inside the woods, however, they ran into the reason why the chopper had held its fire.

A six-man Federal squad, all in the standard black fatigues was moving into position, having just gotten the ‘heads-up’ from the

helicopter that a pair of CAP guerrillas were headed their way. The sound of the chopper had concealed the noise of the four-wheeler's motor, and the pair were literally on top of the squad before either side knew what was happening.

They saw each other simultaneously: both the riders and the black figures standing in the immature pines that fringed the main wood. Both guerrillas let loose instinctively with paralyzing Rebel yells, and Jeff flipped the rifle's selector to full auto and fired one-handed for effect, spraying the area with a long burst in the general direction of the Feds in an attempt to force the enemy to cover instead of returning fire. It worked, for the most part.

As they blasted through the line, one Fed, like a deer in the headlights, was startled into immobility for a second too long. The ATV's right front fender hit him hard and sent him airborne. He glanced off Jim's shoulder nearly hard enough to knock him from his seat before landing in a pile of broken bones in the brown pine needles that covered the ground.

Unfortunately, the Feds were professional and quickly got over their surprise, opening up on the fleeing vehicle with a vengeance. The roar of fully automatic fire filled the air as the muzzles flashed tongues of fire in the gathering twilight, and sent a swarm of 5.56mm and 9mm agents of death at the rear of the machine.

Jim felt Jeff's body jerk and thrash as it slammed against him repeatedly, driven by the bullets coming from behind. He also felt hard hits, like blows from a hammer in his own back, where his passenger's body had been insufficient to stop the penetration. He knew that he had been hit seriously, and probably fatally; in a distant part of his mind, he wondered why it didn't hurt more.

They entered the thicker trees, weaving along a deer path like earth-bound Kamikazes, and the firing became more infrequent and distant as the Feds who hadn't emptied their clips were firing where they thought the men might be. Jeff was slumped against the driver's back, his head lolling on his left shoulder. Jim spared him a glance and nearly crashed when he realized that the whole top of Jeff's head was gone, and he was looking into the bloody, shot-out remains of his passenger's empty brain case. The combination gun was long

gone, dropped somewhere behind them from a limp hand. Not knowing what else to do, he instinctively put his left hand back to steady the body and hold it in place. As he did so, an idea came to him.

It was a good thing, too, because his wounds were beginning to hurt, he was weakening, and his breathing didn't feel quite right.

"Better buckle up," Billy told her as he started the engine. "This might get rough. Grab that shotgun - it's got special loads of steel ball bearings. If you have to use it, aim for the driver's side windshield; those bearings'll blow right through it." He slammed the truck in reverse and cut the wheel as he backed up quickly onto the grass, then threw it into forward and punched the gas, fishtailing slightly, heedless of the ruts he was cutting in Sam's lawn. "If that don't work, shoot their radiator, right through the grill."

It was with a numb sense of unreality, almost as if she were watching someone else performing the action, that she picked up the ugly, short-barreled weapon as they rocketed out of the driveway and turned left onto the road, picking up speed.

"Is there a round in the chamber?" She was surprised at how matter-of-fact her voice sounded, considering how frightened she was.

"Yeah; just push the safety on the trigger guard when you're ready to shoot. She kicks like a bitch, so hold on tight."

Reaching up to the visor, he pulled down an extra pair of wrap-around sunglasses that matched his own.

"Put these on."

"So no one will recognize me?" she asked hopefully.

"Well, there is that; but mostly because if any shootin' starts, there's going to be broken glass flyin' like a hail storm all over the inside of this cab."

She managed a sick grin as she slipped into the dark shades. She noticed that the big man had produced a vintage Thompson submachine gun from the floorboard – an old "Tommy-gun" like in the gangster movies, complete with a big, round drum magazine – and laid it across his lap.

“Do you always have this much ‘fun’?” she asked him.

He showed her a set of big teeth from the forest of his moustache, but she could read the tension in the hard lines of his face, despite the facial hair and the sunglasses.

“I have to admit that this is a little more excitin’ than usual.

“Look, if everything goes to hell, and really screws up big-time, do exactly what I tell you. If I tell you to get ready to bail, unbuckle that seat belt and put a hand on the door handle. When I slow down and give the word, you jump for it. Keep that shotgun tight to you – but for God’s sake don’t point it at yourself – and hit rollin’. Then get up and run like hell, and keep runnin’. They’ll probably follow the truck, but if not, be ready to kill the sons o’ bitches.” He noticed her staring at him. “What?”

“Is every Southern man that willing to die to keep a woman alive? Frank offered to do the same thing just hours after I met him.”

Billy pursed his lips and spared a little concentration on that thought. “I reckon every *real* Southern man is. ’Course, sometimes I wonder how many of those there actually are.”

“I’m beginning to think,” she said in a serious tone, “that I’ve never known what a *real* Southern man was until the past few days; now I’m surrounded by them. You’re all so different; cops, bikers, farmers, but you’re all a lot alike too, if you know what I mean. I’m really proud of you all.”

Billy, a romantic at heart despite his crudity, blinked rapidly behind his glasses.

“Thank you, ma’am. I’ll tell you somethin’; we’re all really proud of the real Southern women too, ladies like you and... *Oh shit!*”

They rounded a curve and less than a hundred yards ahead of them, two federal Humvees were parked nose to nose, crosswise, blocking the highway from ditch to ditch, with less than four feet of space between their front bumpers. Gun muzzles poked over their roofs and hoods, the sinister black mouths aimed right for them. Instead of slowing, the big biker jammed the gas pedal to the floor.

“*Fire!*” he roared. “*Fire, damn it! Fire!*”

Setting the example, he shoved the venerable Thompson out the window in his giant left fist, extended his beefy arm like he was firing a pistol, and began hosing down the road block in short bursts, the hot spent brass bouncing off the blacktop, the truck's roof, and even falling back inside unheeded. The huge full metal-jacketed bullets slammed into and through the sheet metal of the vehicle bodies with a loud staccato clanging.

Samantha leaned out the window and couldn't get a full field of fire due to the restraint of the shoulder harness, but she took what she could get, blasting off a pair of shots and being hammered by the recoil before Billy grabbed her and yanked her back inside, nearly causing her to lose the shotgun.

"Hang on!" he shouted. "We're going through!" Then he threw his head back and let out an inarticulate primordial battle cry that would not have been out of place on a Viking raid, a band of painted Celts sweeping down on a Roman legion, or rising from the Southern Armies during Pickett's charge at Gettysburg. Samantha was startled to hear a similar cry coming involuntarily from her own throat like a previously unknown yet irrepressible atavistic racial memory as their truck slammed into the roadblock at nearly seventy miles an hour.

Billy aimed for the one weak point, the forty-five inch gap where the vehicles' front bumpers faced each other. The impact jolted the truck's passengers nauseatingly, slamming them against their shoulder harnesses, but they tore through like a bullet through a knee-joint, knocking the Humvees aside like toys. Their firing, which hadn't actually hit anyone, had caused the Feds to duck, and they quickly scrambled away from the expected impact – all except for one of them, who had waited too long to move. The spinning left-hand vehicle that had been his shelter smashed into him broadside, shattering his pelvis and femur and knocking him into the ditch, where his right shoulder was crushed and that arm and several ribs broken.

The pair in the truck had their own problems. The impact had ruptured their radiator, and a cloud of hot steam pouring from the remains of the grill obscured their vision. Worst of all, however, was

that the front bumper of the left-hand vehicle had hooked inside the truck's ruined fender-well and ripped the driver's side front tire open, causing an instant blow-out. Dazed by the crash, Billy instinctively fought the wheel for control. Within seconds, their high-speed fishtailing dropped the wheel with its shredded tire into a ditch. The truck flipped, missing a total end-over-end revolution by only a few degrees, and sending the junk in the bed flying like it had been shot from a catapult. The air-borne truck clipped a utility pole with its bed, snapping it like a toothpick and tearing the vehicle virtually in half. The crumpled remnant rolled twice more, before coming to rest on its roof in a cloud of dust.

Cautiously the Feds approached the twisted wreck, guns pointed and fingers on the triggers.

Across a narrow field, only a hundred yards wide and just over a mile away from Sam's place, a tangle of kudzu vine had taken over an abandoned neighboring farm, turning what had been a house, trees, and land into a surreal, rolling landscape of shaggy green leaves. It was only the regular grazing of a multicolored herd of goats kept solely for that purpose that held the mess in check and kept it from spreading through the field and engulfing the woods. They were there now, contentedly munching in ignorance of what lay only yards away.

There was a rustling from within the vines, and a radio crackled.

"Do you see him, Eight?"

"No," one of the men in the vines responded, staring out through the slit of his ski mask and speaking into the microphone of his headset, "but I hear him. His motor's idling just inside the trees. He's probably checking out the field before he crosses, trying to see if we're here."

"Roger that. Everyone hold your positions, and don't fire until I give the word. We need to wait until he's well out in the field, so he won't have a chance to get back into those trees. It's getting dark, and I don't want to have to go in after him at night."

"One, be sure you keep the choppers back; we don't want to spook him."

“Get ready,” the spotter ordered, his voice tense. “I hear the engine revving...he’s coming!”

On the other side of the field, the four-wheeler burst from the tree line and roared over the grass at a forty-five degree angle across their line of fire, the rider crouched low behind the handlebars. Frightened goats scattered in all directions.

“He’s heading for the other end of the field,” the tinny-sounding voice on the radio barked. *“Take aim, but don’t fire until I give the command. I’ll wait until he’s in the middle. Ready...hold it...hold...Now! Let him have it!”*

A sheet of flame exploded from the kudzu as the squad opened up with two M4’s and three MP5’s on full auto, and a 12 gauge Remington belching loads of double-ought buckshot as fast as it’s operator could pump the slide. At only fifty yards, the effect was devastating. Even in the poor light, they could see sparks flying off the ATV as the rounds impacted it, and bits of clothing and gobbets of flesh being knocked from its rider. Still, he made it nearly to the tangle of vines before a shot blew a front tire, causing the machine to swerve hard and roll over on top of him. Gasoline began to spill from the bullet holes in the tank, and ignited in a loud *whoosh* when a final bullet glanced from the engine in a shower of sparks. Both man and machine became an instant funeral pyre.

“All right, we got him,” the agent said into the radio as the squad left cover and entered the field “One, there was only a single individual on the four-wheeler.”

“That would be correct. The first squad reported that they had hit the passenger several times, at least once in the head. They found a baseball cap full of brains at the scene, so I don’t think we have to worry about him. His partner probably dumped the body along the trail somewhere; they’re following them, so they’ll pick it up.

“That should be the last of them. Hold your position until they get to your location. We’re sending a chopper to collect the suspect.”

“They’d better bring a fire extinguisher,” he muttered to the man closest to him as the wind shifted slightly and the smell of cooking human meat filled their nostrils. He was suddenly distracted by a

loud, irritating noise off to his right. A lone white goat lay there, bleating in agony, its spine severed by a stray bullet. It was trying to drag itself along by its front legs, pulling its useless hindquarters across the pasture.

“Somebody shut that damned thing up!”

The agent with the shotgun shrugged, shouldered the big-bore weapon, and blew the wounded animal’s head into bloody rags from twenty feet away.

The shooter, as he curiously watched the creature’s legs thrash and spasm for a few seconds in its death throws, remarked, “it’s kind of funny how they’ll keep moving when they ought to be dead, isn’t it?”

A small ditch, little more than a foot-deep weedy depression, crossed the pasture a hundred feet from the dead goat, and in it, Jim Reynolds flinched at the sound of the shot. He kept moving, crawling past on his belly while fighting the pain and struggling to keep breathing. He didn’t know how long it would take them to figure out that he had tied Jeff’s body to the four-wheeler with long, briar-studded pieces of green woodbine before he wedged the throttle open and popped the clutch while standing beside the machine, but he wanted to be far, far away when they did.

“Okay,” Edge told them, “now that we’re done with the debriefing, here’s the plan. I don’t want to risk the same hiding place to transport us twice, and there’s no way we can openly go back as a unit without attracting attention, so we’ll have to split up. That way too, if they grab somebody, they won’t get us all.

“Rob, Brian; you two stay here in Columbia. You’ve done a great job so far – keep doing it. You’re our presence on the ground here; keep an eye on things, and let us know if anything comes up.”

Rob nodded crisply, while Brian, staring at the floor, didn’t bother to respond.

“Tommy, I know you’ve got a friend here somewhere,” referring unknowingly to Mike Dayton. He left out the “*And I still don’t know who the hell it is!*” as he gave a meaningful look at Sam. “So why don’t you stay with him – see if he has anything new for us.

“Sam, you and I need to rest up for the night and do some brainstorming, and we might as well arrange to meet up with your buddy Larson and get it over with.”

Sam looked at his Goddaughter.

“Donna, you’re running cross-country with that Jeep of yours all the time; do you know a way out of Columbia that won’t take you past the roadblocks around the city.” She nodded, and he continued, treating Frank to a halfway grin. “Good. I know our newlywed’s mind isn’t going to be on anything else other than getting back to his wife, so take him on the scenic route out of town. I’m pretty sure his new look,” he said, referring to Frank’s shortened, lightened hair and his moustache and goatee, “will pass the casual muster with someone who hasn’t actually seen him, but I’d just as soon not put it to the test if we don’t have to. When you hit the main road try to get in a big line of moving traffic – you’re less likely to be stopped in the crowd, but be sure and have a story ready in case you are, and some hardware at hand in case they don’t buy it.”

Frank nodded and patted the butt of the .45 beneath his shirt in affirmation. “I’m as ready as I can be. I don’t want any special consideration, but...well, thanks.”

“No thanks needed; it’s for my benefit too. You’re still all wrapped up in wedded bliss, so you’re the only one of these yahoos I trust alone with my Goddaughter.”

“*Uncle Sam!*” she shrilled, flushing with embarrassment.

“I don’t have to tell you all to be careful, but I’m going to anyway. Take your time and get back to the farm where it’s safe.”

Chapter 30

Jim had gone as far as his body would carry him. With the instinct of a wounded animal, he had finally taken shelter in the ruins of an old tobacco barn he had stumbled across on a back road, where he buried himself beneath some of last year's moldy hay left behind by the farmer who had stored it there. He could see the stars through the holes in the roof, and the whole structure listed precariously to one side, looking as though it would collapse in a decent breeze. No one in their right mind would enter such a hazard, which made it the perfect hiding place for Jim.

He had no more gotten under the strong smelling hay than he heard the sound of a vehicle pulling up outside, and a spotlight played over the structure, its glow filling the empty doorway, visible through the finger's width of hay he had pushed up to see out. The light cut out, and he heard doors slamming.

"*That's it then,*" he thought to himself, and quietly slipped off the safety on the customized .45 Colt Combat Commander he already had in his hand. He could hear them moving outside, then a hand holding a flashlight stuck around the rotten wood framing the weed-choked entrance. A head bobbed into view for an instant, then jerked back, followed by a figure leaping into the room and stepping to one side, immediately followed by a second, both of them trying to point their weapons, a pair of M4s, in every direction at once. They were little more than alien-looking silhouettes in their ubiquitous black garb, and Jim had to stifle a crazy laugh in spite of the his predicament, as it hit him that, with their coalscuttle Kevlar helmets, their heads looked vaguely like penises.

Walking pricks from outer space; that's about right!

He was in the process of psyching himself to make his last, quick move, to bring the .45 up firing and take at least one of them with him, when the larger of the agents, black and probably from the inner city from the sound of his voice, suddenly screamed shrilly before exiting the old barn even faster than he had come in, leaving his startled partner trying to keep up.

“What the hell’s the matter?” Jim heard one of the voices shout from outside, a Pennsylvania Yankee, judging by the accent. “What was it? What’s the matter?”

“Didn’ you see that snake? That thing was as big aroun’ as my arm, an’ it crawled right over my foot!”

“Geez, guy! Was it poison?”

“How the hell do I know if it’s poison? You wanna know if it’s poison, you git yo’ own ass back in there an’ look at it! I ain’t goin’ near it!”

Jim cringed and shuddered beneath the hay. If there was one thing on this earth he hated and feared, it was snakes. Listening closely, he could hear the reptile’s belly scales slithering in the darkness. It took every bit of will power he had just to hold still. Finally the sounds ceased, but in some ways that was even worse, not knowing where it was.

“Well, I didn’t see anything anyway. With something like that crawling around, I don’t think anyone’s very likely to be in there with it. So, what now?”

Jim listened to the retreating footsteps with relief, but it was short lived. The pair reached their vehicle and stopped, still talking. After several minutes, he decided that they weren’t going anywhere. Shifting his position slightly in an attempt to relieve the pressure for the blood in his chest cavity, he felt something gouge him in the side. Slowly and silently, half-afraid that he was laying on either the snake or its big brother, he gingerly put his hand down and found the source of his discomfort – his cell phone.

Frank and Donna looked questioningly at each other as a series of electronic beeps played ‘*Dixie*’ from somewhere in the front seat, barely audible over the night wind blowing through the open topped Jeep as they rolled along. Both looked down, trying to find its source. It was Frank who finally located it, wedged down in the crack of his seat.

“It’s Uncle Sam’s cell phone!” Donna exclaimed as Frank produced the object. “He must have dropped it when he was in here

talking to me earlier, right before we left. Here,” she extended her hand, “I’ll answer it.” She pressed the button.

“Hello?”

“D-Donna? This is Jim; I need to talk to Sam. Emergency.”

“Just a minute, let me get stopped; I can’t hear on this thing for the doggone wind noise.”

“All right, Jim,” she said, once she had pulled onto the shoulder, “Sam’s not here right now. He accidentally left his cell phone in my Jeep. Can I take a message?”

“Yes.” His voice was a gasping whisper and didn’t sound right at all. *“Don’t come up here! The Fed’s hit us a little while ago. They’re all over the place.”*

“Feds?” she gasped, unbelievably, and Frank snatched the phone from her hand.

“Jim! This is Frank; what the hell’s going on up there?”

“Frank? They hit us hard; choppers, Humvees, and probably at least a hundred Feds.”

“Where’s Sammie?” His voice was ice.

“I don’t know. We all split up to give us the best chance of getting away. I sent her South with Billy in his truck, but I don’t know if they made it or not. The only one I know for sure about is Jeff; he was with me. He’s dead, and I’m all shot up. I’m pretty sure they got my lungs. I’m sorry, man.” He sounded close to tears with the guilt that only a lone survivor can feel. *“God knows, I’m sorry.”*

Leaning in close and overhearing, Donna clamped her hand to her mouth as Frank fought for control, and somewhere in his subconscious he realized that the best way to get control of himself was to seize control of the situation. Using his years of training in the fighting arts, he forced his mind out of chaos and back on track.

“Okay, where are you now?” Donna looked at him in surprise at the calm, cold tone of his voice.

“Don’t worry about me. I’m hit hard and I figure I’m dying anyway. Don’t come up here; you’ll only get yourselves killed, and there’s nothing you can do for me.”

“We’re coming. Where are you holed up?”

“But you can’t, they’re...”

“Don’t ‘but’ me, damn it! I asked you a question and I expect an answer. Now are you going to tell me where you are, or are we going to have to come up there and start looking for you at random; which is it?”

“Alright, alright, you dumb, stubborn son of a bitch! I’m in that old tobacco barn on the Thompson place, right by the road.”

“Hold one.” He gave the information to Donna, and she affirmed that she knew the location. Turning back to the phone he said, “Okay, we know where you are. We’ll be there in about fifteen or twenty minutes.”

“You can’t. There’re two Feds in a Humvee sitting right in front of the building. They missed me in the search, but they’ve picked this place to loaf.” He stifled a cough. *“I guess this just ain’t my lucky day.”*

“I reckon that remains to be seen. You just hold tight, friend. We’re coming after you.”

Pushing the “off” button, he turned to Donna. “Do you have a number where we can get hold of Sam or any of the others in Columbia?” She shook her head, and he sighed heavily.

“Looks like it’s just you and me then. There’s no time to go back and get them and still save Jim, and I’m not willing to leave him behind. Are you in?” She nodded, pale, but determined. “Alright then, let’s go. We’ll plan on the way. First, tell me all you can remember about Thompson’s tobacco barn.”

Chapter 31

The two agents looked up at the sound of a distant vehicle.

“Somebody’s comin’.”

“Probably nobody important, but we’d better check ’em out anyway. Besides, it’ll save us a major ass-chewing if it happens to be the captain coming out to check on us.”

“Huh!” the black agent grunted. “You got that right!”

They listened as the vehicle slowed down near the curve a quarter of a mile down the road, then accelerated to an even cruise as it came into sight. They recognized the headlights as those of a jeep and flipped a switch, turning on their blue flashers.

The oncoming four-wheel drive immediately began slowing and when it neared, the white agent motioned it to a halt with a flashlight, while the other kept him covered with his M4 across the hood of the Humvee.

“Evenin’ officers,” Donna drawled softly, trying her best to put a simultaneous note of seductiveness and stupidity in her voice. She covertly studied the sandy-haired white man and his black partner. Neither were as tall as Frank, but even in the darkness, she could tell both of them were in good shape. She really hoped this worked.

“Evening, Miss,” the white officer responded, running his eyes up and down her young body, its slenderness revealed by the tight jeans and the T-shirt that plainly showed the outline of her nipples, erect from the cool night breeze. *Not very old but not bad.* “Aren’t you a little young to be driving on the highway? Hey Leroy!” he laughingly called to his partner. “You’d better get down here; it looks like we’ve got a hardened criminal.” Leroy grinned, showing a mixed mouthful of white and gold teeth in the darkness, and joined them.

“Why, no sir!” she said, handing him her license. “I’m eighteen: all grown-up and haired-over!” Then she giggled suggestively like the stereotypical empty-headed white trash slut she was pretending to be.

The agents looked at one another, and then back at the girl, who winked at them flirtatiously.

“Where you heading, honey?”

“Lookin’ for a good time – know where I can find one?”

The black man gave his partner a knowing look.

“Well now, we just might, but how do we know you’re not one of them CAP terrorists we’re lookin’ for?”

“You wanna search me, big boy? I’ll be happy to get up against the car and spread my legs for a couple of cute guys like you. Y’all look real snappy in them black uniforms.”

“I don’ know, what do you think, Schneider?” he asked, grinning all the harder. “You think this calls for a strip search?”

The white man ran his eyes up and down her body once more.

“I’m thinking more along the lines of a full cavity search, myself.”

“Ooh, baby!” Donna exclaimed, squirming in the seat in her best ‘turned on’ manner, and keeping her eyes fixed on theirs, lest her gaze betray the figure that was coming up behind them.

When Donna had slowed down for the curve, Frank bailed out of the Jeep with his .45 and a hatchet he had found under the seat. After getting a few yards off the road, he hit the paralleling woven wire fence line she had told him about; overgrown by morning glory, honeysuckle, and poison ivy. Climbing over at a post, he took off running on the other side, trusting on the plant-covered wire and the moonless night for concealment and his skills for silence. He ignored the pain in his healing ribs as his strong legs rapidly ate up the distance.

Donna already had the agents deep in conversation when Frank reached the section of fence behind the old barn. Climbing back over as silently as possible, he used the tumbledown structure for cover, working his way around to the front in its shadow, to come out only yards behind the pair. He began his stalk.

He wanted to avoid gunfire if at all possible; the area was crawling with Feds and a shot was certain to bring them running. He thrust the pistol into the belt holster Sam had given him and grimly

gripped the hatchet. He would have killed for a silencer; now he'd have to kill without one.

I guess I'll earn my pay tonight.

Neither agent had any inkling he was there until he used both hands to swing the flat, pounding edge of the hatchet with a powerful blow against the spine between the closest enemy's shoulder blades. Even though the body armor gave some protection, Schneider collapsed, stunned. The loud, hollow *thump* of the impact caused the other agent to spin around just in time to die. Frank rolled the hatchet in his hand to put the cutting edge forward as he stepped past his victim with his left foot and whipped the blade into the Negro's throat, half severing his head. Arterial blood sprayed in Frank's face as Leroy lurched away, clutching at the hideous, gurgling wound, but Frank leapt on his back and rode him to the ground, wrenched the back of his helmet up while forcing his face into the earth to stifle any possible outcry, and severed his neck vertebra with a second stroke.

Schneider had recovered just enough to grope for his dropped rifle when Donna jumped from the Jeep, stomped down hard on his arm, and snatched up the gun, pointing it at his head. She was so scared her voice was little more than a squeak.

"You move and I'll kill you!"

Schneider, very wisely, did not move.

Frank rose, covered in the dead man's blood, and called out.

"Jim! Are you in there?"

"Yeah," his voice came to them faintly, followed by a gurgling cough. "But I don't think I can walk."

After securing Schneider with his own cuffs, Donna covered him while Frank dragged Jim out of the barn and briefly examined him. He had three wounds in his back, one of them sucking and bubbling in time to his breathing. Frank hurriedly put a compression bandage from the Jeep's first aid kit over the lung wound, then loaded him into the Humvee. They'd care for the rest later – time was of the essence. Unshackling Schneider, they kept their guns on him long enough for him to strip to his underwear, then left him bound,

blindfolded, and gagged in the back of the vehicle before stripping Leroy's body and dumping it in beside him. Since Schneider was the smallest, Donna put on his clothes. The uniform hung on her small frame like a tent, but Frank thought they would pass in the dark if they didn't have to exit the government SUV. Frank hoped that Leroy's BDUs that he put on himself would pass a quick observation as well: they were soaked with blood, and he could feel it cooling and sticky against his skin. He refused to think about blood-borne pathogens like HIV and hepatitis.

"Is there a place you can leave the jeep? I'm going to need you to do most of the driving; I've got to work with Jim and try to keep him alive."

"I've got some friends about ten miles back the way we came – I can pull it off the road and into their woods; I'll call and tell them I broke down there, and I'll pick it up later."

"Good – since you know where you're going, I'll follow you. Let's get moving."

They were just entering the vehicles when the sound of movement in a patch of roadside brush stopped them and brought both of their confiscated weapons to bear as they darted for cover behind the Humvee. The source soon revealed itself as a tired and bloody Thumper, tongue lolling, limped painfully out into the road.

Frank held the cell phone to his ear as they rode along in the Humvee, Donna in the driver's seat. Both were dressed in the agents' Federal issue black, complete with helmets. "Jim gave me this number. I can't go into too much detail right now – no keywords, remember." He shuddered at the risk they had taken in the cell phone conversation with Jim. Nothing but the grace of God or just pure dumb luck had kept it from being picked up. "You just have that garage door open and a doctor there when we arrive. Jim's been hurt bad. Under *no* circumstances is *anyone* to go near the farm, do you understand?"

"*Has it been...compromised?*" It was Sam's voice on the other end.

"Yeah, it's been compromised as hell."

“Sweet Jesus. Who’s with you two?”

“Just Jim and a *guest*; that’s it. We’re in borrowed transportation, courtesy of Uncle Sugar.” After a moment’s thought he added, “You might want to get a vet too, if you can find one. Thumper’s with us, and he’ll need some help as well.”

“What about my sister, Frank?”

“I’m sorry, Sam, I don’t know. Have you heard from Billy and Samantha?”

Frank heard the heavy sigh on the other end.

“No, Frank; I was hoping she was with you.”

“No,” he said, his voice breaking and a tear trickling down his bloody cheek. Donna took her right hand from the wheel and laid it on his arm, offering what comfort she could. “No, I haven’t seen her.”

He thumbed the *off* switch and threw his head against the seat back in frustration.

Oh God, what am I going to do?

“Excuse me, sir: are you Dr. Bowman?”

The sixty year-old physician eyed the man in his doorway suspiciously. In spite of the darkness, the stranger was wearing dark glasses that matched his black government fatigues. Something about him raised Dick Bowman’s hackles.

“Yes; can I help you?” he inquired uneasily.

“Yeah,” the stranger said, flashing a badge. “FBI, Homeland Security Division; we’ve got a patient that needs your help. Please come with us immediately.” He turned his head and muttered into a lapel microphone, and Bowman heard a vehicle start in front of his house.

“But... but, I’m retired.”

“Not anymore,” Jonathon Edge told him.

“But I don’t understand,” the doctor complained from the passenger seat a few minutes later as he twisted his neck back and forth in a vain attempt to see past the gauze pads they had put over his eyes before winding bandages around his head, making an

effective blindfold. “Why can’t you just take your man to a hospital?”

“It’s a matter of national security,” the CAP leader responded, “and the less you know, the better. All you have to do is treat the victims. Rest assured that you *will* be adequately reimbursed for your efforts – tax free.”

The doctor sighed in frustration. “Can you at least tell me the nature of their problems, so I can prepare myself for what I’ll be dealing with?”

“Gunshot wounds.”

Chapter 32

They hauled the garage door open as the Humvee rolled into the alley, and quickly slammed it shut behind them. Lights came on, and masked men scrambled around the vehicle. As Donna and Frank opened their doors, Edge, and an older, professional-looking man that Frank had never seen before – both with faces bare – along with Sam and Rob in ski masks were already pulling Jim out, barely conscious, while the similarly masked Tommy was shouting profanely for them to “be careful, damn it.” Brian, his face likewise concealed, reached in the other side to help, only to come face-to-face with the black man’s body clad in bloody underwear, the head nearly severed and hanging on by a flap of skin no wider than a hand. He lurched out of the vehicle, barely managing to raise the mask before spewing vomit. Tommy and the stranger ignored him as they hustled the wounded man up the rickety steps, and the door banged behind them.

As the high school teacher leaned against the wall, retching, Frank spoke to him quietly, trying to reassure him.

“Don’t feel bad. I thought I was going to have to stop and throw up myself afterwards.”

Brian rounded on him, eyes wide and fists clenched.

“Get the hell away from me!” he shouted, spraying slobbers. “You just get the hell away!” Then he spun on his heel and stormed out of the room, leaving a startled Frank staring tiredly at his back. The ex-cop knew he should have felt bad for him, but he was too fatigued and emotionally mangled to care very much right now. Rob gave him a silent thumbs up before going after his partner.

Thumper slowly dismounted with a grunt and limped to Sam, who was too upset to notice.

“Never mind him!” he growled at Frank, Edge frowning beside him. “What the hell happened up there?”

Donna stepped up beside him, still looking slightly ridiculous in the helmet and oversized black BDUs with ‘SCHNEIDER’ written above the pocket.

“Don’t badger him; he’s all tore up over Samantha, even if he’s too stubborn to admit it. *I’ll* tell you what happened.”

The tale went on for several minutes as Donna gave a no-nonsense rundown of their activities.

“...And when we got to the roadblocks around Columbia, we just turned on the flasher and siren, waved at them like good little Feds, and they motioned us right on through. So here we are,” she said nonchalantly.

When she finished, Sam, who had been standing open-mouthed and gradually reddening, exploded.

“*Damn it, what the hell is wrong with you?*” He yelled at her, waving his fists in the air and actually stomping the floor in his rage. “You could have been killed! My God! I’ve got a good mind to turn you across my knee and bust you good!

“And *you!*” He spun on Frank, shaking a finger in his face. “What the *hell* were you thinking, risking her life like that? Who the hell do you think you are – *Unngh!*”

A loud *crack* split the air as Donna’s unexpected slap rocked Sam’s head back, startling the others in the room nearly as much as it did her Godfather.

“I’ll tell you who the hell he thinks he is!” It was her turn to shout now as she reached out to point her finger at the end of Sam’s nose. “He’s the man who had the guts to go in there and save one of *your* men he barely knew from certain death by taking on two armed Federal agents with a hatchet! He’s the one who went into this fiasco that wiped out our base and most of our organization, and came out driving a Humvee loaded with guns, a prisoner and your pet bulldog! And he’s the one,” she said, her voice rising to a crescendo, “that went ahead and did his duty, even though God only knows what’s happened to his wife!

“So who the hell do you think *you* are to criticize him for that?” She punctuated this last by stabbing the finger hard into his chest like a rapier.

Sam’s face seemed to collapse in on itself, his eyes filled with tears, and he literally staggered under the impact of her accusations.

For the first time anyone who knew him had seen, he was at a complete loss for words. “I...I...” he stammered.

Suddenly, Donna’s lower lip began quivering and she threw herself on the older man, embracing him tightly.

“I’m sorry, Uncle Sam!” she sobbed violently. “I’m so sorry!”

Sam squeezed his eyes tight shut and hugged her back fiercely.

Frank and Edge turned away to give them their privacy.

“It seems I’m leaving a trail of trouble wherever I go.” Frank muttered.

“Don’t worry about it; it’s a long-standing family thing. Besides, as I’m sure you’ve noticed, emotions run high in times of stress.

“As for tonight, it was a little riskier than I’d prefer, but as long as it works, I guess. The proof is in the pudding, as Mama used to say. That was good work you did tonight, fine work. You two did well, and struck a great blow for the Cause.” He paused. “I can’t tell you how sorry I am about Samantha.”

“Yeah,” said Frank distantly as he tossed the Kevlar helmet back into the Humvee’s open door. “Me too.”

“Not to take anything away from you, but you failed to utilize communication. You should have notified us as to what you were up to. Even if you didn’t have the number, you should have come back for reinforcements first. That was a big risk”

“There wasn’t time; Jim reported being hit through the lungs, and he wouldn’t have lasted that long. Besides, we knew you’d order us not to do it. As long as what you’re planning works, it’s always been better in my experience to ask forgiveness than permission; you get a lot more done that way.”

“The key phrase there: ‘as long as it works’...”

The ex-cop shrugged. “If it hadn’t worked, I don’t think she and I would have had much time to worry about it.”

Edge smiled coldly. “I suppose not.”

“Frank?” It was Sam. As they turned back toward him, he furiously wiped at his eyes while the others studiously pretended not to notice. “I owe you an apology.”

Frank wearily gave him his hand.

“Accepted; people tend to say things they don’t mean when they’re upset. Now forget it. It was nothing.”

“No. It wasn’t ‘nothing’. I had no right to say that to you. I was just scared, Frank! I’ve lost my other Goddaughter, I’ve probably lost my sister and I was afraid for Donna. I love that little girl like she was my own, and it scared me.” He turned and looked at her. “I guess I needed to realize that she’s grown up. I still can’t help but worry, you know what I mean?”

“Yeah,” Frank said, looking away. “Believe me, I know *exactly* what you mean.”

“I guess you would, at that. I am truly sorry. Do you have a clue as to what happened to any of them?”

Frank turned and looked at the Humvee, his lips stretched in a thin line. “No, but I know somebody who might.”

The others digested this information for a moment.

“Donna,” Sam said softly. “Please leave the room.”

“What? Why?”

“Just do it, for me, okay? Put a mask on and go help Tommy and the doc.”

Jonathon Edge, understanding the situation, spoke up. “Consider it an order.”

Not comprehending what was about to happen, she was still reluctant, and Frank, never looking at her, began to speak.

“Donna, you fought beside me; do you trust me?”

“You *know* I do!”

“Good; then trust me now. Leave the room.” She started to interrupt, but he raised a hand. “I’m asking you as your friend and as your comrade. If you stay, you may spend the rest of your life wishing you hadn’t. You’ve got a lot more years to have to face yourself in the mirror than we have. Now, please leave.” After a moment, he added, “take Thumper with you. See if they can do something for him too, while they’re at it.

After a moment of silent hesitation, they heard her footsteps pattering away, followed by the closing door.

“Alright,” Edge ordered. “Let’s get him out of the truck.”

Chapter 33

When they pulled the blindfold off the seated and bound agent, the first thing Joe Schneider saw was Leroy Patterson, likewise seated and duct-taped upright in a swivel chair directly in front of him, so close they were knee to knee. He stared for several seconds, his brain unable to register the reality of what he was seeing. When he finally realized that Leroy's normally black skin was the color of ashes, his head was lying unnaturally over on his body's right shoulder, and there was a gaping, bloody hole where it used to rest, he let out an involuntary scream.

It was just the effect Edge was looking for when he propped the body up. He motioned to the other two, who wheeled it back a few feet, but left it where the agent could see it.

"Allow us to introduce ourselves," a voice said, and Schneider tore his gaze away from his cooling partner to follow it to its source. It belonged to a tall, cold looking man with gray hair and a moustache who looked vaguely familiar. His forehead wrinkled as he tried to recall where he had seen him.

"I see you don't know me, but I'm certain you've seen my picture. I have the honor to be the commander of the Confederate Army Provisional forces; my name is Jonathon Edge."

The agent's eyes widened. "From Virginia? But...you're dead!"

Edge treated him to a smile with all the warmth of a shark's gape. "It's amazing how long it takes them to sift ashes, isn't it? Here's someone else who's dying to meet you. You've probably seen his picture recently too, like right before your raid."

Sam stepped within Schneider's view, and pulled off his mask.

"You're that pig farmer we were after – Wirtz!"

"I'm glad to see your memory is improving," Edge said dryly. "I have one more; I'm sure you know who he is."

The agent's heart sank, and he looked away, but Edge grabbed him by his long nose and used it to brutally jerk his head back to face the front.

“Who is that? Take a good look – picture the hair a little longer and darker, and no goatee.”

“Franklin Gore,” the agent muttered, a cold sweat beginning to bead on his forehead.

“Got it on your first try,” Edge told him. “Take a look at your friend over there, and then look at these men around you. Take a moment and think about what you have done to us, and then tell me something; do you have any idea what we are capable of doing to you?” He saw the agent look at the ashy pallor and glazed, bulging eyes of the corpse, and swallow hard. “Do you?” he persisted.

The agent decided he’d better answer. “Y-yes sir.”

“Good; just so you realize that. Agent Schneider, how would you like to live?”

“I’d (*gulp!*) like that very much,” he said in desperation, looking at Leroy’s remains again.

“Very well, but let me make one thing perfectly clear. We need information, information that you will provide as the price for us to spare your life, until such a time as we can exchange you for our own people. We will be holding you for some time, and we will have ample opportunity to verify that information. At the slightest lie, at the first hint of deception, we will treat you just as your forces have treated us. You will go on trial by the Provisional Confederate government for the war crimes you have committed against the Southern people, the sentence for which *will* be death, and your execution will be carried out by the men here in this room right now. *None of us* have the slightest motivation to make your passing either quick or pleasant. Rest assured, if you do not give us accurate information, we *will* extract it from you before you die. Do I make myself clear?”

The agent nodded rapidly. “Yes sir! Whatever you want to know. They don’t pay me enough for that shit!”

Edge fixed him with a cold stare. “I can assure you, Agent Schneider, that *no one* gets paid enough for that shit.

“Okay, let’s begin; how many dead are there at the farm?”

“Let’s see,” he looked skyward and began counting to himself, as the CAP guerrillas looked on in macabre fascination. “Nine that I

know of; four suspects and five agents, although several more of our people were hurt pretty bad.”

“Who were they – our people I mean?”

Frank tried to steel himself for what he was afraid he would hear, and failed miserably. Outside, he showed no sign, but inside he cried like a child and prayed for a miracle.

“Well, there were two men trying to get away on a four wheeler, and the choppers, uh, got another one in the yard, I don’t know who they were. Then there was an old woman in the house.”

“You killed the old woman?” Sam’s voice was a growl.

The agent shrugged as far as his bonds would allow.

“We never had a chance. She had set up something – they think it was a claymore mine, but they’re not sure yet – and detonated it when the squad broke down the door. It looks like she was either standing right there beside it or maybe even holding it. At any rate, nobody who saw it lived to tell about it.”

Sam paled, pulled off his cap and looked down, muttering a prayer. It was a claymore, alright; he had been saving it to use himself in a last act of defiance in just such a situation.

Unable to contain himself any longer, Frank stepped forward. “What about Samantha?”

“The reporter? Her and some big hairy biker-type crashed trying to run a roadblock. They flighted ’em out in a chopper.”

“Then they’re alive?”

“I guess so; at least they were then. I was on a different squad.”

Frank felt like shouting.

“Anyone else?” Sam inquired.

Their prisoner looked thoughtful. “Yeah; there was some guy on a dirt bike. They flew him out wounded too. As far as I know, that’s it. The Norris woman is the only one who’s name I know, though.”

“Her name’s not Norris,” Frank told him. “It’s Gore; Mrs. Franklin Gore.”

Schneider paled. “She’s your wife? Oh man, I’m sorry! Look, I’ve got nothing to do with those people,” he pleaded in a panic, the sweat beading on his forehead. “You’ve got to believe me!”

The CAP guerrillas looked at one another, then back at their prisoner.

“What are you talking about?”

The agent licked his thin lips nervously. “I’m talking about the ones who’ve got her and the others now. We’ve got nothing to do with them.”

“Who exactly are ‘them’?” Frank demanded.

“Peters’ people – you know, the FEMA guy in Columbia, the one who ordered the raid. We been under his orders to turn over all prisoners related to the latest round of violence directly to him and his squad, the woman in particular.”

“Exactly what is this squad you’re talking about?” Edge broke in. “I thought he was using regular Federal forces, FBI, BATF, like that.”

Schneider shook his head vigorously. “He uses us for foot soldiers, doing regular raids; all Federal law enforcement is under FEMA orders during an emergency as part of an executive order on Homeland Security. He’s also got a private squad of his own, though, drawn from all the agencies, the military, and private contractors that he uses for other stuff: black-bag ops, wet work, interrogations-things like that. They answer only to him.”

The men looked at each other, startled by the agent’s cavalier admission. Edge stroked his moustache thoughtfully before speaking.

“How and when did the establishment of this squad come about? Start at the beginning.” Schneider was visibly fearful.

“I can’t tell you all of it, just what I’ve heard. I think it’s right, but I can’t vouch for it.”

“It’ll do. Continue.”

“Back during the Bush administration, after the 9-11 attacks, the president issued an executive order authorizing the CIA to target anyone, including American citizens, for assassination if it was believed they were involved in terrorism. That’s public record. What’s not on the record is that the CIA is a terminal screw-up. Those guys step right in it every time they turn around: constant scandal, man.

“Now, what people didn’t know is that not all of those assassinations were carried out overseas. Some were done over here, on American soil, using Delta Force teams under agency control, the Agency’s own Special Operations Group, private contractors, and sometimes even Mossad elements on loan from Israel. The administration was scared to death that the CIA would mess up and the public would get wind of it. Even as stirred up as people were about Bin Laden and Al Qaida back then, there were still some things that they would raise hell about. If the public had gotten wind that the spooks at Langley were using the U.S. military, let alone mercenaries and foreign agents, to kill citizens inside their own country, heads would have rolled on Capitol Hill.

“So what they did was to form a whole separate arm to do the dirty work. They recruited their people from everywhere, trained them secretly, and put them under the sole command of the director of Homeland Security and his designees. Since it was a newer agency, it didn’t have all the embedded security problems of the CIA.”

“How did they end up with FEMA?” Edge queried.

“Because of Peters: he was with HS and was one of the director’s designated section leaders. He handpicked his squad, and has been using them for clandestine missions ever since. When the latest crisis happened, they evidently thought that he was a good candidate for the regional FEMA head, because he could get things done. I think he’s still technically with HS, but they just changed his title; anyway, he brought his squad with him.

“I hear you iced two of them at some black woman’s house. That’s surprising, because these are stone killers, man! They’re the best at what they do. They scare the hell out of everybody, and don’t take orders from anyone but Peters. They’re like a covert private army – a death squad.”

Almost too quick for anyone to see, let alone prevent, Frank was on Schneider like a striking snake. In an instant, the terrified agent was lifted, along with the chair he was bound to, his T-shirt wadded in two calloused fists. Frank, eyes blazing like gray fire in a mask of raw fury, shoved his face against Schneider’s.

Afraid that the ex-cop would kill him, Edge started forward, only to be halted by Sam's hard grasp on his arm. Sam not only didn't give a damn if the agent died, he also realized that anyone else who interfered with Frank just now might be at equal risk.

"Are you telling me," the ex-cop said in a voice that sounded entirely too calm, and was all the more horrible and frightening for that, "that you gave my wife, the woman I love, to a death squad?"

"Please, Mister!" Schneider wailed, looking wildly from side to side in a vain search for help. "We had to! We were under his command, just following orders!"

After an eternity, Frank slowly lowered the man back down into the chair, untangled his hands from his shirt, and placed one on each of the prisoner's arms where they were bound to the chair, keeping his face only inches from Schneider's.

"What will they do to her, and to the others?"

"You'll kill me!"

Frank's stare never wavered, and neither did his cold voice. His powerful fingers slowly dug into the pressure points on the man's forearms. "If you tell me the truth, and I get my wife back alive, I will let you live. I won't harm you. However, if you lie to me, I *will* kill you, and if she dies, so help me God, I will take you apart piece by piece. I will take your life as just the first payment for hers. Do you understand me?"

Schneider nodded vigorously.

"Now, tell me what they'll do!"

"They'll interrogate her," he said, then involuntarily squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his teeth, fully expecting to die, despite Frank's promise. "They'll torture her until they get all the intel they can from her. Then, if she lives through it, they'll either lock her up secretly and indefinitely as an 'enemy combatant', or else they'll...they'll...you know."

"Yes," Frank said in almost a whisper, "I know; but I want you to tell me anyway, and I want you to look at me when you do it – *right into my eyes, you son of a bitch!* I'm her husband. Look at me and tell me exactly what they are going to do to my wife." His right

hand raised and grabbed the prisoner by the throat, not squeezing hard – yet. “*Tell me, damn you!*”

“They’ll torture your wife,” Schneider said, eyes wide now and looking into what seemed the gray depths of Hell. “They’ll beat her, drug her, and...and use electric shock, maybe r-rape her, and then they...they’ll kill her! T-they’ll kill your...your wife!”

The agent broke down in tears as he finally realized the enormity of what he had never really thought deeply about, and how easily the wife in question could have been his own.

“It doesn’t sound so nonchalant when you have to actually say it, does it, Agent Schneider?”

“Oh God!” the prisoner sobbed as Frank released his throat. “Oh Jesus, I’m sorry!”

Frank turned away, wiping his hands on his bloody pants legs in disgust.

“You’re certainly that, Agent Schneider. You certainly are that.”

DAY 8

Chapter 34

Samantha was lost in a world without sensation. The blackout goggles totally blocked the light; the charcoal-impregnated paper respirator masked the scent, and the monotonous drone of the white noise from the headphones was the only sound. Even her body and hands were in limbo: other than a dull, all-over pain that she supposed came from the wreck, she could feel nothing through the padded coveralls and heavy gloves. She couldn't move or raise her arms; evidently they were bound with the rest of her to some sort of bed.

All this was guesswork; she hadn't actually seen her clothes or bindings. All she could remember was being jerked half-dead from the destroyed truck and wrestled to the ground, the stick of the needle, and finally waking up to darkness and silence. Samantha hoped her guess was right; if not it meant she was dead or comatose but still conscious, and letting her thoughts run that way was the road to screaming madness. She clung to her conclusion with the desperation of one with nothing else to grasp, like a delicate spider-silk thread that supported her over a bottomless black abyss. Although her logic told her she couldn't have been in this condition more than hours, she couldn't actually swear that she hadn't been here for days, weeks, months...or even forever, in which case her whole life had been nothing but a dream. Her mind wandered to and fro in the blackness, regardless of how hard she tried to rein it in. The powerful, driving lyrics of an old Metallica song she had heard in school about a quadruple amputee soldier, blind, deaf, silent, and brain-damaged from a shell, yet kept alive in a hospital bed kept echoing through her head, and it wouldn't stop.

"Oh God, please..." she cried silently, biting back on her panic. As a journalist, she knew academically about sensory deprivation

torture, and knew that disorientation and panic was what they wanted, but it was so hard to stop.

After a while, unable to call out for the strip of duct tape across her mouth beneath the mask, she finally couldn't hold it any longer and had pissed in her pants. The act was humiliating enough, but even more so because of the involuntary pleasure that she achieved from the sensation. It was the first thing she had felt in what seemed a very long time.

After another eternity, and the slightest feeling of movement that she wasn't certain whether or not she was imagining, the bindings securing her limbs were being released. Samantha's dark world exploded in light and sound as her goggles and earphones were snatched off; brilliant halogen lights blazed in her eyes and her bonds dropped away. The sudden overload was too much and she screamed behind the tape and covered up, pulling up her knees and pawing at her face with her gloved hands. She rolled off the stretcher onto the concrete floor, dimly aware of someone pulling off her gloves. The duct tape gag was next, ripped away with a single jerk that felt as if her lips were being torn off with it, eliciting first a gasp, followed by a loud moan.

"I'm sorry about the tape, but it's much kinder to get it over with all at once than dragging the pain out, don't you think?"

Strong arms on either side yanked her to her feet, and she blinked in the direction of the masculine voice with the faintest trace of a New England accent, which seemed to emanate from a silhouette behind the desk just in front of the blazing lights. Quivering from the pain of the accident and her long immobility, she squinted hard, unable to shield her eyes due to the grip on her arms.

"Where..." she rasped through her dry mouth, then forced herself to stop. *Don't open yourself up; don't make a chink in your armor, or they'll find it and use it.*

"Where you are, Samantha," the voice droned on, completing the sentence for her, "is a place where you do not ask questions; you answer them. You answer them when they are asked, and you answer them truthfully. When you do so, and I assure you that you eventually will, you will be rewarded. If you fail to do so, you will

be punished.” The owner of the voice revealed himself, rising and stepping around the desk. At about fifty years old, with his shaved head and sharp features, he looked like a stern schoolteacher, radiating authority. Inside, she realized that was the whole purpose. “Do you understand?”

Samantha looked at him silently, coldly. In response, he gestured with a slight nod of his head to the left, and a fist slammed into her kidney. Even through the insulated padding of the coveralls, the agonizing pain took her breath away and buckled her knees, dropping her writhing and gagging to the floor, only to be jerked to her feet again.

“I see some introductions are in order. I am Lieutenant Colonel Sedgeway. You've just met Sergeant Stalnakar.” He nodded in the same direction that had brought the blow. She turned her head and looked into the broad face of an incredibly burley white woman in black fatigues with a butch haircut not over a quarter of an inch long. “And my other assistant is Sergeant Beauchamp.” On the opposite side, she had to tilt her head upward to see an equally intimidating black giantess with abnormally large, bulging eyes, as stoutly built as her companion but several inches over six feet tall.

“They are my two good right hands, even if their personal tastes are a bit...unusual to say the least. But then, to each his or her own, I always say. I'm certain that, before your stay with us is over, you'll get to know them very well indeed.”

Another nod, and the hands digging into her arms dropped away in perfect synchronization like mechanical clamps. The two guards stepped back, leaving Samantha weaving on her feet, still nauseated from the after-effects of the kidney-punch.

“Now, let's begin again, and please – no more refusal to cooperate. It will make things ever so much easier on the both of us.

“Undress.”

“What?”

Yet another nod, and the fist slammed back into the same kidney, folding her to the floor once again, this time in a brief state of semi-consciousness that let her face smack the concrete hard enough to drive her teeth most of the way through her lower lip. Her nose,

already throbbing and swollen from the wreck, began streaming blood again, running down to join the flow now oozing from her mouth. The hands jerked her up and left her wobbling as before, the scarlet fluid dripping down her chin.

“Samantha! Why do you persist in putting yourself in so much pain? You heard the command perfectly well, and you know that you’ll eventually obey. Let’s try again. Undress.”

Oh God, Frank, where are you? The thought gave her strength. She raised her head and stared defiantly at her tormentor.

“You go to hell, you son of a bitch!” she shouted, and a spray of bloody slobbers from her torn mouth splattered his clothes as she spat on him.

“You’re only making it hard on yourself,” he said, unperturbed. Then he nodded again, same direction.

Samantha supposed she finally won the round in the end; after the sergeants had beaten her unconscious twice, Lieutenant Colonel Sedgeway finally ordered the two women to strip her. She never knew if the intentionally brutal and prolonged cavity search by the laughing Beauchamp while Stalnaker pinned her across the desk and Sedgeway looked on was in retaliation or not. Probably not – they were going to do what they were going to do, regardless. Finally, they forced a cup of medicinal-tasting liquid down her throat, and the Lieutenant Colonel gave her an injection.

Sedgeway shook his head pityingly. “I do so wish that you wouldn’t hurt yourself like this, Samantha. Perhaps you need to sleep on it. A good night’s rest will do you good, and tomorrow you may be better behaved.

“Sergeants, take her to the locker room.”

They half dragged, half carried her, still naked and bleeding, down a long hallway. Even though her eyes were swollen nearly shut from the beating and her previous injuries, she could still see a little: enough to tell that there seemed to be no windows or natural light here, meaning she was probably in a basement somewhere. They passed several men in the same black, unmarked fatigues as Sedgeway and his pair of Amazons. At the sight of her, they made

ribald and obscene remarks. More soldiers, Samantha realized dully. At least she guessed that's what they were; it was hard to tell from their actions.

"Hey Sergeant Stalnaker! Can we have her when you're done?"

"Yo, we'll pull a train on her lily white ass!"

"Hey, Puta! I got something for you!"

"Y'all will get your turn, but best you horn dogs wait a while les' you wanna git messy," Beauchamp said with a nasty laugh. "The colonel done give her a bomber!"

"Oh shit!" one of the men said, and hastily gave them a wide berth.

Stalnaker laughed cruelly. "That's about the size of it."

The two pulled her on to a door marked 'WOMEN', kicked it open and dragged her inside, around a bench and to a bank of lockers. They stopped in front of one that was standing open.

"Time to hit the lockers, bitch!" Beauchamp growled, and before Samantha realized what was happening, the two had wedged her inside and slammed the door. A padlock was snapped in place outside. "Sleep tight!" She heard their chuckling as they left, until the door closing behind them cut off the sound. On the way out, they had turned out the lights, denying her even the tiny amount of illumination filtering through the ventilation slits in the sheet metal.

The pain began almost immediately. Jammed in an impossible position, limbs twisted, head forced backwards and jammed down between her shoulders, she was virtually unable to move any part of her body. Within minutes, the pain reached the point of continuous fiery agony in every extremity – those that hadn't gone numb from disturbed circulation. Someone, presumably her tormentors, had cranked up the heat, and the temperature in the locker room began to climb into the nineties, making the stale air inside the locker suffocatingly close. To top it off, she began to suspect that what they had injected her with was some sort of stimulant; she was becoming panicky and had an obsessive urge to move which, of course, she could not. Something was making her break out in hives and itch uncontrollably, and it was impossible to scratch. A little later, she realized the true nature of what they had forced down her, when the

projectile vomiting and diarrhea started, turning the hot confines of the tiny locker into a filthy hell. With her head tilted back, most of the vomit blew back in her face and it was a constant battle to keep it from strangling her. The involuntary heaving made her feel as if her cramped muscles were being torn apart, while the filth from her bowels covered her legs and pooled around her feet.

She wanted to scream, but she knew that no one would come, and once she started, she was afraid that she would never stop – she would scream herself to death. Through the heaving and pain, she thought of Frank. Would he come for her? If he was alive, she had no doubt of it. If he was alive...

A sob broke through the choking and moaning. *Oh God! What if he's dead? What if they had him as well, wedged into another filthy locker somewhere, in another room?*

Struggling through her pain, she began fumbling with the prayer that she hadn't said for so long.

"Our F-ather (*moan*) who art in H-Heaven (*heave*), hallowed b-be thy name..." The formal prayer soon fled, replaced by a barely coherent cry for help from deep within her soul. "P-please, Jesus, don't let him be dead! Don't let him be hurt! (*heave*) Please God Almighty, let him come! Please...oh please, just help me hold on! Please...Father forgive me; h-have mercy on me, a s-s-sinner. Oh God, *help me!*"

She barely heard the small, still voice that seemed to echo gently through her from nowhere in particular: a voice that seemed to say, *"It will be alright; I am with you, and Frank is alive."*

Samantha's mouth twisted in a rictus that would have been a smile, and a feeling of peace settled over her through the red haze of pain and nausea, not dimming it so much as overlaying it. She remembered feeling that same peace long ago, as a gangly schoolgirl in the hard pew of a little church. Her good sense tried to intrude, telling her that the voice was a false hope, the tortured product of her own mind, and, not for the first time, she consigned that particular awareness to perdition. She knew what she knew, and she would hold on to that hope (*"that blessed hope," that long-ago preacher*

had called it, in his soft Southern drawl), and because she held on to it, she would hold!

Frank stood, staring out the window at the darkness and seeing only his own tormented reflection staring back. He had been unable to eat, sleep, or even think of anything other than what might be happening to Sammie. Even though his head told him it wasn't his fault, his heart was torn with guilt. He was safe and sound, while, according to Schneider, she was probably screaming her lungs out in a makeshift torture chamber in the very building where he used to work, and there was no way he could see of getting her out.

He shifted his weight and something bumped against his chest. Reaching for it, he closed his hand around the old brass locket. If he hoped for comfort, it wasn't there; its ghosts were silent, and the case and all its treasures were nothing more than a chunk of cold metal. A lot like his heart.

There would be no help there, real or imagined. This decision was to be his and his alone, and he made it.

He would get her back or he would die trying. If she were already dead, then he'd die avenging her. Now he understood her fear for his life when he left her to go on the mission. Faced with the situation reversed, he fully comprehended it.

God forgive me, but I can't live like this. It's not suicide; it's duty and honor. More than that – it's love.

Strangely, the locket felt warm in his hand again, almost as if someone approved.

He turned to find Tommy standing there looking at him.

"You're going after her, ain't you?"

"Yeah."

The little biker pursed his lips in thought before speaking.

"Yeah, me too. Got to – they've got my best friend."

Frank clasped his hand firmly. They both knew the score, and there was nothing more to say.

Chapter 35

“I know you want to do something, but it won’t serve any purpose to get yourselves killed. We need you here.” Edge had feared this might be coming, but he had yet to figure out a way to stop it.

“Too bad,” Frank responded, shuffling his feet in agitation on the carpet of their latest safe house. “They need us right now a lot more than you do.”

“We have to be reasonable here...”

“To Hell with reasonable!” Tommy growled. “And to Hell with you too if you won’t help us!”

With Jim stabilized, the doctor returned to his home, and Tommy freed up, it hadn’t taken long for him and Frank to make the decision to confront their commander about freeing the prisoners.

Hoping to find a more reasonable response, he turned to Frank.

“You’ve got to understand we don’t have enough people right now. We can’t allow you to go haring off...”

The former cop cut him off with an upraised hand. “Whoa. Stop right there. This is the way it’s going to work, and there’s no point in you arguing about it. We are going to take back those prisoners, both my wife and his best friend, and anyone else we can get our hands on, and whether you’re with us or not doesn’t alter the fact that we’re going in; it just changes the odds against us when we do. We are going to do it regardless, and if you’re not with us, I highly suggest that you don’t try to stop us.” Frank’s voice was as cold and inexorable as a glacier grinding across the landscape, and there was hot and cold running death in his eyes. “You’re my comrades – hell, I reckon you’re my commanding officer – but as God is my witness, I’m going after my wife, and I’ll kill you where you sit if you interfere with that.”

Frank’s hand dropped to hover over his .45 and Edge instinctively did the same. Tommy’s hand strayed inside his denim biker’s vest.

“Make up your minds; you either help us, or you stand clear...or else we shoot it out right here and right now.”

There was a long silence as they stared at one another. No one’s hand actually closed around his pistol, but neither did they have them far away. It was obvious that Frank and Tommy had no intention of backing down, and neither did Edge, who was seething at the thought of his authority being challenged. Sam, along with Rob, hadn’t moved. It was the pig farmer who finally broke the tension before someone died. His decision wasn’t hard; despite his friendship and loyalty to Jonathon Edge, he agreed with Frank and Tommy deep inside. Besides, if they started killing each other now, as few as they were, the whole Cause would be lost. Maybe their way, there would be at least an off chance to save it.

“Well, fellows, then it looks like we best come up with a plan.”

Edge nodded cautiously and removed his hand, but his eyes warned that he would not forget their threats and defiance.

I’ll deal with them later.

“I think we can agree,” he told them, managing to keep his anger out of his voice. “That it’s impossible, with the forces we have now, to get them out of where they’re being held. Alive at any rate.”

Frank started to speak, then shut his mouth. As much as he wished otherwise and as much as he was willing to try anyway, he knew logically they were right. He ran the options through his mind, and came up with the only viable one.

“So, we need to convince the enemy to move them somewhere else.”

Officer Willie Duckett was excited; after all, this was his first mission as an undercover Federal agent. He felt like James Bond.

He’d gotten the call just before he started his first evening of midnight shift. Recognizing the voice of the Fed who had offered him the deal, he had listened carefully. Of course, the instructions hadn’t been that hard.

“Are you able to follow a wiring diagram?”

“Yes sir, I...”

“Good. Do you know the electrical room where the building’s telephone lines run into?”

“Yes sir.”

“Look in your locker and you’ll find several keys, including one to it, and a bag of gear. There’ll be a diagram and some notes with it, telling you where to go and what to do. See that you do it *exactly* and just as importantly, tonight! Don’t get caught.”

To a past master at not getting caught at a lot worse things, it didn’t sound too hard. Once he looked inside the locker, he nearly missed it. He was expecting a large duffle bag full of spy equipment, but what he found was small: just a plastic grocery bag with an unlabeled software disk, a few pieces of electronic hardware, a single page printout with a list and diagrams, and a ring of door keys, each of them labeled.

The instructions for the installation of the software, taps and keystroke loggers were exacting but well within his capabilities as well as his time constraints, even allowing for entry into all the rooms and offices on the list, especially on the night shift. The place was nearly empty after midnight, so he’d do the work then.

He wondered if this would get him his promised promotion.
Agent Willie Duckett, FBI. Damn, that has a nice ring to it!

DAY 9

Chapter 36

Samantha heard the rattle of the lock an instant before the locker door slammed open and hands grabbed her, yanked her out, and threw her on the floor, heedless of the large patches of her skin that were scraped away on the edges of the sheet metal door frame. The agony of her cramped muscles rose to a whole new level that left her screaming involuntarily as she tried to straighten out her body and limbs.

“Whew-whee!” Beauchamp exclaimed. “She ’bout a skank ‘ho’, ain’t she?”

Stalnaker responded with a sadistic grin. “She definitely stinks. What do you say we clean her up?”

“Sounds good to me. I think she needs a shower.”

“One shower, coming up.”

Samantha gasped as the stream of cold water from the fire hose hit her. The impact was so great that it actually began to slide her across the wet floor. Soon she was pinned against the wall by the pressure. It tore savagely at her skin, and when it hit her face she felt she was drowning. There was no escaping it; when she tried to huddle in the fetal position, they simply directed the spray onto a single spot until she could no longer stand the pain and would have to move, exposing yet another vulnerable area.

After what seemed like hours, the water finally stopped.

Even after the stimulation of the powerful stream of water pummeling and tearing at her muscles, she was still unable to walk. Her legs trailed limply as they dragged her back down the hallway, still naked with her feet leaving a pair of wet streaks on the floor, and back through the door of pain.

A little over a block away from the Columbia Police Department, an old red pick-up with the letters for “Pearson’s Plumbing” freshly

stenciled on the doors pulled into a parking lot with Tommy and Rob in the cab. As soon as they existed, Rob held up a range finder and pointed it at the distant building as his partner climbed into the back of the truck and began rearranging some short pieces of steel pipe. Putting the instrument down carefully on the front seat, he picked up a four-foot carpenter's level and went to the tailgate.

"Range, three hundred and ten meters," Rob directed.

Tommy nodded, and began making the required adjustments.

Lieutenant Colonel Sedgeway was standing behind the desk waiting, just as he had the day before. Stalnaker and Beauchamp unceremoniously released Samantha's arms and let her collapse in a heap in front of it. Sedgeway leaned over and looked down at her in disapproval.

"Tch, tch, tch! Such discourtesy! I'm surprised at you, Samantha. Stand up!"

She tried, but her muscles still wouldn't work. She could barely lift her head. Sedgeway nodded and Stalnaker's boot slammed into her ribs with carefully controlled force – enough to crack one of them, but not enough to cause serious internal injuries. She gasped in pain and clutched the injured area.

The order came again. "Stand up."

Beauchamp stamped down hard on her thigh, bringing a cry of pain.

"Stand up."

It seemed to go on forever; first Sedgeway's repeated command, then another boot. By the time they were finished, her nose was smashed and bleeding once again, both her lips were split, her fingers and toes practically crushed, and both ankles bloated from being stomped on. Her entire body was covered with new bruises on top of the old. Samantha kept drifting in and out of consciousness, revived several times by buckets of ice water thrown in her face. Finally, the Lieutenant Colonel called a halt.

"Ladies, we've been remiss in the care of our guest. It's obvious she needs medical treatment, don't you agree?" He gestured toward the other side of the room. "Put her on the examination table."

Samantha saw the gynecologist's table they were dragging her towards, complete with foot-stirrups and several tie-down straps. Horrified, she tried to struggle, but in her condition, she could manage little more than feeble twitching and pawing. She didn't miss the expectant smiles of the two women as they bound her in place with her knees high and her legs spread wide.

"You know Samantha," Sedgeway said conversationally as he rummaged in a desk drawer. "Considering what my specialty is, you might say that I'm a medical professional myself."

He pulled the object he sought from the desk and closed the drawer before holding it up for her examination. Her eyes widened as much as their swelling would permit as she recognized the black plastic body of an electric stun gun. He pressed the stud on the side, and 40,000 volts of blue fire arced between the electrodes. He walked towards her, still smiling.

"My specialty is, of course, *pain*."

"All set?" Rob picked up his precious laser rangefinder, slipped it into a padded case, and put it in a lunch cooler to take with him.

Tommy nodded as he climbed out of the truck. "Ready when you are."

"Alright; let's do it." Rob reached over the side of the truck bed and flipped a switch. The two men began walking away.

Six pieces of two-inch diameter steel pipe were propped up and wired tightly in place at an identical angle in the back; all pointed in the direction of the Columbia PD offices. Their open ends were in the air, while the lower one's were capped, with electrical wiring running through tiny holes drilled in the plugs.

Exactly two minutes after they left, the timer, activated by the toggle switch Rob had flipped, detonated the explosive charges in the bottom of each tube. The charges weren't particularly large ones, but they didn't need to be. Their job was to propel the tubes' payloads in the direction of the station.

Each shell was essentially a pipe bomb, an inch and a half in diameter and eight inches long, filled with a shaped charge of stolen C4 plastic explosive. A short piece of smaller tubing on the bottom

cap, complete with stabilizing fins, contained a grazing fuse: a plunger made of a piece of round steel stock, held back by a spring off of a nipple covered with a large percussion cap. The device was designed so that, when it hit on its nose, the plunger would slam forward and impact the cap, which, in turn would set off the detonator buried in the explosive.

The truck hunched down onto its frame, the worn springs flattening out under the massive simultaneous recoil of the mortars. A loud roar filled the air, and half a dozen messengers of high-explosive death went streaking toward their target.

Three of the crude missiles missed; two falling short and landing in the front parking lot, destroying a vehicle and injuring two policemen and a civilian passerby. A third over-shot the building entirely and exploded harmlessly but noisily in the rear.

Of the others, one landed on the roof, blowing a hole all the way through the ceiling of the room beneath, and causing the sprinkler system to go off.

A second detonated against the outside wall. Plaster blew off the inside, spalling from the impact hard enough to knock a desk sergeant out of his chair and send him rolling in the floor in a cloud of dust.

The final round managed to enter the building through a window. Shattering the glass, it zipped only an inch past the nose of a startled secretary and out her open door into the hall way, where it struck the floor and exploded near the coffee machine, killing two Columbia police officers instantly and injuring several more.

Immediately after the homemade mortars fired, several sticks of dynamite hidden in the truck's undercarriage and against the fuel tank blew parts of the evidence all over the parking lot, across the sidewalk, and into the street.

The echoes of the impact hadn't yet died away when the same van used on the bogus FBI raid to recruit Willie Duckett roared along the street in front of the department. Frank Gore was at the wheel, wearing sunglasses with the lower half of his face covered with a bandanna. The two ski-masked figures of Sam and Donna crouched in the open sliding side door and sprayed the building with

automatic fire from a pair of M4's as they passed. Windows shattered and ricochets screamed off the concrete. Both inside and out, and those not already on the floor got there in a hurry. The van sped around a corner and disappeared. It would later be found abandoned in a parking garage, three blocks away.

The screaming had been going on for nearly an hour, until Samantha's voice was nothing but a hoarse, croaking parody of human sound. Straining vainly against her bonds, she was literally insane with agony. Sedgeway stood between her immobilized legs and reached out yet again with the stun gun, when a series of explosions echoed through the building. Her tormentors could feel the vibration through the soles of their feet, and a small piece of loose plaster cracked from the ceiling and shattered on the floor beside the table.

"What the hell?" Sedgeway shouted, sounding unnerved for the first time. "Beauchamp! Stalnaker! We're under attack! Get everybody formed up *now!*"

There was a brief thunder of boots and then Samantha was alone, still bound to the table, gasping for breath, crying and moaning softly. She had never imagined that a human being could absorb so much pain and still be alive. Worse yet, she was near the breaking point and she knew it. Once they returned, and began the torture once again, within a few minutes she would begin screaming out the answers to any questions they asked. That was the worst torture of all; she was about to betray her husband, her friends, and their cause, and there wouldn't be anyway she could stop herself.

Be strong, she told herself. You've got a little rest; use it to gather your strength; you're going to need it to hold out as long as you can.

"*Oh God!*" she cried aloud in the empty room. "*Oh Jesus, help meeee!*"

Sedgeway, Stalnaker and Beauchamp had joined the other members of their squad and were double-timing down the basement

hall, M4's locked, loaded, and held at port arms, when Peters came down the steps in front of them. He motioned for them to stop.

"Yes, Mr. Peters? We didn't know you were in the building. What's going on?" Sedgeway asked, mildly excited but not in the least out of breath.

"It's alright, Colonel." He had been standing in the wrong spot when the makeshift mortar rounds hit, and as a result both he and his expensive suit were soaked with sprinkler water and he was not in a good mood. *A hell of a time to pick to network in person with Columbia's finest!* "There was a hit and run attack on the building, but it seems to be over with now. We'll let the locals deal with it for the moment, at least until the BATF gets here. Tell your people to stand down; you and I need to have a talk."

Sedgeway dismissed his troops and tossed his rifle to Stalnakar, who, along with the rest, headed back the way they had come to replace their weapons in the rack. As soon as they were alone, Peters filled him in on what they knew of the details.

"I believe that this was no ordinary attack just to be doing something. I think it was a probe; they were feeling us out, testing our response and looking for weak-points. Do you concur?"

Sedgeway rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "With disorganized guerrilla forces, it's hard to tell, but I'd say it's definitely within the realm of possibility."

"Assuming that is the case, it raises the question as to why? Even if they have the forces to take the building, there's no way that they could hold it against the forces we could bring to bear. Unless they simply want to strike a blow against the Columbia PD, which is possible but unlikely, they want to get their hands on something in this facility."

"The prisoners, sir?"

"That's my thought exactly, and I believe that we should proceed under that assumption."

"I don't see how they could hope to free them. They simply don't have the resources and manpower for that kind of operation."

Peters gave him a cold look. "They might not be able to free them, Colonel, but they damn well might manage to kill them, along

with a hell of a lot of other people in the process. Then they would deprive us of valuable intelligence, make a coup that we would not be able to cover up, and make even more martyrs for their followers to rally around. That's the most realistic scenario, and what I'd do if I were in their position."

"That makes sense," Sedgeway conceded. "So what's the plan?"

"We'll move them somewhere where they won't be able to get at them. They have the brig at the Charleston Naval Base, where they're still holding terrorists and enemy combatants from 9-11 and the following conflicts. It's only a couple of hours away, and once we get them in there, they won't be going anywhere."

"What about the risk of attack during transport? That would be their best chance to either recover the prisoners or terminate them."

"It would if they knew it," Peters pointed out. "I don't intend to give them a chance to find out. Have them ready to go first thing in the morning, before the CAP forces get a chance to see what's happening and mount an operation. By the time they figure it out, the prisoners will be safe and sound in Charleston brig. Arrange for the transportation. Comments?"

Sedgeway sighed in resignation.

"Something the matter?" his boss asked.

"It's just that I've got that reporter, Norris, nearly broken. If I keep at her, I'm sure she'll crack either today or tomorrow. If we wait to finish until she gets to Charleston," he said almost plaintively, "we may have to start all over again."

Peters regarded him with his expressionless blue eyes.

"Sometimes life's a bitch, Colonel; I suggest you learn to deal with it. Besides, it won't be your problem after that; the military has more people to spare to handle the interrogations than we do. Have the prisoners ready and reasonably cleaned up at first light, and your people and yourself in civilian clothes, ready to do the escort duty. You'll be filled in on the details as they become available. Dismissed."

Samantha fought to suppress a groan as the door opened. Stalnaker, with an orange bundle of cloth under her arm, and

Beauchamp reentered the room, this time without Sedgeway. It was much to her surprise when they unbuckled the straps that held her in place, grumbling and cursing all the while. There was no question of her being able to stand on her own now; her aching body was limp and her head dangled loosely as they dragged her off the table. The black giantess Beauchamp supported her entire weight under her arms, as Stalnaker unrolled the set of jail coveralls and worked them over her feet and up her body. Once they had them fastened, one of the female sergeants took each arm and, dragging her as before, took her out the door and down the hall.

Thankfully, they passed the locker room this time and kept going until they came to a steel door with a heavy lock and a tiny, head-high observation window. Once again, Beauchamp supported her while the smaller of the two unlocked the door, revealing a small, six-by-eight foot cell, painted the ubiquitous light green, with a mattress-topped steel plate jutting from the wall and a stainless steel toilet with a wash basin built in above the flush tank. They unceremoniously dumped her in the middle of the floor, and Samantha heard the door slam and lock behind them. She was alone.

It was over an hour before she could move enough to reach for the bunk. Frustrated at her inability to climb onto it in her battered condition, she cried from the pain of her broken fingers as she finally managed to drag the filthy mattress down into the floor and roll onto it. The thing was stained with piss, blood, and vomit, stunk like a garbage dumpster on a hot day, and no doubt was crawling with vermin, but it was the closest thing to comfort she had felt in a long time. She said a little prayer, sincerely thanking God for it.

The mattress' filthiness suddenly reminded her of that dirty old cap Frank had taken out of the pickup truck parked in front of that bar to disguise himself when they had first gone on the run. She smiled, wincing at the pain of her dry, torn lips. It seemed like ages ago, so much had happened since that evening.

"I love you, Sammie," he had told her, as he held her close in that little twin bed of Mary's. *"I've loved you since the first time I set eyes on you."*

She knew it was true then, just as it was true when he had arranged their marriage in the middle of a CAP guerrilla base, and when she gave herself to him in those nights of fierce passion that surpassed anything she had ever imagined to be possible. And within her heart, she knew it was just as true now. Frank loved her and he would come for her as long as there was life in him, even if it meant charging Hell with a bucket of water. Those blasts that had stopped her torture had to be his doing. He was coming; she could see it in her mind's eye and feel it in her soul. Her paladin, her knight, her crusader, her savior and utterly merciless avenger all rolled into one, Frank would come, and when he did...

I looked, and behold a pale horse, and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him.

All she had to do was wait and stay alive. She would, and she would *hold*.

Chapter 37

Chief Perkins sat at his desk with his chin propped on his hands, staring at nothing. In the past few days, the lines on his face had deepened, his jowls sagged, and his hair seemed to have more gray than before. He felt hollow, as though all the life had been sucked out of him.

He'd never thought it would come to this in his worst nightmares. He had lied, schemed, backstabbed and kissed ass, whichever was appropriate, to get where he was today. That was politics, but this... all the deaths, all those avoidable deaths of citizens and cops – his citizens, the ones he had sworn to protect and serve, and his cops who looked to him for leadership. They all weighed on his conscience like a millstone.

Big Jim Perkins was a man trapped, and he knew it. He was in too deep to ever claw his way out, and he knew without a doubt that, when it all finally came down, he was going to be the one left buried underneath it. Maybe he would, he grimly mused; that is if he wasn't assassinated by the Southern Nationalist radicals, or maybe by that bunch of nut-case killers of Peters. The way he felt right now, either might be a welcome relief.

The phone's ringing interrupted his reverie. He looked at it, instinctively knowing who was on it; like his mama used to say, speak of the devil and in he comes, riding on his broomstick. After the second ring, he reached out a pudgy hand for the receiver, idly noticing the nails chewed down to the quick. That was one bad habit he hadn't had even a week ago.

"Perkins."

"Peters here, Chief Perkins."

There was really no need for the FEMA boss to identify himself, as far as Perkins was concerned; that cold reptilian voice was so familiar he heard it in his dreams.

"Yes, Mr. Peters?" he inquired tiredly. "What can I do for you?"

"I need a police presence. We're transporting some prisoners to the Charleston Naval Base first thing in the morning, as your

department seems to have become a rather dangerous place lately. We need some of your men in our immediate vicinity in case we run into any problems. We shouldn't; this is a secret operation, but you never know."

"Are you wanting a convoy, an escort, what?"

"Neither. Columbia's not the safest place anymore, and we want to avoid a public spectacle as well as any ambushes. We're using civilian vehicles, and we don't want to give it away that we're anything but that. We also don't want your cops knowing exactly what is going on and I don't want them informed that they're going to be doing it until just before we leave. We've already uncovered one terrorist sympathizer there in the form of Franklin Gore, and where there's one, there's probably more. All they need to know is to be on alert and not to interfere with us themselves."

Perkins stared at the phone in wonder. *That bastard sounds like he believes his own lies!*

"What I need from you is a heavy presence on the streets parallel to our route until we're out of the city limits, so we'll remain unobtrusive, but with the ability to have help there in seconds if we're attacked. Part of them need to be SWAT units. Needless to say, no one besides yourself is to know exactly what's going on."

"Alright," Perkins said, rubbing his eyes. "Just fill me in on the details and I'll work up a plan."

Unbeknownst to either of them, across town in his basement, Mike Dayton sat in his wheelchair with a headset clamped on listening in on their conversation, and getting more excited by the minute

Chapter 38

“Okay, they’ll be in route to the Charleston Naval base tomorrow morning,” Edge said. “That’s the brig where they’ve been holding some of those so-called ‘enemy combatants’ since Afghanistan; the ones they don’t intend to bring to trial. If they get in there, we can forget about getting them out; we’ll have to write them off.”

Tommy started to protest, but Frank beat him to it. “No one gets written off as long as I’m alive.”

“Damn right!” the biker added. “His wife and my best friend are both involved here. There ain’t going to be any write-offs. We’ll get them out if the two of us have to do it ourselves.”

Edge decided that this had better go right, as he couldn’t afford to lose the men – not right now at any rate. Lose them he would, he knew full well, if they tried it on their own. He also knew that they weren’t posturing; both of them were angry and determined enough to attack the entire naval base alone if they had to. He would have to shoot them to stop them, and, supposing they didn’t kill him in the process, that too would defeat the purpose.

He sighed inwardly. The mutinous pair had complicated things immensely, and now he was going to have to risk it all – his life, and most likely the life of the movement – on a single roll of the dice, planning and executing a highly complex and dangerous mission within a few hours.

Once this is over, presuming I survive it, I’m going to have to figure out a way to insure this never happens again, one way or another. The time will come when I have enough men to make troublemakers expendable.

As always, he carefully kept his thoughts from showing in his face. “Then I guess we’d better make sure it works, hadn’t we?”

First they reviewed the information that Mike had gleaned from the phone taps. The transport was to be made in three vans – commandeered church vans to be exact. If the numbers were right, there would be an armed driver, one to three guards, and an

unknown number of prisoners in each vehicle. Rob, who had experience in similar matters, pointed out the likely details.

“This is an incognito transfer, so the vans will probably have tinted windows if they have windows at all, and the prisoners will probably be in civilian clothes so they’ll look normal to any passing vehicle that may somehow see them. I figure that they’ll be doped up and tied down tight to the seats to keep them from attracting attention. We’ve got to assume that Peters will send his whole remaining squad – that’s nine guards, three per van: one to drive and the other two to watch the passengers. We’ll be out-numbered by half, and we can count on each guard to have a pistol as well as an assault rifle, submachine gun, or possibly a shotgun close at hand. They’re bound to be wearing Kevlar vests and pistol ammunition won’t reliably penetrate them. Everyone here’s at least decent with a handgun, so I recommend we load with good hollow points and go for head shots, since it’s all going to be point blank range anyway.” He looked at Tommy.

“We’ve got ’em in all standard calibers.”

“Okay. We need to catch the vehicles close together when we take them; preferably stopped. I’d prefer to hit them all at once, but the front and rear vans are key; if we shut them down in the right place, the one in the middle isn’t going anywhere.”

“How do you suggest we shut them down?” Sam asked.

“Without killing the prisoners?”

Edge leaned forward. “I think I have the answer. When they get them where we want them, we kill the drivers all at once; shoot right through their windows, blow them out, then get flash-bang grenades inside. When they go off, we enter from the side door and kill the guards. Everyone inside will be stunned and probably unconscious, so it shouldn’t take long.”

For the first time during the conversation, Brian, who had been staring silently at the floor as usual, raised his head. “Aren’t we going to take any prisoners? I mean do we have to kill them *all*?”

“No prisoners; this has to be total mission closure. We’re out-numbered and out-gunned to begin with, so we have to do it fast, hard, and final if we want to succeed. We don’t have the time to fool

with them or the men to spare to guard them. Also we can't take the chance on one of them coming to early and putting a hole through one of us or one of our people they're holding. The rescue of those prisoners is the priority here; everything else is secondary – *everything.*”

“Besides,” Tommy growled, “after what those bastards have done, to Hell with 'em!”

The others nodded or grunted their agreement with the biker's sentiment and Brian dropped his head again. Frank lifted an index finger for attention.

“What will the flash-bangs do to our people in the enclosed space of a vehicle? That's going to intensify the force considerably.”

“It'll beat them up pretty badly,” their leader frankly admitted. “It depends on what kind of shape they're already in. Certainly it will knock them out, and will probably leave them with perforated eardrums and concussions at least. Depending on where it lands, it may throw debris in the van like shrapnel; there's no way to tell.”

“Is it likely to kill any of them?”

“Not likely, but certainly possible. Look, as dangerous and brutal as this tactic is, it's still by far their best chance for survival. If we get in a shoot-out with someone inside one of those vans with the hostages, I guarantee some of them will die. Likewise if one of the guards has a chance to threaten to shoot them if we don't back off, what are we going to do? Do you want to be faced with that choice?”

Frank dragged his hand down his face in exasperation, stretching his features.

“Alright, we'll do it your way. I still don't like it, but I don't have anything better to offer.” After a moment's thought, he asked, “have we got flash-bangs?”

Tommy nodded. “I've got two cases stashed where I can still get to them.”

“I reckon you'd better get them.”

“Okay,” Tommy continued, “we know how we're going to take them; now where do we do it? At a stoplight?”

It was Rob who answered him. “It wouldn't work. If it were a simple hit, yeah, that would be perfect. We try to pull something

more complex like this in an urban area though, dozens of innocent people could get killed and we'd never get away; too much time involved, too much congestion, and too many witnesses. With the prisoners in the vehicles, a more rural stoplight's out of the question too. The brush is always trimmed back several yards from the intersection to provide visibility. There's no cover close by, and this is going to have to be a point-blank ambush if we're going to keep our people alive."

Brian shuddered and both Sam and Rob looked in his direction, but no one commented. Most of them felt like doing just that themselves.

"How about a road construction site?" Frank suggested. "We'd have them pinned in where they couldn't get away."

Rob nodded agreement, but Edge differed. "If we had more men or they didn't have our people prisoner, maybe, but we've still got too much traffic and too many witnesses, some of them driving heavy equipment. They might try to interfere. Any drivers that saw it would have those cell phones and CB's hot, and they'd track us like a bloodhound.

"Besides, and Rob, correct me if I'm wrong, we've got to assume that the enemy is at least as smart as we are. If this transport were your operation, where would you expect to be hit?"

"You're right; I'd expect it anywhere that slowed me down and bottled me in. I'd definitely be extra-alert in a place like that."

"Okay, now, where would you be *least* alert along the whole trip, from start to finish?"

He scratched his chin and thought for a minute. "I'd have to say at the end of the trip," he decided. "When I'm pulling in that gate at the end, I'm home free." His head snapped up. "Are you thinking what I think you're thinking?"

Edge returned a cold semblance of a smile. "What better place for an ambush and what bigger blow to your morale than someone hitting you and hitting you hard right on your home turf, where you least expect it, in the one place where you thought you were safe at last?"

Sam shook his head and blew out his breath. "*Damn!*"

Chapter 39

“John, we need to talk.”

Edge looked up from his fifth phone call to see Sam and Rob standing in the doorway. He raised a finger signaling them to wait a moment. Quickly finishing his conversation, he hung up the phone and turned towards them.

“That was your buddy, Larson. He’s agreed to provide us with ‘peripheral support’, giving us some blocking drivers and distractions, but not to take direct part in the fighting until we ‘prove ourselves’—his words.

“He also said we owe him.” He looked accusingly at Sam and shook his head before asking about the subject that brought them to him.

“What’s up? Have the two Rambo’s gone off on their own or something?”

“Those two are some of the best men you’ve got, John.” He didn’t say, *As you’d well know if you’d pull your head out of your ass so you could see past your own ego*, but he felt like it. “The problem is Brian,” Sam told him. “I think he’s losing it.”

Rob snorted. “I know he’s losing it! I’ve seen that look too many times before. He’s in over his head and can’t handle it. It’s eating him up.”

“I noticed he seemed a little...distracted; I suppose that would be the best way to put it. I don’t know him that well. What’s the cause, do you know?”

“Some people just ain’t cut out for this,” Sam said, spreading his hands in a helpless gesture, “and he’s one of them. Hell, he’s a schoolteacher for goodness sakes, and he killed two people in a week. That’s enough to affect anyone, but it’s hit him harder than most.”

“It’s more than that,” Rob put in. “It’s who he’s had to kill.”

Both of them looked at him questioningly, and Sam asked, “What do you mean?”

“Brian’s black, in case you haven’t noticed. That cop he killed at the capitol was black too, and so was that Fed he took down at the Summers’ place; not to mention that agent that Frank practically decapitated rescuing Jim. All of them were Negroes, just like him.”

“So you think he’s suffering from some kind of race guilt, then?” Edge asked him.

“That’s exactly what I think; and I don’t just think it, I *know* it. I’ve seen it before, with other races in the different combat zones I’ve been in, when a grunt might be fighting essentially for another race against his own. Most soldiers, to be honest, don’t give a damn, mainly because they’re not deep thinkers. They stay alive and get paid enough to buy some booze and cheap whores, maybe a little dope once in a while, and they’re content. But you take an intelligent man like Brian, and he’ll think about it and worry it like a dog on a bone.

“Besides, I don’t trust anyone. When he stayed to talk to Mrs. Summers, I didn’t go to the car; I waited outside the window and listened to what they talked about. That’s exactly what’s bothering him; that, and the fear of this becoming a race war with him not sure he’s on the right side.”

Edge sighed. “He’s right about the race war, and we all know it. I don’t know of anyone who really wants it, but it’s coming to that. We’ve never been able to separate race from the Southern Cause, and every time we’ve tried, the blacks themselves want to make it an issue. That’s a bad situation to be caught in.

“So, do you think he’ll last through this mission?”

Rob shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know; maybe, maybe not.”

“You decide,” Edge pressed him, “and decide now. You two have worked together before, and that’s why I want you together again. Can you depend on him to do this job?”

“It doesn’t look like I have much of a choice. Larson’s got good people for this kind of stuff, but he’s holding them back to wait and see, and Brian’s the only one of our people we can call on who’s been proven. I think some of the others are good, but I don’t know for sure, and this is one place I don’t want to use for a testing ground to find out. I guess we need him.”

“What if he snaps?” Sam quietly wondered. “What do we do then?”

Edge fixed him a steady gaze. “You know how it works. No matter what happens, nobody gets left behind that’s still alive, and I mean nobody. All of us know way too much for the movement to afford that information falling into the hands of the enemy. That can’t be allowed to happen under any circumstances. That includes you, me, Brian, and every last man on this team.”

“And if he’s had enough when this mission is over and wants to leave? What then?”

Edge and Rob both looked at each other. “We took an oath to serve, and there’s no going back for any of us. We’re all in for the duration, including Brian. We can’t sacrifice dozens of lives to save one deserter, and dozens of lives is what it will cost, including ours, if just one man in our inner circle talks, voluntarily or otherwise.” He sighed. “You’ve been my friend for years, Sam, but I wouldn’t let you walk out during this war carrying all the knowledge that’s in your head, and I hope you’d have enough sense to stop me from doing it as well, using *any* means necessary. *Any* means.”

Unable to argue with that wisdom, yet not relishing its acceptance, Sam dropped his head, suddenly feeling very old.

“Well,” he said finally, “we’d better start fine-tuning so we can get this thing set up. We don’t have much time.”

DAY 10

Chapter 40

At the main entrance to the Charleston Naval Base, the fat civilian guard in the white shirt glanced up from his desk at the arriving vehicles. A slightly scratched up crew cab Ford pickup with five men and a woman was being followed by a dump truck, both vehicles with South Carolina Department of Highways logos on their sides. They looked legitimate because they were: they had been stolen from a state road garage only hours before, with the help of a sympathetic supervisor who would wait until the end of the day before reporting them missing. The dump truck began turning around, backing into the exit lane with the closed tailgate beneath its canvas covered top pointed toward the base, while the pickup eased to a halt beside the guard shack as the driver lowered the window. The guard pushed aside the sliding glass and stuck his head out.

“How are you today, sir?”

“Fine, sir,” Sam told him. God how he hated what he was about to do. The man was working for the wrong people in the wrong place at the wrong time. *All the wrong in the world doesn't make it any easier, ol' hoss!* “We're here to start widening the entrance to your drive.”

“Really? I haven't heard anything about it, but it could sure use it. Try to take the bumps out while you're at it.”

The driver chuckled and extended a sheaf of documents in his left hand. “We'll do what we can. Here's our paperwork.”

Focusing on the proffered forms, the guard never saw the muzzle of the thick silencer of the specially loaded Para-Ordnance automatic that suddenly appeared over the truck's door frame. Three rapid pops sounded, one right after the other, and instead of the jacketed hollow points carried by the rest, a trio of .45 caliber Glaser Safety Slugs tore into his chest. Unlike conventional bullets which remain in one piece, the Glasers were little more than a copper jacket filled with

fine shot that blew apart on contact with the target and spread out inside like a shotgun blast, shredding everything in their path: expending all of their energy in the body, and leaving nothing to exit to break the windows behind, a dead give-away. His destroyed heart barely fluttering, the guard collapsed and died.

Sam quickly exited the truck, shedding a pair of khaki coveralls to reveal a security uniform underneath, identical to that of the dead man. Taking the coveralls with him, he hurried into the shack, dropping the cloth on the floor and kicking it against the body to prevent the blood from flowing out the door. He changed clips, pocketing the Glasers and slamming home a magazine full of vintage Black Talon hollowpoints.

Before the door closed behind him, Tommy in the dump truck had already lowered its gate. The four other men got out of the pickup, followed by the biker, all clad in coveralls and orange and white reflective vests. Donna slipped across the pickup seat and behind the wheel. Throwing the truck back in gear, she continued on into the base to the first intersection, where she rapidly set up orange cones and a detour sign directing traffic in the direction of the other gate. Edge had stressed the importance of speed in this, as no witnesses could be allowed if they were to have any hope of escape – ‘total mission closure’, he had called it. That meant if someone came up the road at the wrong time, they would have to die, innocent or not – that’s the way it is, he told her. She was glad it hadn’t come to that. Finished, she hurried back and parked behind the larger vehicle. She got out of the pickup, then climbed into the driver’s seat of the dump truck. Reaching behind her, she fished out one of the M4’s she and Frank had taken and laid it across her lap. Acting as security, she was ready to roll, one way or another.

“Positions, gentlemen, and everybody get your safety glasses on – you’ll need them when the glass starts flying,” Rob called out in a commanding voice as he lowered the cell phone from his ear. The CAP guerrillas didn’t stand firm on rank in the field – Rob had the most experience with this kind of operation, so he was field mission commander. “Move your asses! We’ve got less than two minutes.” Quickly he, Frank, and Edge took the passenger side of the base

entrance, Rob with the phone still in his hand and the two others with a bundle of wooden stakes, a hammer, and a roll of bright red barrier tape. Tommy and Brian on the other side, similarly equipped, spread themselves out just over two truck lengths apart, beginning one length from the guard shack. Sam stepped outside, closing the door behind him and leaning nonchalantly on the frame while holding a clipboard in his left hand. He drew a Camel from the pack in his pocket, lit it and stood calmly puffing, just another employee who had stepped outside for a smoke.

Three white vans prominently marked '*First Independent Baptist Church*' passed an unloading state road truck at the last intersection before their destination. As soon as they had gone by, two of the men on loan from Larson dragged out barricades and '*ROAD CLOSED*' and '*DETOUR*' signs of their own. They set them up, effectively directing the traffic elsewhere, before quickly pulling out and heading in the direction the vans had taken. Behind them, the road was definitely closed; one of the pair, a leathery former Klansman named Basil Caffary, used a chainsaw to drop a large gum tree across it as an afterthought, effectively stifling any pursuit in that direction. At their cell phone alert, a second pair had set up another detour barricade, although without the physical obstacle, along their escape route. They drove away, their part of the job done.

Samantha's head lolled against the smoked glass window, rolling back and forth with every bump in the road. That was about all she could move, because besides the torture and the drugs that they had injected her with this morning to keep her docile, she had been bound into the seat with plastic cable ties, immobilizing both her upper and lower legs and arms. Not that she could have done anything if they hadn't; she could barely think through the chemical-induced haze, and her bruised eyes were swollen to little more than slits behind the dark glasses Stalnaker had put on her to conceal the damage. Presuming that they would have allowed it, she couldn't have even put together the words to speak to her fellow prisoner, one of the guards from Sam's farm. Ben, that was his name. Of course,

he couldn't have answered her. He was in bad shape, and fully unconscious. God only knew what he'd been through. One of their guards took his blood pressure and pulse every few minutes, and occasionally pried up an eyelid with a thumb to check his pupils.

Other than that, they paid their prisoners little attention beyond occasional glances. The pair, Stalnaker and one of the men, sat in the back with them, their submachine guns across their laps, and spent most of their time in quiet conversation with each other or with the driver, who was even now slowing down to make the turn. Dimly, she could see a sign that said Charleston Naval Base. One of the men saw her looking in its direction.

"This is it, lady. Welcome to your new home." He glanced up to see a flagman waving a caution sign. "Wonderful: road construction!"

"Don't worry about it," the driver told him. "He's waving us on through to the guard house."

The guard dropped the cigarette butt at his feet and crushed it on the pavement, stepping close to the driver's window as the van pulled to a stop. "How are you today, sir?"

Something in the man's voice struck a chord of familiarity in Samantha, and she tried to focus her eyes on his face. A shockwave of recognition surged through her. *My God! Sam Wirtz! It can't be!* A desperate, fading spark of hope suddenly began to flame again.

"We're agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation." The driver flashed his false ID, one of several he had available. "All three vehicles are together."

"Yes sir!" The guard straightened slightly, apparently impressed by the importance of the visitors. He offered the clipboard. "If you'll just sign here, you can go right on through."

The driver grabbed it, rested the clipboard on the wheel, and began scribbling, and the guard drew the silenced .45 and shot him through the side of the head, sending a spray of blood and brains across the van and into the next seat. Immediately he tossed an object through the open window and dropped into a crouch. There was a sudden flash and a roar that left nothing but darkness behind.

Sam Wirtz crouched beside the van as the “flash-bang” concussion grenade he had thrown went off. As the only one not posing as a highway worker and therefore without an excuse to wear the protective eye-wear, he turned his head and covered his face with his arms. It was a smart move; the power of the detonation was magnified several times in the confined space, blowing out all of the vehicle’s glass in a storm of smoky crystalline sleet. The last shards were still tinkling on the road when he leapt to his feet and reached through the window for the button that would unlock the doors, his fingers slipping in the driver’s blood. At the other two vans, his actions were being repeated, the only difference being that the closed windows in the other vehicles were simply shot out while killing the drivers before the grenades were thrown inside. He heard a submachine gun go off in one of them, but he was too busy to worry about it.

On the passenger side, Frank Gore ripped the sliding door open and shoved through, seeking a target only to come face to face with Samantha across the width of the van. Her head dangled limply and blood was flowing from her hideously swollen mouth and nose. Her sunglasses had been blown off and her black eyes and battered face told the grim tale of her mistreatment.

He fought the urge to panic, to scream out his grief and fury. Instead, he let it take hold and take control. It was as if someone had doused him with cold water as he shifted into the killing zone, a frightening place of unnatural calm and unfathomable rage: a place he had only been a few times in his life, and never so completely. He saw with abnormal clarity everything he needed to do, what he was going to do, and nothing would or could stop him from doing it. It was as if his body was functioning on its own, and he went along for the ride.

Dimly through his fear for Sammie and the ringing in his ears, he heard Wirtz shouting something and saw movement out of the corner of his left eye. He remembered the briefing; the prisoners won’t be able to move, so if it moves, shoot it – *kill it!*

After seeing Sammie, he would have been neither able nor willing to stop himself; after looking at his wife’s beaten, distorted

face, it wouldn't have mattered what the briefing said. There would be no prisoners today, because Frank Gore was going to kill them all.

He twisted in time to see one of the agents, a white woman, who had reflexively thrown herself to the floor and had thus escaped the worst effects of the blast, on one knee groggily raising an MP5 in his direction. Never changing expression, Frank grabbed the barrel with his left hand, shoved it aside, and punched the muzzle of Mary's old .45 at Stalnaker's head, driving it right through her teeth in his fury. He squeezed the trigger twice in rapid succession and her skull exploded, bathing him in blood and brains that he took no notice of. As the agent collapsed, her finger closed on the trigger and sent a stream of lead out through the windshield and along the driver's side of the van, forcing Sam to duck and shattering the glass of the guardhouse. Frank ripped the weapon from her dead hand.

The second agent was still unconscious, face down on the floor. Somewhere deep within, a tiny voice warned the ex-cop that he would one day feel the full impact of his actions. *So be it. It won't be today.* Frank shot him twice through the back of the head with no more remorse than crushing a roach, sending an explosion of gore across the carpeting, before ejecting the partly-spent clip and slamming a full one home. He heard someone yelling, "Clear!" although he had no conscious idea that he was the one doing so.

By the time Sam had tossed his grenade, Tommy was already into his draw, whipping the Glock from underneath his safety vest. The driver was staring in shock at the sudden demise of his counterpart in the preceding van, and never knew it when the biker's 9mm wiped out the window and took him in the side of the head, cutting off the tip of his left ear before it blew a path through his skull and shattered the opposite window on its way to parts unknown. Tommy fired once more to make certain, then pulled the grenade and drove it through the spider-webbed remains of the glass before releasing it. It bounced off the back of the passenger seat and rolled into the rear compartment. One of the agents in back – Lieutenant Colonel Sedgeway himself – was quicker on the uptake

than the others, and managed to get off a short burst just as Tommy ducked. The FMJ 9mm projectiles missed him by inches but hit the last remaining patch of glass, sending the shards ripping into Tommy's face. An instant later, the flash-bang rocked the vehicle and a blizzard of glass shards tinkled to the ground.

Although there was no pain yet, Tommy was well aware of the impact on his left cheek and that the inside of his mouth didn't feel right. Still, before the echoes of the blast had died away, he sprang to his feet, reached through the window, and sprung the lock.

"Go!" he shouted in a voice that was strangely slurred.

On the other side of the van, Jonathon Edge grabbed the door handle and wrenched it open. There was no movement inside, only two unconscious prisoners hanging limply in their restraints, the dead driver, and a pair of agents lying on the floor. He killed both of the latter, coldly and without hesitation, with a pair of rounds each from his Para-Ordnance .45 through the head.

"Clear!" He slipped a Gerber Mark II combat knife from his boot and began cutting the prisoners' bonds.

Just as Brian took up the slack in the Glock's trigger, the driver turned to look at him. It was a black face, its color almost a mirror of that of his own features. His mind screamed for him to stop, but his finger had already gone too far. Beauchamp's eyes widened and her mouth had just opened as if to protest or beg when the sear engaged, the spring propelled the firing pin forward and 150 grains of hollow nosed death shattered both the glass and the face behind it, hitting her on the bridge of the nose, right between the eyes. Both already protruding orbs bulged even more as the hydrostatic shock of the high-velocity round ripped through her brain and forced them out of their sockets. Her head fell against the ruins of the window, its unnaturally huge dead eyes resting accusingly on her killer.

His own eyes wide and staring back, Brian stumbled back over a dropped roll of the barrier tape and flopped down into a sitting position, the stun grenade forgotten.

Outside the sliding passenger door, Rob crouched waiting for the blast that never came. He heard shouting inside the van, then

windows shattering as the agents opened fire with their MP5's. Horrified, he saw a burst blow out the windshield from the inside, impacting the road right behind Edge who, unaware, was opening the door of the second van.

Believing that the grenade had been thrown and would go off at any moment, Rob squinted against the expected hail of glass and rose just far enough to make out a moving shadow inside, and quickly double-tapped it with a pair of .45's before ducking again. After passing through the glass, the first round impacted stunningly in the upper chest area of a bullet proof vest but failed to penetrate, while the second cut a bloody furrow across the back of the agent's neck as he turned, chipping a flange off his 4th vertebrae and shocking his spinal chord. He dropped like a marionette with its strings cut, stunned and unable to move.

"Damn it!" Still unsure about the other flash-bang but realizing that the situation was rapidly going to hell in a hurry, he grabbed his own grenade, pulled the pin, and bobbed up just far enough that his extended hand could flip it through the window his shots had demolished. He heard the agent inside yell, and then all other sound was drowned in a loud roar.

Jumping to his feet, he grabbed the door handle with his left hand. *Locked!* Quickly, he fired a round at the keyhole from two inches away, driving the entire locking mechanism out and sending it bouncing against the opposite inside wall. He hoped he hadn't hit anyone, but there was no time for niceties. Rob jerked open the door and ducked inside. The silencer made four rapid coughs.

"Clear!"

Looking out through the empty windows, he saw Brian sitting on the pavement with a vacant look. He called out to him, asking if he was hurt, and the black man's head snapped around. With ashy skin and wide, crazy eyes, Brian screamed, "you white bastard!" and raised his pistol.

By the time Rob realized what was happening, it was too late. Brian's finger squeezed the trigger and the bullet streaked for the former soldier's head.

The only thing that saved his life was the fact that the slug barely nicked the window frame, altering its course just enough that it passed within a millimeter of his scalp instead of blowing a hole in his skull. Before Brian could fire again, Rob's finely honed reflexes had thrown him to cover on the van's bloody floor.

Sam looked up, startled by the yell, just in time to see Brian fire and Rob fall, apparently hit. Unwilling to believe what he saw, he yelled Brian's name, hoping against hope that his act was an accidental shooting brought on by the stress of the situation. He realized too late that he should have raised his pistol as the black man swiveled and took aim at him.

Everything suddenly seemed to be unnatural clear; the yawning bore, the tightening finger, the fact that he was never going to get his own gun up in time, and the realization he was going to die at the hands of one of his own men and there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it.

The shot's roar filled his ears.

Frank had just bent over Sammie when, alerted by the same sixth sense that he had learned to rely on as a police officer, he jerked his head up and looked out of the driver's side, back toward the last van. He couldn't clearly see Rob for the intervening van, but he heard the yell and saw Brian firing in that direction. In his mind's eye, Brian became Jackson, beginning his killing spree at the capitol flagpole.

No! It's not the same! You can't see clearly!

Brian pivoted towards Sam.

Are you going to let it happen again before you do something to stop it?

No! You're not certain!

His intellect warred with his instinct, but Frank was in his zone, and in the zone, instinct was king.

His .45 slammed out three fast rounds as its tongue of fire reached for Brian, and all three burrowed greedily into the Negro's broad chest. Brian managed to get off a pair of shots as he fell. One glanced harmlessly off the pavement, but the other hit the van where

Frank crouched, first making a loud *Clang!* followed immediately by a meaty *Smack!* as it found flesh inside. Brian hadn't yet hit the ground when Rob bobbed up and fired a round of his own that blew off the side of his former comrade's head.

By the time Donna fully comprehended what was happening and aimed her rifle from the truck window, there was no need for it.

Frank feared that the stray bullet had struck Samantha, but it was immediately obvious from Ben's bleeding head where it had finally come to rest. He fished one of the wire cutters out of his pocket that he had brought for the occasion and went to work. Knowing that there wasn't time to check for injuries and fighting the impulse, he quickly cut the unconscious Samantha loose and dragged her to the door.

Sam took barely time to swallow and take a deep breath at his near death experience before running around the front of the vehicle to get to the open passenger door. His ears were still ringing from grenade blasts and close range gunfire, but the shooting had finally stopped.

"Sam! Where are you?"

"Here!" The strong pair of hands joined Frank in supporting Sammie, and then took her from him. Sam cradled her in his arms like an oversized child. "I'll get her to the truck – you grab the other one and come on! We're running behind!"

"Coming!" He grabbed Ben, seeing that he was literally soaked in blood, but, as with Samantha, he didn't have time to do anything about it. Stumbling as he exited, he knew he was managing to violate every rule on patient transport when he heaved the limp body over his shoulder in a fireman's carry and headed on the run for the dump truck where Sam was waiting. From the feel of the body he also knew in his heart that the man he carried was dead, but regardless, no one was to be left behind, not by Frank Gore at any rate. Evidently, Ben was the last, and he vaguely wondered what a struggle it had been to get the huge Billy loaded. He passed Rob, who had just pulled one of the vans across the exit lane and thrown an object into it. He darted to the guardhouse and the other two vehicles and tossed a package in each of them as well.

“Come *on!* We’ve got to go! I hear sirens!” Sam rasped as he helped Frank heave the body into the back end before clambering up himself. His feet hadn’t cleared the side before the truck started rolling and the winch began taking up the cable, closing the gate. Just before it blocked off the light, there was a flash and a loud roar as the incendiaries detonated, turning all three vehicles and guard shack into a fiery hell, effectively blocking any pursuit from that direction.

Behind them, thrust into the ground just out of reach of the flames as a final act and a ringing statement, was a pole: no more than a sharpened piece of re-enforcement rod. At it’s top, the 3rd National Confederate Banner waved once again, and immediately below a blood red Battle Flag whipped defiantly in the fiery breeze.

The South had officially risen again.

Chapter 41

“*Alright,*” Rob called out over the radio, which was a cheap sportsman’s walkie-talkie – all they needed for the short distance. He and Edge were in the pickup to serve as lead and blocker if need be, while a grim-faced Donna handled the dump truck. “*How many casualties have we got?*”

Tommy replied from a crouched position, his hands busy applying first aid with Frank feverishly working beside him. Sam was relaying the information, holding the radio up to his ear and a flashlight in the other hand to illuminate the line of bodies lying in the darkness with their feet propped up to reduce the risk of shock.

“We’ve got two KIA. Ben bought it – took one in the head. Brian’s dead too, of course.”

He didn’t look at the two bodies, lying by themselves. All of them had unobtrusively avoided the black man’s corpse in particular: it was something they really didn’t want to deal with just now. Besides, there was nothing to be done for it, so he repeated Tommy’s narrative verbatim as the biker-medic continued down the line of the living and hurting. “We’re checking for internal injuries; they had a real rough time before we got to them and the grenades didn’t help. Billy’s evidently got a broken leg; at least they have it in a cast, and his head, ribs and abdomen are taped – it looks like there’s a surgical bandage underneath the abdominal wrap. It’s seeping a little, but I don’t want to pull it off until we get him somewhere that we can do something with it. All of them are still unconscious and concussed; I don’t know how badly yet. They appear to have been drugged, so that might complicate things. There’s blood in their ears; I’d say that they all have blown eardrums too.”

“*That it?*”

“That’s all that’s immediately apparent, although some of them look like they’ve really been through the mill. I’m worried about this one heavysset old guy with an old open heart surgery scar.”

“Roger Nash,” Sam supplied the name.

“His pulse and blood pressure are a little erratic, but I just started him on oxygen, so maybe he’ll straighten up. I’ll update you as needed.”

“Tommy’s hit too, in the face,” Frank broke in. “But it’s not life-threatening. His cheek’s laid open so you can see his teeth. I’ll take care of it as soon as he gets a chance to hold still a minute.”

“Blabbermouth!” Tommy hissed.

“Alright. Scan them to make sure they haven’t been chipped while in captivity, then just hang tight back there, and be quiet whenever we stop. We’ve got a ways to go before we hit our destination. Go ahead and break out the heavy stuff, and keep it ready; any stop is a red alert. If we have any other problems, I’ll let you know.”

The ride was a long one. Huddled in the sweltering darkness beneath the canvas, they had stripped the patients, any question of modesty giving way to the very real fear of heat stroke as the sun rose higher. Sam, at Tommy’s instruction, took over the task of maintaining the injured with wet cloths dipped in the cooler’s icy water and rolled, the bundles then being placed in the groin, armpits, and neck where the blood vessels close to the surface would carry the coolness inside. Tommy and Frank got IVs started in each of them to avoid dehydration. The three men guzzled water, stripped to the waist and wrapped cold, wet dressings around their own necks.

Frank finally dressed Tommy’s wound, doctoring him while the paramedic worked on the others. The treatment of the disfiguring but not life-threatening gash was quick but effective. Frank first shaved the spot before flushing it with sterile saline solution, then glued it together with Derma-bond, reinforced with a line of butterfly tapes. Finally, he smeared on a layer of antibiotic ointment and taped a gauze pad over it.

“Are you done now, damn it?” growled the little biker.

Frank almost grinned, despite the situation. Still buzzing with adrenaline and relieved to find Samantha still alive, he didn’t feel entirely sane. Clinically, he probably wasn’t.

“Yeah, I’m done. You’re just mad because I had to shave off half that underbrush growing on your face to get it out of the way so I could close that cut.”

“As a matter of fact, I am. I’ve always had a beard.” He rubbed gingerly at the bare patch surrounding the bandage. “Why the hell did you have to take off so much?”

“Because I’m kind hearted. I could’ve just taped it up and then ripped it off, like a certain someone who shall remain nameless did to the tape around my broken ribs. My chest hair still hasn’t grown back!”

Tommy threw up his hands. “Okay, okay! Mama always told me not to argue with the law. Let’s see how the real patients are doing.”

Quickly, the two went down the crowded line yet again, checking pulses and blood pressures, accompanied by Sam with one of the flashlights. To their relief, it seemed that nobody was going into shock; on the contrary, all of the freed prisoners were improving in color as well as vitals, as far as they could tell by the flashlights. They were also showing some signs of regaining consciousness.

Their fierce ‘nurses’ on the other hand, were on the downhill slide, showing signs of pain and fatigue as the physical and emotional energy they had expended began to set in. After loading the wounded and dead, all of them had at least minor pulled or torn muscles, Tommy’s facial wound was beginning to sound off, demanding his attention, and the ex-cop’s ribs felt like they had a blade in them where they had been cracked just over a week ago.

No one complained, and all of them whispered private prayers of thanks. Against all odds, they were alive, and at least most of their people were alive.

At least Sammie was alive! Thank you, God!

Frank spent every moment that he could spare from doing his share of the patient care with her, simply sitting beside her and holding her hand when he wasn’t fussing over her. The thought of her naked body had crossed his mind more than once since their forced separation, to be honest, but not seeing her like this, so weak and helpless that, despite her obvious womanly development, she seemed smaller somehow, almost like a child. He was determined to

care for her himself, but at the same time it was hard for him to see his strong, proud wife this way. There was no desire in him, only love, pity, fear, and, as he gently traced the sullen blue line of a bruise on her ribs with a damp cloth, an unquenchable anger that the killing he had done so far did little or nothing to alleviate.

Then he saw something else, at the end of the bruise: a pair of tiny red marks about an inch apart. Curious, he held the light closer and saw an identical pair a few inches away. Then another. And another. All in pairs. The realization of what it meant began to dawn on him, and he shone the light on her breasts, revealing dozens of the same tiny marks, some of them angry blisters, centered on and around her nipples. Turning the light so the beam shone down her body, he saw even more inside her thighs and at the edge of her pubic hair. He knew where the others would be.

An inarticulate, animalistic roar, and his flashlight shattered against the unyielding steel side of the truck bed, sending batteries and bits of plastic in every direction, startling Sam out of the heat and stress-induced doze that he had just managed to drop into, and causing Tommy lose his balance from his squatting position, nearly falling on top of the unconscious Billy.

“What the hell?”

“Look out! He’s lost it!”

Frank was shouting and cursing at the top of his lungs and hammering the truck side with the bottom of his fist like a hammer.

“Frank, quit!” Tommy grabbed his arm. “Stop it! You’re going to hurt yourself!”

Frank, lost a berserk rage and fatigue and pain forgotten, twisted from the grip and threw his forearm backhanded across the biker’s chest, sending him sprawling across the width of the truck bed. Sam took the opening and lunged forward, but he didn’t try to grab Frank; instead, he slapped him hard across the face with his open hand.

Frank’s eyes were still crazy for a disturbing and dangerous second, then he blinked rapidly as his sanity returned. At least mostly: his eyes were still wild and a string of saliva hung from his lip. His breath was coming rapidly, nearly hyperventilating, and his voice was a rasp.

“S-sorry. Sorry about that.” He looked over at the biker, who was watching him cautiously, surprised at the power of the unexpected blow. “I’m sorry, Tommy.”

“What’s with you, man?”

He gestured toward Samantha.

“Did you see what they did to her?”

Shining the light on her body, Frank pointed out the marks to him.

“Damn,” Tommy muttered. “They’re all over her. I didn’t pay any attention to them – I thought they were a rash. I was too busy looking for major injuries. What the hell are they?”

The ex-cop didn’t look at him. “You ever see an electronic stun-gun?”

“One of those things with the two electrodes that...oh, *hell!*”

“Yeah...hell.”

The two gaped at the enormity of what had happened for a moment, before Tommy leaned over and reached for the wet cloth between her legs.

“We’d better check to see if she’s hurt inside. She might be in a bad way.” He looked to Frank for permission to perform the intimate examination on his wife.

“You’re a Special Forces medic, a paramedic, and the closest thing we have to a doctor. I want nothing but the best for her.” He sighed heavily before continuing, “We’ll do what we have to.”

Tommy patted him on the shoulder before turning to Sam and making a circling gesture with his finger. “You might want to turn your head to give us a little privacy here.

“Frank, reach down here and raise her legs a little.”

Frank complied, and as gently as he could with his gloved fingers, the medic carefully spread her open.

“*Aw shit!*” Tommy shouted, slamming his own fist against the truck bed. “*Shitshitshit!*”

At the biker’s outburst, Sam turned despite himself, catching a glimpse of a continuous mass of tiny blisters where they should never have been. He jerked his head sideways and clamped his hand over his mouth, just in time to spray a mouthful of bile through his

fingers onto the truck bed. Wiping his hand on a spare bandage, he began muttering more a prayer than a curse.

“Sweet Jesus! That poor little girl! Oh sweet Jesus!”

Frank had taken her hand again and was stroking her hair, with tears streaming silently down his face.

“They used it inside too.” His voice was a whisper as the observation confirmed what he already knew.

“Yeah.” Tommy grimaced. “She has the marks all over the inside of her vagina and on her anus. It looks like the dirty sons of bitches probed her with it. I don’t know how many times, but it was a lot. Man, I’m sorry.”

“Is she permanently injured?”

The medic shook his head sadly. “I don’t know. I’m not a gynecologist – there’s no way for me to tell for sure. For what it’s worth, I don’t think that there’s anything permanent down there other than some possible scarring, and if it was a standard shocker I don’t think they could have reached her uterus, but,” he tapped his head with an index finger, “up here, that might be a whole different ball game. Some things, there ain’t no getting over, you know? You’ve got to be prepared for this, man. How she handles it – *if* she handles it – will all depend on how strong she is and how much support she gets.”

“She’s strong.” Frank’s voice caught for a moment. “And as God is my witness, she’ll have my support.”

Sam touched his shoulder. “We know that; hell, she’ll have ours too. We’re all in this together.” Seeing the tears running down Frank’s cheeks, he said softly, “Go ahead and let it out, boy. There ain’t no shame.” He sniffed and wiped furiously at his own eyes. “You got the right to cry if anybody does.”

“When I let it out,” he replied in a voice that was horribly calm, “there’ll be some people to let it out on. They killed my grandmother, they killed my friend and now they’ve done...*this*. Every last son of a bitch that was involved in doing this to her is going to die. Anyone who gets between me and them is going to die. I don’t care who they are or what they are; I intend to kill them all!”

None of them had the least doubt he meant every word.

Sam ran his fingertips down Samantha's cheek. "I'll tell you this, son; you're gonna have help. She wore my wife's dress and I stood up for her as a father. She's part of my family too, as far as I'm concerned, so even if I didn't love her too, I'm honor bound. This isn't just war any more; now it's personal."

"You know it, bro'," Tommy quietly pledged.

"Thanks."

"Look," Sam said, glancing at the biker for confirmation. "Stay here with her. Take care of her; hell, I don't know, just hold her hand. Be sure you're there for her when she wakes up; she'll need you more than we will. We can handle the others, and if we need you, we'll holler."

"Thanks; I think I'll do that."

Samantha moaned softly and stirred, and instantly a light showed against her closed and swollen eyelids while someone squeezed her hand. She could barely make out a voice through the ringing from her damaged ears that seemed to fill her head.

"Sammie? Sammie? Can you hear me?"

The response from her dry, split lips was an inarticulate croak. Immediately, someone dabbed at them with a wet cloth. She opened her mouth and took it between her teeth, greedily sucking in the cool moisture, the first drink she'd had since she'd been captured. She was ecstatic as it ran drop by drop over her parched tongue and the dehydrated tissues of her throat, lubricating her voice. "M-more?"

"Sure Sammie – there's plenty." A calloused hand gently caressed her forehead, brushing her hair back and letting fingers slide softly down her cheek. "Just take it slow so you don't make yourself sick."

That voice; it couldn't be! Slowly opening her eyes as much as she was able, she squinted in the light, trying hard to focus on the dark figure behind it. Fearing it wasn't real, she almost didn't dare to speak his name, lest she break the spell.

"Frank?"

"Yeah, Sammie?"

She gripped the hand tightly despite the pain from her smashed fingers. If this was an hallucination, she was determined to hang onto it. “I-I can’t see you.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, turning the light around so it shone in his own face. “Here.”

Frank’s face came into view; twisted with emotion, blackened with burnt powder and dirt, and splattered with drying blood. The telltale pallid tracks of tears had plowed gullies through the filth all the way down to a short, stubble of a beard that was glittering with tiny splinters of broken glass. His eyes were hollow and bloodshot, and had deep lines at their corners she didn’t remember.

It was the most wonderful sight that she had ever seen.

Newscast, Charleston

We interrupt your regular programming to bring you an important news bulletin. Nine FBI agents and one civilian security guard were ambushed and killed during a massive terrorist attack inside the Charleston Naval Base in Charleston, South Carolina. The terrorists attacked the agents with high explosives and automatic weapons, then, according to the latest reports, executed the survivors. No one still alive seems to be able to say how they got on the base, committed this act, and then got out again without discovery. The slaying of the security guard was apparently part of a ruthless campaign to leave no witnesses.

Although no one has yet claimed responsibility for the attack, authorities believe that one or more groups of Neo-Confederate extremists are responsible. Sources close to the FBI tell us that the raid freed six prisoners recently arrested in the Columbia riots and in federal, state, and local law enforcement raids on various white supremacy groups, who were being taken to the military base for detention under the Federal laws governing terrorist combatants. Authorities have confirmed that one of the escaped prisoners is none other than the notorious Samantha Norris, whose airing of a faked video of the Columbia Capitol Riot sparked a second, even more violent confrontation that left over seventy people dead, seven of

them police officers. Norris is known to be the accomplice of the white supremacist renegade policeman alleged to have turned drug dealer, terrorist, and multiple murderer, Franklin Gore. Gore currently tops the FBI's ten most wanted list, and agents suspect that he both masterminded and was directly involved in this cowardly attack on America's finest in an effort to free Norris.

There is no word on whether any of the terrorists were killed or injured in the attack. The names of the fallen agents and the guard are being withheld pending notification of their next of kin.

DAY 15

Chapter 42

The safe house was a two-story white home on the outskirts of Georgetown. Old enough to be comfortable yet not so old as to be dilapidated, it was owned by an elderly couple, the Fords, who were quiet but enthusiastic supporters of the Southern Nationalist Movement. Always eager for something adventurous, when Sam contacted them the night before the raid, they had jumped at the chance to play an active part in the sheltering of the CAP guerrillas and their wounded. At Mr. Ford's insistence, who, as a veteran himself, realized that the freed prisoners and fighting men needed their privacy, the pair satisfied themselves with fussing over the wounded and baking an endless stream of pies, cakes, cookies, and casseroles to leave out for the others. Otherwise, they left their guests to themselves.

“Well Dr. MacFie, how are you feeling today?”

The professor looked up irritably from the recliner at Edge's voice. Neither man offered his hand to the other, and neither would have taken it if it had been. “Fine,” he grunted rudely. His rivalry with Edge was both personal and professional, and went back a long way in the Southern Nationalist Movement. MacFie despised Edge with a passion (a passion that Edge returned in spades), and it bothered him to be confronted by the CAP leader while he was at a disadvantage in such a weakened condition. He was bruised and aching all over, with a broken nose and the resulting black eyes from his preliminary interrogation. He and the others had escaped the intensive treatment given to Samantha, as Sedgeway had decided she would be the most likely to break and was physically more durable than the injured or older men, so they hadn't gotten to them to the same degree. To top it off, his ears were still ringing faintly from the stun grenade's blast.

“Good. Now that we’ve got the surviving Southern Council members up and around, we can get some work done.”

MacFie looked pointedly around the room. “The only one I see here is you, Edge.”

“The others are in the next room,” he replied, gesturing toward a wall with his thumb. “I wanted to talk with you for a moment before we go into session.”

“What do you want?”

“One thing: your support. I’ve already spoken to Nash and Herdman, and they’re in agreement. The thing is, for the sake of unity, we need a unanimous decision. That brings us to you.”

“What exactly are you asking for?”

“First, I want sole overall command of all CAP forces for the duration of this conflict, with the said forces being formally designated as the official military arm of the Southern Nationalist Movement.

“Second, I want you to join the others in voting for a formal declaration of war against the Government of the United States.

“Third, Richard Jameson is to be sentenced to death for treason, the sentence to be carried out by any Southerner who can get to him.

“Fourth, all of the above is to be done in front of a camera for public distribution.”

As Edge ticked off his demands on the fingers of his right hand, he affected not to notice the professor’s face getting redder and redder.

“Like hell!” he finally exploded.

“Look, Doctor, this is the way it is. The war has already started, like it or not, and you had your part in starting it as well as I did. Up to now, the entire movement has been in shambles, and we’ve finally got a chance to pull it together once and for all if we act in unison. In order to do that, someone has to be in charge. There is no other choice.”

“And I suppose *you* are the one to lead it?”

“Who else? Who else on the Council besides that traitor Jameson has had any successes whatsoever? I managed to stay footloose and fancy free while every last one of you were captured, and then I

came in and pulled your chestnuts out of the fire. I beat them at their own game – not once, but twice – and I was smart enough not to be taken with the rest of you. The information I had never got into their hands, unlike your own.”

MacFie reddened even more in his fury. “You have no idea what they did to me!”

Although it never showed in his face, Edge smiled inwardly in triumph at the admission he had suspected and had, in fact, been probing for. He had him now.

“No I don’t, but I know that what they did to Samantha was a whole lot worse, and you want to know something? *She* never broke! While you and the rest of the Council were spilling your guts because somebody knocked you around a little bit, they nearly tortured that girl – that *girl* – to death and she told them exactly zip. Do you understand what that means? Your dedication to the Cause has been measured, and you have been found wanting.”

“Dedication?” Flushed with humiliation and having no answer to that, the professor, true to form, quickly changed the subject and attacked his opponent. “You bastard, the only thing you’re dedicated to is yourself! You’ve wanted to head this movement from day one!”

“That sounds like the pot calling the kettle black to me. It’s well known you’ve always thought of yourself as the second coming of Jefferson Davis. There’s a difference between you and me though: I’m not a hypocrite, because I’ll admit it. I do want to head this movement, and I want it so bad I can taste it. The important thing is that, unlike you or the others, I have proven myself capable of doing so. I have led my followers to victory and now have a proven record of success. No other member of the Council can say that.

“Make no mistake; my first love after God is this movement and I am dedicated to it 100%. I’ll die for it if necessary, as I’ve demonstrated by rescuing its governing body in Charleston when I could have just as easily and much more safely left you to rot.” He didn’t add either that Frank and Tommy had given him little choice, or that the Council members were almost an afterthought, rescued only because of who they were with, rather than the other way around. “Yes, I’m ambitious and egotistical too, but that has no

bearing on the matter. The plain fact is that this movement will not survive the coming hostilities without capable leadership. I'm the only one qualified to do that, and I am the one who *is* going to do that. I'm already in charge for all practical purposes, so it's already a given; it's a done deal. The best thing you can do is to face reality and make the best of it. I'm not asking you to like me or even to trust me, but for the sake of the Movement, I am asking you to get with the program and get behind me on this, so we can finally present the unified front we are going to have to have to win."

"Over my dead body!"

"Oh, it won't come to that," Edge said, apparently unperturbed, "at least, not from me. If you don't want to cooperate, then I won't force you. Of course, as an obstructionist, you're a security risk, so you will no longer be able to stay here. I'll have you dropped off in front of the Columbia Police Department – I'm sure they'll be more understanding."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"No?" Edge shrugged, took a radio out of his pocket and lifted it to his lips. "Tommy, Rob; come in here please."

There was a static click of acknowledgement, and in a few seconds the door opened to reveal both the men. Although neither Edge nor MacFie knew it, they had been standing in the hall, listening at the door with growing alarm.

"What's up?" Tommy inquired uneasily.

Ignoring the rapidly paling MacFie other than to gesture towards him, Edge gave them their orders. "I need you two to go on a mission. Dr. MacFie is unhappy here, so I would like for you to load him in one of the vehicles, take him to Columbia, and drop him off in front of the police station. Now."

The two looked first at Edge and then at each other, and, not knowing what else to do, shrugged and stepped forward, taking MacFie by the arms and gently but firmly lifting him from his chair.

"Please come with us, sir," Tommy told him, embarrassed by the situation Edge had put him in, but not sure how to get out of it.

“Wait!” the professor began to protest as they frog-marched him toward the door. “Now you just wait one damned minute! Damn you, Edge, wait!”

Edge raised his hand and the impromptu procession abruptly stopped. “I take it you have decided to rethink your decision, Dr. MacFie?”

“I...I...” finally, his head dropped, defeated. “Yes. I’ll do it.”

“Excellent!” Edge exclaimed cheerfully. “Tommy, go get the others and we’ll adjourn to the living room. The Council meeting will begin immediately.”

Frank and Sam sat at the kitchen table in silence as the pair relayed what had happened. When they finished, Frank let out his breath in a stream. Although he would never let it show and would have denied it to anyone who had the poor grace to ask, dealing with Sammie’s recovery and mood swings as she traveled the long, hard road back to the chaos that at least passed for normalcy in their lives was taking a heavy toll on his own stress levels. He wasn’t in the mood for more B.S.

More infighting – I don’t know how much more of this petty crap I can take!

“So,” Tommy asked insistently, “what do you think?”

“Is fight each other the only thing we do?” he muttered disgustedly, cupping his hands around a mug of coffee, trying to let the warmth relax them.

“It’s common in every nationalist revolutionary movement,” Rob broke in. “It’s also why so many of them fail.”

“I can believe that. I understand what happened, and I understand the necessity for it, considering, but...Sam, I know you and Edge are good friends and all, but...”

Sam nodded his understanding. “Yeah, it bothers me too. I know that, under the circumstances – I mean we have to have at least the image of unity now as never before – Edge did what he had to do, but something about it that bothers me.”

Frank didn't look at Sam as he spoke. "In other words, you might agree with what he did, but you're wondering if he did it for the right reasons?"

"That's it," he said, as the other nodded. "I know war is hell on democracy and desperate times call for desperate measures. I reckon this measure was mild compared to some we've taken in the past few days. Still, the question is, did he do it out of necessity, or did he do it because he doesn't like MacFie?"

"Even worse, did he do it just because he *could*?"

"That's the part that worries me," Rob spoke for the first time, leaning forward in his chair with his hands clasped and his elbows resting on his knees. "I'm in this thing for liberty, not to put an emperor on the throne. I've seen too many men who would be king already in my life – that's not what I'm fighting for."

"I was just thinking the same thing," Tommy muttered. "Like my daddy used to say, no king but Jesus."

"So, what do we do?"

"What we have to," Frank replied, "nothing."

All three men looked at him strangely.

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. Look, whatever his reasons, we're all in agreement that he did the right thing, correct? Okay, now whatever his plans for the future are, we still need him now."

"After all," he said, gesturing with his palms up, "who else is going to do it? I mean, who's qualified? I'm not; how about you, Tommy?"

The biker leaned back and held up both hands as if to physically push away the suggestion. "No way, man!"

"Rob? You've got a spec-ops background; you want to take over?"

"I'm not qualified – I'm strictly small unit tactics. I wouldn't even begin to know how to run an army."

"How about you, Sam? You probably know more about it than any of the rest of us; think you can handle it?"

"Lord no!" Sam declared, with what looked like fear in his eyes: an expression that turned grim immediately as he went on. "I don't

know that I'm hard enough to order the things done that will have to be done before this thing's over. I hate the thought."

"Anyone trust one of the other members of the council to do it, bearing in mind that they opposed the idea of actually fighting for independence from the start, and that, among all of them, Edge was the only one smart enough not to get caught?"

There was head shaking all around.

"Alright then; we've all agreed that we need our commander, or general or whatever he's got them to make him in there by now, because he's the only one qualified. We just don't know where he's coming from. He might be as ambitious as Cromwell, or he might just be doing what needs to be done. Doesn't matter. Either way, we need him, and since none of us have what it takes to replace him, we're stuck with him, at least for the time being. He was right about one thing: we'd better back him all the way if we want to have a hope in hell of winning this thing.

"Of course," he continued after a moment's pause, "that doesn't mean that we don't keep an eye on him. If worse comes to worse, *we'll* do what we have to. However, just to be honest, him getting a chance to become a dictator looks like it's a pretty far piece down the road, and we can cross that bridge when we come to it – *if* we come to it. There's some pretty long odds for all of us between here and there."

All of them looked even more sober than before.

"Ain't that the truth," Tommy muttered grimly.

"So, who died?"

Startled, they all looked up at the sound of the soft voice to see Samantha standing in the doorway.

It had been a hard time for an independent woman like Samantha. For the first two days, she had been virtually helpless, and Frank had not left her side for more than a few minutes at a time. He cared for her wounds, bathed and dressed her, brushed her hair, and carried her back and forth to the bathroom when she needed to go. He was even going to wipe her butt for her if she hadn't drawn the line despite her pain and insisted that was one thing she was capable of doing for herself, no matter how much it hurt. Then, as she began

to heal, she nearly had to fight him to get him to let her move under her own power.

Still, she reflected often, he was perfect despite that. Not only was he her sometimes too-willing slave, but he also never asked her what happened. He only mentioned it once when she woke up from the first of a constant string of nightmares that had her back in the locker or back on the table. She had screamed and cried, insane with fear, and he held her close and kissed her hair as he rubbed her back. He told her he loved her, and that, whenever, if ever, she was ready to talk about it, he was ready to listen.

She wasn't ready – not yet.

He told her that was fine, and just held her.

What hurt the worst was the loss of control. She had been under the full control of the torturers for days, and now she was under Frank's control as he helped her recover. It chafed at her, and sometimes she took it out on him when the feelings of helplessness got to be too much. He would take it silently, trying to understand her anger and not look hurt at her raging. Then she would feel terrible about how she had treated him and go off another crying jag, curling into the shelter of his arms like a child.

If she didn't get back some tiny handhold on her life, she was going to go stark, raving mad. Catching Frank out of the room, trying his best to give her the space she needed for as long as he could stand it, she made her move.

She had taken the time alone to put on enough makeup to at least tone down the bruises and try to do something with her hair for the first time since her rescue. Getting out of her gown, she had slipped on a white, off the shoulder summer dress she had found in the closet. It didn't exactly fit, but at least it was something other than a nightgown.

Then she had, by George, just got up and walked out of her room under her own power!

Well, limped out anyway, bracing herself against the walls as she moved. And despite the pain, it felt good.

There was a scramble and a loud scooting of chairs as the men stood up. Frank started for her. “Sammie, I didn’t know you were up...”

She waved him off. “It’s alright Frank. I’m not completely helpless.” Actually, she was beginning to hurt like hell and felt a little dizzy, but she wasn’t about to tell him that.

He respected her obvious wishes and didn’t reach to aid her as she moved painfully and unsteadily across the kitchen, although it was obvious that he and the rest of them were tensed and ready to lunge forward to catch her if she showed the slightest indication of falling. She grinned inwardly at the thought of finally getting out of bed only to be crushed to death in a rugby scrum of four men all scrambling to catch her at once. When she reached the table, he scooted back the chair for her, and held it as she carefully eased her way into it, involuntarily flinching from the pain of her many injuries. Only after she was seated firmly did the men nervously resume their own places, except for Frank.

“Would you like some coffee, honey?”

Not really wanting coffee but knowing Frank would fuss over her until she let him do something, she smiled. *God, how I love that man!* “Coffee would be nice – cream and sugar, please.”

As Frank took the pot out of the coffee maker, Sam broke the uncomfortable silence.

“You’re looking mighty pretty today, Sammie.” He sputtered a moment. “That is, if you don’t mind me calling you Sammie; it’s just what Frank calls you all the time...”

“Yes, you can call me Sammie. You and all of the rest of the men in this room have earned the right to call me anything you want to.” She reached out and laid a hand on Sam’s for a moment, much to his embarrassment. “And I look like death warmed over and you know it as well as I do, but it was sweet of you to say that.”

None of them said anything. They tried not to stare at the bruises and abrasions that still adorned her bare arms and shoulders like tiger stripes, her swollen jaw and nose, and the still-black eye and healing splits in her lips that the makeup couldn’t hide. Her hands were as bad; fingers still swollen and nails purple, three of them

hidden in white splints that held the broken bones in place while they knitted. She sensed their unease and, as Frank brought her coffee and sat down beside her, decided to put everything to rest.

“Look, guys. We’re all friends here – more than friends. One of you is my husband, Sam is the closest thing to a father I’ve had in a long time, and the rest of you, along with Billy and Jim, are like my brothers. We’re all family here. All we’ve got is each other, and you’ve all proven just how seriously you take that idea.

“You don’t know what to say to me after what happened. You saw me naked in the back of that dump truck – no, don’t interrupt!” She stopped their protests with an uplifted hand. “And you all know at least some of what was done to me. Well listen; I’ve been through a lot, and I’m still going through it, and will be for a while – probably a long while. The thing is, I’m never going to get back to being me unless you all start treating me like me: like the woman you all know. I’m busted up, but I’m not broken by a long shot. This is one Humpty-Dumpty that’s going to be put back together again, and I can’t do that if you’re all going to walk on eggshells every time you’re around me. Frank knows what I’m talking about, but I haven’t broken him of it yet either. Well, that’s going to stop right here and now.”

She scooted her chair back and gingerly stood up supporting herself by leaning against the table. She silently prayed it wouldn’t scoot away under her weight and dump her in the floor.

“Right now, each and every one of you is going to come over here and give me a hug, so you can see that I’m not made out of porcelain. Just go easy on the ribs, please.” She pointed a finger at Rob. “You first.”

For the first time in any of their experience, Rob was visibly embarrassed. He tried to stammer, but she cut him off.

“Front and center, soldier; right now!”

Red faced but obedient, he stepped forward and carefully put his arms around her.

“There,” she said. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“Tommy, get over here.”

Tommy, getting into the game, hugged her just as carefully if a little more enthusiastically, and even gave her a quick peck on the cheek before he let go.

He grinned hugely at Frank. "Sorry, Bro'! She's just too damned cute; couldn't help myself!"

Frank smiled and then laughed as he told the biker he was going to have to keep an eye on him.

"Now it's your turn, Sam. You hugged me at my wedding, and you're going to hug me now. Come here to me."

Sam complied, holding onto her longer than the rest, then sniffed and wiped at his eyes. "Damned girls are gonna' be the death of me yet!"

"Now for you, husband." She took Frank's hand and pulled him to her, embraced him, and kissed him, as deeply and passionately as her healing lips would allow.

"Alright," she said as she disengaged and eased back into her seat. "Now that we've got that settled, we've got work to do. One of you please get me a pencil and paper so I can organize my thoughts." She paused, looking at her smashed fingers. "On second thought, I may need one of you all to write them down for me. Once they get their business out of the way, I need to speak to the council. Your communications officer is now officially back on the job."

Roger Nash sat at the head of the dining room table in the chairman's position, but both he and William Herdman had begun to realize what MacFie had already found out: that it was Jonathon Edge who was running the show. As subdued and changed in attitude as the head of the Southern Majority was when he entered the room, they began to suspect what had happened, and none of them wanted to face that situation themselves. Edge had become the defacto Shogun and Lord Protector, all rolled into one. As the meeting continued, there was little doubt where the real power lay, no matter how much all of them, including Edge, pretended otherwise.

Nash sighed. This was not at all what he had expected.

Of course, being taken prisoner and tortured wasn't what he had expected either. Whatever Edge was up to, there was no question that they all owed him for getting them out of that, big time. There was also no question in their minds that Edge was fully aware of that debt too, and intended to collect on it down to the last red cent...or pound of flesh, if it came to that.

The conversation stopped with a knocking on the door.

"Yes?" Nash called, and the door opened to reveal Samantha standing there, supporting herself with one hand on the jamb.

The men all rose, although MacFie, Nash, and Childers did so painfully and had to support themselves a bit too. Edge looked just as startled as the rest of them.

"Samantha, is everything alright? You shouldn't be out of bed yet."

"I'd like to address the council. May I come in?"

Before Edge could speak, Nash seized the opportunity to reestablish his authority, at least in this small matter. Grinning like a cherub, he pulled out the chair nearest him and limped toward her, extending his hand. "You come right on in and sit down, ma'am." As she complied, she allowed him to take her arm and assist her into her seat. "We'd be glad to have you speak, Miss Norris – er, I guess it's Mrs. Gore now isn't it? Congratulations."

Samantha thanked him graciously.

"Now what can we do for you, ma'am?"

"Well," she said with a smile. "To begin with you can call me Samantha. After that, I'd like to address the council in my official capacity as the Confederate Army Provisional Communications Officer."

"Yes, Mr. Edge informed us of his placement of you in that position, and frankly, we approve. We certainly have no one else with your qualifications for the job." He didn't add that they just as certainly had no choice in that particular matter either. He figured she was Edge's puppet as much as they were. "I suppose you're ready to disseminate the news of our recent victory?"

"No sir; I'm here to tell you that you haven't had a victory yet."

If someone had dropped a pin in the room, it could have been heard loud and clear, as all of them, Edge included, stared at her in stunned silence. Nash retained enough presence of mind to notice Edge's reaction, and he quickly reevaluated Samantha. If she were actually independent, that could be useful down the line.

"I don't understand," Edge finally said. "We tore the Feds a new one on their home turf, killing nine of them and rescuing their prisoners, yourself included, with minimal losses. Why is that not a victory?"

"Because the public doesn't know the real story; all they know is what they're told, which is that this was a simple terrorist attack on the FBI, and they'll never know any different unless we tell them our side. Until we do that, as far as they're concerned, we're just criminals; nothing we did matters.

"We'd better do it soon too, as short as the public attention span is. Otherwise it'll be old news and forgotten, or else the other side's version will become so ingrained and accepted that no one except the conspiracy theorists will give what we have to say the time of day."

Herdman leaned forward, speaking for the first time since she had entered the room. "Mrs. Gore – Samantha – is the general public's perception of our actions really that critical right now, at this stage of the game?"

"It's the difference between success and failure."

"Could you elaborate, please? The finer points of revolution are new to me."

"To me too, Mr. Herdman; however, it comes down to this: from what I know, any revolutionary force depends on the public's support, or at least its tolerance. Without it, not only are there no recruits – and I don't think that less than a dozen of us are going to win this thing by ourselves – but there is also no shelter. Unless at least a small percentage of the public is supportive or even neutral towards us, we simply will not be able to function; and we're not going to get that support with them only hearing our enemy's side of the story. Not to mention all the other groups that I presume we need to bring in as allies; we need to impress them too."

“I don’t see the problem,” MacFie said somewhat testily, still stinging from his confrontation with Edge. “Surely we can manage an undercover media release.”

“Oh, we can release anything; however, that doesn’t mean the mass of people will ever see it. Look, this is the way it is: the mainstream media will not disseminate anything that is not politically correct or that is too far outside the government line; I know that from experience. If you’re hoping to see our story in any form that would even possibly help us on the evening news, you’re in for a big disappointment.”

Herdman spoke up again. “What about the alternative media and the internet?”

“Then the information would come out in a trickle rather than a flood, and it would not only lose much of its impact, but it would give the government time to formulate a response before too many people saw it. The alternative media is far too limited, the internet is only a single source, and, contrary to the opinion of those who use it, it is not the primary source. Most people still get their news off the TV at home or off their radios on their way to and from work. That’s the people we have to reach.

“Besides, the government and the private political hackers will drop anything we put out almost as soon as it goes up unless we can get it out there in a form and volume that’s simply too big for them to overwhelm.”

“How can we do that – put it out there in an overwhelming fashion, I mean?” It was Edge’s turn. Though a master tactician when it came to military matters, media management was one place where he was thoroughly in the dark.

“If we could reach several people at once – even a few hundred in some sort of controlled environment where they would actually be able to see it in some kind of numbers, the mainstream press at least wouldn’t be able to deny or ignore its existence.

“What we need is to find a neutral journalist who will do the actual coverage; otherwise, it will not have legitimacy in the public eye beyond being simply our propaganda. I can tell you from experience, anyone telling the truth about this will lose his job with

any major news agency out there. Further, given the liberal nature of most of the press and the flag-waving neo-conservatism of the rest, we can't count on anything resembling neutral, let alone positive coverage of what we have to say. Instead, what we'll get is a hatchet job: answers taken out of context to the questions – anything to make us look bad. Even the foreign press may do it, if it suits their country's agenda at the time. We have to find a way to get around that."

"Again," Edge asked, "how can we do it?"

"I don't know, but we're going to either find an opportunity or make one, and soon. I need any and all ideas to that effect that anyone has ASAP. In the meantime, we need to have everything ready to move at a moment's notice at the earliest opportunity. I'm going to have to begin putting together a presentation and a press packet to give to whomever we get to do the actual coverage. In order to accomplish that, I need a videotaped statement from everyone involved in this – including every one of us in this room – describing in detail exactly what was done to us. I also need any political statements that any of you want to make: declarations of causes, council decisions, whatever."

Pleasantly surprised and highly impressed by her competent, no-nonsense attitude, Nash smiled as he spoke.

"Anything else?"

"Yes; I want it today."

Two weeks later, the CAP's entire Columbia Command was huddled in a bunker – literally. Their command headquarters was Mike Dayton's daddy's bomb shelter.

Sam had returned to Columbia to take up the position of 'Commander, South Carolina Theater' as Edge put it, more than a little over-dramatically as far as Sam was concerned. His second in command, equally grandiosely christened 'Commander, Columbia Theater' was a surprised Frank Gore, promoted to captain by the Confederate Council for his actions in rescuing Jim Reynolds and capturing the Federal agent and his Humvee. The move was orchestrated by, surprisingly, Roger Nash. Nash was nearly sure that

Edge would, or at least should, promote Frank for his actions that went above and beyond the call of duty. However, in preemptively suggesting it himself and asking for a Council resolution requesting that 'Field Marshal Edge, Supreme Commander of the Confederate Army Provisional' (his new title, selected by the Council as a subtle dig when they made their semi-voluntarily appointment of him to the head of the army) take the action, he gathered another increment of power back to the body, not only in perception, but as a precedent for later use. Further, Nash had placed someone in a powerful position who carried no baggage of bad blood within the movement; someone he hoped he could work with instead of having to work against. Edge realized what had been done and even though he didn't want either Frank or Tommy in a position of power, he could think of no real argument to marshal against it that would not make him look bad and use up valuable political capital, he had no choice but to accept it with reasonable grace.

That still didn't mean he had forgotten Frank's defiance of his authority, of course, but there would be time enough to consider the proper response later. *Revenge is a dish best tasted cold* as the Chinese proverb went, although Edge would have preferred to call it an issue of dependability rather than ego, even to himself.

Tommy went as well, since it was he who made the arrangements with Mike for the establishment of their headquarters. He and Donna became the public legs of the command because they were relatively unknown to the authorities. They were to pose as a couple that, as far as any of Mike's neighbors were concerned, were renting his upstairs.

Samantha came along too, at her insistence. Actually, it was her defiant threat to cease any and all work and walk there, if need be. Waving off their assertions that she was too valuable and that they needed their Communications Officer with the leadership, she informed them, in what sounded like a reasonable argument, that since the whole mess had centered around Columbia from the beginning; and since that was the enemy headquarters, that was where any breaking information that she would need to correlate would be coming from; and that, since the people of Columbia were

the most involved that they were the ones the CAP story most needed to be released directly to in order to have maximum impact; therefore, she needed to be in Columbia, where it was all happening.

When the irascible MacFie accused her of simply wanting to be near her husband, she replied, “so? Don’t I even get to finish my honeymoon that I started at a scenic hog farm?” A laughing Nash asked Edge to approve the transfer to keep their Communications Officer happy.

“There’s a precedent after all; didn’t they have to bring Jefferson’s wife up from Virginia before he could manage an acceptable writing of the Declaration of Independence?”

She and Frank made another cramped ride: this time inside the ventilated, hollowed-out shell of a large refrigerator. Frank, Tommy, and Sam had carefully removed a new side-by-side from the box and stripped the whole inside of it out, made sure it was ventilated, and put the newlyweds in it. “Be sure you go to the bathroom first,” Tommy told them, “because I ain’t stopping!” Frank stood while Samantha sat between his legs, and the biker closed the door and put the box back over it so it would look like a new model being delivered, and anyone checking the box would see that there was actually a refrigerator inside. The whole works was loaded into the back of a borrowed pickup truck, and strapped upright for delivery. Sam made the trip a bit more comfortably. He was lying down, if somewhat scrunched, inside the shell of a boxed chest freezer in the same truck. Lacking a partner to talk to, he brought a flashlight and a book.

Tommy hauled them into Mike’s house on a two-wheeled dolly.

The biker had arranged things with Mike Dayton to make his fortified basement available to them for a safe house and command center, but Mike went them one better and gave them yet another level of protection: a genuine bunker.

Back in the early 60’s, during the Cold War, Mike’s father had decided to give his family the best protection that he could from a potential nuclear war; he designed and built a fall-out shelter. Actually, it was more of a bomb shelter. He had over-built the thick reinforced concrete chamber until it would have withstood anything

short of a direct hit from a bunker-buster. It measured twelve by sixteen feet inside, and it was accessed through the basement via a concrete slab in the bottom of a sump, just big enough to squeeze through after lifting it out by using the sump pump bolted to it for a handle. The hole dropped into a three by three foot crawl space about six feet long that led to a circular steel door made from a surplus ship's hatch, which in turn opened into what his dad called 'Dayton Bunker'.

"It'll need a little fixing up," Mike told them. "I haven't been in it since I got busted up, and it was pretty moldy then."

"I can't believe you never told me about this," Tommy had said, somewhat petulantly. "We could have had a ball in there!"

Mike shook his head. "Dad wouldn't hear of it; he said that the best defense is for no one to know what you're up to. I'd nearly forgotten about it myself until I got your call, and then it seemed to be a natural."

Moldy didn't begin to describe it, but the entire Columbia Command threw themselves into it and, after some cleaning, paint and a little carpet, along with a dehumidifier, the place soon looked better than new. With quite a bit of manhandling and not a little cussing, they managed to pack it with chairs, electronics and weapons, although the furniture had to be constructed in place from parts dragged through the narrow passage. All the illegal items found a new home there, including the software and printer for the counterfeiting operation and anything else whose origin was questionable. A phone line was laid in, along with cables leading to the satellite TV receiver and an external radio antenna. Their computers were hooked up to Mike's in-house network, which was about as secure as it got. For the first time in a couple of years, Mike's house itself was relatively 'clean' in legal terms, and for the first time since the raid on Sam's farm, they had a safe place to work, and they went at it with a vengeance.

They had to find the opportunity they were looking for. The only question was how.

DAY 30

Chapter 43

As with teen-agers everywhere, the four gathered in the booth at Wild Bill's Restaurant were loud and full of plans and self-importance, ready to change the world that they knew so little about.

"I tell you, guys, this news service is lame!" declared Jared Robinson, a seventeen-year-old boy with unruly blonde tinted dark hair and fashionably baggy pants. He was referring to their high school journalism class that ran a printed newspaper, a news website, and a school-wide morning TV news program. "We don't do jack!"

The auburn-haired girl sitting across from him named Kerrie O'Brien sighed. "You got that right! The most exciting thing we've covered lately was the school's new sewer system. Wow. What fun."

"Hey!" Chucky Donahue, a bespectacled, nerdish type protested. "We did cover the anarchy club's protest last month. That's something, at least."

There were moans from the other three, and the fourth girl, Cynthia Dover, a petite blonde, chimed in. "Oh yeah; covering four spoiled, unwashed idiots in berets and ski masks blocking the school cafeteria door for buying '*globalistic imperialist produce*.' That was really something – *not!*"

"Alright, fine! I'm just the cameraman – *you're* the idea people. You tell me what we should be covering?"

Jared waved his arms dramatically, threatening the soft drinks in front of them.

"Important stuff! Exciting stuff! Like those riots, for instance; we should have been there. We should at least have interviewed some of the principles on both sides. That's *real* journalism!"

"Yeah, right! Like they'd talk to us!"

While they continued to argue, a young brunette who happened to be sitting in the next booth rose with an idea in her eyes and took her cell phone out of her purse.

“I’m telling you...” Jared was still holding forth when the dark-haired girl stopped beside their table.

“You want a *real* story?”

Startled, they looked up at her. Then Cynthia spoke up.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I asked if you wanted a real story; I heard you all complaining about not having one.”

Jared looked her up and down. “Do you have a story?”

The seated girls looked knowingly at the other and snickered. The stranger went on, ignoring them.

“I heard one of you say that you’d like to interview some of the principles from the riots. Well, I just got off the phone with two of them and got their approval; they’re willing to talk to you tonight, and to allow a video taped interview.”

Despite themselves, the students were intrigued.

“Just which principles are you talking about?” Jared inquired.

“A pair of leaders from the Confederate movement who were heavily involved in the rioting. No,” she held up a hand, “before you ask, I won’t tell you their names. It’s at their request, for security reasons. You’ll find that out at the interview. This is an exclusive, however; no one else has interviewed either of these people since the riots.”

Kerrie spoke up. “How do we know we can trust you? For all we know, this could be a joke or even a plot to get us somewhere and kill us.”

The standing girl locked a pair of surprisingly hard eyes with hers, and Kerrie was the first to look away. “You don’t know. That’s what investigative reporting is all about, finding out things you don’t know. Sometimes that involves risk – that’s the nature of the business.” She shifted her gaze back to Jared, the group’s obvious leader.

“This is the chance at the story of a lifetime; a story even CNN can’t get. A *journalist* would jump at the chance. You decide what you are. You all talk a lot of trash, but when the opportunity comes, do you really have the guts to go for it?”

She turned to go, tossing a final remark over her shoulder.

“My ride will be here in a couple of minutes. If you think you’ve got what it takes, come on. If not, you can sit right here and play make believe. It’s your choice.”

As Donna walked out the door, she heard them begin arguing in earnest whispers. When the van pulled up three minutes later, they were standing there with her.

While they had settled into the rear seats of the long wheelbase Dodge, the driver – Tommy underneath a baseball cap pulled low over a pair of dark glasses – nodded his approval at Donna as she got into the van behind her new acquaintances. He called back to them. “What music do you all like?”

There was some argument, but the girls held out for pop, so they were soon listening to a station playing the latest teenaged diva’s lament for her “baby” to come back. Their driver may have muttered something vaguely profane regarding their taste in music, but the comment was too low for them to hear exactly what he said, which was probably just as well.

After a few blocks, he pulled to the curb in front of a dilapidated building.

“Is this the place?” asked Chucky, fumbling for his seatbelt latch and camera all at once.

“No, just sit still. I’ve got to take on a couple of more passengers.”

Two shadows walked briskly from the building, quickly opened the van door and piled in. By the time the journalism club had recovered from their shock at the sight of the ski masks and silenced submachine guns, the door had slammed shut and the van pulled away.

Four voices began talking and shouting at once, with demands, recriminations, and pleas, but they were cut off by Rob’s sharp and very sergeant-like command. “Silence!”

The voices instantly subsided. Beneath his own mask, Sam smiled as he spoke. “Good. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your cooperation. First off, let me assure you that none of you will

be harmed in any way, *although*,” he said, raising his voice slightly at the sight of mouths beginning to open, “I am not above turning any one of you across my knee to teach you that it’s bad manners to interrupt your elder when he’s talking.” Faces reddened and mouths instantly shut. “This young lady here tells me that you fancy yourselves professional journalists. As long as you behave in that manner, that’s how you’ll be treated.

“I want you all to understand something about the people you are about to interview. They, like revolutionaries everywhere, are considered by the government to be subversives and terrorists. Each one of us has a price on his head and is being earnestly sought by every law enforcement agency out there. Needless to say, we value our privacy, because it’s that privacy that keeps us alive and free.”

The little blonde timidly held up a hand.

“Yes ma’am? And your name is...?”

“Cynthia – Cynthia Dover, sir. If your privacy is so important, why are you willing to let us interview you?”

“That’s a fair question, Miss Dover. What it boils down to is this: we’ve got a story to tell that nobody wants to hear. If we put it out ourselves, it will be dismissed as propaganda. We need an aura of journalism to give it legitimacy in the public eye. We can’t go to the mainstream media because they’d twist it, assuming that the government even allowed them to put it out at all. You, on the other hand, are pure journalists; you haven’t had your ideals knocked out of you yet. You haven’t sold out. You may need us for your story, but we need you to tell our story.” Noticing the auburn-haired girl looking at him suspiciously, he added, “We will not censor anything you write. Once we arrive at the interview site, you can ask any questions that you wish, although I *strongly* suggest you phrase them politely, and you may publish the answers and the tapes in their entirety. As I said, we won’t censor you, and we ask the same consideration; that you don’t censor us. Just tell the truth about what you see and hear – fair enough?”

Four heads nodded in unison.

“Good; I’m glad we understand each other. Now, as I said, we value our privacy; therefore, the location of this interview must

remain a secret. He produced a black gym bag, unzipped it, and pulled four objects from it.

“Pass these out. These are ‘blackout goggles’: simply ordinary safety goggles painted black. They will prevent you from retracing this route and compromising our location. Please put them on.”

They began to comply hesitantly, especially the girls. Sam reassured them. “Remember, if we intended you harm, we wouldn’t need to blindfold you. There are four of us; two armed with 9mm submachine guns. If we wanted to hurt you or force your compliance, we would. If you want the interview, put the goggles on. If you don’t, we’ll turn around and drop you back at the malt shop, and you can spend the rest of your lives talking about what real journalists do instead of actually doing it yourselves. You will get no second chance. So, what’ll it be?”

All four sets of blackout goggles went on. Chucky was the last, and as he began to don them, Rob chided him. “Nice try, son. That was pretty slick”

He gulped. “I don’t know what you mean, sir.”

“Oh, I think you do,” Rob said, reaching out a gloved finger and pressing the power button on the student’s video camera. “It’s a strange thing about these cameras; they’ve got this tiny red LED that lights up when they’re recording; it’s easy to see in the dark.” He took the camera, popped out the battery and pocketed it, then handed the machine back.

“I’ll return this when we reach our destination.”

“Damn it, Chucky!” Jared hissed. “This is no time to try to pull something!”

The man’s voice came again, and was a little sharper this time. “On the contrary, this is exactly the time to pull something; that’s why I was watching him.” He chuckled. “I’m not mad; hell, I’m proud! It showed the type of courage and initiative that I thought was lost among the Southern youth.” After a moment he added, with a touch of humor still barely evident in his voice, “Just don’t over do it.”

Chapter 44

Following a long, roundabout drive, the van pulled into the garage. As soon as the door had closed behind them, Sam gave the command for them to remove their goggles and get out. Blinking in the light, the kids scrambled out onto the oil-stained concrete floor that showed that the building's function had once been the same as its name. The tool racks and hoists were all gone; only a few pieces of reasonably clean but mostly threadbare, mismatched furniture sat against the walls. A camera was already set up on a tripod, and its operator – Joel Harrison, a new recruit with a red bandanna covering the lower half of his face – was taping the group as they dismounted from the van.

“What’s with the second camera, sir?” demanded Chucky, a hint of jealousy in his voice. “I brought my own right here.”

The cameraman looked up, his eyes crinkling with humor.

“Simmer down, son. This is for our protection, to make sure that we have a tape of the proceedings, just to see that nothing accidentally gets lost in the shuffle. We’ll edit it, and find some use for it. If you would like a copy to compare with your own footage, or maybe even use part of it, that can be arranged.”

Clearing his throat, their masked escort pointed toward a couple sitting at the kitchen table in the corner.

“There are your interviewees. Do your stuff.”

Both rose when the young people entered. The man was muscular but seemed slightly gaunt around the eyes. He looked familiar but they couldn’t quite place him. He wore a set of gray military fatigues and highly polished combat boots. The blonde woman in the dark business jacket and skirt, however, was recognized at once despite her still slightly bruised features.

“My God!” Cynthia gasped. “It’s Samantha Norris!”

Pandemonium ensued as both girls began jabbering at once, Chucky nearly broke his glasses fumbling in his haste to get his camera up, and Jared grabbed Donna’s hand in both of his and pumped it vigorously in thanks, shouting that this would “make his

career.” Samantha found both of her own hands clasped by the girls who were busy telling her how they’d always been her fans. Flustered at the sudden attention, she looked to her companion for help. Realizing what she wanted, he spoke in his best authoritative cop voice. “Please allow me to introduce myself; my name is Frank Gore.

There was a moment of shocked silence as four pairs of youthful eyes widened with fear of this bogeyman from the TV who had just appeared before them. Just as Samantha had taken her hair back to its natural color, Frank had shaved his moustache and goatee for the occasion, so there could be no doubt of his identity. They almost imperceptibly began to shrink away from his presence.

He grinned reassuringly. “Ladies and gentlemen, please relax; I don’t bite.” A hint of mischievousness glinted in his eyes and he winked at Samantha. “Well, maybe I do, but at least I’ve had all my shots.”

Once the initial shock was over, the interview went remarkably smooth. Treated like adults, the young people quickly took on that role and, after allowing Samantha and Frank to tell their stories, asked mostly intelligent and often very pointed questions. They were by turns skeptical and sympathetic, and utterly spellbound as Samantha described her experience, backed up by a package of photos of both her and the other prisoners taken immediately after their rescue. The pictures revealed all of their bruises, welts, and electrical burns except for those on the most private parts. It was enough to make the young journalists gasp and, in Cynthia’s case, become so nauseated she had to sit down. Samantha went into the details for the first time, holding nothing back. Frank gently placed his hand over hers.

“Sammie, are you sure you want to do this?”

She caressed his cheek. “No, honey, I don’t want to do this, but I *have* to do it – I have to! The people need to know, and I need to get it out in the light. If I keep it hidden inside, in the dark, it’ll never heal. It’s time I lanced it and let it out, once and for all, so I can start to get better.”

Chucky managed to focus on their byplay despite Kerrie gouging him hard in the ribs to make sure that he was doing just that.

As Samantha painfully recited her ordeal, she nearly broke down more than once, but Frank's reassuring touch steadied her. By the time it was over, both girls were crying openly and Jared was wiping his eyes, muttering about having something in them. Chucky, unable to release the camera, did the best he could despite his increasingly blurring vision.

"B-but," Kerrie choked, "how on earth did you manage to hold out? I mean, where did you find the strength?"

"From two sources. First I rediscovered my Christian faith I had wandered away from too many years ago. I had become so wrapped up in my career that I had forgotten God; thankfully, He had not forgotten me. Secondly," she looked at Frank and squeezed his hand, "I knew that, if he was still alive, this man would come for me sooner or later. I knew it, and he proved me right. He came, he fought for me against impossible odds, he saved me from the people who hurt me, and he saw justice done." She turned from the camera to look into Frank's eyes. "And I love him so very much!" She buried her face in his shoulder and couldn't hold back the tears any longer. He slipped his arms around his wife and held her as the cameras rolled.

When the interview was finally over, Sam handed an envelope and a stack of disks and videotapes to the young reporters.

"Here is some more information – *exclusive* I might add – that we believe you can use. Besides the photographs proving the torture of our people we gave you earlier, there are video taped statements from each member of the Confederate Council, from one of the government's would-be victims, from some of our liberated POW's, and from one of theirs that we are holding. I only ask that you allow them to have their say."

There were handshakes all around and the girls hugged Samantha and then, much to his surprise, Frank.

"What was that for?" he asked, looking down at the teary-eyed teen-agers.

The auburn-haired girl sniffed and smiled. “That was for being in love, and for teaching us what it really means.”

“Here’s the deal,” Sam told them when they were back in the van, blindfolded once again and rolling through the streets of Columbia. “You will be contacted, at least one of you, so we can keep track of your progress. As soon as you’re ready, and it will need to be soon, we will have friends set up a public venue for your documentary to be premiered; you’ll be notified. You can handle the rest of your local distribution your own way. Just be sure it is simultaneously disseminated with its initial showing and not before, because I guarantee that the Feds will shut you down as soon as they get wind of it. You need to have all you can out there floating around when that happens, but beforehand no one, and I mean *no one*, can see it or even know you’re working on it. If they do, you’ve lost it all. Once you finish it, as long as possible before you release it and definitely before you distribute it, we’ll need a copy of the finished work. We’ll send somebody, probably a hired ‘gopher’ to pick it up. He’ll tell you to give him the tape for Frank, and you will do exactly that – give him a copy with no questions asked. He won’t know anything anyway, except that he’s being paid to make a pickup and delivery. Agreed?”

“What do you plan to do with it, if you don’t mind me asking?” Cynthia queried.

“We’ll make a large number of copies on our own equipment, then stash them at various places. Once we know the date and time of your premiere, and while you are in the process of showing it for the first time, we’ll be sending our copies out, along with the same additional information packs we gave you, through our own people. By the time you finish your presentation, your documentary will have been distributed quite literally world-wide, so do a good job.” He grinned, a touch of humor in his voice. “Other than that, no pressure.”

Quietly, the four young people exited the van several minutes later at the same place they had boarded it, and paused to watch it drive away down the dark street. As soon as it was out of sight, their

faces broke out in smiles more fitting to their ages, and Jared and Chucky high-fived.

“Yes!”

DAY 31

Chapter 45

Presiding over the gathering in Chucky's basement, Jared gestured at the tapes, disks and papers on the table before them. "So, let's brainstorm." Putting on his best editor's voice, he said, "okay, people; suggestions."

Kerrie spoke up. "First, we need to define and order what needs to be done.

"Number one: we need to create a video documentary, a website, and a printed version, and have all of them ready for release at the same time; simultaneous distribution, like they said."

Chucky brought his right palm to the fingertips of his left hand.

"Time out. First, we need security. There are a lot of people out there with good reason to want to see our data disappear. Without it, we've lost the story of a lifetime; I mean, who's going to believe us? I suggest we make four copies of everything, one for each person, updated on a daily basis. Then each of us can stash them some place that only they know about, so if something happens, we're still in the game."

"Good idea," Kerrie conceded. "Can you think of anything I missed on my list?"

Cynthia raised her finger. "Yes. We also need to do an audio version. My uncle listens to short wave radio all the time, and they talk about a lot of conspiracy stuff, cover-ups and things like that. If we can get some of them the audio, I think that they'll use it."

"Audio is quicker to load from the net than video," Chucky pointed out. "It's also the easiest. We can take the sound track from the edited video for a straight audio version, along with a gallery of dramatic stills, and add a little narration to make up for the loss of the visual imagery for use on the web. Once the other is done, that will be easy, so we could save that till last."

Jared smiled. "Great. Okay, lets try this.

“First the video version; as editor, I’d like to go with that as my job, at least in the first phase. Chucky, you’re the computer whiz; you add the effects to the final version to make it look professional. You should have the website complete in its basic form by the time the video editing is done.

“Cynthia, you’re the best designer here; you’ll need to work with Chucky on the website. Kerrie can do the written transcription as we edit, and Chucky can put it on the site. What do you think?”

Jared grew uncomfortable under their silent stares.

Cynthia and Kerrie looked at each other, then back at their editor. “Actually Jared,” Cynthia said sweetly, “we think it sucks.”

His eyes widened and he started to speak, but Kerrie cut him off. “This is *not* the Jared Robinson documentary; this is the journalism club documentary. We literally risked our lives to get this story, and if you think that you are going to get the glory while the rest of us do the grunt work, you’d better think again, because it’s not going to happen!”

“But...I’m the editor...”

“Yes, you’re the editor, and I’ve seen some of what you edit. You’re more wrapped up in making yourself look good than in making the story look good. The video is the most important part of this story. It’s the most important thing we’ve done in our lives, and it’s too important to all of us to let that happen to it. We are going to have a say in how it’s put together, and we’re all going to be part of the finished product.

Cynthia nodded in agreement. “We’re not in class now, where there is no god but the editor and Mr. Proctor is his prophet, backing him up. It’s just us four; nobody else knows and nobody else can know or we all lose. We’ve got careers to think about too, and we’re all going to be involved in every part of this. If you don’t like it, tough.”

Desperately he looked to his photographer for succor.

“Hey, Chucky, help me out here!”

“Okay,” he said, cleaning his glasses, then holding the lenses up toward the light for inspection. “I’ll help you, and the best way to do that is to tell you that I think they’re absolutely right.

Jared shook his head in disbelief. “Shit, man! I thought you were my friend!”

“I am, and so are Cynthia and Kerrie. We’re also your partners in this, not your employees, and we expect to be treated accordingly.”

The editor threw up his hands, conceding defeat. “Alright, already! I’m sorry.”

Kerrie smiled.

“Good. Now then, maybe we can get to work.”

DAY 40

Chapter 46

Reverend John Gibson knew he was letting himself in for a whole lot of trouble. That didn't bother him unduly, since trouble tended to have been the earthly lot of every servant of God since the beginning of time. The only thing that concerned him was serving God to the best of his ability, and that meant doing right, telling the truth, and letting the chips fall where they may. After tonight, the chips would be coming down like a hail storm, and he knew some of them were as likely to fall on the just as the unjust. So be it. He could live with that, or even die with it, if need be. *Thy will be done.*

He raised his hands to get the attention of the crowd gathered in the recreation hall of the Sword of the Word Independent Baptist Church. A little over three hundred people were gathered for a special presentation that promised to make sense out of the troubles and violence that had plagued Columbia recently. Gradually, the crowd quieted down, and he began to speak. "Everyone in this hall today is here because they want to know the truth. And why do you want to know the truth? Because the Bible tells us that the truth will make us free. Truth is like a form of light; it illuminates the dimmest corners, and darkness and all its terrors have to flee before it.

"Deep down, most of us are afraid of the truth. Why is that? Why are we afraid of the truth? Well, like that old proverb says, the truth hurts. Truth hurts because it's like a surgeon's scalpel, peeling back the layers of self-deceit and exposing the lies underneath, then cutting them out.

"Truth hurts, because truth is a two-edged sword; it cuts both ways. It cuts coming and going with an edge keener than the sharpest razor, sharp enough to divide soul from spirit."

He paused and scanned the crowd. Besides his and a smaller neighboring Fundamentalist congregation, and the family members the kids had dragooned into coming, he spotted several students and

a couple of teachers from the high school, along with a heavy sprinkling of curious strangers. All the people stretched the capacity of the small building to the point where several were left to stand along the back wall or even sit on the floor.

“We are here tonight to view the project of a group of young people from the Marion High School Journalism Club. Now the purpose of journalism is to report the truth; unfortunately, all too often our media forgets that concept. These four young people, I’m proud to say, have not.

“These young men and women have had the courage to seek the truth, even when it led them down paths that our paid professional journalists refuse to tread. They risked their lives to find the truth, and they are risking ostracism, physical violence, and perhaps even incarceration to bring it to you this evening.”

Ignoring the crowd’s uneasy stirring, he continued, “I am proud of these young reporters.” He gestured toward the front row where they sat, embarrassed by all the attention. “Cynthia Dover, Kerrie O’Brien, Jarred Robinson, and Charles Donahue, for what they have done, and what they have dared in their thirst for the truth. Once you see for yourself, I think you’ll be proud too.” He sat down and motioned to one of the ushers, who turned on the VCR and large screen TV.

Following the credits, the film began with each of the four in turn describing a part of their adventure in simply getting to the interview, drawing gasps and whispers from some of the crowd at the idea of these children finding themselves locked in a van with masked, armed men.

“We still didn’t know who we were going to be interviewing,” an enlarged Jared was saying on the screen, “but when they took us out of the van and introduced us, we were surprised to say the least.”

The scene cut to a table where a figure sat: a woman familiar to nearly everyone in Columbia and most of South Carolina.

“Hello. I am Samantha Norris, now Samantha Gore, formerly of Channel 13 News.”

The camera panned to the figure beside her. “And I am Franklin Gore, formerly of the Columbia PD.”

As the tape rolled on, the audience alternated between pandemonium and stunned silence. One fist fight broke out, when one of the Fundamentalist deacons took it upon himself to attempt to prevent the crowd from hearing what he referred to as “lying terrorist propaganda” by turning off the VCR, and the elderly Reverend Gibson gave him a sincere “I’m sorry to do this, Brother,” and knocked him down with a right cross from his old, bony fist.

The tape alternated between characters; Samantha and Frank told their stories, Edge stressed the Cause, the other Confederate Council members branded Jameson a traitor and verified to all that Jonathon Edge was now the commander in chief of the CAP forces by unanimous consent. Jenny May Summers gave her story of how her life had been saved from a pair of killers, and Federal POW Schneider gave them book, chapter and verse of what he knew of the Federal operation in Columbia, and of Peters’ deceased team of killers.

What hit the crowd hardest, however, was the description of the torture. Their testimony, Samantha’s heart-rending account in particular, along with the stills of the victims taken just after their rescue, set some of the crowd literally weeping and gnashing their teeth in fury.

The final scene clinched it all: Frank and Samantha together. “You see before you,” she said, “two people. Two people, American citizens, one of whom protected you and the other informed you of the truth; citizens who were hunted, persecuted, and tortured; citizens who had family and friends murdered in cold blood by what they thought was their own government. What was our crime? Only that we dared to tell the truth.”

It was Frank’s turn. “We are called terrorists because we have fought against the armed forces who have sought to kill us, while those same forces slaughtered civilians who dared demand their rights, and murdered helpless old ladies, like my grandmother, Sarah Gore, and my friend, Mary Wheeler, for no other reason than that they knew too much. Those forces,” he snarled, “those forces beat my wife, tied her to a table, and forced electrical probes into her private parts until they very nearly killed her!” His fist slammed the

table in a momentary loss of control, almost collapsing it under the impact. He was barely able to speak from the emotion. “I ask you – who are the terrorists?”

“Until then, like most of you, we had no cause; we fled to the Confederate Army Provisional simply in order to stay alive. It was only after we saw what the Federal Government and its shameless lackeys here in the local administration were capable of doing that we became true believers. Due to their un-Godly persecution, we became revolutionaries, not because we lack patriotism, but because we *are* patriots. No patriot will allow tyrants and despots to hold sway over their country, for any reason. This South of ours, this beautiful Dixie Land, has been trodden under the heel of the tyrants in Washington for a century and a half, and that heavy tread has beaten down the Southern man until it’s made us think that’s the way it should be.

“No more. Now, the tyrant’s greatest fear has come true; the South is finally rising again. Southerners have always led the drive for liberty, and we will lead it now. We are taking back our country, the Confederate States of America, because it is *ours*, and because having a country of our own is not just the only way for Christian liberty to survive, but it’s the only way for the Southern people to survive.

“God save the South!”

As the tape rolled at the Sword of the Word, there was a flurry of activity elsewhere. Copies of the video along with the information packs were mailed from several different cities in three states, destined for foreign news agencies throughout the world, many from countries at odds with U.S. policies. Still others were hand carried by a small team of volunteers in Washington, D.C. to embassies representing Asian, European, Middle Eastern, and Latin American nations. Audio, video and text files sped through cyberspace, and hardcopies were mailed through the post office. By the time the tape hit its end in that South Carolina Church recreation hall, it was already hitting the foreign news wires with the force of a runaway freight train.

Richard Jameson grumbled as he made his way toward the front door of his ranch-style just outside of Orlando. He stubbed his bare toe against a chair leg and swore.

Blinking at the clock on the wall, he saw it was 2:35 in the morning. *Who in the hell would come calling at this hour?*

He fingered the .38 Smith & Wesson Airweight he had dropped into the pocket of the robe he had thrown on over his pajamas. He wasn't overly worried, but you never could tell.

The doorbell rang again, insistently. "Just a minute!"

He flipped on the porch light and pressed his eye to the peephole only to see George Todd, the vice chairman of his own organization, looking back at him.

"Todd, what the hell's going on?" he growled as he jerked the door open.

"How are you, Dick? We need to talk."

The squat, rotund man extended his hand.

Reflexively Jameson took his own hand from his pocket to take it. As soon as they clasped, Todd's grip abruptly tightened and he stepped back and jerked, pulling the startled and off-balance agent out the door. Before he could protest, he sensed a second figure at the side of the doorway, and a fourteen-ounce shot-filled blackjack crashed into his head.

Chapter 47

“What’s it look like?”

Samantha smiled without looking up at Edge’s voice; he had made it back to Columbia just in time for the video’s release, after traveling around organizing other resistance groups in several states and bringing them on board. Now he was holed up with the others in the old bomb shelter that they had taken to referring to as ‘Fort Dayton’. The CAP communications officer and Donna each sat at a separate computer. Frank manned a bank of TV screens all turned to different channels, and Tommy scanned radio frequencies while Sam hovered over everyone and Edge paced back and forth in what little space was left. Mike, meanwhile, was at the other end of the tunnel in the basement, trying his best to keep everything electronically tied together and undetected.

“It looks like I finally got my story. It’s all over the world; Cuba, China, and the Islamic news services are all running it in its entirety, and it’s on their websites as both text and video on demand. Clips are playing all over the EU. Anti-U.S. rallies have already broken out in France, Germany and Russia; they’re actually waving Battle Flags in Paris and Berlin.”

“The domestic media has it,” Donna said. “I’m beginning to see it cropping up here and there with a few selected lines of text with stills. No doubt they’ll get orders to drop it within a few minutes of it going up, but the alternative websites will keep – hello, what’s this?”

“What have you got?”

“Yes!” she exclaimed. “Here it is; I just heard from a friend of mine, and the full video and sound files have begun to go out as a zipped file on at least two large Southern mailing lists that serve *thousands*, and they say there’s a short wave station out of Belize broadcasting the complete audio at the United States. Tommy, would you check the radio? They won’t be able to ignore it for too long.”

It was Frank’s turn. “The big boys have picked it up. The JAX headline news got it from some little station in San Francisco, of all places. They’re not showing anything but a couple of stills and short

audio clips yet until they get Homeland Security approval, so I doubt that they will, but they've acknowledged that it exists. It'll be hard for them to blow it off as a rumor now."

Tommy pulled off a set of headphones. "It's all over the short wave; not only foreign stations either. I've run a quick check on the frequencies that carry the conspiracy and patriot broadcasts, and they are going totally freaking nuts."

Edge straightened up with his hands clasped tightly behind his back and a thoroughly satisfied look on his face. Frank and Tommy's past indiscretions were forgotten – for the moment. "We've done it people; we have done it!"

"Hey 'General'," Mike called out on the intercom, "there's an encrypted message for you here. It's some guy calling himself Neil – says he knows you and Sam, and he wants to set up a face-to-face meeting. He also says something about being able to field a unit of thirty 'effectives' in exchange for a seat on the Council."

Sam and Edge looked at each other.

"Neil Larson," Sam told him. "Evidently we proved ourselves to his satisfaction. You've got the first of your shock troops now. I hate to say I told you so, but..."

Mike's voice interrupted him. "Here's another message; there's a JPEG with it. Let's see...Son of a *bitch*! I'm sending it back there – check your mail. Do any of you know this guy?"

All of them turned at his excited tone and gathered around as the image opened up.

"Oh, yes indeed; I know him!" Edge told them. "It doesn't seem that we'll have to worry about Mr. Jameson anymore."

The CAP personnel stood looking at the computer screen with cold expressions on their faces. An e-mail signed by the vice-chairman of Jameson's group had been forwarded to one of their overseas cyberspace mail drops from what looked to be a phony address. It contained a pledge to support the Confederate Council and the CAP forces, and claimed to be ready to begin operations on command.

It also contained a picture, the JPEG file that held their attention, of the pajama-clad body of Richard Jameson, hands tightly bound

behind him, dangling by a rope around his unnaturally stretched neck from the limb of a big live oak. A cardboard sign had been pinned to his chest, with a single word scrawled on it in black marker: *'TRAITOR!'*

None of them were particularly sympathetic; in fact they all took a certain grim satisfaction in justice being well served. Frank couldn't help but notice, though, that Edge was the only one actually smiling.

DON'T MISS

**THE THIRD REVOLUTION II:
THE LONG KNIVES**

About This Series

‘The Third Revolution’ is part one of a planned series of four books chronicling the progress of the war and its aftermath. If you like this book, watch for the sequels to come out periodically: ‘The Long Knives’, ‘Total War’, and ‘The Warlord’.

Author’s Notes

Writing a book is a strange experience that can sometimes leave you wondering if you wrote the book, or if the book wrote you. While I’m playing the literary puppet master and pulling the strings to make the characters dance to my tune, sometimes it seems I feel them pulling back, making my fingers move to a rhythm of their choice rather than mine. They’ve taken on a life of their own.

Many people, particularly those active in the Southern Nationalist Movement, will believe that they recognize certain individuals and organizations – ‘the good, the bad, and the ugly’ – portrayed within these pages. Rest assured, you do not; at least, not directly. No character or group depicted in ‘The Third Revolution’ is based on any particular individual or group in any way, shape, or form. They are types, not portraits, and any resemblance to any real individual, living or dead, or any organization of any type is purely coincidental. The locale of the City of Columbia and the great State of South Carolina was chosen simply as the natural location for such events as is described herein. The offices, businesses, churches, schools, and TV stations were created out of whole cloth, not based on any that may exist there or elsewhere. Further, although I’ve attempted to make the weapons, interrogation tactics, and combat techniques within these pages authentic, this is not an instructional manual nor should it be used as such, and many of the things done in “The Third Revolution” would be extremely dangerous, not to

mention highly illegal. In other words, don't try this at home! This is strictly a work of fiction.

Still, regardless of the above, this book will step on some toes; any realistic work will.

Some will look askance at the profanity. I kept it toned down as much as possible, but left it where it was needed. I had a choice; I could set 'The Third Revolution' in a G rated fantasy world, or I could go for realism and depict how people really express themselves, particularly when under stress. This is not intended to be a children's book, and I didn't write it like one.

There will be those in the Southern Nationalist Movement who will be less than pleased because of my depiction of the movement as a disorganized mess torn by over-sized egos, betrayals, and backbiting. To them, I can only say that, as a long-time part of it, I have attempted to depict a fictional semblance of the movement accurately as it is in reality, warts and all, rather than as we like to pretend it is. If you don't like what you see in the fictional mirror I hold before you, then either go write your own book or, preferably, work to change the reality for the better.

No doubt the Federal Government, the minority special interest groups, the self-appointed watchdogs, the "New South" advocates, and the "multicultural Confederates" and "rainbow Rebels" will be highly upset. Good – that means I did something right. I have endeavored to depict the outbreak of a 'Third Revolution' and the progress and conduct of the early days of the conflict from a point of realism, backed up by both historical and modern events, and based on nationalistic struggles around the world. I've studied conflicts that ranged from our own Revolutions in 1776 and 1861, to the battles for self-determination of the Irish, Scots, Boers, Palestinians, and many other nationalists of many races: anyone who has ever declared that his people had an identity and a right to exist as a sovereign state, and then put his own life – and more importantly, the lives of his enemies – on the line to make it happen.

That being said, this work is not primarily about a future 'Third Revolution'; instead, it is about people: real people in a real world; the idealists, the fanatics, the sadists, the betrayers, the egotists, the

ambitious, and the ordinary people swept up and borne away by events much larger than anything that they could have possibly imagined. It's a world where both of Murphy's Laws (*anything that can possibly go wrong will, and, when it does, it will be at the worst possible time*) have as much force as the laws covering motion and gravity...sometimes even more.

In short, it's a world much like our own.

God save the South!

Gregory Kay

About the Author

Gregory Kay is a Southern Nationalist activist who has lived, worked, and traveled extensively in most parts of the South. Born in 1958, he is a husband and father, and currently resides in West Virginia.