

THE THIRD BOMB

By Glenn Coleman

From the National News Wire
1900 GMT August 7, 1945
Dateline: Washington DC

The White House announced today that a new type of bomb was dropped over the Japanese city of Hiroshima yesterday by a single bomber of the US Army Air Forces. Aircraft type and home base were not disclosed. This bombing followed intense fire bombing over the past six months intended to destroy the Japanese will and ability to defend against a land invasion by Allied forces. Such an invasion would be expected to create Allied casualties numbering in the hundreds of thousands. A surrender ultimatum to the Japanese Showa government, entitled The Potsdam Declaration, has been essentially ignored.

This bomb, code name Little Boy, was of the atomic or nuclear variety, and recent rumors of such a weapon suggest that this is the most powerful single weapon detonated in the history of mankind. Follow-on bomb damage assessment [BDA] suggests that about 70% of Hiroshima's buildings were destroyed. No estimate was provided regarding casualties.

A radio transmission intercepted from Radio Tokyo stated that "practically all living things, human and animal, were seared to death." President Truman announced, "If they do not now accept our terms [of surrender], they may expect a rain of ruin from the air the likes of which has never been seen on this earth."

The White House offered no further comment.

From the National News Wire
1830 GMT August 10, 1945
Dateline: Washington DC

The White House announced today that a second atomic bomb [code name Fat Man] was dropped over the Japanese city of Nagasaki yesterday. Nagasaki is one of Japan's largest seaports. Bomb damage assessment [BDA] showed total building destruction out to one mile from the center of the explosion. The first atomic bomb was detonated over the city of Hiroshima three days ago.

Both bombs were delivered by Boeing B-29s from the island of Tinian, some 1600 miles to the southeast.

President Truman would not comment on future atomic bomb attacks, targeted cities or the number of such weapons available.

Military Intelligence had reported that Germany and its Axis Allies had been developing such a weapon, but with the defeat of Germany and Adolph Hitler's suicide in May of this year, the United States remains as the sole military force with atomic weapons.

From the National News Wire
1930 GMT August 15, 1945
Dateline: Washington DC

The White House announced today that six days after the atomic bombing of Nagasaki, Japan has announced its surrender. The war is over.

General of the Army Douglas MacArthur will represent the United States and the Allied forces in accepting the surrender documents from the Japanese government at a time and place yet to be determined. General MacArthur had already been designated to command the forthcoming invasion of the Japanese homeland.

From the National News Wire
1600 GMT September 2, 1945
Dateline: Washington DC

The White House announced today that General of the Army Douglas MacArthur has accepted the formal Instrument of Surrender from the Japanese government. It was signed by representatives of the Japanese government as well as representatives of nine Allied countries. The formal 23-minute ceremony took place at noon, Japan standard time, aboard the battleship USS Missouri anchored in Tokyo Bay.

President Truman has appointed General MacArthur as Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers to supervise the occupation and rebuilding of Japan. General MacArthur has been given direct and total control over the main islands of Japan as well as the immediately surrounding islands. Outlying islands and other Japanese possessions will be divided among the United States, the Soviet Union and the Republic of China.

1

some four decades later...

Every combat pilot, regardless of the war, the decade, the flag, lives with the albatross of instant and glorious death hanging about his neck. It is not the billet he seeks, but one he faces daily, moment by moment...even in his quietest moment. The grim reaper is his omnipresent wingman...always in waiting with his fickle finger counting down the moments as the sands of the hourglass of life slip away.

Pete Benedetto was down to his last few grains of sand. One in his line of work seldom knows when that last grains falls, yet an experienced combatant like Pete instinctively knows when the opportunities for death approach. This was not his first encounter, but it would be his last.

The North Korean AAA guns had sliced up his fighter jet severely on his last strafing pass, shattering his canopy and leaving his left aileron dangling from its remaining hinge. Fuel streamed from the holes left by the Commie cannons, and red warning lights illuminated all about his shattered cockpit. Pete was in trouble and he knew it. A MiG had entered the fray and was maneuvering into a trailing firing position to finish him off. Pete had commanded his robotic wingman to attack the MiG...and the parade of three aircraft zoomed back and forth down among the jungle mountains, all trying to survive the day. The robot was firing on the MiG; the MiG was firing on Pete. The best Pete could do was to keep his bleeding aircraft airborne long enough to allow the robotic wingman time to finish off the MiG...but time was running out. He considered ejecting from his ride, but no fighter pilot is going to leave his bird while it could still fly. He always would bet on the Come.

Pete was fighting for his life now, down at tree top level to limit the MiG's windows of opportunity for a kill, banking left and right as best as his bent bird could handle down among the tree tops and mountain ridges. The tracers were so close, he could smell them, and the ones that impacted his airplane were taking their toll. The noise from the shattered canopy, the violent shaking of the airframe from the damage...then everything turned blood red and then bright white...and then nothing!

"Bail out, Pete. Dammit, bail out!" This was the same dream, night after night, that had haunted Dave for so long and plagued him with guilt and anger. Why had he not been there to help his friend? Why did it have to be Pete? Why did you leave me? These were the questions that were driving Dave crazy and woke him in the middle of the night screaming, "Bail out, Pete. Dammit, bail out!"

It had been almost three years since Dave Edwards had lost his best friend, Pete Benedetto, to that North Korean MiG. He had finished up his tour there in Korea flying fighters for the Air Force, having flown 249 missions and credited with destroying a like number of trucks supplying the enemy forces in the south. He had even been credited with shooting down a MiG. Well, actually his robotic wingman got the MiG, but the question was still unanswered as to who got to paint the red star on their plane. The introduction of robots flying operational combat missions had introduced a number of interesting issues into the first century of aerial combat. Most evidence suggested that Pete's robot had actually hit and killed Pete when it attacked the MiG on Pete's tail...another victim of "friendly fire".

Life without Pete was really no life at all for Dave. They had become closer than brothers in their four years at the Air Force Academy, pilot training and then their tour flying this new concept of fighter with a robotic wingman. Together they had conquered the many fears and challenges presented to these two young Spartans. Pete and Dave complemented each other's life and personality. Dave was stronger and more audacious than Pete, dragging him from one adventure into another. Where Dave was usually flying by the seat of his pants and quite spontaneous, Pete stayed focused on the goal and the careful path to get them there. Together, no goal was left unreached, no challenge unanswered, no party unattended.

Not surprising, the loss of Pete had taken the polish off the apple of Dave's life. Part of him had died. He found that with each day, he cared less and less about life...less and less about flying. The motivation was dying. Dave felt as if he were wandering around in the swamp...not really caring if he found the high ground ever again.

Dave had never been truly a loner...but for the first time in his young life, he was truly lonesome. Growing up in the Montana mountains and the fishing and trapping that mountain men pursue means spending hours and even days by oneself...and Dave had always enjoyed his time alone and his own company. Tough and self-reliant, yes; hermit or recluse, no. Yet, he had allowed Pete's friendship to penetrate and soften his solitaire. Now he was paying the price for that friendship. And Dave recognized that there was some innate anger toward Pete. He knew Pete didn't choose this billet, but nevertheless, there was part of Dave that he couldn't explain that residual anger. Pete had made choices that had led to his death and stripped Dave of his friend, his mentor, his crutch and even part of his own soul. They had grown that close...not unlike a marriage where one partner, through personal choices, brings an end to the relationship.

Yet, Dave couldn't identify the true target for his anger. It didn't make sense just to be angry without being angry at someone. Perhaps he was angry at fate, or

God, or himself. Yet Dave knew himself well enough to understand that it was a burden, a distraction, a cancer that had to be dealt with. The anger had dulled his coping skills. It had taken the energy and the sunshine out of his life...and in his line of work, distractions can be deadly.

Returning from Korea, Dave had been assigned to what should have been one of the choicest assignments for a young stud combat fighter pilot. He had been asked to return to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson, Arizona to his old training squadron as a combat tactics flight instructor to those just coming out of Flight School and into his fighter world. He was an Instructor Pilot in his old robot squadron, The Bots. And only the best of the proven were thus selected for these IP slots.

Flying is always an interesting adventure and continually provides unique opportunities and tribulations where sometimes you eat the bear and sometimes it eats you. There are the mechanics of flying...the machine following strict rules of aerodynamic principle, $F=ma$, lift vs. drag, and the omnipotent and relentless gravity. There are the rules of flying...the standard military way of doing things, the etched tablets of stone that hang about the necks of every military aviator for the past century. And there is the essence of flight...the proverbial seat-of-the-pants flying that separates the Sky Kings from the bar stool cowboys...the falcon from the dodo. No amount of study and practice can grant the gift of instinctive flying. It is a blessing from the cloudy canyons...or perhaps a curse. Nevertheless, Dave was well on his way to the head of the long blue line. He was the personification of the essence of flight...the son of Icarus. When Dave went to fly, he didn't get in an airplane; he strapped it on. Aerodynamic principle bowed before him; the archangels carried his parachute.

Yet lately, every day seemed like the one previous. He would get up and put on his flight suit...no decision there as each one looked just like every other...with all the right patches sewn in the prescribed location. Maybe a cold slice of pizza and a cup of yesterday's coffee for breakfast. Maybe not. He would climb on his motorcycle and head for the flight line.

Distraction was not healthy for a jet pilot. The world comes at you at supersonic speeds with no margin for error. One prolonged blink or a stray thought or a fuzzy focus can lead to a mid-air collision, a busted landing...or worse. And the skills Dave was responsible for passing on to his students were based on an acquired wisdom and combat experience...and one doesn't gather that from a book. It was critical that Dave not omit one iota of his insight to his fledglings.

Dave knew there was a problem. He felt it in his soul. Something was missing. Pete had always been there for him. Dave didn't always turn to Pete for advice or his wisdom, but just to know it was always there and spot on gave Dave considerable comfort and confidence. Now that Pete was gone, he felt the loneliness constantly. Nothing specific...just a hole in his young life. And Dave

was wise enough to know the dangers such a distraction created. He needed some relief to his pain, and he needed it now. Perhaps it was a change in scenery. Maybe some R&R. Maybe a road trip. Perhaps Dave needed a good woman...or maybe just a woman. He was proverbial with most of the Friday night camp followers that hung out at The Auger Inn, the Officers' Club basement bar where most of the flight crews partied. He had suffered through enough one-night stands to fill a calendar. In the bedroom shadows, they were all named Dawn...but he had had his chance with her and totally blew it. Why didn't he call her? Why didn't he invite her into his life. He knew she wanted to be there. But he missed that opportunity, and she married Stebinski. Why? Why? Why? He knew that she was totally out of bounds and off limits now. He seldom thought of her now...only when he was awake or in his dreams.

There were always things to do in the squadron hangar down on the Flight Line, and Dave found himself staying longer and longer each day. There was just no good reason to go back to his little grey apartment or to the O Club bar. He was already drinking too much by his own admission and was bypassing the traditional Shiner beer for Jim Beam Rye and Coke. He knew the problem was getting serious when His Squadron Commander stopped him in the hall one evening and asked him why he was still at work.

Dave needed a break...and he would soon discover his opportunity awaiting in the mailbox at his apartment.

2

The invitation looked quite formal...not at all like the military would send. But it was signed by the Superintendent of the Air Force Academy, a three-star general, and invited Dave, along with several hundred of his Academy classmates, to return for this special event.

Each graduating class at the Air Force Academy holds its reunion every five years back in Colorado Springs. It usually involves a football game with serious tailgating, a memorial service for those class mates now gone but not forgotten, a formal dinner, and lots of golf, libation and fellowship. This four-day fandango brings the flock back to the Academy, and this would be Dave's first. It would be a break in the action and an opportunity to see some old friends and to suffer through the bragging and competition among those who gained self-aggrandizement through such self-centered foolishness. The first liar never stood much of a chance.

As heat tempers metal, the not-so-subtle blend of competition, crap, harassment, survival and success...also known as the system...creates a bond among the participants, much like combat, that is both nonsensical and often invisible to the outsider. Yet to the survivor, it can be a gravitational force, forged on love and respect, stronger than the mountains, often invisible and indescribable, never-ending. There is no one single word that adequately describes or explains that fellowship among warriors of the same vein.

At any four-year military academy, simple survival within such a system depends on one's ability to compete and to win. Academies are not created for followers...so seldom do they survive. Everything is graded and analyzed...from the classroom to the athletic field, from decision-making to the simple ability to cope, co-operate and co-exist. Many drop out of the line in the process, and many of those are among the finest the American society has produced, continuing on to stardom on yet another stage. Academy life is not for everyone, but for Dave, it took what the mountains had initiated and honed it into a finely tuned machine.

Yet, the dark side of Dave's returning to celebrate with his classmates was that a number of them would want to know about Pete's fate...a place where Dave had rather not return. Most of coping with the loss of a friend is not forgetting, but rather folding those past memories into the tapestry of life. They are always there, but hidden and diluted by memories less painful. And once they resurface, it oft takes time to force them once again back into the past. However, Dave respected that these were Pete's friends as well. They, too, would miss him terribly and deserved an answer.

Dave had plenty of leave accumulated; he seldom left the base any more. He submitted the form up through channels requesting two weeks of leave...but

when it returned, attached was a note from his Squadron Commander approving 30 days and telling Dave to “go get lost for a while”. There was no question in anyone’s mind that he needed and deserved it, yet what appeared to Dave’s cohorts as a strong work ethic was actually an expression of his depression and burn out.

But Dave had another motivation for returning to "The Zoo". All the while he had been in Korea and later in Arizona, Dave had worked on his Master’s Degree in History. Dave was no academian, but he knew an advanced degree was necessary for his promotion to Major. Over 80% of Air Force officers held at least a Master’s, and to be competitive, it was a must. Dave didn’t really care about any particular academic subject, but enjoyed reading. He respected history and his paltry place within it. This seemed to be the most logical route since most of his academic work could be accomplished outside the classroom via reading and extension courses. There was really no demand for History majors in this Air Force...or anywhere else, but he found it interesting enough to keep him engaged...and it would fill the square for the promotion board.

Most of the classroom work was finished, but Dave still had his thesis to complete. Dave had acquired an interest in Japan and Korea in his time spent there during the war. He had visited such historical places as Kyoto and the Tokyo Imperial Palace while on assignment there...even Hiroshima. The Japanese build-up to World War II and the post-war Japanese growth had especially interested him, so Dave and his professor had agreed on his thesis topic of MacArthur’s role in the rebuilding of Japan. President Truman appointed General MacArthur as Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers immediately following the Japanese surrender in 1945, and as such, MacArthur held basically dictatorial powers in the venue. He ruled with an iron hand, but he brought the nation out of defeat and placed them on the road to their legendary success. Nothing of any consequence was initiated or engaged on this journey without the personal approval of General MacArthur.

With the passing of enough time, the most confidential of government classified materials is offered for public consumption...and that’s the way it should be in a democracy. Otherwise, time and experience has shown that the ruling powers often exercise their advantage to re-write history as they wish. Recent government releases relating to the end of the war with Japan and to the MacArthur regime were now archived in the Air Force Academy Library, and Dave thought they may be of some value for his thesis. He would spend a few days there in the sixth floor archives and perhaps find some new info that would interest and impress his professor.

The reunion was still several months off, but that was long enough for Dave to get back on his work-out regiment so he would look extra good when he saw his classmates. Dave didn’t have a vain bone in his hard body, but he would always be competitive.

Dave discovered a new vigor in his life. He was breaking through the blahs. He was once again setting goals. He looked forward to this trip and started counting down the days just as he had done for his AFA graduation. He was going to enjoy this trip, and he had set aside a few extra days prior to his reunion to do his research in the Academy library...and maybe even return to Stanley Reservoir for a little fishing and reminiscing. He had an entire thirty days off; time was not of the essence. Little did Dave know that the genie was about to escape the bottle.

3

It didn't take much "stuff" to fill up Dave's 'Vette...never did. But then Dave didn't own much. The majority of his waking hours were spent in a flight suit or jeans. He even had to purchase a suit for the reunion festivities. "Well, I needed something to be buried in, anyhow." mused Dave to himself. "Like there will be anything left."

He turned his 'Vette eastbound out of Tucson on the Interstate toward El Paso to pick up I-25. At Las Cruces, he took a bit of a detour over to Ruidoso to visit his old high school basketball coach and to pay his respects to the widow of one of his Academy classmates. He had never actually met her, but Dave had seen her picture in his friend's room when they were stationed together back in Korea. Dave simply found something intriguing...and inviting...in her smile. It just seemed to be the right thing to do. It had been quite some time since Dave last held such feelings, and it excited him to know that part of the old Dave might be experiencing resurrection.

Dave found his old coach at home, and they had an interesting afternoon sitting out on the deck in the warm autumn Lincoln County sun and talking about the 'old' days...some nine or ten years earlier. And as usual in these types of conversations, the subject finally got around to the juicy behind-the-scenes stuff, who were shacking up together...the dirt. Dave and his coach had always been close...both in the gym and in the mountains.

Dave enjoyed being treated as an equal, an adult, by his mentor but he still always addressed him as Coach...or sir. He had always been a good coach, one who really tried to teach his students the game of basketball. Too many coaches simply play out their egos, inflicting their own shortcomings and failures on their students. Coach had always allowed Dave to find his own game, fine-tuning where necessary, suggesting changes, keeping him focused on continual improvement, not perfection. Dave had been blessed in having a flight instructor cut from the same cloth. His words were etched in Dave's mind..."I'm here to keep you from bending the airplane or hitting the ground too hard. Otherwise, this airplane is yours to fly." Coach was the same kind of man.

"Whatever brought you to New Mexico, Coach? I figured you would never leave those Montana mountains. I know that a part of me is always back there."

"Same for me, Dave. This is my home. I was raised here and something supernatural seemed to draw me back. I can't explain it any better than that."

"I think I know what you mean, Coach. Regardless of wherever the Air Force sends me, Montana is still home. It's a strong draw. I hope to go back someday...and maybe raise a family."

Coach chuckled at that last comment...and wondered why. Yes, Dave had grown into quite a man. He was proud of his investment in Dave...and for a good coach, that is what it's all about.

"Why are you smiling, Coach? Something I said?"

"I look back at my life and all of the opportunities I have been blessed with to help young men and women grow...and then one like you returns. It makes it all worth it."

Dave broke the lingering silence. "Coach, why did you ever quit coaching? You seemed to enjoy that so much. I know I was just a snotty nosed kid, but it seemed to me that you were really good at it."

"Well, Dave, all I ever wanted to do with my life was to coach. I was so happy just to be working with you guys, helping you grow up to be men, and teaching you the right from the wrong. Basketball was just a tool, just an instrument to use to help me help you. The lessons you learned on the court went well beyond the sport. But the demands of life go on...the bills, the marriage, growing older. I had the chance...the choice...to make more money. It just seemed like the right thing to do...leaving coaching and moving into school admin. Now I am not so sure. I haven't made too many mistakes in my life...but that was probably one of them. One should follow his heart..."

"Well, it just doesn't seem fair."

"Dave, life isn't always fair...to everybody...nor can it be or should it be. As we go through our process of making those daily decisions, it often comes down to asking ourselves what's fair? The danger in that question is what's fair to whom. Fairness, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Being fair to everyone impacted by our decisions is quite often impossible. Most of us want to be fair and to be considered a fair person by others. It seems to be a trait desired by each of us in the American culture...often to our detriment because being fair doesn't seem to be so important in some other cultures. So when we make that decision, we must widen our scope and consider the points of view of everyone impacted. Is it fair to all? Now that's a tougher question and can present some real ethical challenges."

"And it was my decision. I get all the blame...or the credit. It seemed like a good idea at the time. It's just like the man walking across the desert who jumped into the bed of cactus. It seemed like a good idea at the time." Coach chuckled. He was old enough to understand the philosophies that had gotten him thus far through his life...and was always too willing to share them.

"But it was my decision," he repeated. "We cannot always control what happens to us...what comes our way. Perhaps the choices we make might contribute to

those events, but too often it just happens! BUT we can always control how we react. We cannot logically defend the position of taking an action simply because of what someone else did. We take the action because we choose to respond in such a manner... and two wrongs seldom make a right. Situations don't make decisions; people do!"

"When the dust has all settled, whatever the issue, focus on the positives that have come from the situation. Make the right choice the first time. You may not get another opportunity. And that's a lesson I have learned the hard way."

Dave filed Coach's lesson away in his heart...once again.

Coach knew the widow, who had lived not far away in Alto, but had remarried last spring and moved away to Santa Fe. It was a disappointed Dave who bid his farewell to his old friend and pointed his 'Vette north toward Colorado Springs...and wondered why the feelings...why the disappointment. New juices were flowing in Dave's veins...and he acknowledged the feelings.

The sun was low in the western sky as Dave passed through Santa Fe, and again he thought of his friend's widow. He had hoped for more, but that door had closed. He muttered a brief prayer for her safety and warmth. The car and the driver were running well and together, with a fresh tank of gas, they decided to continue on into the Springs. He had reservations for billets on the Academy that night...regardless of their ETA.

Dave had forgotten how beautiful Colorado Springs was...and even more so at night. The full moon lighted the early snow atop Pikes Peak, and the clean cool air allowed about a billion stars to cast their light on the high country that night. It had been a long time since Dave had his boots on Colorado soil...and again he wondered why. His spirit had always been wandering, and now again, as it had been when he had first come to the Academy, the Front Range seemed more like home. Something uneasy deep in his soul had come to rest. The words from a Montana ranch hand echoed back from Dave's memory. Around a campfire one night in his youth, this friend told Dave that once he left the Bitterroots, he could never return home. His meaning was that one can never return to the way and place it once was, for you change and the place changes. Things would never be the same. As Dave entered the Academy's South Gate, he was looking right up into Stanley Canyon...right at the place where he had left Pete's ashes. Maybe that's why he felt as if he'd come home...as much as one could come home.

Dave loved road trips and loved driving...but this had been a very long day. He had picked up a six-pack and a bag of pretzels at his last gas stop in Pueblo and was ready for his fighter pilot's dinner as soon as he got horizontal in his room on the Academy. It was good to be back, and Dave went to sleep thinking of times

past, good friends, good fellowship...days before pain, days before dying and killing...days before scar tissue.

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The actual Air Force Academy site, where the Cadets lived, played, attended class and paraded about for the general public, covered only a small portion of the total 18,000 acres that stretched the ten miles between the North and South Gates off of I-25. The Academy grounds lay in the afternoon shadows of the Front Range of the Rockies just north of Colorado Springs, extending from the foot hills east down to the river and railroad, then on to the flats and the Interstate. Dave's objective, the Academy Library, was housed in the north end of Fairchild Hall, the enormous six-story Cadet academic building.

Yes, it felt good to be back at the Academy. There's something magic about this small plot of ground...the mountains, the aluminum and glass, the marble and the static aircraft that adorned the Cadet Area. Everything was squared off, prim and proper...nothing out of place...except the Cadet Chapel. While everything else was an aluminum and glass box, the massive seventeen shining spires of the chapel mimicked the mountains while pointing the way to the heavens and God himself. Cadets and wars and politicians come and go, but the Cadet Area stands pat against the ever-changing face of time...serving as that touchstone for the long blue line of Cadets. Heroes enter and exit these doors, sleep on these bunks and learn the trade of combat. Perhaps it was the four years of challenge that took most Cadets from being a snotty-nosed kid to a Spartan ready to serve and protect the American way of life. Perhaps it was the friendships and the camaraderie. One cannot describe it thoroughly, but none deny its existence or its relevance.

And there is nothing to compare to the Colorado autumn. The burn of the high-altitude air brought back many memories...as did the smell of the Cadet Area. Dave never could figure out the source of that odor, but it, too, reminded him of better days...days when Pete was part of his life. Yes, there is something magic here...even spiritual.

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Dave parked his old 'Vette across from the Mall of Heroes between the Library and the Cadet Dorm...and imagined Pete's face on one of the bronze statues there. Pete had certainly been one of his heroes...even before he came to rescue him from that Korean POW camp. Dave figured he would never finish the grieving over Pete and actually honored it and found strength and a bit of closure in the memories.

How young these Cadets of today appeared to Dave. Even the Firsties, the seniors, seemed like juveniles, even though they were only five or six years younger than Dave...but, oh, what a five or six years. Several of the Doolies ceased their double-time to render a salute to Dave's silver bars and a hearty "Good morning, sir!" Dave returned their salutes and proceeded to the elevator up to the library's main desk on the fourth floor.

Dave had always loved this library as a Cadet...a place of mystery and knowledge, a place of needed seclusion buried within the high energy of Academy life. It would take him to other places and other days. It provided distraction from the Academy stress and introduced him to many new friends, thoughts and philosophies. It aided a boy from the Bitterroots in becoming a man of the world. He recognized a few familiar faces behind the counter...and one even recognized him.

"Good morning, Captain. Welcome back. What's it been now? Four or five years?" She was a pleasant young woman...about Dave's age. And her face...it was the kind of face that draws a man's attention. Nothing specific, but a certain turn, an interesting twist, a collection of angles and curves that demands your notice and sends a clear message that this is an interesting person. She placed the stack of books she was holding on the desk and extended her hand to Dave. He took it politely and gave it a light squeeze. She held the handshake a bit longer than Dave was expecting. The muffed come-on left her blushing just a bit, both searching for the return to appropriate conversation. Again Dave could feel the juices beginning to churn...and smiled inside.

"You have a good memory. Or did I just make such a lasting impression on you?" Dave was always ready to play the game...and always tried to answer a question with a question...a conversational tactic he had learned from his old antagonist, Stebi.

But this honey had been working around horny Cadets long enough to know the game even better than Dave. "I'm sorry. What was your name again?" She was good.

"David...David Edwards. But my friends call me Dave."

“Then why don’t I just call you Captain?” she countered sweetly, once again sending Dave down in flames. “What can I do for you today, Captain?”

“Hmmm. If you’re going to call me Captain, then...what are you going to call our children?”

Without even a hesitation, she responded, “The first I’ll call Dreadful Accident and the second I’ll call Brandy Alexander.”

Dave just smiled and shook his head. He was not going to win this battle of charm and cunning. He knew he’d been routed. “Dave. Just Dave.”

She smiled at Dave with her deep dimples. “Nancy, just Nancy.”

“You got a last name?” Dave persisted.

“Nancy. Just Nancy,” pointing to the nametag on her blue Marian-the-Librarian cardigan sweater. “Now, what can I do for you, Dave?”

“Would lunch be out of the question?”

Nancy looked into Dave's blue eyes just for a moment, picked up her books without comment, and turned to leave. “Archives,” shouted Dave.

“Sixth floor. Our elder customers seem to prefer the elevator,” pointing to her left as she disappeared into the stacks. She stuck her head back around the corner for one last salvo. “By the way, Captain. I read the book about your friend’s rescue. You must be very brave...or very stupid.”

“Yeah, I often wonder...” But Dave found himself talking to himself as Nancy had already turned to return to her work. Dave heard himself mutter, “Wow,” as he watched her slim figure withdraw. “I should have spent more time over here when I was a Cadet.”

Maybe it was the altitude. Maybe it was the excitement of being back at a place that had meant so much to him and helped him grow to be a man. Perhaps it was this encounter with such an awesome and alluring young woman. Nevertheless, feelings of enchantment and invigoration surged within his veins. For the first time in many years, Dave truly smiled. He acknowledged that he had returned home to many important things in his young life.

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The Archives was a large, closed, dimly lit room kept at a constant temperature and humidity to protect the valuable documents as well as possible. A short search of the card files led Dave to the section he needed. One problem with

archives is that they are what they are...too often a collection of bits and pieces, papers and notes, news clippings and letters, pictures and books and just plain stuff. Lots of stuff...often with little or no documentation or organization. Though the air was dried and filtered for preservation, there was the penetrating odor of dust and mildew. History and chaos were continually engaged in battle. Cataloguing was an endless process here. Dave was searching the time frame of 1945 through 1950. It soon became obvious to him that he was perhaps the first to open some of these documents and treasures.

Dave's undertaking appeared to be a much larger project than he had anticipated. There were boxes and file cabinets and stacks and stacks of raw information waiting to be catalogued. Dave did not know where to start. He nervously opened one or two file cabinet drawers and pulled out random files covering everything from invoices for materials to pages of statistics to white papers written on every imaginable subject. This elephant would be eaten one bite, one page, one article at a time.

One particular box caught Dave's eye. It was labeled Manhattan and had obviously been opened before. Manhattan was a code word for the super-secret national project that developed the atomic weapons used on Japan just before the end of the war. Dave figured he was in the right time period, for he remembered that the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were followed closely by the surrender of Japan, and that just after that General MacArthur had accepted the surrender documents from the Japanese and had taken over control of their government and reconstruction of the Japanese society. This might be a good place for him to start.

Dave was startled when he realized someone was standing directly behind him looking over his shoulder. He smiled, inside and out, when he recognized it was Nancy. "Thought you might need some lunch, Captain." She sat on the edge of Dave's table and opened a white sack from the snack bar. "Hope you like tuna fish." She produced two sandwiches wrapped in butcher paper and two Diet Dr Peppers.

"Thanks... and my name is still Dave...just Dave!"

With her long slender index finger, she tapped on the table: 1-4-1-1-5-1-1-5.

"Tap Code?" asked Dave.

"I told you I read your book, D-A-V-E. Sorry to hear about your buddy, Pete. I think I actually met him at a party when you guys were Cadets here. He wrote me a poem on the back of a napkin."

"Yeah, that sounds like Pete. Please tell me you still have the napkin."

"No, probably not." The conversation took them both momentarily back to better times. "I'll bet you miss him."

"Yep." Dave hoped that Nancy had gotten the message that he really didn't want to talk about it. The silence between them was mutually uncomfortable...yet neither wanted the conversation to end. "Thanks for the sandwich. It hits the spot."

"De nada. So what are you researching?" asked Nancy.

"Well, I'm writing a paper about General MacArthur and Japan just after the end of the war, and I thought these documents that they just declassified might have some good information that I could use."

"Working on your Master's degree?" queried Nancy.

"Yes, and I am just about finished with it."

"So then you will be coming back here to teach?"

"What?"

"Yeah, so many of you Cadets talk about how much you hate the Academy. Then you graduate and can't wait to return. And so many of you do. You go off and get your Master's degree and back you come. I'll bet that over half of the instructors here are graduates. And that's not a bad thing."

"I'm afraid the Dean wouldn't be too interested in me."

"Oh, Dave, after all the coverage and notoriety you received about Pete's rescue, I'll bet the Academy would love to have you back."

"Would you like for me to be assigned here?" challenged Dave.

"Eat your sandwich, Captain, before your bun gets soggy." She smiled to herself about the possibility of Dave's return. She looked again deep into Dave's eyes and subconsciously licked her lips...a reaction not unnoticed by Dave.

Dave had always liked women with what his uncle had called spunk...that refusal to take backseat to anyone...especially a cocky fighter pilot whose picture had been on the front of a number of national magazines. That's one quirk he had loved about Dawn...and now Nancy.

Small talk reigned as they finished their lunches. Dave continually tried to lead the conversation back to Nancy's life and circumstances. He really wanted to know more about this interesting woman, but each time he probed, she would

sidestep and intentionally turn the conversation away from herself. By the time their lunch was finished and Nancy needed to return to work, Dave found he knew very little about her. But she had left him hungry for more...much more.

5

The search through the archives and the box labeled Manhattan had failed to turn up any new and interesting information. It was the same old stuff, well covered in the history books and period news releases from the National News Wire. Dave was beginning to fear that his venture to Colorado and his visit to the Cadet Library may not yield the desired treasure.

“Well, I’ll give it the rest of the day,” thought Dave. “If nothing turns up, I’ll just focus on the Reunion and maybe spend some time with Nancy. I’ve got to admit this was a great idea but with not-so-great results.” And then Dave opened a folder with several copies of a picture showing three bombers, B-29s, parked side by side on a tarmac somewhere. The flat sandy terrain with a few badly damaged tropical palm trees in the background led him to believe it was taken on some Pacific island...probably near the end of the war with Japan, since B-29s were used only in the Pacific theater and primarily late in the war...as he recalled from his military history classes. There was really nothing special about a picture of three bombers parked on a jungle runway except for the fact that on the ground in front of each plane and its pilot were what appeared to be three very large and strangely shaped bombs.

Dave was about to disregard the photo as newspaper propaganda fluff until he pitched the photo face down onto the stack of previously discarded media. On the back of the photo, Dave discovered intriguing hand-written information:

Hiroshima-Little Boy-Enola Gay-Colonel Paul Tibbets
Nagasaki-Fat Man-Bockscar-Major Charles Sweeney
Tokyo-Blockbuster-Chickenhawk-Colonel Dan Daley

Dave was very familiar with the first two line entries. The Enola Gay, the B-29 piloted by Colonel Tibbets, dropped the Little Boy atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Bockscar, flown by Major Sweeney, dropped the Fat Man on Nagasaki. But who was Colonel Daley, and what were the Chickenhawk and the Blockbuster?

Three B-29 bombers, three bombs, three pilots...but only two completed their missions. “Why the third B-29?” Dave muttered to himself. He knew the history of this time period and of the nuclear attacks, but he had never heard about a third bomber and a third bomb.

“Maybe it was just a backup,” thought Dave. A quick examination of the photo with a magnifying glass verified from the nose art that this bomber was indeed named Chickenhawk. “But if it were only a back up, why was its destination listed as Tokyo? Maybe the war ended before it could be used. Maybe they held back on the nuclear bombing of Tokyo because of the tremendous number of projected casualties in this large population center.” Dave recalled from his studies that there had been somewhat of a world backlash against carpet

bombing of German population centers at the end of the European Theater conflict. As German military targets became fewer and fewer due to the intense bombing, Allied bombing selected secondary targets such as rail yards and transportation, which resulted in the collateral damage to German cities and the general population. The world knew the end of the Third Reich was near and found little value in the continued assault on a non-resistive population.

Dave knew his military history... particularly aviation history. Nowhere in his studies had Chickenhawk and Blockbuster ever been mentioned. There were only the Enola Gay and Little Boy, Bockscar and Fat Man.

Dave started down the stairs to the fifth floor to the Military History section of the Library when he once again encountered Nancy. "Two steps at a time, Captain? Aren't you afraid you will overexert yourself at this altitude? Remember your age."

"Good grief, girl. Give it a rest. Look at this photo I found in the archives."

"Don't you know you're not supposed to remove the items from the archives? Can't you follow the rules like everyone else? What am I going to do with you? Maybe I should just spank you," Nancy added with a twinkle.

"No, no. You don't understand. There was a third bomber...and a third bomb."

"Okay, Dave. Slow down. What are you really trying to tell me?"

"Show me where I can find information about the Manhattan Project and the bombing of Japan at the end of the war."

It didn't take long for Dave and Nancy to find multiple books covering the nuclear attacks on Japan... but nowhere was there any mention of Chickenhawk or Blockbuster.

"Dave, speaking of the Manhattan Project, something very interesting...and somewhat unnerving...happened to me a couple of days ago. I was returning some items to the Archives right where you were working and encountered two men who seemed to me to be out of place...civilians, not military. I asked if I could help them, and they said something about Manhattan. They were hard to understand...a rather strange accent...but good English. Well, only one of them actually spoke to me. I didn't think they belonged there; something just didn't seem right. So I asked them if they were assigned to the Academy, and one grumbled something I couldn't understand. They were kind of scary to me. I asked them to leave, and when they refused, I told them I was calling the Security Police. As they started to leave, the one that never spoke turned and took my picture. Weird...huh?"

"Did the Security Police stop them?"

"No. Since they left, I never called them."

"Well, did your security cameras get their picture?"

"We don't use cameras here."

"That's really strange. I think you should at least contact Security. You can never tell what they were up to. Just be careful."

"It was all just very strange. It was probably nothing. Now let's get back to work on your search."

"You want to help me do some detective work?" asked Dave. "I am going to track down the history of this B-29. I think I can get the tail number from the photo. And if you will, find out everything, anything, you can on a Colonel Dan Daley. All I know about him is that he was a bomber pilot in the Air Force, or rather the Army Air Corps, at the end of the war. I don't even know whether he is even still alive. He is probably around 75 to 85 years old now."

"Okay, I will start with the Veterans Administration rolls and the Air Force Association. I doubt that the DoD will help us, but I have a friend who has a friend there. We'll see. If he stayed in the Air Force, he may have retired." Nancy was glad to be working with Dave, but was still unsure about what they were doing. "Dave, just what are you going to do if we find this Colonel Daley?"

"Well, I hope he will give me a history lesson. I want to know more about this weapon destined for Tokyo and how it all disappeared from history. It needs to be added back in, and my paper may be the way to do it. This ought to get me a good grade. I feel a road trip in the making. Want to come along?"

6

Dave left Nancy back in Colorado Springs searching for info on Colonel Daley while he headed back home to Davis-Monthan AFB in Tucson, home not only to his Bot Squadron but also home of the Air Force's Boneyard. He was still on his 30-day leave and was afraid to tell anyone he was back in town temporarily. They might want him to come back to work...and right now, he had other things on his mind. He needed to get really lucky on this scavenger hunt. The target was Chickenhawk. He had flown over the Boneyard everyday for several years in his fighter, but had never paid much attention to its contents. Little did he know what adventures had been in his own backyard.

The Boneyard is 2,600 acres of rock-hard desert floor adjacent to the Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, that the Air Force uses for their storage of aircraft since 1946, just after the war. This location was chosen primarily for the low humidity. And the firm ground eliminated the need for lots of concrete...about four square miles of concrete.

A trip through the Boneyard was like taking a trip back in history. There were WWII aircraft of every description. Dave thought he knew his airplanes, but he encountered some here he had never seen before. Some were probably even one-of-a-kind experimental versions. As he drove down the perimeter road heading for the entrance, he stopped several times to peek at relics that caught his eye. Then he found his target. He spotted a double row of B-29s that was so long he could not see the end of it. His first guess was there were four or five hundred B-29s...maybe more. The wings and engines had been removed from each fuselage, but the tail sections were still attached. The wings had certainly been reduced to scrap and recycling, but the engines were probably sold for rebuilding and reuse on some other airframe.

On display at each side of the entry gate were about a dozen restored WWII aircraft...B-25, B-17, P-51, P-47. There were even a P-38 Lightning and a P-40 in Flying Tiger paint scheme. These were not museum pieces, but all had been repainted and cleaned up. Dave wished he had time to crawl all over each one of these old war birds, but he had a full day before him. He was a man with a mission.

Just past the main gate was a low metal building with a large white sign directing all visitors to stop and check in. He told the lady at the desk that he was an Air Force pilot from across the base and was there to research a paper he was writing on the B-29 for his Master's degree. He just wanted to see some up close. She smiled and affirmed that was quite possible and called her boss, an Air Force Major.

Major Gregory was quite interested in Dave's fabricated story and offered to help in any way he could. Dave wanted to ask him if the B-29 with the right serial

number was in his collection, but was afraid to call attention to it. The Major showed Dave on a map of the installation where the 29s were and gave him a pass to drive out into the Boneyard. "Remember, Dave, take all the pictures you want, but no souvenirs!" Dave smiled, shook his hand and headed out the door. He had no clue as to what in particular he was looking for, but he was happy just to be spending this cool desert afternoon walking among these sleeping giant warriors from another battlefield.

Up one row and down the next, like looking at gravestones in an old cemetery, Dave thought that this must be the largest air force in the world. "Oh, the stories you could tell." Fighters, bombers, cargo, even helicopters...what a collection. Some of the airframes, primarily those carrying Navy markings, were totally alien to Dave. There was one family of airframes that probably spent time at NASA or Edwards in flight test. As a military historian, Dave felt quite at home in this 'museum'...but his mission was to find the B-29s and, in particular, Chickenhawk. When he finally arrived at the row of 29s, he was daunted as to how many there were and impressed with its size. Although he had seen a B-17 at an air show, he had never personally been near a 29.

The Boeing B-29 was considered to be quite an advancement in late WWII. It was much larger and more streamlined than the B-17s that had carried the war to Berlin. And although primitive to the aircraft in Dave's flying career, the 29 had much longer legs and boasted many improvements, such as pressurization for survival at the higher altitudes it could attain. This was the landmark airplane that evolved into the post-war Boeing line of military airframes and commercial passenger carriers and eventually into the jet fleet.

Dave had only a tail number and a mental picture of the nose art of the Chickenhawk. Fuselage after fuselage had been lying here on the desert floor for several decades, and the sun had bleached most of the surface paint off the 29s. He parked his car and chose to walk among these aluminum heroes. The number of airframes was simply overwhelming. He imagined what it would be like to be a crewman in a hundred-plane flotilla of these colossal beasts as they streaked toward their singular target, with enemy fighters attacking from all directions. Or how would it feel to be a fighter pilot attacking such an armada, squarely in the cross-hairs of several hundred 50 cal. machine guns. Definitely a strength in numbers!

The sun and the light desert breeze parched Dave's face. He was certainly enjoying this journey through aviation history, but he had walked past so many that he was beginning to think his search was futile. His heart leaped up in his throat when he spotted one fuselage with a partial tail number showing that matched Chickenhawk's. The rest of the number had succumbed to the sun's rays. Dave crawled up through the belly door to access the cockpit. He could feel his heart beating in the graveyard quiet. He was just as disappointed when he

found the manufacturer's placard riveted to the firewall aft of the cockpit that showed the full tail number. It wasn't Chickenhawk.

Dave crawled on into the cockpit and sat dejectedly in the aircraft commander's seat. He still had several hundred B-29s to check out but wanted to feel the spirit of this old bird. He respectfully put his hands on the weathered yoke and clicked the intercom button. "Bombs away," he yelled, then looked sheepishly around to ensure no one had heard him. Just for a moment, he could hear the squawk over the intercom, "Bandits, 12 o'clock high," and smell the cordite from the tracers and feel the vibrations in the airframe as the old bird fought for its life somewhere over the Pacific many years ago. The combat this war bird had seen was so primitive compared to the jet war of today. Dave recognized that he was sitting in a reverent monument and said a silent prayer for those who had fought and died in or around this machine.

Dave looked out through the dull windscreen scratched and pitted by decades of blowing desert sands. He was looking at the line of 29s across from him, thinking of the stories these old airplanes could tell and admiring the nose art left on some of them. And then, there it was. Chickenhawk. The nose art was faded, but it was clearly the Chickenhawk... just as in the picture he found at the Academy Library. The art work clearly showed a hawk with wings spread and a golden lightning bolt in his claw. He bolted from the cockpit and slid down the ladder to the ground.

Standing before his target in the middle of the dusty desert road, Dave could only imagine what this old bird had seen in its day. The tail number matched, but he couldn't wait to check the placard behind the cockpit. The fuselage rested on several railroad ties, allowing room for Dave to open the belly door and access the flight deck. The numbers matched; Dave had found Chickenhawk.

There were still two tests Dave needed to complete. Enola Gay and Bockscar both had had all the gun positions removed to save weight, and the bomb bay had been lengthened to accept the larger nuclear bombs. The first was easy to verify. Dave crawled back through the fuselage, and in fact, all gun positions had been removed and sealed. Each of the B-29s had been stored with the bomb bay open, perhaps for easier access. It was quite evident that Chickenhawk had been so modified. It only had three attachment hooks for a bomb where the others had multiple. Dave made a photographic record of all of this to include in his paper.

Returning to the cockpit, Dave sat down in the left seat, the aircraft commander's position, to take more photos and to savor his success. And as before, he placed his hands on the weathered yoke and let imagination roam. It was then he noticed a message scratched into the metal window frame:

15AUG45
NO JOY

DD

Dave didn't understand the message, but he took a picture to have a record. He was hoping to find other clues, but the weather and the time and the salvage crews had taken their toll.

"Hey, Dave. Are you up there?" called a voice from below. It was Major Gregory. He crawled up in the other seat on the flight deck. "Thought I'd stop by and see if you were doing alright."

"Yeah, this is a real trip down memory lane. I could spend a lot of time walking among these heroes. I can't believe how many planes are out here."

"Quite a collection," added Gregory. "The stories they could tell. We see everything imaginable out here. It's sad to chop these beauties up for salvage...but one by one, down they go."

"Do they all go to the scrap pile?" Dave asked.

"No, there are several categories of planes here. Some are here for only a short storage and get their engines run up and ready on a regular basis. Others are on longer term storage and get run up every 45 days. And still others are here basically forever...or until Air Force finally decides to destroy them. Those are like this old 29. They just sit here with no attention whatsoever."

"Who runs them up...the ones that still have engines, I mean?" asked Dave.

"Well, that's part of my job. I grab a Flight Manual and a couple of mechs with a tool box and a fire extinguisher, and off we go. I see a lot of interesting airplanes." Gregory chuckled to himself. "I became an Ace last week."

"You did what?"

"Yeah, I destroyed my fifth airplane last week...so I guess that makes me an Ace. I've had them catch fire on me during start-up. I had one electrical fire. But last week was the strangest. I was starting up an H-21 helicopter, following the Flight Manual precisely. This was my first time in an H-21. The Flight Manual had a mistake in it. I cranked up the engine...no problem. But when I went to engage the rotors to the motor, a step was left out. I engaged the stationary rotors to a running engine. The instant torque applied to the rotors ripped off two of the six rotor blades. The chopper leaped into the air and rolled over on its left side and exploded in a large fire ball. We were lucky to get out of that damn thing."

"So that was number 5...the one that made you an Ace?"

"Yup...want an autograph?"

“No,” chuckled Dave. “But I now have a great story to tell. I’ve had a bit of chopper time myself, and they are hard to fly...if that’s any consolation.”

“Say, why are you sitting in this particular B-29. Is there something particularly unusual about this one? There are hundreds of 29s out here.”

“No. I just wanted to crawl up in one of these to see how it looked and felt. Nothing unusual about this one, I suppose. One’s just like any other.”

“Well, the reason I mentioned it is that several days ago, two fellows came by asking about this particular tail number. But I don’t let civilians back in this part of the Boneyard. It didn’t make them too happy. They got kinda ornery. One of them even called me a name...I think...in some other language. I think he said something about my mother,” Gregory chuckled.

“Why do you think they were interested in this particular plane?” asked Dave.

“Don’t have a clue. But it just seemed strange to me. I recall heavy accents...kinda looked middle-Eastern...but not really. You know what I mean? Seemed nervous. Well, listen. I gotta get back to work. Got a whole string of T-33s to run up. And they are real bad about having raw fuel collecting in the plenum chamber. Hopefully, no number six today.” Major Gregory smiled. “And remember, no souvenirs.”

“I’ve got everything I need right here in my camera. Thanks for your help.”

7

From the balcony window in Nancy's condo, one could see all the way from Monument, down past the Academy, across the lights of Colorado Springs to Pike's Peak. It was a gorgeous view late on an autumn afternoon just as the sun was dropping behind the Front Range and the shadows were again extending their fingers across the valley. On a clear day, you could barely make out the shrine on Cheyenne Mountain just behind the Broadmoor Hotel. She had picked this place primarily because of that view...and of course, because she could make it in to work in fifteen minutes...if the roads were clear.

Her thoughts turned to Dave as Nancy practiced her yoga there on her living room floor. He had gotten under her skin and into her heart, and she wondered why. She had dated her share of Cadets in the past few years and probably understood them better than they did themselves. But now she was older than even the seniors, and they were coming off to her now more as overgrown kids. Certainly, Dave was easy on her eyes, but in her life, he was but one of many. Was it because he truly was a hero and she was enamored by that... "a groupie", she chuckled. The thought of his risking his life and his freedom to save his friend certainly had captured her notice. "Why is this one different?" She liked the way Dave didn't need her. He was so obviously comfortable in his own skin and so sure of himself, but not in a cocky way. He just seemed to know who he was and where he was...and where he was going. His goals were lofty; he was just a different breed of cat. She wanted so much more of his time just to check out these feelings. It might be an interesting journey, and she wondered if she wanted to make the trip with him...to invest her time with this guy living in the fast lane. She had learned from previous relationships that people don't change in a relationship...even if they really want to and honestly try. If you enter a relationship with the intent of changing the other person, failure is pretty much guaranteed. But with Dave, she liked what she saw...exactly like he was.

Just at that moment, her phone rang. "Dave," she exclaimed out loud...and then again wondered why. She was in a Strong Cat position so she waddled over to her phone on all fours.

"Hey, babe, what are you doing?" asked Dave.

She was so happy to hear his voice, but couldn't resist playing her game. "Who is this? And whom were you calling?"

"It's Dave. Dave Edwards. Am I interrupting something?"

"Dave Edwards. Hmmm. Have we met?"

"I'm sorry. I must have a wrong number." Dave hung up. He was surprised, confused, disappointed, but certain he had dialed correctly. Maybe there had

been someone else there with her. Or was this just weird Nancy playing her flirty games? Yes, she had been on his mind, but so had many other things, perhaps more important.

“Oh shit,” thought Nancy. “I screwed that up.” She didn’t know where Dave was or how to get in touch with him...and really wanted to hear his voice. “Oh, please call me back.” And after a few minutes that seemed to her like a few hours, he did.

“Please don’t hang up again. I miss you,” Nancy exclaimed. Dave was as surprised by her greeting as Nancy was when she blurted it out. The iron chain around her warm heart had just loosened.

“Well, I wish I were there to let you tell me in person. I miss you, too...a lot.” Yes, Dave was surprised, but in a most delighted fashion.

“Maybe I don’t miss you that much,” she lied.

“I’ll bet you do.”

“Okay, asshole. I do! Now where the heck are you?”

“I’m still in Tucson, but I have found the Chickenhawk. And I have a lot to tell you.”

Nancy’s heart dropped. She would have been a lot happier if he had called from the payphone downstairs. She regrouped. “Well, I have a lot to tell you, too.”

“Did you find Dan Daley?” asked Dave.

“I think I have. Actually, I found two. I had no luck with my friend at DoD or with the VA. But I know that a Pilot’s License never expires, so I tried the FAA. There was one Daniel Daley right near you...in Sun City. But the phone has been disconnected, and I am at a dead end with him...and he only had a single-engine rating. And someone else now lives at his address. I tried the local post office, but they were no help. You might have to put boots on the ground there.”

“Then there is a Dan Daley living north of Dallas who has a single and multi-engine rating and is about the right age. His address is at Kittyhawk Airport, a private landing strip with homes along each side of the runway. This may be your man.”

“Excellent. Sounds like I’m on my way to Dallas.”

“Baby, isn’t Colorado Springs on the way to Dallas?”

"No," Dave chuckled. "But you could come meet me there?"

"Sorry, baby, I would really love to, but I have to work."

"Then, I'll see you on Wednesday...after I go to Dallas and find Colonel Dan Daley. And then I promise you we will have some quiet time together. I promise. Would you like to go to my reunion dinner party with me Friday night? It's right there on the Academy grounds at the Officers' Club. Please say yes."

"Oh, probably. I'll check my calendar."

"There will be lots of good looking men there. Great food and music. You can dance, can't you?"

"Better than you can, cowboy."

"Can you two-step?"

"You get 'em to play some George Jones, and I'll stick on you like a coat of paint."

"Can you wear a little black dress for me?"

"Yes, Master. I'll be the only woman you'll see at that dance. Now get your cute little butt back here to the Springs." Nancy paused. She had more to say, or maybe just didn't want him to hang up. "Dave..." Again, she paused.

"Yeah, baby, what is it?"

"Nothing. I don't know. Just hurry back to me...and be careful." She quietly hung up the phone and wondered about what she had just said...and why.

Nancy was more than a little aggravated, but more disappointed. But then it helped her understand what it was that drew her to Dave. He was a man of action and determination. She knew from the rescue of his friend and their escape from the POW situation. He was on a mission, and she had to respect that...for now. She would have her time...and perhaps her way...with him.

Nancy never realized how lonely lonely was until she was forced to be lonely. It wasn't so bad when it was her choice, but this was different. Nancy reflected on how her life had changed in only two days. She sat cross-legged on the floor with her glass of Kim Crawford, looking down the valley at the lights of a half million people...but not the one she wanted to be with tonight.

8

With the help of a strong jet stream, the flight from Tucson to Dallas was just over an hour. And an hour and a half later, Dave pulled off the main road onto Kittyhawk Airport. The Kittyhawk runway was a grass strip, some 200 yards wide and a mile plus long. Down both sides of the runway were substantial homes, each with an attached, or almost attached, hangar. This setup was so typical of private airports established by pilots who wanted their homes and their airplanes close together. They join forces and funds to purchase the land for their homes and their flying passion. Many are commercial pilots; some are retired. Such was Kittyhawk.

Dave pulled up the gravel road past the Private Road, No Trespassing sign and looked for the address Nancy had provided. The mailbox clearly identified this to be his target, the home of Colonel Dan Daley. It was an older brick home, but very nice. The signs of affluence were obvious...as were the signs that a pilot lived in this home. The license plate frame on the Jeep in the drive way read I'D RATHER BE FLYING. And an orange wind sock adorned the roof peak of the second story. Through the open hangar doors, Dave could see a beautiful yellow and blue Stearman and a maroon Staggerwing. "Wow!" thought Dave. "The Boneyard yesterday and this museum today. I wonder what tomorrow will bring." Soon he would wish he could have those words back.

No one answered the door, and as he turned to leave, Dave spotted the mailman driving down the gravel road. Dave went to meet him at the mailbox and asked if he knew Dan Daley.

"Sure, everybody around here knows Pappy."

"Pappy?"

"Yeah, it's an airplane thing, I think. If you find him, he will be in an old flight suit with oil stains...and he'll probably be on his back under the engine of one of these old planes. The old man is a fanatic about his birds...and one heck of an engine man, so I hear."

"Do you have any idea where I might find...Pappy?"

"Just saw him over there in the yellow hangar across the strip. He's changing out an engine on a Corsair."

"A Corsair?"

"Yep, this is a regular flight museum around here. Seems like everybody who lives on Kittyhawk has something interesting stashed in their hangar. Every Memorial Day, they drag everything out and fly what they can. It's amazing!"

“Well, thanks for the info. I’ll go see if I can find Pappy.”

“Hey, only his friends call him Pappy. You might start out with Colonel. Just a warning.” The mailman started to drive away, but turned back to Dave. “Say, aren’t you...?”

“Yup,” responded Dave before the mailman could finish his question. Dave turned and walked away.

• • •

Colonel Dan Daley was exactly as the mailman had described...older than Dave had expected, donned in a stained OD flight suit with the name Daley stenciled on white tape above his left breast pocket. He wore a pair of used-to-be-white Converse All-Star tennis shoes. An off-red grease rag hung from his right thigh pocket. His curly white hair was a month overdue a haircut. He was from the days when what went up had to come down.

Dave walked in the hangar as if he’d been there before. The two men ignored him and continued to discuss the Texas-OU football game from a week earlier. Dave was enamored by the Corsair and surprised by its size. But he had work to do.

“Colonel Daley?” Dave queried.

“Could be...unless you’re the sheriff or a bill collector...or maybe one of my ex-wife’s relatives.” The Colonel looked over the top of his smudged glasses at his mechanic and winked. Dave just smiled courteously. “Well, what can I do for you, son? I’m Dan Daley.”

Without speaking, Dave handed him the photo he took of the inscription scratched on the window frame of the Chickenhawk. Colonel Daley looked at the photo, then took off his glasses and wiped them down slowly with the oily red cloth from his pocket. He replaced his glasses and continued studying the picture. Dave felt as if he were stalling for time. “Nope. Doesn’t mean anything to me. Now why don’t you leave me alone so I can get back to work?” He turned back toward the Corsair.

“Blockbuster,” shouted Dave. He watched for an effect.

Colonel Daley spun around. “Son of a bitch! Who the hell are you, boy?”

“My name is Dave Edwards, sir. I’m an Air Force Captain...a fighter pilot stationed in Tucson at D-M.”

“A damned fighter pilot, huh? You got an ID card?”

Dave hastily retrieved his ID from his billfold and handed it to the Colonel for his inspection. Dave felt as if he'd finally developed some credibility with him.

“Where did you get this photo, Dave?”

“I took it yesterday, sir. I was sitting in your seat in the Chickenhawk...in the Boneyard.”

“So the Chickenhawk is still alive.” Pappy noticeably softened. “Wow! How is she?”

“Well, not too good...for an airplane. Her engines and wings are gone, but the rest is pretty much intact...including its oversized bomb bay.”

Colonel Daley didn't blink or show any signs of recognition of Dave's comment. Dave figured the Colonel to be a fine poker player or maybe just had cold steel running in his veins.

“Dave, why don't we sit for a spell and have a glass of mint tea? I think this Corsair can wait a while.”

At the rear of the hangar was an old rectangular dining room table with benches on each side. A random scattering of dominoes awaited the next game. From an older avocado-colored refrigerator, the Colonel filled two red plastic cups with ice and then tea. Dave had hoped the old man would have at least washed his hands first but found the taste of the cold sweet mint tea with a flavoring of avgas and 50 weight oil much to his fighter pilot's delight. “Tell me what you know, Dave.”

“I'll tell you what I know if you'll tell me what you know, sir.”

“Hmmmph. We'll see.”

Dave had an instant like and respect for his new friend. Dave had never met a Bird Colonel that he wanted to be like...but this man was different. He could see himself in the Colonel some 50 or 60 years down the road. He hoped to get his story, but couldn't understand the Colonel's reluctance...but was about to. Dave began to unwind his story.

“Well, sir, I was born in Montana, went to the Air Force Academy, then Flight School and Fighter School, then flew in the war in Korea.”

The Colonel interrupted. “A ring-knocker, huh? What did you fly?”

“We flew fighters with a robotic wingman and...”

The Colonel interrupted again. “Wait. Now I know why you looked familiar. Aren’t the guy who...”

Now Dave interrupted. “Yes, sir. And now I am working on my Masters degree in history. That’s when I stumbled onto your story. And...”

“Got a copy of your book with you, son ? I’ve been wanting to read it.”

Dave sighed and quickly retrieved his only copy from the bag in his car. He held it out for the Colonel to take. He refused.

“Gonna autograph it for me?”

Dave fired one for effect. “Whom shall I make it out to...Pappy?”

“Naw. You don’t know me that well.” Dave caught a bit of a twinkle in the old man’s eyes.

“Maybe I’d like to,” retorted Dave. “Does that cause you a problem, sir?”

Ignoring Dave’s question, the old Colonel wiped his hands with his oily rag and took the book from Dave, opening it to the first page. “Make it out to My new friend, Dan.”

As Dave wrote in the book, the Colonel continued. “You don’t want to talk about Korea and your buddy, do you?”

“Nope.”

“I understand.” And he did.

“Thanks. I kinda figured you would.” The bond between combat pilots never ends. “Anyhow, I’m going through some recently released declassified documents when I stumbled upon this picture of three B-29s and their pilots. One is the Chickenhawk...and I’m guessing you know who the other two are.” Again the Colonel didn’t react. “I found the Chickenhawk in the Boneyard and took these pictures...and finding you wasn’t that tough through the FAA. I know my WWII history, and I have never heard of the Chickenhawk or the Blockbuster...and I have searched the library for info. There’s nothing! I want to save this story and correct the history books.” Dave paused for an attitude check on the Colonel, but he continued to browse through the recent pictures of the Chickenhawk with no reaction. “Okay,” added Dave. “Now it’s your turn.”

Dave could tell the old man was fighting a battle in his mind. He knew the Colonel knew more...much more. But would he tell his story?

“Understand that I’m the only one left who flew the Chickenhawk. All the others, the entire crew, have crossed that last river. Now it’s just me. It’s a story that we were all sworn to keep a secret. But apparently, it’s out. There were several other fellows in here not long ago asking about the Chickenhawk. I told them they had the wrong Dan Daley, that I had never flown bombers. I don’t think they believed me, but they went on their way.”

“Everybody has heard the story of the two nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki...and the hundreds of thousands who died. Well, there was a third bomb...the Blockbuster. The problem with the first two bombs was that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were a long way from Tokyo...where the military and political decisions were made. And information getting back to Tokyo was slow. Communications with Tokyo had been cut off by the bombings. We figured the Japs would probably surrender if they knew what had happened in the days before on the other side of the island...but there was simply no one left to report it and no way to communicate it if there were. So the target for Blockbuster was the huge naval facility at Yokohama...just down the bay from Tokyo. We didn’t want to destroy Tokyo, for there had to be somebody left in control to surrender. If we bombed them, then in the chaos, we still would have needed to invade Japan and fight door-to-door forever...with tons of Allied casualties. So we chose Yokohama. Blockbuster would take it out and the fireball would be very visible to the government in Tokyo. It wasn’t that far from Yokohama to Tokyo...maybe twenty or thirty miles.”

“So what happened? Why has this escaped all of the history books?”

“Well, it’s a long story, and it has to do, of course, with politics. I’ll get to that, but now, back to the story. We were en route to Yokohama when the Japanese notified the Allies of their surrender. The plan was for a three-ship of B-29s to fly from Tinian to Yokohama. The other two left our formation 50 miles out and waited for me to deliver the Blockbuster. We were only 10 minutes out from the drop when word was received that the war was over. I was honestly happy that we didn’t have to drop it. We would have killed over a half million Japanese and closed Tokyo Bay for a long time. We closed the bomb bay, secured the weapon, and returned to Tinian.”

“What happened to the bomb...Blockbuster?”

“Now, I don’t know how much you know about nuclear weapons, but they are hard to make...more so then than now...but still hard to make. Uranium is scarce, and plain uranium can’t be used in a bomb. It takes a refined uranium that is clear of impurities. And there just wasn’t that much of it available. In fact, we didn’t have enough to make another bomb...period. We used a lot in testing,

in the Manhattan project, and we made one bomb to test in the Nevada desert. That left enough for the two we detonated over Hiroshima and Nagasaki...and, of course, for Blockbuster. That was it.”

“Now enter the Russians. Sure, the war in Europe was drawing down. Hitler was dead and the Nazis on the run. But the Russians were strong and hungry for land and power. We just didn’t know where and if they would stop moving west through Europe...even if the war ended. The plan was to save Chickenhawk for Moscow...and we did. We flew the bomb back to the U.S. and left it at a desert strip just north of Vegas. It came to us by boat, but we flew it back. I guess they wanted it ready and in place if they had to use it. And that’s the story.”

He added, “We were debriefed at our base on Tinian and ordered never to discuss our mission. Obviously, no one did or it would be in the history books. They confiscated our maps, our flight logs, our cameras...everything. But now that it is declassified, probably all of that stuff has resurfaced. I’d like to think so.”

“When the war ended, everything was chaos. The US had been mobilized for war for five years...and all of a sudden, it was over. Men and units were coming back to the States. Records were packed in boxes and shipped to somewhere. Planes and tanks and weapons were cut up and dumped in holes or in the ocean. It was chaos!”

Dave was mesmerized by the Colonel's story. “So what happened to Blockbuster? Where is it?”

The old Colonel leaned back and took a long draw on his iced tea. Dave sensed that Colonel Daley was searching for an answer. The pause was alarmingly long. The Colonel's answer was both curt and contrived. “Don’t know.” The old man turned his eyes away from Dave with that answer. All of Dave’s red warning lights were on and flashing. “I gotta go to the john,” the Colonel said, and he briskly walked away.

Dave sensed inconsistency in the Colonel's words and actions, but he couldn’t identify specifics. The Colonel soon returned...too soon for an old man with a need for a piss. “Everything okay, sir?”

The Colonel ignored the question. “Be straight with me, son. What in the hell are you doing here? Is there more than just a history paper involved? Are you being honest with me...totally?”

“That’s strange, Colonel. I was about to ask you the same question?” The old man smiled, paused, then took another long sip on his tea.

“Is it okay if I call you Dave?”

“That’s what all my friends call me. Are you my friend?” The Colonel smiled again. Dave could tell he was becoming more relaxed and perhaps that meant more trusting.

“Dave, I’m an old man. I don’t know when the Good Lord will let me exchange these silver wings for some white ones. But I have more to my story than I have ever trusted anyone to know. I know your story of Pete and your attempt to rescue him. I read the articles in Air Force magazine and in Stars and Stripes. I know you are a good man...a man who cares and will do the right thing. But if I tell you my story, the whole story, you will have a terrible responsibility...all by yourself. You will have to determine what to do with some information that most likely no one else knows. And if I know you correctly, you will be driven to take some very dangerous actions. Or you may choose to do nothing and live with the dread that I have lived with since August of ’45. If I tell you, we will be opening Pandora’s box. So what is it? Walk away now...or say hello to Pandora? What’s your pleasure?”

Dave mumbled, “Maybe I should go take a piss.” Again the Colonel smiled.

The Colonel’s responses and his body language were exposing frightening yet interesting possibilities for Dave. And then it hit Dave. After an uncomfortable pause, Dave played his trump card. “You didn’t bring Blockbuster back to the States, did you?”

The Colonel didn’t respond. Dave kept digging on his hunch. “You didn’t bring it back to Tinian either, did you, sir?”

“I’ll answer that, Dave, if you really want me to. Is that what you want? You are about to join a club with only two members...you and me.”

Dave really wanted to hear the answer...but questioned why. He understood that strings were attached to the answer. Was he willing to accept the consequences the Colonel had threatened? He thought back to the inscription on the Eagle and Fledglings sculpture at the Academy...“Man’s flight through life is sustained by the power of his knowledge.”

“Damned right I want to know. Where is the third bomb?”

“Okay, son. Remember, you asked for it.”

The Colonel took a deep breath and began, “As I said, all was chaos at the end of the war. And the war didn’t end 10 minutes before I was to drop Blockbuster. It ended 10 minutes after I dropped the damned thing. We got the call to abort the drop, but it came too late. We were headed back to rejoin the formation and return to Tinian.”

“But there was no explosion over Yokohama.”

“Right! Blockbuster was a dud. It didn’t detonate.”

“So where is it?”

“As far as I know, Dave, it’s in the bottom of Tokyo Bay just off the end of the runway at Yokohama. The other two B-29 crews on the mission believed that since there was no explosion, we still had it on board...and reported that status back to our home base. When we got back to Tinian, we were covered in security, debriefed and told to keep our mouths shut, and immediately returned the Chickenhawk to the States. The last time I saw Chickenhawk was on a secret runway just north of Las Vegas.”

“Do you mean that there has been an armed nuke in Tokyo Bay ever since 1945?”

“Bingo! Remember the chaos surrounding the end of the war...and the political battle going on between President Truman and General MacArthur. Truman eventually fired MacArthur, but until then, he ruled that end of the world with an iron fist. Nothing went down west of Hawaii without his approval. Mix the military’s fear of MacArthur with the chaos, and the easiest route was to ignore it. No one had the balls to tell MacArthur that there was a nuke in his backyard. Can you believe it?”

“Yeah, I’ve seen the chaos of war in Korea. I can believe it...but I am amazed.”

“There was an incredible amount of security and secrecy around the Manhattan Project and the existence of the bombs themselves. Before Truman became Vice-President, he was a Senator and head of the Senate committee that oversaw all spending for federal defense...including Manhattan...and he didn’t even know about it. Even as Roosevelt’s VP, he knew nothing about the extent of the program. It was only after he took over the Presidency at FDR’s death that he learned the full story. Two days after FDR died, the Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, gave Truman the entire story. So combine the secrecy with the chaos of bringing the war to an end and with the battle between Truman and MacArthur...then mix in a new President who had been kept pretty much out of all inside information...and throw in Truman’s having to deal with the Soviets...and you can get a better feel how this all fell through the crack and eventually covered up. When Truman decided not to run for a second term, and Ike beat Truman’s man, Stevenson, for the Presidency, I’ll bet any paper trail regarding the fate of the Blockbuster vanished. It was a case of so much secrecy keeping anyone from knowing the entire story. It’s just unbelievable!”

“My unit at Tinian, the 509th, always kept to ourselves...wrapped in secrecy. The other bomber squadrons didn’t have a clue as to what we were doing. Our flight

crewmembers knew we were into something big...but not the atomic part. We didn't fly regular bombing missions. We didn't participate in anything...and that created a lot of friction on the base. But when the war ended, they were all recognized for their actions...and the 509th disappeared with no recognition whatsoever. It was hurtful, but we all knew why."

"You probably don't know the attitude of the world at that time. We had been at war forever, it seemed. And the war had shifted heavily in our favor. The days of the Third Reich were numbered. It was just a matter of time. Everybody knew that. In Europe, the 8th Air Force had bombed out about every military target...every factory...every refinery...every military base. So the bombing shifted to secondary targets...rail yards...bridges...transportation centers...warehousing and storage facilities. But these were usually near population centers and our intensive bombing caused some collateral damage...lots of it! That means some civilians were killed. The saturation bombing of Dresden, which really had not been a real target til then, brought this all to a point. A mission to take out the rail yards there was very accurate on its target. Nevertheless, over 35,000 people were killed. And the attitude of the world seemed to change. They started asking why the mass destruction. There always seems to be a part of this world with a rather short memory."

"The nuclear bombing of Japan was viewed as favorable by most Americans just after the war...but not for long. It didn't take long for the Great American Public to turn on anyone who was associated with the big bombs. The GAP started focusing on the Japanese suffering and too soon forgot about the atrocities the Japs committed and the millions of casualties we would have taken if we had to invade the Japanese islands."

"Actually, the Pentagon wanted to save that third bomb for the Russians, if necessary. When the Japanese would not surrender unconditionally after the first two bombs, we put up a real show of airpower and over-flew Tokyo with 1000 airplanes...B-29s and fighters. They quit right after that...unconditionally."

"So, Dave, there it is. Now what are you going to do with this info? What's left of my life is probably going to get a little crazy. Welcome to the two-member club."

"So that's the whole story. You didn't leave anything out?"

"Oh, I may have missed a detail here or there. Nothing critical. As I said, they took all our maps and targeting data when we returned to Tinian. All of the flight plan details may now be unclassified. I don't know. But the bombing run was from south to north, heading 360, right up the western edge of Tokyo Bay, which is about 10 miles wide at that point. The detonation point was to be at two thousand feet directly above the west end of the long runway at the Yokohama military base. It was intended to both take out the entire Yokohama complex and put on a light show for the boys in Tokyo, about 20 miles to the north. This was

going to get their attention! But it didn't detonate, so it's in the water just off shore in Tokyo Bay northeast of Yokohama...as best as I can figure."

"Wow! Screw the iced tea. I need a beer!"

"You know, Dave. I feel better! I'm glad to have that finally out in the open. Hell, maybe I'll just join you in that beer. Who's buying?"

"It's your hangar and your frig. That would be you."

The Colonel smiled and started for the refrigerator.

"Or better yet, why don't you take me up for a ride in your Stearman. I've never flown in a tail-dragger, Colonel. Maybe you could teach me a thing or two."

"Yeah, probably. I've got more time in the top of a loop than you got total flying time."

Dave knew the Colonel was probably right, but he couldn't let that one go. "Ever flown supersonic?"

"Ever flown under a bridge?" the Colonel retorted.

"Ever flown so high that the sky was black?"

"Ever flown so low that your wheels were wet when you got home?"

Dave had to stop and think just to stay in the game. "Ever pull so many Gs that you get a compressor stall...and fire belches out of the front of the engine?"

"Ever flown home with two engines out?"

Dave knew he was not going to win this battle. "Ever wanted to fly in an open cockpit so bad and the only thing that stood in your way was a grumpy old man with an ego bigger than Dallas who only wanted to play word games?"

The Colonel laughed out loud on that one. He extended his hand to Dave and pulled him close. "I'd be honored to fly with you, Dave. It's been a long time since I've flown with real heroes. There's a parachute in the front cockpit for you...and you can call me Pappy.

9

The Stearman was designed and built by Stearman Aircraft, a subsidiary of Boeing in the 1930s and 1940s. Almost 10,000 were delivered to the Army Air Corps, Navy and the Canadian Air Force to train pilots during WWII. At the war's end, most were declared surplus and began a second life as crop dusters and sports planes.

Dave noticed that the PT-13 Stearman, like the F-14 Tomcat, was one of those aircraft that seemed to grow bigger the closer you got to it. Pappy's was painted out with a blue fuselage and yellow wings and vertical stabilizer. The rudder was red and white striped. His only other experience with a Stearman was when he was a kid. He had built a rubber band-powered model and doped it yellow, the same hard bright yellow they used to paint the stripe down the middle of the highway. Dave's second impression was that it was a huge box kite with a monstrous seven-cylinder radial engine hung on the front of it. Dave was surprised to find a drip pan under the engine, but the Colonel assured him that, like a Model T Ford, the only time a radial didn't leak oil was when there was no oil in it.

Pappy motioned to Dave to take the front cockpit. "The instructor sits in the rear," claimed Pappy with a school boy grin. Dave knew this was the Colonel's turf and complied. He struggled to get his parachute and his butt down into the seat. Pappy walked up along the wing root to help him strap in.

As Pappy completed his walk-around inspection, Dave familiarized himself with the pristine cockpit. Padded leather rimmed the cockpit. Updated instrumentation filled the panel. And there were no buttons on the stick hand grip, where Dave usually found six or seven on his aircraft. He pulled on the soft leather flying helmet that allowed him to talk with the rear cockpit. All was good. Dave felt as if he had stepped back in time into the golden age of aviation. Pappy set a few switches in Dave's cockpit and then climbed down into his own.

The Stearman is a biplane with wings and fuselage covered in fabric. Its wing span is just over 32 feet and weighs empty about the same as a VW Beetle. After a few turns of the prop to prime the engine, Pappy flipped on the magnetos, and the engine roared to life, belching black smoke and a throbbing roar that took Dave to places he had only visited in his private moments.

Pappy commanded the Stearman through a series of S-turns as he taxied toward the end of the runway. With the tail on the ground and the big radial in front, this was the traditional way to clear the path ahead. He ran up the engine, checking all the vitals and grounded out each magneto one at a time to check their operation. After clearing final approach to his left, he turned right onto the grass runway.

As Pappy advanced the throttle, the biplane started its slow acceleration. Dave felt the bump of every clod of grass that passed beneath the fat tires. Pappy eased the stick forward to bring the tail wheel off the ground, and soon, the bipe slowly lifted into the air. Not only did it look like a hefty box kite, it flew like one. Dave felt the wind currents move the big bird around but was confident in his pilot and his bird. This was the first time Dave had experienced the wind of flight peppering his face. Now he knew the secret that only the old pilots knew. This is what draws man back into the wild blue yonder. What Dave had done before was merely a video game; this was flying!

Dave rested his arms on the padded piping that rimmed the open cockpit as Pappy climbed to 3000 feet altitude and leveled off. He prayed that Pappy would let him fly this awesome beauty...and eventually, he did. Pappy shook the stick left and right, the signal for Dave to take control of the airplane. Dave entered a slow left climbing turn with the nose slightly above the horizon to continue the ascent. Dave was used to the quick response of his modern jets. The Stearman demanded the slow, calm hands of a suitor, caressing the stick with subtle pressures, then waiting for the plane to respond. In his hands, he could feel the laws of aerodynamics and nature dancing their waltz. He was as free as a leaf running before the storm.

After a few lazy turns, Dave pulled the nose up, released back pressure and nudged the old bird into a aileron roll. He knew Pappy would respond if he exceeded his limits. Then a barrel roll. He really wanted to fly a cloverleaf or a split S but didn't know the Stearman's G limits.

The intercom was constant on, and Dave could hear Pappy humming over the engine noise. "OK, Dave. I want you to fly it straight and level. And when you get there, use the two trim wheels to keep it there."

It took Dave a couple of attempts, but he finally got it trimmed well enough to take his hand off the stick and the Stearman neither banked nor pitched. "This is what the Brits call balanced flight, Dave. All the forces on the bird are balanced...in equilibrium...no roll, no pitch, no yaw. Now be very quiet and listen to the airplane. Listen to the wind."

Dave complied and made note of the sounds of the engine, the wind vibrating the guy wires between the wings, and the airstream bubbling over the windscreen in front of him.

"Now shut your eyes, Dave, and listen again. Concentrate on those sounds. What do you hear?"

"I hear it, Pappy. I hear it. The airplane is talking to me."

"That's right, Dave. You got it. Listen to the music. You must use all your senses to be a good pilot. Now keep your eyes shut and concentrate on every point of your body where it touches the plane...your butt, your feet, your back...every spot...especially your hands. Feel the ailerons and the elevator through your fingertips. Feel how the bird touches you and sends its signals to your body. Can you feel it? Now this doesn't work so well in your jet. There's not much real feedback through a hydraulic flight control system...but this is different."

"Now do the same with the rudder. See how weird it feels when you are not coordinated...like you are flying sideways. Keep your eyes shut."

Again, Dave complied.

"The seat of the pants is always more reliable than your middle ear, Dave ...but neither is as good as a quick peek out at the horizon...even tho' that can fool you, too. Blend them all three together, and when you think one is lying to you, that's when you can get in trouble. Trust your instruments."

"Thanks, Pappy. This is all so evident in this old Stearman...much more so than in a jet where so much is artificial."

"Yes, but the instruments are so much better. You can trust those...usually." Pappy let Dave do some basic maneuvering. "Okay, now keep those eyes shut and give me a 30 degree bank to the right. Okay, now level the wings. Listen and feel. Let her talk to you. Now pull the nose up a few degrees. Listen for the airflow to change as you slow down. Feel it through the seat of your pants as you climb. Now try a roll with your eyes shut and stop when you think we are back wings level."

"Not bad, Dave. Open your eyes and level us out. Not bad."

"I have never experienced that in a jet, Pappy. I can't wait to try."

"Well, it's certainly different than in a jet. But don't do it solo. Flying around at 500 knots with your eyes shut may shorten your career."

Pappy continued, "If you practice this regularly, Dave, you will get to the point where you don't get in an airplane; you strap it on. Now, go ahead and spin it if you want, Dave. I know you jet jockeys don't get to do that in your new planes."

"Yeah, I haven't done a spin since pilot training. What are the numbers?"

"Simple. Just power back to idle. Nose slightly above the horizon. When you feel the nibble on the stick, suck it back in your gut and full rudder." A spin requires both wing stall and rotation around the vertical axis. Eliminating either will normally bring a fat-winged airplane like the Stearman right back to normal flight.

Not necessarily true for the modern jets...which is why many jet jockeys don't practice it. The rotation caused by the rudder input causes the inside wing to have less velocity than the outer one, shoving it further into the stall, increasing the drag on that wing and perpetuating the spin.

Dave powered back the engine and pulled the stick to raise the nose. As the airspeed slowed to near stall, he could feel the vibration of the separated airflow through the stick. Then it was stick full back and full rudder...stall and rotation. The result was the laziest stall and spin he had ever experienced. In pilot training, the airplane would wind up like a top, but the Stearman, with its great wing span, would just rotate like a merry-go-round. After a couple of turns, Dave eased the stick forward and added power to break the stall and applied opposite rudder to stop the rotation.

"Hmmmph, not bad...for a kid," came the critique from the rear cockpit. It was more than Dave had hoped for.

He recovered from the spin nose low and allowed the airspeed to build up for a loop. "Pappy, what's the entry airspeed for over the top?" Dave was feeling more comfortable in the old plane and more than just a little bit cocky. Once a fighter pilot, always a fighter pilot.

"Let me show you a cloverleaf, Dave. The secret is being smooth. Don't over-control the stick. Just pressures. If I do it right, you will never see the stick move." Pappy pulled the nose so smoothly up to 45 degrees above the horizon and started a right roll so the nose would fall through the horizon just as the wing became level inverted. He pulled it on through toward level flight just as in recovering from a split S. "Okay, you fly the next leaf just like that."

Dave took the stick in his right hand and shook it slightly to see if Pappy was riding the controls. He wasn't. It was Dave's ship because Pappy trusted him to take care of the old bird. Dave pulled the nose up to 45 degrees high trying to mimic Pappy's smoothness. He rolled toward the right horizon just as Pappy had instructed and nailed it...inverted, wings level, 90 degrees of turn...perfect. Dave beamed with pride, but Pappy was happier. The good teacher revels in his student's success.

Dave checked his location just over the field and was turning to clear the area for a loop when he heard a muffled explosion. It seemed to come from below the engine just ahead of Dave's feet.

"What the hell was that?" yelled Pappy through the head set.

"I don't know, but I'm getting smoke coming from under the instrument panel. Pappy, we're on fire. We're on fire. I can see the flames at my feet."

“Get out of there, Dave. Bail out! Bail out!”

Dave unfastened his lap belt and threw back his shoulder harness straps. He encountered the full impact of the slipstream when he stood up and climbed over the cockpit rail. Flames had now engulfed most of his cockpit.

Dave clung to the side of the fuselage as he edged his way back along the wing root to Pappy’s cockpit. “Come on, Pappy. Get out of this thing!”

“Hit the silk, Dave. I’m going to try to get this SOB on the ground. I’m not losing my Stearman.”

“Come on, Pappy. Bail out! Bail out while you still have the altitude!”

“See you on the ground, jet jockey. Last one down buys the beer!” And with that, Pappy shoved in full rudder, forcing the Stearman into a violent side slip that both kept the flames away from the fuselage and created a higher rate of descent.

Dave dove off the trailing edge of the wing to clear below the tail of the Stearman. As soon as he was clear of the horizontal stabilizer, he put both hands on the D-ring and pulled as hard as he could. The parachute canopy unfurled from the backpack and blossomed into the air stream. Dave’s thoughts flashed back to that bad day in Korea, but all instincts were churning. He looked up to check for a good chute and was horrified to see six of his twenty-eight shroud lines were not attached to his parachute canopy. They had broken...or had been cut. “Damn, why didn’t I check this on the ground?”

Normal procedure for a parachute descent dictates that if the chute is good, the pilot cuts the four back risers or shroud lines to create the ability to steer the chute in the descent, plus it creates a larger canopy resulting in a lower rate of descent. This was not the case for Dave. With six random risers missing, he was unable to steer it and the rate of descent was extreme. And with only three thousand feet to descend, Dave had little time to take any action whatsoever. He was just along for a wild ride. He briefly caught sight of Pappy maneuvering his Stearman toward a short final, trailing some serious smoke. But Dave had problems of his own to deal with.

Along both edges of the grass runway below were mature red oak trees, and the wind carried Dave toward them like a magnet. Thoughts of Korea again flashed through his mind. He crossed his legs just as he entered the tree canopy, banged a few large branches on the way down and came to a groin-wrenching stop just six feet above the ground. The tree limbs had snagged the parachute canopy and arrested his wild descent. Dave popped the quick releases loose and dropped to the ground where he shucked the rest of the parachute harness. His thoughts turned to Pappy and the Stearman.

The flaming Stearman was rolling to a stop in the grass some thirty yards to the east. Even at that range, Dave could see the rear cockpit succumbing to the fire. Others living along the grass strip were also running toward the blazing Stearman, fire extinguishers in hand. Dave hopped up on the trailing edge of the wing and onto the top of the fabric-covered fuselage just behind Pappy's cockpit. Pappy was half choking, half cursing, with his cotton flight suit smoldering from the heat as he struggled to get loose from his lap belt and harness. Fully laced by now with adrenaline, Dave reached down, grabbing Pappy under his arms and literally jerked his body up and out of the flames.

Dave slid down the side of the fuselage to the ground and pulled Pappy's semi-conscious body after him. Dave was knelt over Pappy's body checking his breathing when the fire burned through the right tire, resulting in an explosion that ripped a jagged hole thru the fabric of the lower right wing and blew Dave's body across Pappy and to the ground. "We gotta get out of here!" Dave shoved his arm down the back of Pappy's flight suit along his spine and grabbed his waist band...just in case Pappy had injured his back...and drug him about twenty yards upwind of the fire.

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By the time the EMTs had gotten Pappy onto a gurney and into the ambulance, the firefighters had extinguished what was left of the Stearman. Pappy was burned seriously, but was more alert and talkative. As expected, he was more concerned about his Stearman than his own wounds and blamed himself for whatever unknown malady had attacked his bird. "I don't understand, Dave. There was nothing down by your feet to catch fire...no fuel line...no flammables...no nothing! I don't get it."

"Don't worry about the Stearman, Pappy. Your buddies here will take care of it. Let's just get you to the hospital. You've got other stuff to worry about right now. We're down, and we're alive. Let that be enough for right now."

"But you don't understand..."

"Just shut up and put the oxygen mask back on. You've sucked up a lot of smoke. Now they're going to take you to the hospital, and I'm going to get my car and follow."

Pappy grabbed Dave's arm and pulled him down close, face to face. "God, I hate hospitals...too many old sick people there! And they had better not try to put one of those damned gowns on me! Hey, as long as I gotta go, stop by the hangar and get us four or five cold beers in a brown paper sack. And grab that copy of your book. If I'm to be there a while, I want something to read."

Dave just shook his head, but Pappy's orneriness gave him faith that Pappy's injuries were superficial and that all would soon be back to normal for this old soldier...whatever normal meant in his inimitable life.

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By the time Dave had retrieved his car, the ambulance was ready to leave Kittyhawk for the hospital some two miles away. This would be the last time either Dave or Pappy would see the Stearman...but what a day! He pulled in behind the ambulance and could see one of the EMTs inside still working on Pappy.

The ER was ready for their burn victim and went right to work cleaning his wounds. Pappy balked when the medic pulled out his scissors to cut off the charred legs of his old coveralls. "Hey, don't be cutting on my best flight suit."

"Sir, with all the oil soaked up in this thing, you're lucky you didn't go up in smoke."

"Dave, tell 'em..."

"Pappy, don't worry about it. I'll get you one of mine. I have plenty."

"Okay, but don't you forget."

The meds were beginning to kick in, and Pappy finally began to relax. The nurse on duty told Dave that they were going to take Pappy up to Room 205 in about a half hour when they finished and directed him to the staff locker room if he wanted to clean up after his ordeal. It was then that he realized that the flames and the tree limbs had him looking like second place in an ass-kicking contest. Dave placed the brown bag with the beer and his book under Pappy's sheet. The nurse smiled at Dave and threw him a towel.

10

The sun was just dipping below the flat western horizon as Dave retrieved a change of clothes from his rental car and headed up to 205. Having spent so much of his recent time in the mountains of Arizona and Colorado, he hadn't seen such a beautiful sight in some time. The reds and pinks cutting through the cumulous painted the entire sky...even to the eastern horizon. He found Pappy between clean sheets with an IV in his arm...reading Dave's book and picking at a tray of hospital gourmet delights. "Who's the girl, Dawn? Anything ever come of that?"

It's covered in the book, Pappy. But in short, I screwed it up."

"Hmmmph...me, too. I had the best military wife a man could ask for...but when the kids left home, so did she. The last I heard from her, she had married some doctor in Colorado."

"Well, is there somebody I need to call and tell them what happened to you?"

"No, I don't have anybody. A couple of my Kittyhawk buddies called while you were gone. They'll come by tomorrow to check on me."

"That's good, 'cause I need to head back to Colorado Springs tomorrow morning. Did they mention the Stearman?"

"It took some damage, but they say it can be fixed. I'm still curious as to what happened. What caused that fire? What was the explosion? There's nothing down by your feet that could have caused that. I don't get it."

"Well, you'll have plenty of time to figure it out when you start putting it back together. I hear you're pretty good at that."

"The best...hands down."

'Well, as Dandy Don Meredith once said, "It ain't braggin' if you can do it.'"

"Hey, what do you know about Dandy Don? You a Cowboy fan?"

"Aw, it's just something my friend Pete once told me...on a better day. And speaking of better days, I think I'm ready to bring this one to an end. It's not that late, but I'm tired. It's been an eventful day, and we both need some sleep. I'll stop by tomorrow morning on the way to the airport. And try to keep your hands off the nurses."

"Yeah, right. Like they have any interest in a used up old fart like me. I figured they'd be lined up over you. By the way, if you need a place to bed down tonight,

the hangar is probably open. If not, the combination is 2245. It has all the luxuries you need...a shower and a couch...and it's free. And there's always cold beer in the frig. There's a drive-in up on the next corner...The Royal. Ask Mike to fry you up some okra...extra crispy. It's the best."

"Thanks. I'll probably take you up on that."

"Dave, before you go, all in all, this was a good day for me. I'm glad you tracked me down. And I'll get that old Stearman back in the air someday, and we'll go cut some corners off some clouds. What do you say?"

"Pappy, I can't think of anything I'd rather do than fly with you. I'll bet you could teach me a few things."

"About flying...or about life?"

"Maybe about women, eh?"

"I usually bounce the landing when it comes to the ladies, Dave. Never had much luck there. I probably wasn't much of a husband, being gone so much, flying for the Air Corps and the Air Force...probably worse as a father."

"I remember you said you had kids. Are they near-by?"

"Have two...a boy and a girl. Well, had two. My son got killed...or murdered."

"Murdered? Want to talk about it?"

"Well, I taught him how to fly when he was just a kid. Great hands and a great seat-of-the-pants...my genes, of course. He eventually went on to the airlines and made Captain on a 747. One night on a leg down the Aleutians heading for Seoul, the damned Russians intercepted him with one of their fighters and shot him down. They claimed he was flying a spy mission and over-flew Russian territory. The bastards shot down a loaded passenger airplane. They couldn't tell the difference between a damned 747 and a U-2."

"Yeah, I remember hearing about that. Everybody on board was killed."

"I didn't even get to bury my son, Dave. I hate those damned Russians. I wish I had saved Blockbuster for them."

"Come on, Pappy. Don't get too riled up. That's not good for you right now. Let's change the subject." Dave was ready to go grab some dinner and go to bed, but he didn't want to leave Pappy in such an emotional state. "What was the most important thing you taught your son, Pappy...other than how to fly?"

"Well, if I hadn't taught him to fly, I'd probably be talking to him right now instead of you."

Dave didn't really know just how to take that comment, so he just let it go by.

"That was a stupid thing for me to say, Dave. Sorry. I just can't get by losing my boy like that. Those damned Russians."

"No offense taken, Pappy. By the time you finish my book, you will know I am not too fond of them either...and why. It's only by sheer luck that I am not rotting in some Russian prison...or dead. And indirectly, they robbed me of my best friend. I have no love for them. So let me ask that question in another way. What was the best advice you ever gave him?"

"Hmmm, I'll have to think about that. You haven't known me long, but long enough to know that I probably had plenty to say."

"Roger that. I know you are not one to keep an opinion to yourself." Dave could sense Pappy was settling down a little.

Pappy smiled. Their relationship was only now budding, but there was an instant mutual attraction and respect only shared by those who slip the surly bonds of earth. Dave knew he could learn much at Pappy's knee and longed for a future opportunity to do just that. Dave was smart...and knew it. But he was smart enough to know that true wisdom comes only from experience and age.

"I guess the best piece of advice was for him to trust his instincts. Your instinct is a conversation between your heart and your brain. Your brain gives valuable input built on experience, training, practice...your smarts. But all the knowledge in the world is pretty useless without input from your heart...the oughts, the should-haves, the want-tos, your personal ethics...and just that which makes you happy. If there's a raging battle between your heart and your brain, I can't tell you which one to follow...but when they conflict, it should be raising a red flag warning you to take a closer look."

"And the second piece of advice is to stay in the game. Unless you got a good reason to be a spectator, jump in the middle and make things happen. An old Aggie buddy of mine, another old Air Force colonel, had this sign on his desk. 'Say nothing. Do nothing. Be nothing.' He was the kind of guy who would choose to do something...even if there was a good chance that it was the wrong thing to do...than do nothing at all. He believed that it was easier to change the direction of your action than start it up from dead zero...kinda like Newton's Law. It's always more interesting and productive...and fun...to be in the middle of the action than to be on the outside looking in. Get in the game. Stay in the game. Stay engaged. But isn't that the way we pilots are? Isn't that the reason you went

in to rescue Pete from that POW cell? Did your airplane actually fly itself back to your base and land after you bailed out? Really?"

"Yeah, that's the way I programmed it. A lot has changed, Pappy...since W W two. I think the Air Force was going to even try to charge me for the canopy, parachute and ejection seat until it hit the newspapers. Then they got their hero and all was forgiven...I think."

"Being a hero isn't all it's cracked to be, is it?"

"I still don't want to talk about it, Pappy."

"I know. But Davy, one of these days, one of these days, you and me are going to grab a fifth of Beam with two straws, park our butts under the shade of a wing and have a heart-to-heart about life. I think that would do us both some good. We both are carrying some baggage along that we need to dump. I sense that you are...and I know I am. There's just something between us, Dave, that I trust, admire and love. Don't know what it is...maybe just an instinct. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah, Pappy. I know it would sure help me to have somebody to talk to. I promise you that I will get back to Kittyhawk someday soon, but right now you need to get some sleep."

"Oh, I will, but I want to read some on your book first. And did I thank you for pulling me out of that fire?"

"Nada, mi amigo."

"Well, it was to me. Thanks, I owe you, Dave." And he popped Dave a quick salute. Dave stood a little taller, returned the salute and headed back to Kittyhawk for the night. He had developed a new relationship, a new friend. He could see a lot of himself in Pappy...and a lot of Pappy in himself. He pledged he would fly again someday with this old eagle...but maybe not.

11

It was well after dark when Dave finally got back to Kittyhawk. All was quiet, and the security lights cast interesting shadows everywhere. He wondered about the condition of the Stearman and figured Pappy's friends had secured it in his hangar across the runway. He was just as happy, for he really did not want to see it right now; he could save that for another day.

Dave found the door to the hangar housing the Corsair was still unlocked. He was longing for a cold beer to go with the burger that he had picked up at the Royal in town. Dave wondered how many of his friends ever sat on a Corsair tire to eat their dinner. Well, he wasn't about to miss that opportunity and wished he had a camera to capture the moment. He toyed with the idea of eating in the cockpit, but that would be a violation of protocol. One doesn't climb into another man's cockpit without an invitation...but dinner under the wing is another matter. "I wonder how many guys my age have ever slept under a Corsair's wing," Dave mused. "Well, we're going to add one more to the list tonight. And if Nancy were here..." He returned with three cushions from the couch and bedded down for the night.

The dark hangar, the smell of the avgas and oil, the shadowed hulk of the Corsair overhead, the events of the day, this whole Chickenhawk thing...Dave's brain was a racetrack of thoughts and disquieting concerns. Why was he even here in Texas? Why was he even chasing this shadow? Why was he always asking himself why? Dave had always been a conflicting combination of self-doubt and awesome confidence and capabilities. "I'm supposed to be flying my jets and playing Air Force. What makes me think I can do any of this?"

Even though Dave acknowledged and honored this conflict, one of his greatest assets was that he knew his strengths...and his short-comings. He knew he had his doubts and his unique set of flaws, but he was beginning to like what he was and the journey of life he was on...quite a change from but a few weeks before. He loved being that different breed of cat...an Air Force combat pilot. He loved where it took him mentally and physically and emotionally. And he loved being among those who shared the joys and challenges of flight. He loved their bravado, their language, their niche in history and their view of life...and especially the trust and love of the brotherhood. He had staked out his position in the Long Blue Line.

Life was becoming clearer for Dave. Within the past few days, he had met an awesome woman that he could see in his future...and he had met a crotchety old pilot with a mutually developing love. For the first time since Pete's death, Dave felt he was genuinely lovable and loved. His thoughts turned to Pappy, and he hoped he would be okay. He would have a chance to visit him briefly before he returned to the Springs tomorrow.

"And I really want to see you again, Nancy, most of all." His last thoughts before he drifted into his slumber were of Nancy...and they lasted all night.

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Someone down the runway cranked up their engine...not a radial like the Corsair, but an inline, with a muffler. Nevertheless, it was loud enough to blow the cobwebs out of Dave's sleepy brain. He was stiff. Perhaps it was the night on the ground. Perhaps it was the strain of yesterday's parachute ride into that oak tree. After a bit of stretching and some push-ups, Dave stripped down and showered with the hose on the wash rack inside the hangar. He shaved at the kitchen sink and considered brushing his teeth with beer. "I'm not that kind of a pilot." He dressed quickly and headed for the hospital. He had a noon plane to catch back to Colorado Springs...and Nancy.

The door to Room 205 was shut. Dave thought that to be a bit strange and knocked. A nurse cracked open the door slightly and slipped out into the hallway, shutting the door behind her. "May I help you?"

"I just came to visit my friend and tell him goodbye."

"Sir, are you a family member?"

"No. No, I'm just a friend. He and I were in the airplane yesterday..."

"Sir, I hate to have to share with you the bad news, but Mr. Daley passed away last night in his sleep."

"Oh Christ! What happened?"

"We don't know yet. He was fine late last night. When the nurse checked on him just before midnight, he was lying there reading. No apparent problem. But this morning, he was gone. We only discovered this less than an hour ago. It's all very strange. No visible signs of anything. Guess it must have been his heart."

"May I see him? I want to tell him goodbye."

"I am sure that would be fine. Do you know who his next of kin would be?"

"No, I really did not know him that well. He told me about his ex living somewhere in Colorado, but that's all. He has some friends over at Kittyhawk airport, but other than that, I don't know."

Dave entered the darkened room with reverence. The curtains were drawn, and one small light illuminated Pappy's face. The nurse had straightened out his covers and provided as much respect for someone could under the

circumstances. There was really no expression on Pappy's face...just the calm that accompanies death. Dave put his hand on Pappy's and again muttered through the tears the words of the chorus of the Air Force song:

"Here's a toast to the host of those who love the vastness of the sky,
To a friend we will send the message of his brother men who fly.
We drink to those who gave their all of old,
Then down we dive to score the rainbow's pot of gold.
A toast to the host of the men we boast,
The U.S. Air Force."

Dave rendered his friend a final salute and started to leave the room. He noticed the copy of his book on the tray next to Pappy's bed, subconsciously picked it up and slipped it in his jacket pocket.

Sometimes life in the military really sucks...and this was one of those times. Flying can be a real thrill and provide some the highest highs...and the lowest lows. Flying creates an indescribable bond among those who choose to partake from the cup, but it leads its membership into Harm's way. And if one shakes that clenched fist into Fate's face too often, there may be a price to be paid. First, Pete, and now, Pappy. And there were others. Dave was sick of losing good friends. It's not a habit to which one becomes accustomed. If anything could ever get Dave to leave the wild blue, this was it.

The nurse met Dave in the hallway and again, expressed her condolences. "I just cannot imagine what happened. Apparently he was... Well, who knows what happened? I guess his heart just gave out. It appears he died peacefully in his sleep. But still, it's all just very strange."

The trip to the airport didn't even register in Dave's mind. He couldn't shake the thoughts. They were still with and about his new friend, Pappy. Dave had been around death before, but that was to be expected in his line of work. But with Pappy, it was different. He shouldn't be dead. They had a future together, Dave and Pappy...and now Dave had again been robbed of that by the Grim Reaper. "Sometimes my life sucks! What's next?"

12

Absorbed in those thoughts, Dave slid into his assigned seat next to the window on the left side of the MD-80 aircraft. He buckled in and stared out the window at the contrails crossing the clear Texas sky. He was conscious that someone had occupied the other seat to his right, but wasn't in the mood for conversation. "Just get me back to Colorado," he muttered softly. He wished he'd never found that picture of the Chickenhawk and had never encountered Pappy. He could feel the depression that followed Pete's death creeping back in. "Christ, why me? What's next?" He was about to discover just that as the man sitting next to him slipped a business card into his hand.

Without looking up, Dave read the penciled message on the card... "Don't look at me. Don't say a word until we're in the air." Dave turned the card over, and his heart almost jumped out of his chest when he read: Major John Charles Stebinski, Air Force Office of Special Investigation. It was Stebi! Dave couldn't resist, and turned to his right. Stebi was reading a magazine and paying no attention whatsoever to his fellow passenger... even looking away to ensure there was no conversation until the airliner was en route and the ambient noise level would cover their dialogue.

When the Captain had leveled off and powered back to a cruise power setting, Stebi initiated the conversation by leaning slightly over toward Dave. "I just want to know one thing, plow boy. What the hell are you up to?"

"What do you mean, Stebi? I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't play stupid with me, Dave. I'm taking one hell of a risk just talking with you. If my boss knew I was sitting here, he'd have my ass in the brig before dinner. Now, what are you up to? What are you doing in this mess? I want to know and want to know now!"

Dave could tell from Stebi's tone and nature that something ugly was coming down, and he had no clue what. "I don't know what you're talking about," Dave repeated.

"Then why were you digging through the files at the Academy library? And why did you go to the Boneyard at Tucson? And why were you with Colonel Daley? Do you have any inkling as to what you're involved in?"

"I went to the Academy for my reunion and to research my paper for a Masters' degree. I found a picture of Pappy, Colonel Daley, and his B-29 and a nuke code named Blockbuster. I went to the Boneyard looking for his 29 and found it, the Chickenhawk. Then a friend of mine located Colonel Daley in Texas, so I went to visit him to gather more info for my paper. But he died last night."

“Colonel Daley died? Damn, I'll bet those bastards killed him!”

“No, Stebi. He died in his sleep...probably from the burns he received... What? Who did you say killed him? You think Pappy was murdered? Who would have done that? He had no enemies.”

“Later. What do you know about Colonel Daley?”

“No! You said somebody killed Pappy? Who? Why? I want to know!”

“Later, Dave. Later. I'll tell you all I can. But now tell me about Daley.”

Dave hesitated as he processed Stebi's suspicion about Pappy's death. The energy in Dave's soul dwindled. “I know he was the AC of the B-29 that dropped Blockbuster on Yokohama...and that it didn't explode.” Dave could tell from Stebi's silent reaction that he had just slipped a turd into his punchbowl.

“Is that all you know, Dave?”

“Maybe and maybe not...but it's your time to answer some questions.”

“Such as?”

“Such as why are you asking so many questions...and why are you so interested in Colonel Daley and Blockbuster? And why do you know where I've been and who I've been talking to? But I really want to know why you think Pappy was murdered.”

“Okay...but understand that I shouldn't be talking to you about this at all. My boss at OSI doesn't know that I know you...and the only reason I followed you on this airplane is that I owe you a big one for saving my life in Korea.”

“So now you are responsible for me, your rose?” Dave noticed a slight smile on Stebi's face at the reference to *The Little Prince* and a conversation they had on the med-evac coming out of Korea.

“Right! Okay, this is it. After I got out of the hospital in San Antonio and healed up from those burns, I could never get back on flight status. Something about some damage to my lungs. They grounded me and were trying to throw me out of the Air Force, too. But you know me, Dave. Air Force is all I have ever known. It's in my blood. Well, I had a friend in Washington who found me a billet in the OSI, the Air Force Office of Special Investigation. It looked interesting, and I could keep my commission. I figured that eventually, I could get back my wings back.”

“So I've been working on this case tracking two bad guys out of the Georgia Soviet Socialistic Republic, there on the east end of the Black Sea. They are

trying to gather info on...on the last flight of the Chickenhawk. We don't know why they want it, but what you are telling me now makes sense. The Russians and the Georgians hate each other. The Russians keep an iron fist on Georgia, and I think the Georgian rebels want this nuke to use against the Ruskies. But we really don't know. So we're keeping an eye on these two guys."

"I followed them into C Springs, and when they left the Silver Fox Motel, they left some documents from the Academy library archives that contained the flight plan of the Chickenhawk the day the war ended...target, Yokohama. I didn't know the rest of the story until you just told me. Now it's beginning to make sense."

"So, Dave, you think there was a third nuke...this Blockbuster? How come we have never heard of this before?"

"Stebi, I don't think there was a third bomb; I know there was! Pappy told me so. He told me all about it...how they dropped it and how it didn't detonate. I've even got a picture of it. And he told me how they cloaked everything in secrecy when he returned to base. They even went as far as to pretend to return it to the U.S. to keep to use against the Russians. He even told me where it is today...in Tokyo Bay."

"Jesus, in Tokyo Bay? Do the Japs know about this?"

"Hell no! I'm the only one alive who knows where the bomb is...and now you."

"And maybe two Georgian terrorists."

"So how did you figure I was involved in this?"

"Well, Dave, every time these guys would get on an airplane, we would check the passenger manifest for several days around it going the same places...and your name kept popping out. I couldn't figure what the hell you were doing, but they were in Colorado Springs nearly the same time you were and flew to Tucson a couple of days ahead of you. Then they flew to Dallas ahead of you. They are still there, but some of my guys are tracking them. I wanted to talk to you in private to see what the hell you were doing...and here we are."

"So, Dave, tell me about Colonel Daley...Pappy. Why was he in the hospital?"

"And I want to know why you think...what was it you said...those two bastards killed him. He was just an old retired bomber pilot living out his dream. He had a Stearman and a Staggerwing in his hangar. He wasn't a threat to anyone."

"Except that he knew too much. He was the only one who really knew the story of Chickenhawk. The two Georgians found out somehow and needed to silence him. They obviously didn't know about you, or you might be dead, too."

“Well, this may shed some light on it. He took me up in his Stearman, and after a few minutes of flight, there was a small explosion, and the thing caught fire. Pappy couldn’t understand why it caught fire where it did and how it did. The fire started underneath my feet in the front cockpit. He said there was nothing there to ignite like that. It sounds like somebody, maybe these terrorists, rigged an incendiary on the Stearman.”

“Makes sense to me.”

“And that would also explain why the lines in my parachute were cut. They probably figured he would be wearing it and bail out when the plane caught fire. Wow! So when he survived all of that, they came to the hospital where he was being treated for the burns and finished the job. Must have been in the middle of the night. I remember the nurse said this morning how strange it was that he had died. Those sons of bitches. I’ve got a debt to settle with these boys. Who are they, Stebi?”

“All in due time, my friend, but these are some bad dudes. Be careful.”

“Stebi, I’ve got a girl friend in the Springs...works out at the Academy library. She helped me find Colonel Daley. Do you think she’s safe?”

“Yeah, these guys probably don’t know about you...or her. What’s her name?”

“Nancy.”

“Nancy what?”

“Just Nancy.”

“So you don’t know her last name...or what?”

“Actually...I don’t.”

“You’ve certainly got a way with women, plow boy.”

“More than you’ll ever know, Stebi. More than you’ll ever know.”

13

Soon after Major Stebinski left his seat to visit the john, an attractive, middle-aged Flight Attendant stopped to offer Dave something to drink. Her smile revealed dimples that would stop a train, and her Texas twang would soften an old saddle. Her name badge read Marilou. He secured a Coors for himself and then another for Stebinski. Reaching in his jacket pocket for money to cover the cost of the beer, he discovered the copy of his book retrieved from the hospital night stand and instinctively pulled it out. It was then he noticed the folded sheet of paper perhaps marking the place where Pappy was reading. He stared at the book spiritually...wondering if Pappy's reading was interrupted by the two murderers. He silently hoped that it was only the place marker when Pappy fell peacefully asleep. Dave swore he would extract fitting revenge for the death of his friend. In their brief friendship, Pappy had left an enduring wrinkle in Dave's soul. It were as if Dave had been searching for Pappy...or someone like him...to fulfill his life...maybe a replacement for Pete.

Death becomes your wingman in combat operations...and to Dave, death was no stranger. Dave was mentally and physically fit to give and to receive such...never fleeing, yet seldom seeking.

Dave was curious as to how much of the story Pappy had read and with a bizarre reverence opened it to the appropriate page. At the top of the folded paper was Dave's name, most likely written by Pappy's hand. He opened it as if it were a note from the grave...which in fact, it was. Pappy's message read...

"Dave, if you are reading this, then it means that I have crossed that last river...and I am sorry we could carry our friendship no further. I hate that, for I sense you are a good man...one that I would love to have had as a son. But from the events of today, I suspect something is afoot...the unexplained fire, the sabotaged parachute...and now my death. From our discussions, I know that the genie is out of the bottle, that others know I am the only one left who knows the secret of the third bomb. And those others may want to keep that story under wraps. I don't know who they might be or whose side they are on, but I have always feared the day when the story was exposed. Players from both sides are not to be trusted."

"There is still one piece of information that you do not know...and this is critical and relative to the exact location of the third bomb. I didn't tell you the absolute truth about the bomb drop...most everything was true...but not all. I told you I flew the bomb run on the flight-planned route, south to north, toward Tokyo and perpendicular to the main runway at Yokohama. That was the flight plan, and that's what all the released documents will tell. But I had another plan. I was going to fly west to east right down the runway, using Mount Fujiyama to shield me and the Chickenhawk from the blast. At 30,000 feet, we had 17 seconds until the shock wave from the blast caught up with us. Once we dropped the bomb,

we would be almost 10,000 pounds lighter. I was going to put the Chickenhawk into a shallow dive to accelerate to max speed. If all went right, by the time it detonated, we would be on the other side of the mountain and shielded from the blast. Although the first two bombers, Enola Gay and Bockscar, survived the blast, none of us really knew what effect the shock would have on the B-29's airframe. It seemed like no big deal at the time, for the point of detonation would be the same...2000 feet altitude and two miles west of the end of the runway. But it didn't go off. So instead of the bomb's being three and a quarter miles NW of the end of the runway, it should be in the water one mile west of the runway and right on centerline. So now you are truly the only one who knows where the damned thing sits."

"Dave, don't know what you have in mind now, but if the good Lord allows, I'll be looking over your shoulder and wishing I could help you. Always check six. Trust no one...only your instincts. Pappy"

A fire was now burning in his gut...a fire fueled by another untimely loss of a trusted friend. He recalled the feeling when he heard Pete had died...a feeling of anger without target, loneliness without abatement, guilt without explanation. He knew that for his own mental health and stability, he had to get it under control...and quickly. He knew the best solution for his grief was action.

Dave quickly refolded the paper and returned it to the book as Stebi returned and slid into his seat. He squeezed a lime into his beer, a habit he had picked up from Pete in Korea. His focus returned to the window, and his thoughts responded to the letter in Pappy's book. He had some choices to make, and fortunately Stebi's silence allowed for that to happen.

An intentional diversion, Dave returned his focus pleasantly back to Nancy and the fun they were to have at his reunion events. He questioned how much to reveal to her about Stebi and Blockbuster...but needed someone to trust. Pappy's words resounded in his mind...trust no one. What role in this did Stebi really play? Who were the two Georgians, and what threat were they to him...and to Nancy? What would happen if he just destroyed Pappy's letter and forgot about the whole thing...but he knew there was slim chance for that.

As the Rockies began extending above the western horizon, Dave knew what he had to do. "Stebi, do you have pictures of the two guys?"

"What would you do with them if I gave them to you?"

"Always answering a question with a question," thought Dave. Playing Stebi's game, Dave responded, "Is there a problem with your giving them to me? After all, I have certainly given you a ton of info."

Stebi smiled as he produced four photos showing the men. "Yuri and Alexi Gorchov...brothers."

After studying the photos for a few minutes, Dave returned them to Stebi. "Here's what I want you to do, Stebi. Go back to your boss, and tell him about our meeting. Tell him everything I have told you. I think I know what you guys are going to have to do. And then find me, and tell me your plans."

"Dave, that ain't happening. He'll never bring you into this. This is way over your head. I know you're thinking about revenge, and that has no place in this...at least right now. Your wanting revenge creates a dangerous situation for the rest of us. No way are you getting involved. No way."

"Just tell him...and tell him one more thing. I didn't tell you the whole story. There is more, and if you guys go off trying to find this bomb on what you know, you'll just be pissin' in the wind. I am the only one alive who knows where that bomb really is. The choice is yours."

"Now my class reunion is this week-end in the Springs, and I have one hell of a date. I'll be there all week-end and will call you on Sunday. I have your business card and phone number. You guys talk it over, and we'll negotiate."

"You're bluffing, Dave. I can tell it in your eyes."

"Maybe I am, and maybe I'm not. I can go off and forget all about this, and let you guys go off on your wild goose hunt. But sooner or later, you'll be back knocking on my door. That's your choice. Bring me on board, and I'll take you straight to the bomb...first. Then you have to help me finish the job with your two bad guys. That's all I ask."

"Okay, Davie, that's a fair enough deal. We'll talk on Sunday. I'll see what I can do...but you'd better not be bull-shittin' me."

"Stebi, one last thing...I will never lie to you. I may not tell you everything I know, but I will never lie to you. We've got to trust somebody in our lives...and today, I choose you. Don't disappoint me. So long, my friend. Do svedanya, moi droog."

"Do svedanya," Stebi replied in his limited Russian with an Appalachian accent.

As soon as the seatbelt light extinguished, Stebinski bolted for the door without as much as looking back at Dave. By the time Dave had complimented the Captain for his good landing and cleared the airliner, Stebi was nowhere to be seen in the Colorado Springs airport terminal.

14

The bar at the Air Force Academy Officers' Club was a dark but socially inviting place. Nancy had promised to meet Dave there after work, so he had a bit of time to kill with his Beam and Coke. He had been in this room once before as a Cadet when several of them were invited over to meet Sir Frank Whittle, the Brit who invented the jet engine for the Allies during WWII. Behind the bar was a stuffed falcon, the first of the Academy mascots. Dave had always thought it odd to have a dead bird in a bar, but then Roy Rogers had stuffed his Trigger.

Dave reflected on those who had frequented this bar. So many in the aviation world had visited the Academy for one reason or another and probably had spent some time on Dave's barstool. "Oh, if that stuffed bird could only talk," mused Dave. "The war stories, the propositions, the shared secrets, the bragging...the lies..."

It had been only a few days since he had been with Nancy...but it seemed like an eternity. He had known her less than a week now, and already she had gotten into parts of his being that Dave had feared were closed forever. He hoped she felt the same...and soon would discover that she did.

Nancy was certainly easy on Dave's eyes, but there was more. She maintained a mystery that attracted Dave. And for the first time of all the girls that had passed through the doors of his life, this one was bright and street-smart and quick and challenging...and, yes, more than a bit intimidating. It was not that Dave looked down on women, but they had always been on the sidelines of his life...something who brought pleasure and beauty to the Spartan life he had chosen. But Nancy was indeed different. He thought back to the time of his teenage life when he first noticed that girls were different. Now he was discovering that women are different. Perhaps it was his biological clock. Perhaps it was seeing so many of his friends involved in family relationships. Perhaps it was his emerging from the depression of losing his friend, Pete. And perhaps it was just Nancy. But Dave acknowledged the difference...and sought more.

From the darkened bar, looking back toward the sun-drenched entry vestibule was somewhat blinding. But when Nancy entered the door, Dave's grin strained facial muscles unused for several years. The bright sunlight permeating her thin white cotton dress left little to Dave's imagination. Suddenly, Pappy's death, his encounter with Stebi, the whole Blockbuster issue...nothing was more important to Dave than experiencing Nancy.

She walked briskly to Dave, throwing her purse upon the bar and engulfing him in an endless and silent hug. Dave could feel the rapid beating of her heart against his chest, but soon felt more...the moisture of her tears upon his shirt. He held

her head to his chest and kissed her so lightly on the top of her head. "What's the matter, baby?"

"I...have...missed...you...so much," she whispered with a quiver in her voice.

"Well, I'm here now, and I hope that makes you as happy as it makes me. You have been on my mind every minute we were apart. I slept beneath the wing of a Corsair last night, and I dreamed of you." Dave was surprised by her emotion...but not disappointed. He searched for more meaningful words, but her soft lips soon got in the way, communicating all unspoken emotions.

The lingering kiss continued until the bartender interrupted. "Shall I get you a round of drinks...or a room?"

"A room," responded Dave.

"A dirty martini, up," retorted Nancy with a smile and another quick kiss. "Once a Cadet, always a Cadet. You're all the same, and you never change."

"I don't think I want to hear the rest of that story."

"No, you don't," she offered wryly. "Come, I want to hear all about your trip." And she led Dave to a booth in the darkest corner of the room.

They did have a lot to talk about...Pappy, Chickenhawk...and finally the encounter with Stebi. But Dave failed to mention his Sunday plans and turned the conversation to his class reunion...and her little black dress.

Dave had no real plans until the Friday night reunion dinner, and in the back of his mind had a driving interest in returning to Stanley Canyon. It had been almost five years since he carried Pete's ashes up that canyon. "Do you like to hike, Nancy?"

"Do I like to hike? I'm a Colorado girl, Dave. We all love to hike...and fish...and ski...all the outdoors stuff. What do you have in mind?"

"Can you get off work tomorrow?"

"Let's see. Tomorrow is Thursday. Yes, most likely. I can make a phone call and check on it."

"I was thinking about hiking up Stanley Canyon to the reservoir. We can make it in two hours tops...maybe less."

"Don't forget the altitude, flatlander. I'll be waiting for you at the top."

Dave just shook his head. He loved that part about Nancy...always ready to go...always in his face. "Do you have a bed roll?"

"Will I need one?" she retorted with a twinkle.

"Just bring a bedroll...and anything else girls need. I'll bring the food and will cook you a campfire dinner you will never forget. We could go up today, but it would get dark on us. And I still have to go to the commissary to get a few things for the trip."

"Oh, I have a class tonight anyway, Dave. I couldn't go."

"I was hoping we could do dinner or something tonight, Nancy...maybe just lay on the grass and look at the stars."

"Sounds like a good plan for tomorrow night...at Stanley Reservoir. But I have a test tonight and can't miss. Can you wait?"

"As long as it takes, baby...as long as it takes."

Time for each of them passed too quickly, and soon it was time for Nancy to excuse herself and head for class. "I'm really sorry about tonight, Dave. I would have liked to stay. But we will have a great time tomorrow...I promise." And with that, she gave Dave a peck on the cheek and turned to leave. "Call me when you wake up tomorrow."

Dave just watched her as she walked to her car...admiring the view. "Wow," he whispered to himself. Her fragrance remained. "Wow."

15

There is no better sleeping than in the cool of the Colorado Rockies...with the window open. Dave remembered that from his Cadet days. Pete and he would sleep with their dorm windows wide open in a snow storm. It was something about the altitude, no humidity and the cold all wrapped together. "If I could bottle it, I'd be a millionaire," mused Dave.

His call awoke Nancy, so he knew he had plenty of time to make his commissary run and to get his back pack in order. It wasn't that far to her condo, but no trip in the Colorado mountains is a short one...and she still had to get ready. Dave was always amused by how long it took a woman to get ready...but he had learned early on that the wait was generally worth it.

They had agreed to meet at noon at the trail head at the foot of Stanley Canyon just west of the Academy Hospital, not far up the hill from the Officers' Club. There was a safe place there to park if you didn't leave food in your car that would attract the bears. A bear in search of food pays no respect to a vintage rag top or rich Corinthian leather.

When Dave reached the trail head, Nancy was there waiting for him, adjusting her back pack and looking good to Dave. Her dark hair was stuffed up under a blue Air Force stocking cap, and her jeans looked to Dave as if they had been painted onto her body. He had only seen her before dressed for work and loved this new look. The wear on her hiking boots told him she had been in these trees before.

"Good morning, pretty lady. Ready for a climb?"

She gave him her signature peck on the cheek. "Couldn't ask for a better morning...or a better hiking partner. Let's head 'em up and move 'em out, cowboy. I'll race you to the top."

"Hey," Dave countered. He took off his glove and put his hand on her cheek. "We're not rushing anywhere. I have you all to myself today, and I'm going to enjoy every minute of it...nice and slow."

Nancy smiled in silent anticipation, took Dave's bandana from around his neck and tied it around hers. Dave figured that was symbolic of something...but didn't know what...but he felt something in his heart. "This girl is different," he thought to himself. She turned and started up the trail toward Stanley Canyon...but paused. "Oh, I forgot to tell you. I invited a friend along to spend the day with us."

"You did what?" Dave was just a bit aggravated...but tried not to show it. He had wanted her all to himself today. No intruders.

Nancy whistled and called, "Lucy! Come here!" And out of the trees bounded a hundred pounds of Golden Retriever. She was a beauty. "She loves the out-of-doors, Dave. I couldn't leave her back in the apartment by herself. What do you think?"

Lucy ran up to Dave, tail wagging furiously, and placed her huge paws squarely on Dave's chest, nearly knocking him down. "Sit, Lucy, sit!" And she promptly did. But she held out her paw towards Dave...and he instinctively grabbed it and shook it. Instant friendship!

"Oh, she's a beauty. I left one just like her back on the ranch when I came to Colorado. She's gone now, but I sure did hate to lose her. I always wondered what she thought when I left her. I love this dog. Now, what other surprises do you have for me? You don't have a boy friend, do you?"

"I don't know," Nancy countered with a wink. "Ask me tomorrow." And with that, she and Lucy turned up the trail.

• • •

The canyon walls rise rapidly, leaving room only for the narrow trail and the rushing creek. Autumn had begun to take its toll on the aspens, and their leaves were turning to their burnt red color...but the evergreens stood as strong as ever. A gentle breeze eased down the canyon, carrying the ethereal scent of the pines and generations past. Dave was pleased to be back among his friends...especially with his newest one.

About a third of the way to the top, the trail widened briefly, and Nancy called for a rest break. They dropped their back packs to the ground and sat beside the trail. After an uncomfortable silence, Nancy took a swig from her canteen and handed it to Dave. "Isn't this the spot, Dave?"

"How did you know, baby?"

"I went back and read that part of your book last night." That moved Dave. "Is this your first time back?"

"Yeah."

"Do you want to be alone? I can move on up the trail a bit."

"I don't want to be alone, but I need a moment to myself. Does that make any sense?"

"It does to me," she responded. She put her hand on his chest momentarily and turned away from him to give him his desired time and space.

Dave's thoughts turned back to that snowy evening when he carried Pete's ashes up the canyon to this spot and returned them to the earth. He thought about the poem he tied to the tree limb there and the broken wine glass. Yes, this was the spot. After a few moments, he picked up his back pack and started up the trail. "Thanks."

After a few silent minutes of hiking, Dave looked back at Nancy. "It's a beautiful day, isn't it?"

"Getting better all the time, Dave." Although she didn't fully understand what had transpired, Nancy knew the appropriate time to be Nancy and the appropriate time to shut up. It was a good decision...one not unnoticed by her partner. "Thanks, again." Lucy led the way up the canyon.

At the top of the steep trail just below the dam was a large meadow of tall grasses...always a welcomed sight for the hiker, for the trail widened and was less steep...and the end of the hike was near. Dave invited Nancy to take the lead. He wanted to see her reaction when she first saw Stanley Reservoir, a special and sacred place for Dave...and hopefully for Nancy. He wasn't disappointed. At her first view, she pressed her palms together as if praying...but said nothing. She slowly surveyed the mountain pond, standing on the berm above the water's edge and put her arm around Dave's waist. "Awesome," she whispered.

"This beautiful mountain lake...or me?"

"Oh, whatever. Now where do you want to make our campsite?"

Dave pointed over to the ledge high above the water. "Best view in town...guaranteed."

"Aye, aye, Captain. Now if you will get me some wood, I'll start a fire and make us some coffee."

"Wow, a beautiful woman who also cooks! You will make some man a great wife some day."

"I hate to break the news to you, Dave, but there is more to being a good wife than looking good and cooking...but I accept the compliment."

"No, what I meant was..."

"Just get us some wood. I know what you mean. You did bring coffee, didn't you?"

Soon the #10 can of water was boiling, so Nancy dumped in about a cup of Folgers.

"So how do you intend to get the grounds out of it, Chef?"

"No problem," Nancy answered as she removed Dave's bandana from her neck. "Not to worry; it will wash out."

"Have you ever seen anyone put a raw egg in it to settle out the grounds? I had a Turk friend who made it that way. It seemed to work, but his coffee was still terrible."

After the coffee had boiled for a few minutes, Nancy spread the bandana over one of the canteen cups and slowly poured the coffee, allowing the bandana to filter out the grounds and whatever else was in the reservoir water. Then she did the same with the other cup. She pulled several sugar packets from her pack and offered them to Dave. "Helps kill the taste a bit," offered Nancy. "And this might help, too," as she pulled out a package of Twinkies.

The coffee tasted quite good with the sugar...certainly better than Dave had anticipated. "This is a special day, Nancy. I'm so glad we are here...just you and me. A special place with a special lady...and her dog."

Nancy felt the same, but was afraid to express those feelings. She had been in love and been hurt before. "Maybe this one is different," she thought to herself..."but aren't they all?" She just smiled at Dave and slid over a little closer to him. Lucy pushed between them.

"I am going to miss this place, Nancy...and you, too," he clumsily added.

"Do we really need to talk about that right now? Can't we just enjoy the time we get to have together? This is now a special place for me, too, Dave...our little Rocky Mountain hideaway."

After a few moments of staring into the surrounding beauty, Dave broke the awkward silence. "I guess what I meant was that I know I must leave soon and return to my base in Arizona...and I hate to go. These mountains and the Academy have meant so much in my life. They are my touch stone, my home base...lots of great memories. Someday I hope to come back here and never leave again."

"So why don't you...if that is what you really want to do? Why don't you try to get an assignment here?"

"Nancy, there are a lot of very talented people assigned to the Academy. I just don't think I would fit in."

"Oh, you might be surprised, Dave. I have known a lot of guys assigned here, and the best ones are exactly like you."

"Would you like for me to be stationed here?"

"Drink your coffee, Captain." Deep in her heart, that was precisely what Nancy wanted. She found something within Dave where she could not consider him just as another man in her life. There was just something about Dave...a different breed of cat.

"Interested in taking a short hike, mountain girl? There's something I want to show you...if I can find it again. You have been around these weird Cadets long enough to appreciate it."

And the short hike took them to a rocky ridge overlooking the Academy. "Watch your step. It's very steep, and these boulders are loose." Before them lay a wide gravel slide about the size of a football field.

"Is this where you Cadets come to sacrifice your virgins?"

"I didn't know there were any left in Colorado."

"Touché, kind sir. I pray thou shalt spare me."

Dave bowed slightly. "So aren't you going to ask me why this place is special?"

"So Dave, tell me why this place is so special."

"We call this boulder bowling. Help me loosen this boulder." Dave and Nancy struggled with a boulder about the size of a basketball, and Dave balanced it so it wouldn't roll down the side of the mountain. "Now give it a push and see what happens."

"Tell me you are kidding. We might start a landslide."

"No way. Give it a push." And she did. The boulder bounced and rolled down the side of the mountain, careening off other boulders, and smashed into a tree at the bottom of the gravel slide. "Strike!" shouted Dave. "You get extra points if you knock down the tree."

"This is really weird, Dave. You guys need to get out more."

"So now you have been boulder bowling...if anybody ever asks."

"Honestly, I hope no one ever does." Nancy just shook her head in disbelief. "Do you think I could do another one?"

"Oh, really? Now tell me again who's a little weird."

Shaking her head in simulated disgust, "Come on, Dave. Let's go start on dinner. We only have a couple of hours of daylight left."

• • •

It didn't take long to rekindle the fire, and as the shadows grew longer and the mountain air chilled, the fire felt good. Dave had spread an old blanket on the ground next to the fire to help keep down the dust. From his pack, he pulled a bottle of Tuscan red and handed it to Nancy. "Why don't you pour us a couple of glasses while I get our steaks ready."

"Steaks? Really?"

"Only the best for you, Nancy. Yes, and baked potatoes...and a can of pork and beans. And oatmeal cookies for dessert. How does that sound to you?"

Dave opened the can of beans and shoved them into a small pile of hot coals next to the potatoes he had wrapped in foil earlier in the day after swathing them in butter. Then he salted and peppered two filets and placed them in a medium-sized iron skillet with more butter. "It'll take an hour for the potatoes, so we don't want to put the steaks on just yet."

"Okay, I'm impressed, Dave."

"I like to hike, but I don't like to suffer when I do. I always eat well when I go back-packing. Food cooked on an open fire always tastes good to me. Sorry I don't have any appetizers."

"I do," offered Nancy, as she pulled some jerky, string cheese and Ritz crackers from her pack. "Cheers," she toasted, as she handed Dave his plastic glass of red. "Just pretend it's Waterford."

"Nancy, I can't remember ever being so happy. Thanks."

She just smiled. This was a new experience for her...the first of her relationships with a man where she truly wanted to make him happy just for the sake of his being happy...no strings attached. For the first time, it was less about her and more about them.

• • •

Dave saved the last bite of his steak for Lucy...just as he had always done with his own dog back on the ranch in Montana. He washed the dishes off in the lake as Nancy poured the last two glasses of wine left in the bottle. The fire logs had burned down to glowing embers, but the warmth was sufficient to fight back the evening chill. A campfire always mellowed Dave out...and the wine helped. "Embers kinda remind me of clouds. No two are the same, and if you let your imagination run free, you can see all sorts of things in there...faces, animals...things."

"And that hasn't changed throughout history," added Nancy. "Our ancestors living in caves probably did the same thing...maybe right on this spot."

The conversation around the fire lasted long into the night...centering mostly around their growing up. It was obvious that each wanted to hear about the other. It did not go unnoticed by Nancy that whenever the conversation came around to Korea or Pete that Dave would change the subject. She wondered why some subjects were taboo...but chose to leave them alone...for the time being.

As the fire dwindled and the night chill increased, Nancy unrolled her bedroll, took off her boots and crawled in. Dave unrolled his next to her and did the same. He had enjoyed the evening with Nancy and moved to give her a good-night kiss. But Lucy left her warm spot by the fire and shoved her big body between them, emitting a slight growl from deep in her throat. Nancy chuckled, "Good night, David. Thanks for a wonderful evening."

"Good night, Chet."

16

After coffee and a couple of Twinkies at daybreak, Dave and Nancy broke camp and headed back down Stanley Canyon. Dave had several reunion meetings to attend, and Nancy had to be back at the Library by nine. The conversation was lively, and they had already passed the spot where Dave had left Pete's ashes before he even thought of it...an acknowledgement that he either was getting better and was enjoying the great company. Dave knew that either was a positive step for him. Lucy was waiting for them at the bottom. The hike and the time spent together served them both well, and each anticipated the planned reunion events of the evening and of the week-end. Dave wanted to tell her about Stebinski and Sunday...but hesitated.

The plans for Dave's class reunion included a dinner dance that Friday evening at the Academy Officers' Club, a Saturday memorial service to honor those who had passed over the past five years, A Cadet Wing parade, some briefings and a football game at Falcon Field against Navy. The AF team had beaten Army at West Point earlier in the season, so if they could defeat Navy, Air Force would retain the Commander's Trophy for another year. Betting on games between service academies is always risky, for they are always emotional, and skill is but a lesser part of the game.

Dave was billeted at the Visiting Officers' Quarters next to the O Club, and they agreed to meet at Dave's room at six that evening. Having her own car was important to Nancy. It was a pain to have to drive all the way in to the Academy from her condo, but it gave her control of the evening. This was her first real date with Dave, and she didn't know whether things would unfold or unravel. Colorado women who date Cadets are used to driving...primarily because many underclassmen may not or do not own cars. That is a privilege reserved for the upper classes. Although Dave had his vintage 'Vette, it still gave her control...and for Nancy, that was her choice. In a way, she hoped she would be driving home in daylight...and she brought along several changes of clothes just in case.

Deep down, Nancy wondered why Dave wasn't married yet. Had he been? It was unusual to find someone like Dave, five years after graduation and still not in a serious relationship of some sort. That would be a subject she would have to delve into tonight. She had been burned once before, and she wasn't going to repeat. But then she realized that Dave must have the same questions about her.

Many thoughts raced through Nancy's mind as she headed for the VOQ. She sat in her car outside Dave's quarters for a few minutes thinking about the evening before her, how she expected it to unfold and to end. She smoothed a few wrinkles from her LBD that Dave had asked her to wear, grabbed her few essentials and headed for Dave's door.

“I saw you pull up. I was afraid you were changing your mind and would drive away. Is everything all right?”

“Fine. Just fine.” And she gave him a quick peck on the cheek. “I just had a few things on my mind that I had to work out. Now where can a lady make her few final adjustments for her exciting evening?”

“The place is yours. Make yourself at home. I poured you a glass of wine over on the table there. I’m going to take mine out and sit on the front steps and stare at the mountains...and Stanley Canyon.”

• • •

This wasn’t the first time Nancy had experienced a man’s room but still found it interesting, and a bit exciting, to see what was scattered around the sink. She picked up his cologne and appreciated its fragrance. She had never encountered Issey before.

It didn’t take long for Nancy to freshen up her make-up and again adjust her little black dress. And when everything was just right, and that last look in the mirror had affirmed it, she refilled her glass and headed out to meet her man.

“Wow,” exclaimed Dave at his first sight of his date. “Wow!”

“I take it that you approve?”

“Nancy, with you on my arm tonight, my friends won’t even know I’m in the room. Wow!”

“Thank you,” and another peck on the cheek. “Are you ready to walk me up to the O Club?”

“Almost,” as he pulled a small silver chain with a tiny cross from his pocket. He bent down and snapped it around her ankle. “Now I’m ready,” and returned her a kiss on the cheek.

Nancy had never owned an ankle bracelet before, and found it made her feel so feminine and sexy. And she was glad it had been Dave who had led her there.

• • •

The reunion dinner had gone about as Dave had expected...a toast to the Commander-in-Chief...a few brief comments by class leaders...a few barbs tossed about...some mystery meat that tasted like chicken and looked liked fish...a few choruses of The Air Force Song with the men and a few of the ladies standing on their chairs. The effect of booze at this elevation always takes many

by surprise. All in all, a good time was being had by all who had chosen to return. Being who they were, where they were in their careers, most of the returning classmates were super competitive. There was more than enough one-upmanship and bragging to go around...and Dave tired of that very quickly. His life had taken him into arenas that he'd just as well close the door on and walk away. Many of his friends, as he had expected, wanted to hear about Pete, and he courteously gave it appropriate lip service. Many camp-followers wanted to talk to their 'hero' and even have their pictures taken with Dave. Every atta-boy felt to Dave as nails in Pete's coffin. Nancy was wise enough to observe what Dave was experiencing and suffered with him quietly a short distance away, but always in his view.

Fortunately, the after-dinner music soon started, and she could rescue him to the dance floor for some R&R. All in all, Dave was enjoying his reunion and the reminiscing about their Cadet days. But he was glad to have Nancy in his arms on the dance floor, enjoying the intimacy of the moment among the throng filling the room.

"You dance very well, Captain Edwards.

Dave didn't answer.

"Baby, are you with me tonight? I know this must be hard for you."

"Sorry, Nancy. I guess I wasn't ready for all of this. The last three or four years of my life haven't been too pretty. I'm sorry."

"Dave, we can leave if you want to. I'm okay with that."

"And miss dancing with you? I may be a little screwed up, but I'm not crazy! I've been looking forward to this night with you, and I'm not going to let Pete screw it up. It's time for me to claim my life back...and I'm glad you are here to help." A little extra squeeze around her waist was answered by her resting her head on Dave's chest. The fragrance of her hair stirred feelings too long ignored.

Nancy looked up into Dave's eyes and whispered, "Dave, just for tonight, forget about Pete, forget about Pappy, forget about that damned bomb. You are with me tonight, and I sense this is going to be a night for creating memories...just you and me.

It was like a scene from a 1940s war movie where the hero dances the heroine right out through the double doors onto the darkened porch outside. The combo was playing Glenn Miller's Moonlight Serenade. It was a perfect evening for both Nancy and Dave...and they shared their first real kiss in the cool of the evening under the Colorado stars.

17

Friday night had been perfect for Dave and Nancy in all ways. Their time spent together had been casual and slow...giving them ample time to get to know each other and just take pleasure in each other's company. Trust and friendship grow quickly and unbounded when that is a shared goal...as it was in each of their lives.

Saturday morning plans included a Memorial Service in the Cadet Chapel where the name of each departed classmate is read...and the response from another classmate is always a resounding "Present, sir!". Too many classmates had lost their lives either in flight school or in the on-going conflict on the Korean peninsula. Dave answered when Pete's name was called. It was always a moving and inspiring service where many Spartan tears were shed. Nancy, in all of her years at the Academy, had never entered the Cadet Chapel and was overwhelmed by the gravity of the moment. Though she really did not know Pete that well, she felt the pain shared by Dave and his friends. As they left the Chapel, the bright morning sun jarred them back to the moment.

Busses awaited to take them from the Cadet Area to Falcon Stadium for the one o'clock kick-off. It was only a ten-minute ride, and by the time they arrived for the pre-planned tailgate extravaganza of BBQ and beer, the chatter was incessant.

"Dave, I have a surprise for you. And we can do it, or not...and it's totally your choice."

"Sounds interesting. Tell me more."

"See those box seats just below the press box. The Association of Graduates has one every game. And I have a friend who works for them and has invited us to join in. We can watch the game from there. Open bar and a great lunch. They always have the cheerleaders and the Falcon and all kinds of stuff going on. However, it will mean you won't be sitting with your classmate. What do you think?"

"Well, let's give it a try, and if it's dull and boring with a bunch of old Generals and Colonels and wannabes, we can leave and go sit with my guys...maybe at halftime. How's that?" Dave appreciated Nancy's efforts and didn't want to rain on her plans. They could always bailout if necessary. Secretly, he wanted to see how the big dogs live and play. And now was his chance. He had no clue as to how this decision was to change his life...in many ways...and it would take years for it all to unfold.

Adjoining the west outer wall of the press box tower at Falcon Stadium was an enormous glass-walled room filled with several hundred Falcon fans wearing the Academy's silver and blue. Most were nosily chatting with their friends, eating

barbeque at the tables or refilling their libations at the open bar. "Ah, the privilege of rank," thought Dave.

Kick-off was still an hour away, so they had plenty of time to eat and join in on the fellowship. The noise level was overwhelming. The aroma of the chow reminded Dave that he had missed breakfast.

As they stood in line for lunch, Dave continued to be charmed by Nancy's wide open personality. Many of the officers greeted her by name, and Dave found himself to be just a little jealous as to the camaraderie she shared with them. They found a place to sit at a table with several other couples. "Can I grab you a beer?"

"Sweet tea, please," Nancy replied.

By the time Dave returned with their drinks, Nancy was in lighthearted conversation with others at the table. The subject focused on the Falcons' ability to beat Navy. He placed Nancy's drink before her and sat down without comment. Dave was always a bit shy in these situations and had never been good at the small talk. "Dave, let me introduce you around the table."

Sitting next to Dave was a young Colonel, looking only a few years older than Dave. "Hi, Dave. Glad to meet you. I'm Greg Frederick. I work for the Dean here and know Nancy from the Library. I spend a lot of time there with my job."

"Dave, Colonel Frederick is the Chairman of the History Department. You two have something in common."

"What's that, Dave," asked the Colonel.

"Oh, the way I met Nancy was that I was up here to research for my thesis. I'm finishing up my Master's in history, and the Cadet Library has some recently released classified documents that cover the end of World War II. I thought I might turn up something that would impress my professor."

"Had any luck yet?" Nancy bumped his knee before he could reply to the Colonel.

"Nothing yet, but one never knows what lies hidden in dusty boxes."

"Spoken like a true historical detective," mused the Colonel. "But aren't you also here for your class reunion? I think I heard Nancy talking about it."

"Roger that, sir. Just mixing business with pleasure."

"So is Miss Nancy business or pleasure?"

“A little of one and a whole lot of the other.” And that got Dave another bump on his leg.

“So what are you researching for your thesis, Dave?”

“The end of WWII and the transition to the MacArthur...dictatorship...and the Japanese economic recovery.”

“Yup, those were interesting days. I don’t know how we all survived the chaos. But history is showing us that Mac was the right ‘dictator’ for the moment. Without him, Japan would certainly not be what it is today. I wonder if the Japanese people understand what good he did for them. Too bad he and Truman couldn’t work their problems out together. Those were two very determined, stubborn and...ego-centric men...but thank God they were there...and on our side.”

“Let me ask you a question, Colonel. What do you think would have happened if the Japanese government had not surrendered after the second nuke was dropped on Nagasaki?”

“Well, that’s a question that most of us historians debate. There were no more atomic bombs, and it was to take months to develop another. Some argue that the first nuke, the test weapon exploded at Trinity site in Nevada, should have been saved for the Japanese...just in case. But we had to know what was going to happen when it detonated. Some scientist predicted that a nuclear blast would ignite the earth’s atmosphere. Others thought that splitting the atom was impossible...that the weapon would not detonate at all. Neither, of course, was correct. But the testing had to be done...leaving us with only two bombs to use at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.”

The Colonel took a sip of his Coors and continued, “But to answer your question, we actually got very lucky. If they had not surrendered after Nagasaki, we would eventually have had to invade the Japanese islands...and the predictions of casualties were in the millions of GIs. It would have been a blood bath for both the Allies and for the Japanese people.”

“Thanks. Can I quote you in my paper, sir?”

“Sure, but only if you footnote it properly,” he mused. “I’ll be looking for your thesis. Be sure to send us...or Nancy...a copy for our files. Sorry, Dave, I didn’t catch your last name.”

“Edwards, sir. Captain Dave Edwards, at your service.”

“Dave Edwards. Hmmm. Why do I know that name? Have we met before?”

And with that question, Dave's demeanor visibly changed. "I don't think so, sir. I haven't been back to the Academy since I graduated." Once again, Dave felt the anxiety building, triggered by his distaste of playing hero and then having the conversation turn to Pete's death. He knew what was coming and felt the need to flee. "Nancy, don't you think we'd better get on up to the AOG box. I'd like to see the Cadets march onto the field before kick-off. Nice to meet all of you folks. Now let's beat Navy!" And with that, Dave whisked Nancy away from the table. Nancy thought she understood why, but she was somewhat agitated to have her plan go down in flames. She had covertly pre-arranged for Dave to sit next to Colonel Frederick in hopes that their meeting might lead to Dave's returning to the Academy to teach on his staff. Perhaps it was self-serving, but she had learned early on how to work the military system to gain what she wanted...and her cross-hairs were definitely centered on Dave.

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Nancy stopped at the base of the stairs going up to the box where they would watch the game. "That's twice I have seen you do that...once with me, and once with the History Department Chairman. And believe me, I'm not complaining, Dave, or being negative, but I just need for you to explain it to me."

"What are we talking about?"

"Dave, you are a national hero. Magazines and newspapers...and even a book have

documented your bravery. Everyone wants to talk with you, to stand next to you, to have their picture taken with you. Your classmates adore you. But you run from the attention every time it happens. I don't get it. You're a hero. People need heroes."

"Is that what you think of me? Am I your hero?" Dave was visibly agitated. He had felt this way on earlier occasions, and he'd identified it as occurring whenever the conversation circled back to his combat experience. He had seen too much and had lost too much to discuss these topics with non-combatants...and those who had experienced the same simply didn't talk about it. Bad memories are easily resurrected and near impossible to force back into the bottle. "I don't want to be a hero...yours or anyone else's. I just want to be Dave Edwards. Why can't they just leave me alone?"

"No, Dave. That's not what I meant. I..."

"Is that why you are here? Is that what you see in me...just your personal hero? If I was just plain Dave Edwards from Montana, would you still date me?" Dave hated himself for feeling this way and talking this way. It was the albatross that would forever hang around his neck.

"Stop, Dave. This is really getting out of hand. You are reading way too much into..."

"Listen. I need to go to the john." Dave knew he needed his space and needed it now. He really did not want to expose this dark side to Nancy...at least not this early in what he hoped would be a lasting relationship. "Why don't you go on up to the box and grab us a seat. I'll be along in a minute."

"Okay, Dave, but I..." Nancy's words were wasted as Dave had already turned and walked away. Nancy validated to herself that she had treaded on an exposed nerve and swore to herself she would never go there again.

Nevertheless, she questioned herself as to why she was so attracted to Dave. Was Dave right on the mark? Was this a case of hero worship for her? Perhaps he was right. She had been with many men of Dave's mettle. Why Dave? Why was he different...or was he? Why was she falling so quickly for him? It would be an eventful interlude before her questions were ever to be answered.

Dave walked back outside. He needed space and time to deal with this conversation and potential revelation. Sitting on a stone wall next to the steps and sidewalk, he stared into the trees west of the stadium and wondered on these events. "Why am I that way? Nancy was right. I don't want to be a hero. I never wanted to be a hero. Does Nancy only like me because of who I am? Of course, she likes me for who I am. But does she even know who I am? Do I even know who I am? Dammit, Pete. Why did you leave me? I need you, buddy."

Dave never considered himself to be brave or a hero. He only did what his heart led him to do. And his heart led him to go after Pete and rescue him. Sure, he had saved Pete's life...and Stebi's. But that was not the reason he did what he did back in Korea. And he hated it when people tried to make him something he wasn't. It only reminded him that his best friend, Pete, was dead...and nothing could even the scales in that trade. He hated the notoriety, he hated the book, and he hated the damned war that cost him his best friend and his personal freedoms. "There are days when I wish I'd never left the Bitterroots."

"Captain Edwards. Captain David Edwards?"

Dave turned to face a tall, angular Senior Master Sergeant dressed in Class A blues with stripes halfway down his arm. "My card, sir. Major Stebinski told me I'd find you here."

Dave returned the salute and examined the business card. He was from the same OSI office as Stebinski. "Sir, I have a car waiting. If you will follow me, sir."

"Wait, I can't leave. I have a date, and..."

"Sir, I have a car...and an airplane waiting for you. We are leaving now. We have taken the liberty to pick up your clothes at the VOQ. Now if you will follow me, sir."

"What about my 'Vette?"

"You won't be needing that for a while, sir. We will take care of it."

"Who is 'we', Sergeant?"

"All in its own time, sir."

• • •

By the time Nancy reached the door to the AOG box, tears were streaming down her cheeks. She was hurt, she was confused, and she was afraid. She didn't understand what had just transpired. Part of her was angry with Dave; part angry with herself...but mostly just confused. Nancy did not want to confront Dave in her scrambled state of mind and she certainly did not want to lose him...she just wanted to flee. She found her girl friend there and asked her to tell Dave that she had to leave. Her message was never delivered.

Nancy descended the stairs quickly, tears streaming down her cheeks. As she reached the bottom, she passed Colonel Frederick and his wife. "Nancy. Nancy!" She paused, but did not turn to him. "Nancy, are you okay? What happened?"

"Dammit, I screwed it up royally...again. Why do I do that?"

He put his arms around her and pulled her head to his chest. "Okay, tell me what happened? I assume it has to do with Dave."

"He hates me. He thinks I am only interested in him because he is a hero. And nothing could be farther from the truth. I really like this guy." Nancy looked up into the Colonel's dark eyes. "I mean I really do like this guy."

"Well, Nancy, don't you think that set-up back at the table was just a bit shallow...a bit too transparent? Don't you think he might have felt you were trying to manipulate him? Guys like Dave don't like that."

"No. It wasn't like that at all."

"Really, Nancy? Really? You could have fooled me."

"Okay, maybe. Okay, it was. But I was just trying to open a door for him...with you. There's nothing wrong with that. After all, he would be good here at the Academy...and it would be good for him...and for the Cadets. You have grads...and heroes...working for you. All of the academic departments have them. They are everywhere. And before you ask it, yes, it would be good for me, too!"

"Nancy, let me tell you about guys like Dave...our heroes, as you call them. Men...and women...are labeled heroes generally because they have shown unreasonable bravery in the face of extreme danger...and that applies to a large number of graduates from here and the other academies...and even to many, many others who ended up in Harm's way. And this extreme danger often means that people get injured or even killed. Sometimes even the hero gets killed. Nevertheless, the decisions and the actions of the hero, while showing his bravery, can result in the death of others...even a close comrade or friend. And

the constant reminders of being a hero just re-opens the old wound of losing that friend. I have two friends, Air Force officers, who were awarded the Medal of Honor for their bravery in combat. In both cases, friends died as a result of their actions. Either one of those fellows would tell you today that they would willingly return their medal to have their friends back. Their medal is a constant reminder of their loss...not their gain. Everywhere they go, every introduction, every event, they are lauded as a Medal of Honor winner. They stand, they accept the accolades, they smile and wave to the audience...but inside they are crying...and dying just a little more. I know Dave's story and sense that he still grieves for Pete. He may not have participated in Pete's death directly, but he stills feels some responsibility...and cannot handle the notoriety. If you want in Dave's life, you'd better learn how to handle this...and protect Dave from himself. That's just the way he is wired up."

"So what do I do now? I'm a wreck. I'm hurting. Dave's hurting. I want this to just go away, but I'm not ready to face Dave right now."

"Well, Nancy. It looks to me like you were running away from it...and that's not a bad plan. Go home and get yourself straight. I'll go upstairs and tell Dave you weren't feeling well and had to leave...and that you will call him tonight. How does that sound? And that will give each of you some time to get your thoughts together. You don't want to lose this guy, right?"

• • •

Dave's trip from Falcon Field to Peterson Air Force Base took only about twenty minutes. It seemed longer with no conversation. Dave could only suppose what Nancy must be thinking and how he had wanted to continue their conversation over dinner at Villa Italia that night. His parting with her had not been cordial. He had other plans for her, also, that were now going to have to wait...perhaps indefinitely.

19

Whether a Lear Jet, a Sabliner or a Citation, Dave couldn't tell one from another. They were not fighters...only small luxury passenger airplanes for important people to ride quickly from one important meeting to another...not something Dave had ever done or ever wanted to do. The plane awaiting Dave carried no military markings whatsoever...only a tail number. Instincts made Dave nervous. The unknowns of this venue were adding up too quickly. Yes, he had given Stebi and his henchmen an ultimatum. And yes, the answer came quickly, a day earlier than expected...but he was yet to know just what that answer was.

The staff car pulled up along side the parked jet...its door was open and one engine was running. Without comment, the Sergeant came around and opened Dave's door. Once Dave had cleared the door, the Sergeant shut it, handed Dave his bag, returned to his seat without speaking and drove away. Dave looked up and down the deserted tarmac. He looked toward Falcon Stadium, but the curvature of the earth kept it hidden. Every instinct screamed at Dave to run...but Dave never ran from anything in his life. He approached the ramp into the small plane, tossed in his bag and climbed into the unknown.

Entering the plane was like boarding a submarine. The only way for an adult to straighten up would require him to be on his knees. "Good afternoon, plow boy. Air Force is ahead of Navy 7-0...middle of the first quarter. Sit down so we can get airborne." It was Stebinski.

Dave took the seat opposite Stebinski. There was only one seat on each side of the aisle of the small fuselage, but it was built for comfort. "I thought I was to call you tomorrow. What's the deal?"

"What's the matter? Have a hot date?"

"You know damned well I did...until your gorilla paid me a visit. She probably thinks I dumped her."

"Is this Miss Nancy No-name?"

"Yup."

"Serious?"

"It could get there. I sure like what I've seen so far, but since you kidnapped me, my chances with her are probably in the toilet...and I wouldn't blame her. Kinda reminds me of your Dawn...only Nancy has better taste in men."

Really? How would you know?"

Dave could hear the second engine turn up and the pressurization kick in. The pilot started his taxi toward the end of Peterson's longest runway. At that altitude, there was no reason to take chances. Dave wanted to ask Stebi where they were going, but he figured he would find out soon enough. And knowing that knowledge was power, he chose not to give that power to Stebi by revealing his curiosity. A turn to the northwest soon after take-off gave Dave the hint he needed. They were bound for Japan via Alaska...the Great Circle route.

"Dave, your military record says you took some training in SCUBA at the Academy. Did you ever get certified?"

"I took a week in the Grand Caymans sailing and diving. Got my certification there. And I've done probably a dozen dives since then. So we're going after the bomb, Huh?"

"So you know how to sail, too. Good. Ever dived at night?"

"Sure. Haven't you?"

"No, but it can't be that tough."

"It's not. So we are going for the bomb, and we're going to do it at night?"

"Yeah, Dave, and it's only going to be you and me. My boss bought into your demand...on my recommendation. And the reason I didn't wait until tomorrow is that the two guys we've been tailing, the two Georgians, are currently en route for Japan. The hunt...and the race...have started."

"The good news, Stebi, is that they don't know where the bomb is...and better than that, they don't know that they don't know. They won't be far away from us, however...maybe two or three miles at the most. Do you think they know about us?"

"No way, Davey. They didn't even know they were being tailed. We're going over as two trophy fishermen from Canada. Our agent in Tokyo is securing a boat for us...a powered, ocean-worthy catamaran sailboat. It'll have a 10-ton winch, provisions, a couple of M-16s and a M-60 machine gun... and diving gear...and some fishing gear. Now, are you ready to tell me where the damned bomb is?"

"All in good time, Stebi. All in good time. That's my only insurance. Now what are we going to do with this bomb once we have it on board our boat?"

"All in good time, Davey. All in good time."

Stebi tossed Dave a sealed packet. "You may want to study all of this. We're going to be on this plane for quite a while. I was up all night putting this together, and I need some shut-eye. Wake me up when we stop to refuel at Anchorage."

Dave opened the packet and spread the contents across the small table in front of him. He couldn't help but think about Nancy and what she must be thinking about now. He knew she would find her way back to his room and find it vacant and his Corvette gone. She would probably try to call him...but with no answer. He hated to think of the pain...and perhaps the anger...that awaited her...and awaited him when he found his way back to her. And he would do just that, but first he had adventure and revenge on his platter. Little did he know that at the very moment, she was returning to her condo alone, thinking how Dave must be at the ballgame wondering why she had left. Neither knew the actions of the other.

20

Something just wasn't right with this situation. Here was Dave flying half-way around the world in an unmarked airplane sitting across from a friend that he really did not know...but trusted. Pappy's words..."Trust no one...only your instincts"...continued to haunt him. Who was Stebi now? He said he was with the OSI, but they wouldn't be dealing with an international nuclear event such as this. That would be at a much higher level of the government...if he indeed was working for the U.S. government. Pappy had warned Dave that the information he had shared regarding the location of the bomb might put a target on his back. He just didn't know whose finger was on the trigger. Dave truly wanted to trust Stebi; they had a history. But he would, as Pappy had cautioned, keep checking six. He knew Stebi wasn't showing all his cards...and Stebi knew he knew it. Dave was once again in a chess match with Stebi...but the stakes were much higher. And Dave was not happy with himself that he had revealed and involved Nancy. He vowed to protect his knowledge and, hence, his power in his relationship with Stebinski.

The sun had dropped into the Pacific off the port side of the plane several hours before the time the jet started its descent into Elmendorf Air Force Base in Anchorage. Dave had digested the packets contents and deduced some awareness on what was before them.

The two Georgian terrorists, Yuri and Alexi Gorchov, were classified as intelligence agents by the government and had most likely discovered the existence of the third bomb much like Dave did...through the recent release of the WWII classified documents. Their country of Georgia was being ravaged by the Russians, and they hoped to salvage the bomb to use against them...but in what fashion was only a guess. Perhaps they had a way to transport the bomb into Russia with plans to detonate it there. Perhaps it was to be used only as a threat or a deterrent. Their intent and their capabilities remained an unknown.

Nautical charts gave details of the search area off the west end of the Yokohama main runway. Dave mentally figured the location of the third bomb from Pappy's letter...and then penciled a mark on the chart exactly one mile west. "Trust no one," he murmured.

Dave had scoured the manual describing the big catamaran sailboat in detail. He figured he could sail this boat by himself, if needed. And the fact it was powered might just provide that extra edge. The electric winch was mounted on the superstructure between the hulls and should be able to handle the weight of Blockbuster. Little Boy and Fat Man weighed in at 8,900 and 10,300 pounds each, so Dave figured Blockbuster would be similar. An additional 10000 pounds would certainly make the big cat sit deeper in the water and decrease its speed. Hopefully, that would not be an issue.

Also in the packet were manuals for two fish finders, a Magnetic Anomaly Detector and a portable sonar unit. He didn't know the condition of the floor of Tokyo Bay, whether sand or silt, but figured since it was an industrial area, Blockbuster would be in gray water and probably under silt and industrial waste. Hopefully, they could detect it with the on-board electronics. If not, they would be diving into the murk and searching for it one step at a time...and probably at night.

Dave still questioned Stebi's plan for the bomb. Two things he knew for sure. They were not going to detonate it, and they were not going to tell the Japanese government. His best guess, since Stebi was withholding that part of his plan, was that since it was an ocean-capable catamaran, they were simply going to haul it out into open waters and transfer it to a Navy ship. But too many eyes meant potential disclosure of the nuke. The extradition, transfer and disposition of Blockbuster needed to be invisible to all but the chosen few...including the satellites.

Perhaps the most troubling document in the packet was a treatise on nuclear weaponry with extensive detail on Little Boy and Fat Man. Why Stebi was so interested in the fine details of these bombs concerned Dave. He had aced a course at the Air Force Academy on Nuclear Engineering and fully understood the simple concepts of fission and fusion bombs.

Regardless of the type of material, its atoms have a center or nucleus consisting of neutrons and protons with electrons spinning about the nucleus in various orbits. The number of protons, neutrons and electrons depend on the material. In other words, a carbon atom differs from an oxygen atom even though they are made up from the same basic parts. It takes internal electrical energy to keep the electrons in orbit, somewhat like the gravitational energy that keeps the Moon in orbit around the Earth. If the electron can be split away from the nucleus, that energy expended in keeping it in its orbit is released in the form of heat. And while splitting one atom would render only minute energy, massive simultaneous splittings would release tremendous amounts of heat, light and shock...a nuclear explosion.

Though the concept is simple, the mechanics of creating such a process are intricate and delicate. The escaping electrons impact other orbiting electrons, splitting them from their atoms, much like a cue ball busting up a triangle of pool balls, and the chain reaction begins. Whatever the material chosen for the nuclear reaction, it must be pure and refined to eliminate extraneous particles that would collide with the electrons and rob them of their energy. And some materials are better than others for nuclear reactions due to the atomic structure, the population and positioning of the orbiting electrons, the ability to refine the material and the simple availability of the material. Plutonium and uranium were the early elements of choice.

As the chain reaction of atom splitting quickly progresses during the nuclear explosion, the intense released heat quickly destroys the remaining material, so only a small portion of the base element is actually consumed. Therefore, the design and construction of the weapon is critical for maximizing the force of the explosion. Additionally, the chaos of the massive splitting process creates all sorts of atomic particles and bi-products...radioactivity...capable of producing long-term damage to living human and animal cell structure.

There were two types of nuclear weapons initially developed during WWII, the fusion bomb and the fission bomb. Though the concept of atom splitting was the same, the process or mechanics was quite different.

Little Boy, the Hiroshima weapon, was a uranium-based fission weapon. A mass of refined uranium isotope is fired, much like a cannon shell, into another similar mass. As the atoms collide, the impact separates orbiting electrons from their nuclei, and the chain reaction begins.

On the other hand, Fat Man was a plutonium-based fusion weapon and released over Nagasaki. Due to its atomic structure, plutonium required a different process to initiate the chain reaction. A mass of the base element was surrounded by explosive, much like the shell surrounding the egg. The simultaneous ignition of the explosive material forced an implosion of the core plutonium, driving the atoms into each other, resulting in the same atom splitting as in the fusion weapon.

While Little Boy looked more like a conventional bomb, Fat Man was short and round, like an egg. From its picture, Dave figured Blockbuster to be a fission weapon. But why was Stebi interested in such detail? Dave's instincts were sending up all sorts of red flares. The fact that they were about to land at a U.S. Air Force base somewhat quieted his concerns.

21

It was well after dark when the jet rolled to a stop and the pilot had opened the door. The stuffy cabin was quickly inundated with the cool Alaskan autumn air. The cramped interior of the small jet had taken its toll over the past six hours, and the two passengers were anxious to get off and stretch a bit. Dave noticed they had parked the jet far from the terminal in the shadows of the big hangars that lined the tarmac...and wondered why.

“I think I’ll walk down to the terminal and grab us a couple of sandwiches. You want to go, Stebi?”

“You’re not going anywhere. The relief crew will be here shortly, and they’ll have us some chow. Get some exercise. It’s a long haul on down to Japan. We’ll take off as soon as we get refueled. And no phone calls! By the way, Air Force beat Navy 21 zip.”

Dave was tempted to start jogging down the ramp...just to see what Stebinski would do. He noticed a Security Police truck parked in the dark under the wing of a C-130 across the ramp...and had second thoughts. The fuel truck had completed its work, and the new crew, dressed in non-descript street clothes, signaled for Dave and Stebi to re-board.

The leg from the Aleutians to Japanese airspace was always dicey. The flight path bordered Russian airspace along the Kamchatka Peninsular, home of much of the classified Russian space program, and past the vast east coast military complex at Vladivostok. US spy planes frequented this area, eavesdropping on Soviet communications, especially when launch activities increased. Russian fighters were known for intercepting and harassing air traffic through this area when they strayed off the published airway. And Soviet radar and intercept capabilities and procedures were known as flawed. This is where they had even intercepted and shot down the Boeing 747, Korean Airlines flight 007, en route from Anchorage to Seoul, killing all two hundred and sixty nine passengers and crew on board. Apparently it had strayed off course and crossed Kamchatka and Sakhalin causing the Russians to think it was an AF KC-135 on a spy mission...even though they had intercepted it and had a visual contact. There were few similarities between a 135 and a 747. The Soviet air defense system was just dismal...from its radar capabilities to its weaponry and its flight crew performance. If they only knew what particular cargo this flight was carrying and what impact it could have on their future.

As they passed abeam Vladivostok some 200 miles to the west, Stebi reflected on Dave’s famous rescue when Pete, Dave and he were POWs on that Russian helicopter en route there. “You know, Dave. If you and Pete hadn’t pulled that off, we might still be in a cell there...if we were even still alive. Even if they had gotten all of the intelligence from us that they wanted, they couldn’t let us go.

They couldn't let the world know that we even existed. I'm glad you two saved us all from those sonofabitches."

Dave just smiled without comment...but he appreciated Stebi's comments.

"I wonder whatever became of the aircrew on that choper...if any of them survived."

"Well, I know of one...the drunk flight mech you tripped. He went out the door head first without a parachute. They all got what they deserved. I'm more curious about what happened to the chopper. Probably ended up at Wright-Patt at the Foreign Technology Division. They probably tore it down to the last nut and bolt. Don't you think they should have at least sent us a thank you note for the gift? It's not everyday they get a fully operational Russian helicopter to play with."

"Give it a rest, Dave. It was only a helicopter...not a real airplane."

22

It was a surreal sight as the little jet circled for its approach to Tachikawa Air Base, Japan. From the air, it looked as if all of Japan was covered in low clouds. But protruding up through the cloud deck was the 12,365-foot volcanic peak of Mt. Fuji. Now Dave understood why Pappy wanted to use it as protection for his B-29 from the blast of Blockbuster.

Also protruding through the cloud deck was the top of Tokyo Tower, much resembling the Parisian Eiffel Tower. It wasn't constructed until the late 50s, but several other towers were there during the WWII B-29 raids. Although much of Tokyo was destroyed by these raids, great care was given to avoiding those existing towers so they could be used as navigation check points for bombing on cloudy days such as this day.

Dave reflected on how we are all just pawns in history...niches in the edifice of the time continuum. We are not unlike the pebble thrown into a stream. We may cause a wave or two with our lives, but soon everything returns to its beginnings and few will remember we even passed this way. Dave was flying through the same air molecules as did Chickenhawk, looking at the same mountain, returning with Stebi to the same base where they had received medical help after being POWs, en route to find something left for him some four decades earlier by his friend and hero, Pappy. All the parts were coming together. And hopefully, he would rejoin the two who had stood on the same ground as he at the Boneyard, the Academy and Kittyhawk...but this time, he would be the only one left standing. Revenge still burned deep within his soul.

The approach down through the clouds and the touchdown were without incident. Tachikawa was in the process of ending its U.S. flight operations, opting for the longer runways at near-by Yokota AFB. The U.S. would maintain the large medical facility and the base housing for a while...but the base was dying. And base activity and security showed it. Even the control tower was unmanned. Few would notice the small jet; no one would care.

Once the engines had ceased spooling and the cabin door opened, an older oriental gentleman entered the cabin, acknowledged Dave and bowed slightly to Stebi. "Sir, welcome back to Japan. I have you on a diplomatic visa and have arranged for you to bypass customs. You don't really need to know anymore than that. The van awaits as you requested for your immediate departure." He again bowed to Stebi and handed him a packet. Then he nodded his head to Dave, departed the jet and disappeared into the shadows.

Dave and Stebi exited onto the abandoned ramp, trying to stretch out the soreness of having been stuffed in that small cabin for so many hours. Stebi climbed into the driver's seat of the small van and pulled several maps and papers from the packet. After he had looked them over, he stuffed them back into

the envelope and pitched it up on the dash along with the packet from the jet. Dave reached for them, only to have Stebi slide them out of his reach. "You only need to know what you need to know. Too much knowledge can be harmful."

"Open up the glove box, Dave, and see if he left me something."

Dave found the 'something' wrapped in a slightly oily rag...two Beretta 9mm automatics and two extra clips. "Let's put these out of sight." Dave instinctively pulled back the receiver to ensure his was loaded. The action ejected the round in the chamber, and it rattled to the floor. He did the same for the second pistol and handed it to his partner. Dave picked up the two rounds and stashed them in his pocket.

As Stebi guided the small van down through the myriad of Tachikawa hangars and warehouses, it became obvious to Dave that Stebi had been here before...and again he wondered why. Eventually they came to an unmanned gate, and they entered the teeming chaos of Tokyo traffic.

Tachikawa was about twenty miles west of the center of Tokyo and about the same distance from Yokohama to the southeast, where their catamaran was docked on Tokyo Bay. Normally, without traffic, the trip would take about an hour through the twisting streets, but Tokyo is never without traffic. Half of Tokyo commutes into the city to work, and the rush hour never seems to end. There are actually two evening rush hours in Tokyo...one when the offices close and another when the bars close. Dave figured this would be a lengthy trip...and he was right...a bit over two hours. But it gave Dave and Stebi a chance to discuss what lay before them.

"Dave, here's what I suggest we do...and, believe it or not, I'm open to suggestions. Let's board the cat, grab a bite to eat and bed down. At first light tomorrow, we launch and head generally out into Tokyo Bay. We'll fish, or pretend to fish, just to check out the area and see if anyone challenges us. Late tomorrow afternoon, we'll crisscross the target area several times to see if we raise anyone's attention...and look for the two Georgians."

"Do you have any clue as to what kind of a boat they will have?" And Dave couldn't resist a sarcastic addition, "You seem to know everything else."

"Dave, this is my job, my mission. I am solely responsible for every detail. If I fail, it's my ass and my reputation. If we succeed, then you are a hero...again. You got nothing to lose."

"But my life."

“Anytime you want out, just mark the spot on the map for me and I’ll drop you at the nearest train station.” With that, Stebi took the nautical chart out of the packet and slapped it into Dave’s lap.

Dave unfolded the map to where it showed the spot he had earlier marked...and slapped it back on the dash board where Stebi could see it. “Anytime you don’t want me on this mission, drop me at the nearest train station.” Nothing much was said as they continued on to Yokohama and the catamaran. However, Dave noted that they passed two rail stations.

Stebi finally broke the silence. “To answer your question, I do not know what kind of a boat they will have. I assume they will have rented it...or stolen it. I figure it will be capable of lifting five tons out of the silt, so it will have to be bigger than a fishing rig. I don’t know what their plans are for the bomb, so I don’t know if it will be ocean-going or not. It’s possible that they are simply going to locate it first and bring in something larger to lift it. I just don’t know...but those are my deductions that I’m working from.”

“Do you think they have agents here in Tokyo to help them...like you do?”

“I doubt it...or we would know about it.”

“Who is ‘we’...the OSI?”

Stebi ignored the question.

“Stebi, the fact that you didn’t answer that question tells me something.”

“Think what you wish, plowboy.”

This time, Dave broke the silence. “So there could be more than two of them.”

“And maybe more than one boat. We’ll just have to deal with whatever comes up.”

Dave felt the 9mm he had stashed in the pocket of his jacket. “You ever done anything like this before, Stebi?”

“Naw, most of my days are spent writing parking tickets at the base commissary.”

Dave couldn’t help but smile. He had always loved Stebi’s sharp tongue and quick wit...even the year Stebi was his upperclassman at the Air Force Academy. Part of Dave wanted to like Stebi, for they were more alike than different. Dave recognized that his mistrust centered around his total inability to read his cohort. Maybe Stebi was just secretive, gruff and curt. Maybe that was just his personality and style. Maybe Stebi didn’t like it that Dave still withheld parts of the

puzzle he was assembling...that he wasn't in total control of his mission. And Dave understood that, but it was his insurance that Stebi would lead him to the two Georgians...and the opportunity to revenge Pappy's death. But with Stebi, there always seemed to be another agenda...one that Dave couldn't penetrate. And Dave had learned the hard way not to trust those he could not read or understand. He had to understand their motivation and schema. To Dave, Stebi was still an unknown. About the time he began to warm up to Stebi, he would fire a shot across Dave's bow. But he wasn't about to give up, for deep inside, he had somehow attached to Stebi.

"Tell me, Stebi, do you ever miss flying? What's it been now...four years?"

"What do you think? Wouldn't you miss it? That's all I ever wanted to do. That's why I put up with four years of crap at the Zoo. Do I miss flying? Only when I'm awake...and when I'm not. After the injuries I got from getting shot down and that POW thing, they grounded me...and that's that. I had to re-invent my life. But do I miss it? You can bet your sweet ass I do. Wouldn't you?"

"Yeah, guess I would. It sure gets in your blood. But I've got to admit, a couple of months ago, I was ready to hang it up. I was worn out. I was still depressed about Pete's death. And I was dangerous...to myself and to my students. I needed a change."

"Never thought you'd be in Tokyo Bay fishing for a nuke, did you?"

"No. And this last week...meeting Nancy, being with my friends at our Reunion, snooping around the Boneyard and the Library, meeting Pappy...and even you...it's been a welcome change that I really needed."

"Pappy really made an impact on you. I would have liked to have met him."

"There aren't guys like him around anymore. Oh, the things he must have seen in his lie. What a character. What a hero! A different breed of cat. Knowing him makes me want to hang around and grow old."

"I promise you this, Dave. My first goal is to find that bomb and dispose of it. That's my goal. But my gut tells me we will meet those two assholes that did Pappy in...and when we do, I will help you take care of your business. But don't let revenge capture your attention. Revenge can make you do stupid stuff, make bad decisions."

"Have you ever killed anybody, Stebi?"

"Haven't you?"

“Yea...probably. But who really knows? You drop a bomb, fire a missile, squeeze off a few hundred rounds...and something...or somebody...blows up. But you’ve been there. We never hang around to count scalps. Most of the time, you don’t even see the results of your actions. I mean have you ever killed somebody right in front of you? Have you seen them bleed and die?”

“You mean like those Russians on board that helicopter?”

“Yeah, but I really didn’t see them die. That’s not what I mean. Hell, I don’t really know what I mean.”

“Let me help you, Dave. You are thinking you might get the opportunity to kill the guys who killed Pappy...and you’re beginning to have second thoughts. You wonder if you can really do it...’cause it will be up front and personal when you do. You may literally have their blood on your hands. Only you can answer that question. But let me share with you some advice that a friend gave me before I first went to combat. He was more than a friend; he was my Pastor. You may find this to be weird advice coming from a man of God, but it probably saved my life...maybe more than once. He warned me that when you get the opportunity or encounter the necessity to pull the trigger on someone, you better have already made that decision...already thought it through. Because if you don’t and you hesitate, it may cost you your life. And if you hesitate, you may cost me my life, too. So you need to decide now what you are going to do then. In the line of work that I am in now, I know what I’m going to do...without any hesitation. No, I’m not some movie super-hero that intends to kill them all and let God pick out the good ones. I do value human life...but I value mine ever more. I owe it to myself...and to my family...to have cleared my mind of any hesitation.”

“I get it, Stebi. And that is what I was thinking about. And I appreciate your putting things so clearly...about the dangers of revenge...about hesitation...and about mission before revenge. I get it.”

“First things first, Dave. But we will get those bastards. If it’s that important to you, then it’s that important to me. You have my word.”

“Thanks, Stebi... I’m good with that.”

23

Tokyo was like any other large Asian city...Bangkok, Seoul, Taipei. Tight winding streets, shop after shop, small apartments over family businesses, laundry hanging from windows, micro cars with an over-abundance of motor bikes, open-air markets, and aromas unknown to the Western nostril. Too many people in too little space...like a crowded elevator. The maze of mankind was continuous from Tachi to Yokohama and beyond.

Stebi navigated straight to the spot where the catamaran was berthed. It looked somewhat larger than Dave had figured...and not near as far. Stenciled across the back of the cabin in English was Takahashi Salvage. By its dress, one could tell that this was a work boat...not a scow by any means...but a ship capable of putting in a good day's work...and had.

"Let's sit here in the van a minute and check out the neighborhood. One never knows what awaits." All seemed quiet. A few fishermen moving about, readying for tomorrow's work...nothing suspicious...nothing noticeably out of place.

Dave and Stebi finally boarded, carrying the few things they had brought with them. "Check under that cargo net for the machine gun and the M-16s. Make sure they are loaded. You might find a better home for the M-60 machine gun. I'm going to check the other provisions."

Dave found everything in order. He checked both M-16s and chambered a round in each. He hoisted the M-60 to the top of the cabin, mounted it on its tripod and stashed it beneath the emergency dingy secured there.

The two large hulls of the catamaran were joined together by a deck structure supporting the bridge and a cabin that served as the joint living and working area and one large mast for the sail assemblies. Each stern carried a large outboard engine, each one fueled by one large fuel tank on the after-deck. Dave checked it and found it full. The winch was mid-ship and appeared new.

"Looks good to me, Dave. The charts are on the bridge. Enough food and water on board to sail the South Pacific. There is even a case of Kirin Grand Ale in the cooler. But don't mess with the can of Coke on the door. It's booby trapped."

"What?"

"Yeah, I cut the bottom out of it and slipped a grenade up inside it...without the pin, of course. If you pick it up, the grenade falls out...and boom! One never knows when that might come in handy."

Dave just shook his head. "Thanks for telling me."

“Just stick with the beer. It’s much better for you. You don’t sleep walk, do you?”

“On a booby trapped sail boat in the middle of Tokyo Bay carrying a nuclear weapon...I think I’ll strap myself into my bunk at night.”

“I’m getting hungry. What kind of beer goes with quail eggs and bean curd?”

“Cold!”

It had been a long day for the duo, and the beer did taste good. They sat on the deck against the cargo net and just enjoyed the cool evening sea breeze, the small talk...and each other. They shared a history together...pawns in the long blue line, perhaps...but still a history.

“Tell me something, Dave. Where do you think you will be ten years from now? What’s on your wish list?”

“Do you really care, or are you just making small talk?” Dave wondered why he had given such a dumb response. But he had already played the card...one that couldn’t be recalled.

“You really don’t like me, do you, Dave?”

“Is it important that I do, Stebi?”

That set him back for a moment. He realized he really did not know the answer to Dave’s rebuttal? But after an awkward moment, “Yeah. Yeah, I guess it is important....to me...tho’ I’m not sure why.”

“Stebi, remember the guys who played the roles of our Commie interrogators in POW training in survival school? I was stationed with one of them in Korea...although I didn’t recognize him in an Air Force uniform. He always ate alone in the Mess...never seemed to have any friends. One day I joined him at his table, just trying to cheer him up a bit. The conversation was a bit uncomfortable for him, it seemed. I thought he really had some psych problems. Then I recognized him...and remembered the pain he inflicted on me. I remember he had his name written in Russian on his coffee cup. Clyde, it was. And I asked him. He admitted that he was the one and told me how people whom he had interrogated...and tortured...didn’t like him and stayed away from him. I, too, got up from his table and never spoke with him again. He just seemed to enjoy his job too much.”

“And you think I was like that guy when I was your upperclassman at the Academy? You think I enjoyed that job too much? You think I was too hard on you?”

“Yeah, at the time, but this is not about me, Stebi. It's about you. I thought you were a chicken shit SOB...but there's more to the story. Even though Clyde was tough on me, he taught me enough to survive as a real POW. What a gift he gave me...and I wish I could meet him again someday to tell him...and to thank him.”

“So I guess you're wanting to thank me for making you tough, huh, Dave?”

“Hell no...you're still a chicken shit SOB.”

They looked at each other for but a moment, broke into a gut laugh...and clinked their empty Kirin bottles together.

“Uno mas, mi amigo?”

“Why the hell not? But not a Coke!”

24

By nature, the day's activities surrounding any port in the world start early...long before the Sun arrives. The musty smell of the waterfront coupled with diesel exhaust and whatever mystery meat and spices get wokked for a hearty fisherman's breakfast platter overwhelmed the plum blossoms that lined the road into the crowded dock area. Dave had always loved the orient...a continuing conflict of centuries of history with the teaming technical advances of the day...a man wearing a loin cloth secured with a piece of rope adjusting his GPS unit on his hundred-year-old fishing boat...the shiny red Datsun pickup parked next to a cart drawn by a water buffalo...the jets landing at nearby Yokohama airport overflying women with baskets balanced on their heads working the local rice paddies.

The first glow of sunlight in the east outlined the hulk of Mt. Fuji. Rising basically from sea level to over twelve thousand feet, it seemed to dwarf even Pike's Peak or any of the other Colorado Fourteeners that Dave and Stebi were so familiar with from their Cadet days. He understood why Pappy had planned to use it as a shield between his B-29 and the nuclear blast. Its shadow stretched further out into Tokyo Bay than either could see.

Sleeping on a boat, even on one tied to a pier, had always gifted Dave with a good night's sleep. Perhaps it was the gentle rocking or maybe the white noise or the fresh air that cradled Dave, but he had always loved being on or around the water. North of where he was raised in the Montana Bitterroots, north of Missoula, was one of Dave's favorite spots in all the world, Flathead Lake. He had awoken many mornings of his early life there, ready for another day of excellent fishing or hiking or just messing around. Today he awoke to a greater challenge. Stebi was already checking out the boat's control panel on the bridge at the front of the small cabin.

"The fuel gage is showing the tank full. Why don't you go give it another check just to make sure? And make sure the cap is secure."

Dave grunted something less than comprehensible and went about his work. The fuel tank was mounted near the back wall of the cabin just forward of the 200-horse outboards mounted to the transoms of the two sponsons that made up the catamaran hull. He found it full as expected and closed the filler cap. "Don't crank 'em yet, Stebi. Let me check the oil. Don't know how long we'll be out."

Dave was sprawled out on the deck reaching over the gunnels to check the engine oil and failed to notice that in the long string of fishing and work boats gathered to leave their small inlet port in that early morning hour was a small barge manned by two round-eyes. Dave might have recognized them from Stebi's photos at that short range had he been looking. In this nippon-centric venue, any Caucasian invites attention...as did Dave when these two passed by.

Yet they failed to notice Stebi standing in the darkened cabin watching them through his binoculars. He muttered to himself, "Well, looks like the Gorchov brothers are in town."

Dave pulled in the gangway plank and returned to the bridge. "Let me know when you're ready, and I'll untie us."

"As soon as I fire up both engines, cast us off. Let's go fishing!"

When the second engine started, Dave lifted the lines from the moorings and tossed them aboard. Stebi cranked the engines full to port and backed out slowly to enter the stream of boats heading for open water. He wasn't about to tell Dave that he had no idea as to what he was doing, but he had been aboard a Navy destroyer when it left its dock in this fashion.

From water level, Tokyo Bay looks like the ocean...nothing but water, water everywhere, with enough haze to limit visibility to a few miles at best. The string of boats dispersed toward their unique duties as they cleared the jetties. His better judgment encouraged Stebi to reveal his sighting of the Gorchovs. He, like Dave, had identified their improving bond and honored a longing for that to mature.

"Dave, take these glasses and check out that little power barge at ten o'clock up ahead."

"Looks like a trash hauler to me. Nothing special. A small cabin on the front corner. A couple of Japs and three crates. And some rope. Probably going to deliver those crates somewhere down the line. Nothing special. What's the deal?"

"Keep looking. They're not Japs."

Dave wiped the lens clean and refocused. "Son of a bitch!" He could feel the hair on his neck standing. "Do you think they know we're here?"

"They know you're here. They took a close look at you when they passed us in port. You were checking the engine oil. Of course, they don't know you from Adam, but they think you're the only other round-eye within fifty miles. They have got to be curious about you. Maybe we can work that to our advantage."

Dave continued to track the two Georgians with the field glasses, but his mind was elsewhere. His instincts told him that Stebi was to be trusted...but Pappy's final lines in his death-bed message rang clear. "Always check six. Trust no one...only your instincts." And Stebi's attitude had not engendered anything positive. Yet Dave knew that he had to trust someone. It was show time. He

placed the glasses on the bridge, turned off both engines and put the ignition keys in his pocket.

“Okay, plow boy, what’s going on? We’re going to lose sight of your buddies up there in this haze.”

“They won’t be too far away. I’ll be able to find them when I need to. But right now, we’re going to talk. There are some parts missing to this puzzle...some things we are going to get straight before I show you where the bomb really is.”

“Yeah, Dave, I would have bet a Coke with ice you have been lying to me.”

“Not completely, Stebi, not completely. The only thing you don’t know is exactly where the bomb is. I’m the only one alive who knows...and that’s my insurance. The rest of the story is true. I swear.”

“Okay, good enough. What else do you want to know?”

“Well, for starters, Stebi, who the hell are you? They didn’t send two smucks like you and me half-way around the world by themselves to go fishing for a nuke. I know I’m way in over my head, and I’m supposed to be trusting you...and I don’t even know who you are.”

“Dave, you’re here because I convinced my bosses that you were the only one who knows where this damned thing is. And...”

“And what?”

“Well, you have a lot of talents that I need...no, really more than talents.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, come on. Do we really need to be discussing this?” Stebi paused while he searched for the right words.

“Dave, I know from your Cadet days that you are one tough cookie. I threw the whole bucket of crap at you, and you fired it right back. You never flinched or quit. Why do you think I was so tough on you? At first, I just wanted to see if you could take it. But then I realized that you were really something special. You made me proud. You and Benedetto, too. You guys made me proud...proud to be your Upperclassman...proud to be from the same Academy...and in the same Air Force.”

Dave waited in silence for the rest of the answer.

“Okay, there’s more. I have read the folder on you. You speak Russian...which we might need. You know boats. You’re a survivalist. You know SCUBA. And you studied nuclear engineering...like me. And you know mechanical things...like cars...and boats. Those are talents I might need for this situation.” Stebi paused. “And you are smart and dedicated and trustworthy. I know you maybe better than you know yourself. And, like I said, you know where the bomb is. You do know where it is, don’t you?”

“Okay, I know why I’m here. So why are you here? Who are you? OSI...searching for a lost nuke? I doubt it.”

“Dave, it would be safer for both of us if you didn’t know who I am.”

“And it would be safer for both of us if I didn’t tell you where the bomb is. Why don’t we just go back and hop a plane back to the good old USA and forget all about this?”

“Dave, you know you’re not going to do that. You’re not wired up that way.”

“Tell you what, Stebi. I’m going to grab one of those fishing poles, sit on the bow and wet a hook. Here are the keys. Go chase all over Tokyo Bay, and find your own damned bomb. Holler at me when you want to talk.”

“Wait. Why do you need to know these things? Why can’t you just accept things the way they are?”

“Like you would, Stebi? Don’t bullshit me. It’s hard to trust someone who doesn’t show his cards. Here I am, in the middle of nowhere, probably going to kill two guys, if they don’t kill me first...and I don’t know if I really trust you. Pappy warned me.”

Dave had grown up pretty much alone. Certainly, he was a social animal, enjoying his school relationships and his sports. But like any other young single guy, he was used to taking care of himself first and depending on others as a last resort. He was neither a taker nor a provider, but as an outdoorsman, he had learned to trust himself and his instincts...not so much depending upon or trusting others. Deep inside, Dave knew that was why he had never been drawn into marriage or any other serious relationship. He was not good at trusting...and knew it.

There are times, however, when anyone must trust and put total faith in others...like the designers of his fighters, the doctors and nurses that had helped him with his recovery from his injuries, and even the nameless and face-less pharmacist who gave him a bottle of white pills that he couldn't pronounce the name of, that he put in his mouth and swallowed without a second thought.

The funny thing about trust is that you cannot prove you are trustworthy. One can only live a life of integrity and hope it speaks for itself. But you can easily prove you cannot be trusted. That one lie or misstep will generally do it. One aw-shit wipes out ten thousand atta-boys. And Dave's history with Stebi when he was Dave's upperclassman still burned in his mind. He didn't trust him then...and for good reasons...and he didn't feel good about giving him his full trust now.

Yet, Dave reasoned that it was better to trust Stebi and have faith that he was doing him right. He had been disappointed more than once in his young life, but he figured he would rather live his life trusting someone and enduring an occasional disappointment than to go through a life of suspicion. Dave was still growing and learning...and he honored that.

Dave walked out of the cabin into the crisp morning sea air with these thoughts heavy on his mind.

Stebi soon followed Dave out on the deck. He handed Dave a hot cup of coffee and sat on the gunnels beside him with his own coffee. "Dave, I'm going to tell you something that I don't want to tell you...for your own safety. You don't need to know it, and if you ever disclose it, someone might get hurt bad...and that could be me...or my family...or you."

"I can take care of myself, Stebi. Go on." Stebi half smiled at his cockiness.

"When I finally returned to the Air Force after my recuperation, I had to find a job outside of flying. Those days were over. I had a classmate from the Zoo who worked with the OSI and made it sound pretty interesting...so I signed up. It was better than counting ball point pens in some warehouse in Oklahoma. Not long after I completed their training, I got called to Washington because of some special talents I have. After that job was finished, they asked me to stay on...so even though I am assigned to the OSI for paperwork and such, I work for someone else."

"Air Force level?"

"No, higher."

"DoD?"

"Wrong building, Dave."

"Wow. Does Dawn know?"

"No. It's just too dangerous for her to know. My paycheck comes from the Air Force, and as far as she knows, I'm an OSI agent searching for fraud, waste and abuse in Air Force supply channels."

“Okay, okay, I’m getting it now. So who are the two guys on the barge and why are they here?”

“I don’t know the whole story, but here’s what I do know. The Gorchov brothers are political activists from the old Georgian Republic who hate the Russians for the atrocities of their war on Georgia. The Russians tortured and killed their father. One of them is an engineer and worked in nuclear power production. We were tracking them in the US but didn’t know what they were up to until you entered the picture...and that was all just a lucky encounter. No one thinks you are up to anything sinister. I told them what a pussycat you are.”

“I don’t know how they found out about the third bomb...probably like you did. And I don’t know what they intend to do with it. It’s a long way back home to Georgia, and they don’t have any means to get it there. And what would they do with it if they had it there? They are not going to detonate it in their own country or nearby, and they have no delivery systems to use it to attack Russia. So that’s probably not the plan. Georgia is a respected trading partner with Japan, and they would do nothing to harm that relationship. So I figure they are here to retrieve the bomb quietly and then go do something with it...but what?”

“So that’s it. You know what I know. Any questions?”

“Yeah, you left out a pretty important part.”

“Oh yeah. What’s that?”

“Did you geniuses ever plan on how we get rid of this bomb once we find it? I know it’s just a minor detail.”

“Dave, our job is to find it and retrieve it...not dispose of it. That’s someone else’s job. In this business, you never hear the whole plan...only a frag, only your part. It’s safer that way. You can’t be forced to reveal what you don’t know. Now are you satisfied?”

“Crank ‘em up...heading 356.”

“No, if the bad guys are watching, we are not going to take them directly to the bomb. We’ll criss-cross the area for a few days...and do some fishing. That way, we can watch them watching us. Our cover is that we are trophy fishermen from Canada. Let’s act like it. How ‘bout a Molson?”

“Nah, but I’d kill for an icy Sleeman’s.” Dave looked at Stebi and knew that he'd perhaps found another friend.

25

For the next two days, Dave and Stebi ran a creeping line search pattern with the extended airport runway centerline as their search centerline. The wind is generally out of the south in Tokyo Bay, so they would motor about a mile to the south of centerline and let the breeze carry them about a mile north of the centerline. Then they would move fifty yards to the west and do it again. Using their sonar and the fish finder, they logged water depths and locations of returns from the bottom, keeping an accurate log of their exact position day or night by triangularizing off the main jetty buoy and the marker beacon at the end of the runway. They found the bay floor to be relatively level, sloping gently toward the west away from land and only 20 to 30 feet deep. But the amount of junk on the bottom was incredible. They figured it to be war debris, industrial waste and just plain trash from the hundred million Japanese who lived around Tokyo Bay. Finding their target was not going to be a trivial endeavor.

To avoid raising the suspicions of either Japanese officials or the Georgians, they would depart occasionally from this pattern, and there were always fishing poles visible and in the water. Surprisingly, the fishing was not that bad, and Dave had already impressed Stebi with some tasty meals taken from the bay.

They remained a significant distance from the Georgians' barge, reassuring themselves that the Georgians were using the wrong data. Yet they would see them returning to port each evening. The well-stocked catamaran was self-sufficient and allowed them to stay out at night, allowing the cover of darkness for Dave's dives to check out the more promising sonar returns.

"Stebi, this is ridiculous. I don't even know what I'm looking for down there. I've seen pictures of Little Boy, the Hiroshima bomb, and I have seen the one picture of Blockbuster, and they look similar. But after all these years and after its impact with the water, I doubt that's what it looks like today."

"Well, I can tell you a lot about Blockbuster, Dave. Even though most of it is made from titanium steel, I figure the tail fins either broke off on impact or rusted off, so think of an over-sized water heater...a 10-foot long slender cylinder about 2 ½ feet across...with three mounting rings along one side so they could hang it in the bomb bay. What's left of it should be pretty much intact as long as it stayed sealed. They built it tough. We're looking at just under 5 tons in weight. Most of the weight is the casing. Remember that this is a pretty primitive nuke...very inefficient by today's standards. Less than 1 ½% of the uranium would be used in an explosion."

"What happens to the rest?"

"Well, once the chain reaction starts...that's the energy release; that's the explosion. Everything else gets destroyed in the heat of the blast...about the

equivalent of 15000 tons of TNT. Not much of a bomb compared to today's stuff. But we're refining better fuel today...purer...resulting in higher percentages of fuel expenditure."

"One last question, Stebi. Any chance this thing might go off if we start dicking with it?"

"You'll never know about it if it does."

"Seriously?"

"These fission bombs are easier to ignite than the fusion bombs. In the case of Blockbuster, a 55-pound uranium projectile is fired into an 85-pound uranium target, splitting electrons from their atomic orbits, releasing that energy. That's why the canister is long and skinny. It's kinda like a short cannon. But by now the propellant should be inert. But you wouldn't want to drop it off a building."

"Or crash an airplane carrying one."

"No, guess not. But you need something to drive the projectile and the target together to start the chain reaction. No propellant; no problem...I think."

"Well, that's reassuring. So how do you know so much about Blockbuster when a week ago, you didn't even know it existed?"

"From the picture, it looks just like Little Boy, and I'm assuming they were built next to each other and identical. That's what I was doing Friday night and Saturday morning while you were shacking up with what's-her-name."

"Nancy?"

"Yeah, Nancy."

"How do you know about..."

"I got people, Davey. I got people."

• • •

Dave and Stebi spent the first two days searching and mapping and plotting...but no bomb. When they came upon a strong return, if some other boat was not in the immediate vicinity, Dave would don his diving gear, slip into the water between the hulls and check it out. Once while Dave was underwater, a Yokohama harbor patrol boat approached but just passed by when they spotted Stebi with pole in hand.

At the end of the second day, they were beginning to question whether Pappy's directions were accurate. Dave had personally checked out two dozen targets on the ocean floor. Their search thus far had accurately covered a two-mile by three-mile grid centering around where the bomb was supposed to be. "I just know we are right on top of it, Stebi. Got any ideas?"

"Perhaps it is under so much silt that the sonar won't reach it."

"I don't know much about bomb trajectory, Dave, probably not as much as you, but I do know that a bomb dropped under those conditions...straight and level...no defensive maneuvering...perfect conditions...that bomb ought to be pretty close to where it was aimed. They had an excellent Norden bombsight...if all the conditions were entered correctly."

"I doubt they had ever flight-tested the bomb for its aerodynamic flight characteristics. And you don't have to be too accurate with these things anyhow, I would guess."

"Kinda like throwing hand grenades, huh, Dave."

"And horseshoes. Close is good enough."

"Here's what I propose, Dave. Tomorrow, we re-search this same area. And this time we use the Magnetic Anomaly Detector."

"And exactly how does that thing work?"

"It's pretty simple. It is designed to find submarines, which is basically a big chunk of metal under the water. The MAD creates an under-water magnetic field which is continually read. When a metal object, in our case, the steel casing of the bomb, comes into the magnetic field, the field is altered, the MAD senses it and we know something metal is there. Fish and non-metal stuff don't have much impact on it."

"And if we don't have any luck with this thing...?"

"I guess we expand the search area...searching further to the west. I don't figure the bomb would be off course left and right, but it might be short...further out from shore. Maybe they dropped it a little early."

"Maybe it had more drag than they figured."

"Maybe. Maybe. But unless you have a better plan, Dave, that's what we'll do."

"Sounds like a man with a plan."

26

Anchoring your boat on centerline just off the end of a jet runway is not a good decision...especially if you plan to get any sleep that evening. Both Dave and Stebi thought that eventually Yokohama would land their last plane, and eventually they did...sometime around 3 in the morning. But there was no real rush to get things started that day as fog shrouded the Yokohama area. With visibility less than a mile and no means to accurately determine their position, they leisurely enjoyed their morning coffee and set up the MAD unit.

There are many uses for the Magnetic Anomaly Detector, the main three being ship-borne, airplane-borne and buoy-borne. Their unit was derived from the latter. It was designed to float passively in the water and monitor any ship or sub traffic, transmitting its hit back to a common monitoring site. Because of its small size, Stebi's techs had chosen this unit and altered it for ship work. The sensors were towed behind the boat and provided a readout in range and azimuth on what looked to Dave like a radar screen.

The plan was to criss-cross the area as before, logging their hits against what they had already found and marked on their map. If they got a new return, it was up to Dave to dive down to perform a visual check on it. He would poke around in the silt with a broom handle until he found it. It would be a slow process considering the clutter covered in the silt...but they had no better plans for finding Blockbuster.

When the fog cleared mid-morning, they initiated the new search. By mid-afternoon of the following day, they had re-covered the initial six square miles with Dave checking out the dozen new targets discovered by the MAD. None had been Blockbuster, but the process had given both Dave and Stebi confidence that the MAD was working well. Plans were made to expand the search area one mile in each direction from the initial two-by-three mile grid. They would run the MAD and the sonar simultaneously...starting the next day.

But this work day was over, and it was time to fish. Neither Dave nor Stebi felt any real urgency to rush their mission. The bomb wasn't going anywhere. The Georgians were still searching in the wrong area...they hoped. And they had plenty of fresh water, beer and food...at least enough to last them a couple of weeks. The water was smooth, the air was crisp and the nights designed for good sleeping. And each was finding the fellowship more to their liking.

"You're still married, aren't you, Stebi?"

"I think you know my wife, don't you?"

Dave was almost sorry he had asked that question and hoped Stebi was referring to their meeting in his hospital room in San Antonio...and didn't know

they had met earlier. Surely, Stebi would have mentioned it earlier if he'd known of their liaison. "Dawn, isn't it?"

"You have a good memory. It's been over four years."

"I never forget a pretty face." Dave wanted to hurt himself over that stupid comment and hoped Stebi couldn't read his face. Yet Dave wanted to hear more about his old flame. "Kids?"

"One boy...will be four next month. We named him Dave. And a little girl on the way."

"Oh, you named him after me. How sweet."

"No, if I'd named him after you, I'd be calling him plowboy...plowboy. Actually Dawn named him...long before she had ever met you."

"Are you a good dad, Stebi?"

"I try, Dave. I really do. But this job keeps me on the road a lot. I wish I could spend more time with my family."

"I never pictured you much as a family man, Stebi."

"Well, you only knew me that one year at the Academy...and we both know that's not the real world. But then neither is sitting on this boat halfway around the world from home."

"Yeah, but isn't this better than selling mutual funds or girdles...or writing parking tickets on the commissary parking lot?" That drew a smile from Stebi.

"So what are your plans, Dave? You ever going to settle down? You can't spend your whole life like a butterfly flitting from one flower to another. The nectars may be epicurean, but the nourishment is short-lived."

"Quite poetic, Stebi. Are you talking about women or just life in general?"

"Yup..."

"I don't really know where I'm going...or even where I want to go. Right now, I'm just going. Maybe, in this journey, I'll discover the destination. Is that crazy, or what?"

"No, Dave. I get it. But the life of a vagabond can't be too rewarding. You need to determine what's important in your life and plot how to get there. That's what gives you the energy...and the drive...to keep on keeping on. I married Dawn

because I thought that's where I needed to be...that it was the time in my life to be married. But then she taught me how to love and how to be loved...how to trust someone else completely. I had no clue what life was all about until she taught me. And the better wife she became, the better husband I became. Now I look back on my single days and wonder why and how. Once you experience a good woman, you will never turn back."

Dave sat quietly with a feeling that Stebi had been reading his life's story...his diary. Dave knew he was adrift. Although focused on this adventure, he knew it was but passing...that soon it was to end and that if didn't do something to change it, he would again be patching one-night stands into the rat-eaten quilt of his life. His thoughts turned to Nancy, and he wondered if she was the destination or only one of the ports-of-call in his journey. He was anxious to pursue that answer and so regretted how they had parted.

The full moon that illuminated Tokyo Bay that evening was the same moon that reflected off the snow cap atop Pike's Peak and cast shadows across Nancy's bed as she pondered the same concerns...and regrets.

27

“Wake up, Dave. We’ve got company for breakfast. Stick this pistol in your belt, and make sure they see it.” Through the morning haze, they could identify the Georgians’ small barge approaching about two hundred yards away. “I’m going to stand here out of sight since they don’t know about me yet. See what they want, but don’t let them board the cat. I wasn’t planning on this. Shoot to kill if you have to. I’ll cover you from the cabin door.”

Dave stood on the open deck next to the main mast. He could use it for cover if it was necessary. He felt the adrenalin in his veins as their barge drew closer. “Konnichiwa, gentlemen, good morning. What can I do for you?”

The Georgians killed their engine about twenty yards out and glided up toward the catamaran. “American?” shouted one of them.

Dave responded, “Canadian. What can I do for you?”

“We have a business proposition to discuss with you. I see your boat is from Takahashi Salvage, and we could use your help. Can we come aboard?”

“No!” responded Dave. “You can talk from there. What’s on your mind?”

“Are you alone?”

“No!” Dave answered, casually pulling back his shirt to expose the Beretta tucked in his belt.

Stebi answered the challenge by partially exposing himself and chambering another round in his pistol. The ejected round from the chamber clanged to the metal deck, not unnoticed by the visitors. Message sent; message received. One of the Georgians spoke to the other in Russian, but Dave could not understand the Georgian dialect.

“Moi droog, we are not here to cause you any concern. We want to hire you to help us with a little problem. We can pay you well.”

“So what’s your little problem?”

“It is a bit of a sensitive situation. I trust you will keep this information to yourself. We do not want the Japanese government to know what happened.”

“Go on,” prompted Dave.

“We are from Russia...from Vladivostok, just west of here across the Sea of Japan. Last week, a ship from the company we work for was leaving Yokohama

with a cargo of nuclear waste, the residue from the nuclear power plant here. We take it back to Russia and bury it there in our nuclear dump site. As they were moving the storage cylinders around on deck just prior to departing, a tie down cable broke, and one of the cylinders fell into the water. We know where it is, but it is too heavy to get to the surface and onto our barge.”

“And it would be a terrible embarrassment for us if the Japanese found out about this accident,” he continued. “We just want to recover it and get it back to Vladivostok...and no one has to know about it. And yes, our company will pay you well for your help...and your silence.”

“Where is this cylinder?” asked Dave.

“About three or four kilometers to the northwest in about ten meters of water. That should not be too difficult of a recovery for you with your winch equipment.”

Well, we’re just here to fish, not to do salvage work,” interrupted Stebi. “The boat belongs to my brother-in-law, and neither of us knows anything about salvage stuff. We just borrowed his boat to go fishing. No deal.”

Dave could tell from Stebi’s face that he was just playing poker with these two... and chose to play another card. “We could use the money...and what your brother-in-law doesn’t know can’t hurt him. And he doesn’t expect us back for a week anyhow. Let’s think about this.”

The smaller of the two Georgians picked up on the display of controversy and made another attempt to persuade. “Let us go back into port and pick up a down payment of ten thousand U.S. dollars...or we can make it in yen or rubles...or even gold...your choice. Then we’ll come back out tomorrow morning and discuss this further. Does that work for you?”

Dave looked to Stebi for an answer. Until they possessed the bomb, it was still his show. “Same time, same place, tomorrow. Don’t be late; we won’t wait for you.”

They both stood silently as the small barge set a course for the harbor and disappeared in the morning haze.

“What do you think, Stebi? Did they find the bomb?”

“I don’t know, but from the way they were talking, they found it. Otherwise, why would they ask for our help?”

“Maybe they realized it wasn’t where they expected it to be and are trying to get our help in locating it. No, that doesn’t make sense. I think they found it.”

“Well, when they come back...if they come back...we should be able to figure it out by what they want to do next. But I’ll bet you a Coke with ice that they know where it is and simply can’t get it out of the mud. And remember, they have already murdered, and we could be the next target. They aren’t interested in us or our help. I think they just want our boat...without us on it. We’ve got to be careful. And they will be armed when they come back.”

“Okay, Stebi, if they have found the bomb, and that’s your assumption, and if it is where they said it is, then let me just finish my job on them when they come in the morning. I’ll have the element of surprise; they’ll never know what hit ‘em...and then we’ll go get your bomb.”

“I’m not into indiscriminate killing, Dave. I’ve been down that road. This revenge thing is yours...not mine. But let me tell you. Don’t get hung up on revenge. It’s not all it’s cracked up to be...and it can cloud your thinking. Best be careful. But once we have secured the bomb, Dave, it’s your call as to when and how...and even if...once we have secured the bomb.”

Dave still found it difficult to trust Stebi completely. They had a history, and it had seldom been pleasant. “I know what’s going to happen. You’ll get this bomb, and all of a sudden, you’re through. You’ll get what you want and to hell with what I want.” Dave could feel the heat of his gut rising.

Stebi moved aggressively into Dave’s space. “Listen, plowboy. You can question my judgment. You can even question my motivation. But never question my integrity. You got that?” Stebi was getting into Dave’s face. “I made you a promise, and I don’t lie...especially to a friend.”

Dave realized he was out of line with Stebi, that he had stepped over the line. Perhaps he was too hung up on revenge. Perhaps... He looked Stebi squarely in the eyes and took several intentional breaths waiting for the passion to cool...and as he knew it would, it did. “Well, they’re out of sight now. Why don’t we just sashay over there and snoop around. If they can find it, we can, too. We could have that thing off the bottom in no time.”

“Let’s just make sure they have gone into port. Let’s drop a hook and...what was that plowboy word you used...sashay? Then we’ll just do whatever seems to make sense. In the meantime, how about a cup of coffee? You guys did have coffee out on the farm, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, but let me tell you, Stebi. My mother’s coffee was so bad, it would dissolve a spoon. My dad always said she made it that way so that we wouldn’t hang around her kitchen and would get on out to the barn. My campfire coffee was even better than hers. The coffee in my life seriously improved when I joined the Air Force.”

Dave marked the target area on his chart, pulled anchor and allowed the prevailing breeze to drift the catamaran in the general direction of their search area. He was more than anxious to find and secure this bomb, but he did not want to raise any suspicions. As Stebi fished and drank his coffee, Dave continually scanned the sea haze with his glasses.

En route, Dave found the bottom just about as dirty with debris as what they had already seen in their search. By noon, after a couple of powered course corrections, Dave figured they were about in the right area as described by the Georgians. Stebi had joined Dave at the bridge working the sonar and MAD units. Dave returned to his glasses as they drifted along. "What are you looking for, Dave?"

"Well, first of all, I'm watching for that little barge. I don't want any surprises. But I figure they had to mark their location somehow...maybe a float or a buoy. So I'm looking for something floating in the water, too."

"Something like that?"

"Where?"

"Two o'clock...about seventy five yards...white."

Dave cranked one of the engines and set course toward the target. He handed the glasses to Stebi. "Here, keep an eye on it."

As they neared the white item, they could clearly see it was a white plastic jug with a rope tied around its handle. "See anything on the MAD or the sonar, Dave?"

"Shining like a diamond in a goat's butt, Stebi. We may have us a Blockbuster!"

"A diamond in a goat's butt?" muttered Stebi. He recalled why he liked Dave so much. Except for Dave's hair trigger, he saw in Dave many of his own qualities...and many he wished he'd had. They made a good team.

28

“The sonar says we’re in about 30 feet of water. Once we’re over it, drop the anchor. Let me get on my wet suit, and I’ll go down and take a look at it. I’m feeling good about this.” Dave anxiously donned his tanks, grabbed his light and jumped off the front of the deck.

The water at depth was neither clear nor murky...more hazy than anything with a visibility of about ten feet. The bottom was covered with loose silt that swirled in the ocean water from the turbulence of Dave’s fins. He searched the bottom for about twenty minutes but could find nothing. “How could those guys find it, and I can’t?” Dave started back up to check with Stebi on the sonar.

He shouted to Stebi, “I can’t see it. Can you direct me from the sonar?”

“Did you even think about following down the rope tied to the white jug?”

Dave was too embarrassed to even answer. “Dumb ass,” he said to himself...and started back down.

At the end of the rope, Dave found what looked like a colorless, oversized water heater. The sides were not smooth...more like corrugated tin. One end was rather blunt, and the other supported what could have been the tail fins...but the impact with the water and years of corrosion had destroyed most of that. Spaced along the axis of the cylinder were three mounting rings that could have secured it in the bomb bay of Chickenhawk. Dave had no doubt. This was Blockbuster.

When Dave returned to the surface, he found that Stebi had fired up the on-board generator to power the lifting winch and had started to unreel the cable into the water. “Talley ho!” Dave shouted to Stebi over the noise of the generator, and gave him a hardy thumbs-up. “Give me about forty feet of cable. When I’m ready for you to pull it up, I’ll pull on the line to the white jug. When you see the jug go under the water, reel us in.” Stebi responded with a thumbs-up.

The weight of the cable and hook took Dave right back to the bottom. He followed the buoy rope back to Blockbuster and attached the hook to the middle mounting ring. “I wonder if one ring is enough to support this weight,” thought Dave. He unhooked the cable and ran it through all three mounting rings and hooked it back to itself. Then, admiring his work, Dave tugged hard on the buoy line.

Awaiting the extraction, Dave backed away from the bomb. He didn’t want to be under the bomb if the cable failed or the mounting rings broke. After several minutes of waiting, Blockbuster still lay on the floor of Tokyo Bay. “Come on, Stebi. Pay attention.” Dave pulled on the buoy rope again, this time pulling in about ten feet of rope. He pulled out his knife and cut the rope loose from

Blockbuster. He could see the slack in the cable begin to tighten up and wished he'd had a camera. "Oh, if only I could put a picture of this in my dissertation."

Very slowly, Blockbuster ascended out of the muck. Dave held onto the cable just above the bomb and rode it up toward the surface. As the water became clearer and the daylight illuminated their prize catch, Dave noted how intact it appeared. As he brushed away some of the collection of silt and muck, he could make out some of the military markings stenciled on the cylinder. In his mind's eye, he could imagine other messages written there by the loading team and the flight crew. He wondered if Pappy had written anything on it...just as he had scratched his initials into the window frame of Chickenhawk. Unfortunately, Dave was so enamored by the historic recovery and buried in his own thoughts, he failed to notice that the catamaran's twin hulls were not the only ones penetrating the water's surface.

As the bomb broke the water's surface between the cat's hulls, Dave pushed away and kicked over to the rope ladder that would bring him up to the deck. He removed his fins, tossed them up on the deck and started the four-foot climb. He was startled topside to be face-to-face with one of the Gorchov brothers, who offered his hand to help Dave up on the deck. Dave couldn't help but notice the pistol stuffed in his belt.

"We got visitors, Dave. I didn't hear them coming over the noise of the generator. I told them that we had found their nuclear waste canister and had decide to go ahead and pull it up. Got any idea how we can get it over on their barge?"

Dave did a quick evaluation of the situation. Weapons-wise, he figured both Gorchovs must have pistols now. He had his knife strapped to his leg...not much use in a gunfight. The M-16s were still under the spare sail cloth on the deck, and the M-60 was above the cabin under the dingy. But where had Stebi stashed their pistols? Dave walked over to the generator and shut it down so he could hear. "My name is Dave," as he offered to shake hands with the two.

"I am Yuri, and this is my brother, Alexi."

"Alexi, Alexi," repeated the larger brother but did not respond to Dave's offer...just wandered aimlessly around the deck and into the cabin. He was a brute of a man, large and round, but slow, reminding Dave of a beer truck driver he knew back home in Montana...but the kind you would want on your side in a bar fight.

"Your English is good, Yuri."

"Only Americans...and Canadians...speak one language. Forgive my brother; he doesn't speak much. But you are Canadian, so you must speak French, too. Oui?"

“Not very well. We are from western Canada...near Vancouver.”

“Tres bon. It is beautiful country there...much like the Urals. I have skied Whistler before.”

Dave was trying to kill time, giving Stebi an opportunity to get to his weapon or devise some other plan. He stayed close to Yuri knowing that if Stebi started something, he could get his knife into Yuri before he could get to his pistol. Dave initiated a distraction for Stebi by taking off his tanks and handing them to Yuri...but no action from Stebi. When Yuri turned to set the tanks on the deck, Dave casually unsnapped the leather strap securing the handle of his sheath knife.

“So Dave, how do we get this canister onto their barge?” Still no action from Stebi. Dave read into his lack of response that his weapon was out of reach. Now was not the right time to attack. Yet he knew Stebi well enough to know he was on track to two dead killers. He needed to stall a bit longer.

“We weren’t expecting to see you until tomorrow morning. So did you have time to get the money?”

“It’s on the barge,” responded Yuri.

“Not that I don’t trust you, but I’d like to see it, please.” Dave had found an opportunity to divide the two brothers. He could take down one brother and get to the M-16 before the other even knew it.

“All in its own time, sir. I am more concerned over getting the canister onto the barge.” Dave’s plan had been thwarted, but he could tell from the look in Stebi’s face that they were in sync. “Actually, I would like to sweeten my previous offer. I trust you will find it to your liking.”

“And...” Dave found that he was actually looking forward to what Yuri had to offer. He figured the Georgian was lying about everything...and would continue to do so...but he was always the curious one.

“I am prepared to double my offer for your additional assistance.”

“Go on. I’m listening,” Dave injected.

“While we were ashore securing your fee, our agent informed us that the ship that was en route to secure this canister developed a mechanical problem and was forced to return to Vladivostok. Now we are facing a great dilemma. We can either delay here and risk being found by the Japanese authorities or we can secure another ship and be on our way. Are you interested in being that other

ship? It's a two or three day journey to Vladivostok. You could be back here in less than a week...and considerably richer."

Dave figured that if he declined this offer, the Gorchovs would take it by force and perhaps kill them. He needed time to think. If he accepted, it would buy time and perhaps an opportunity to get the upper hand would come along soon. "What do you think, Stebi? "

"I've never been to Russia. Why not? We were going to spend a week out here anyhow. But won't we need a visa or something to get into your country?"

Yuri smiled. "You just must know the right person to pay off. It's not all that difficult."

"I'm more than a little bit uncomfortable showing up in Vladivostok harbor with fake credentials."

"I understand," countered Yuri. "But we really need to get this canister out of here...and soon. Let me make another suggestion. I will return to shore quickly and ask my agent to have one of our ships meet us in international waters short of Vladivostok. We can make the transfer there, pay you off, and you can be on your way."

"Hmmm. What do you think, Stebi?"

"Let's do it. How long will it take you to get in to shore and back?"

"Two hours at the most...maybe less. I will not delay."

"We'll be ready when you return."

Yuri called to his brother in Russian. The small barge soon disappeared in the sea haze heading back into port.

29

“That was close, Dave. I never saw those two approaching the cat. They were on board before I even knew it. The generator and winch was so noisy, I never heard a thing. They could have killed us both. Did you see they were packing?”

“Yeah, I saw a pistol in Yuri’s belt when I climbed out of the water. Don’t know about his pet gorilla. What’s with that guy?”

“Strong as a bull; dumb as a cow.”

“OK, Stebi, we have two hours to figure out what to do. You won’t believe this, but I say we take the bomb and run. To hell with revenge. These guys scare me.”

“First of all, Dave, are you sure that thing we pulled up is, in fact, the bomb?”

“No doubt about it. It has the markings, the right size and shape, three mounting rings. This is Blockbuster. How they found it, I’ll never figure out.”

“Doesn’t matter at this point. On any other day, I would agree with you to get the hell out of here. I have my bomb. But the more you have told me about Pappy, the more I want to even his score. He was one of us. If these guys killed him, they need to pay. And I am just curious as to what they are up to. What are they going to do with this bomb?”

“Well, it has something to do with Vladivostok...maybe.”

“But why did they bring only a barge with no way to lift it off the ocean floor?”

“And what’s in those crates on the barge?”

“I want to know what they are up to. Let’s play it out for a while. We just need to be really careful. Don’t forget these guys are killers. But Dave, I can’t believe you are giving up on revenge.”

“And I can’t believe you are letting revenge pull you away from your almighty mission. Remember you warned me of just that, Stebi. Don’t let revenge muddy the waters. It can cost you your life.”

“Okay, okay. So let’s just play this out. We know they are lying about most everything...nuclear waste, an agent on shore, that they are Russians.”

“So why did they go back to shore?”

“And what’s in those crates? Too many unanswered questions for my likes.”

“Where are our Berettas? Still on the bridge next to the throttles?”

“Hopefully. I guess we’d better be carrying them. Do you want me to get yours, Dave?” Stebi stepped into the cabin and retrieved the hand guns.

Dave instinctively pulled back the receiver to chamber a round, just as he had done in the little van on the way to the dock. No round was ejected as he did. “Damn, I thought it felt light,” said Dave as he ejected the clip. “It’s empty!”

“Mine too,” added Stebi. “Alexi must have cleaned us out when he was wondering around in the cabin. And the extra clips are still in the van. Damn, damn, damn!”

“Well, we still have these,” offered Dave, as he retrieved the two rounds from his pocket that he had saved from the trip over from Tachikawa. “And there should be another over here in this sail cloth from when you chambered that round yesterday.” Dave found the round and pitched it to Stebi. “Put this in your chamber, and I will put these two in mine. They will think we are carrying empty weapons...and we might be able to work that to our advantage.”

“Well, we still have the M-16s if we need them.”

“Put everything out of sight, Stebi. Looks like a boat is coming our way. Looks like the Harbor Patrol.”

“Dave, grab that cable cutter by the winch. If they come closer, cut the cable and release that bomb. We don’t want to have that tied to us if they want to board.” Dave grabbed the heavy tool and squatted behind the winch so his actions were out of sight. He opened the jaws of the cutter and hoped it was sharp enough to sever the cable. They could explain a cable without a hook...but not a nuke.

Stebi grabbed a fishing pole from the deck and waved to the patrol boat as it approached. Several Japanese deck hands returned the greeting. Stebi was glad to hear the engines spool back up as it passed and accelerated.

“Okay, that was a bit unnerving. Stebi, I still think it’s time to cut and run. You got your bomb. Let’s go. To hell with those two bums.”

“What’s the matter, plowboy? Losing your nerve? That’s not like you, Dave. You’ve been in tighter situations than this. Let’s see it through. I need to know what these two are up to. We just can’t turn our backs on them. At some point in time, they will need to get rid of us...one way or another. But right now, they need us. They could have taken us when you were in the water retrieving the bomb. They didn’t. They were armed and could have taken us after you got out of the water. But they didn’t. They need us for some reason...and we have to

figure that one out so we can use it to our advantage. But the fact that the gorilla emptied our Berettas tells me something...I just don't know what."

"I think you are making a bad decision, Stebi, but if that's what you want to do, I'm in. But we gotta be careful."

"Okay, relax. When they get back, let's see what's different. Maybe that will tell us why they felt they had to return to the dock. We will have our pistols visible...pistols that they think are empty. But if there is ever any doubt, take 'em out."

30

The next few hours passed slowly. Stebi was half asleep with a fishing pole in hand. "How can you be so calm?" challenged Dave. "My hands are shaking."

"It's a little different, isn't it, when the enemy is right in front of you? You may have to actually get some blood on your hands. You're not dropping an iron bomb from five thousand feet and then heading for the O Club bar to brag about it and get a medal. This is different."

"Well, it's different for me. And you are right. It's different when you are face to face with your enemy. Fighter pilots don't hang around to do a body count. I wonder what it would be like to be a ground pounder and face it every day...up close?"

"Or a combat helicopter pilot," Stebi added.

"Well, your composure suggests to me that this may not be your first rodeo. I'll bet you have some stories to tell from over the past couple of years. Think you'll ever tell me about what you really do...who you really are?"

"Shut up. You're scaring the fish."

"And here they are. Looks like it's show time!" Stebi just kept on fishing as the Gorchovs tied up their little barge to the cat. He pulled his jacket open slightly so the handle of the Baretta stuck in his belt was visible. He kept an eye on the smaller brother to catch his reaction when he spotted it.

"Yuri, are you ready to get under way?" queried Stebi. Dave took a casual but defensive position where he could keep the two in clear sight...and line of fire... as they came aboard. Dave took notice that one more crate had been added to their load and signaled it to Stebi with his eye motion. Stebi nodded that he had seen the extra crate.

"Da, we are about ready as soon as my brother brings our provisions aboard. We added some for the trip. I think we will eat well ...and drink well...for the next few days. I did arrange for one of our ships to meet us just outside Russian territorial waters...so we can make the exchange there. I can understand why you do not wish to encounter Russian authorities."

"What do you intend to do with your barge?"

"I have instructed our port agent to come and retrieve it this afternoon. It should create no problem anchored here." Yuri shouted something to his brother in Russian that he again repeated.

Alexi picked up the barge anchor with notable ease and threw it into the water. After he had dragged the four large crates from the barge onto the catamaran, he untied the barge and shoved it away with his foot. He never spoke but occasionally grunted or groaned his feelings. Dave knew that if he took him on, he would have his hands full. Dave needed to know if Alexi understood English, so he asked if he could help. There was no response. Yuri directed him in Russian to check the security of the canister. Alexi obliged his brother without comment. "Alexi does not speak much English. Actually, he does not speak much at all. I thought I could use his strength in retrieving this canister, but his handicap is becoming my handicap on this trip. He just is not terribly smart. But he can be quite mean, so give him plenty of room. He actually killed a man a couple of days ago...for no real reason. Don't provoke him." Dave nodded his understanding.

"I think we are about ready to get under way, Yuri." Stebi motioned him into the cabin where he had opened charts to plot the trip to the Russian port. "Once we clear Tokyo Bay, we will cruise north and pass around the north end of the big Japanese island and then west to Vladivostok. Should take about two or three days depending on wind and currents."

"I am neither sailor nor navigator, sir, so we are at the mercy of you and your friend. I trust that will not be a problem."

"No, my friend, Dave, and I are quite experienced at this. We came here to fish, but a few days on the seas will be acceptable...for the price you have offered us. I assume the offer is still good."

"Do you consider fifty thousand U.S. dollars adequate?" asked Yuri.

"Is now an appropriate time for you to prove you have that much money for us?"

"Excuse me for a moment, sir, and I will retrieve it from our cases."

Yuri left the cabin and opened one of the crates. He returned to the cabin with a valise and offered it to Stebi. Inside were wrapped U. S. hundred dollar bills...enough for Stebi to nod his approval. Yuri closed the valise and set it on the bridge next to the throttles. "Now, if that meets your approval, I ask that you get us underway as my brother and I sit on your deck and enjoy the cool sea breeze...and some fine Russian vodka."

Dave and Stebi were left alone in the cabin. They looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders in disbelief and broke into laughter. Neither knew what the next few days would bring but would have been more concerned if they could have seen the satisfied yet sinister smile on Yuri's face.

31

From Yokohama, Tokyo Bay opens soon into the North Pacific Ocean. Two hours of sailing south-southeast would get them into open water where they would take a northerly course to circle the north end of Honshu, the main Japanese island, just south of Sapporo. Until then, they would remain within sight of the Japanese shoreline...and the Japanese authorities. Once they passed through the La Perouse Straits between Honshu and Hokkaido main islands, about half way, it would be a straight course across the Sea of Japan to Vladivostok.

The northern end of Honshu is quite flat, and soon, every hour of Japanese shoreline looked no different from the hours past. The prevailing winds were brisk out of the south, so Dave raised their sails to ease gas consumption and increase their speed a bit. The setting sun emphasized the flat terrain to the west, and the lights of the towns and villages began to dominate the scenery. The landscape looked like a continuum of humanity. The on-board radar was easy to master and allowed the pilots to maintain a safe distance from the shore.

The brothers Gorchov, much to the likings of Dave and Stebi, remained to themselves on the deck forward of the bridge. The rumble of the twin outboards kept conversations private for all travelers. "Any idea yet about what they have in those crates, Dave?"

"Well, they did get their provisions for dinner out of one. Other than that, who knows. They do seem to enjoy their vodka. I notice they didn't offer us any."

"Yuri may actually be telling the truth about not knowing anything about sailing. He has shown absolutely no interest in what we are doing or even where we are. Maybe that is why they need us."

"But it still gives us no clue about what they intend to do with the bomb."

"Dave, doesn't it give you a warm and friendly feeling knowing you are standing astraddle a nuke?"

"I sure hope it isn't leaking any radiation. I think I still need a sperm cell or two."

"Thinking about Miss Nancy what's-her-name again?"

"No, but I wish she were here and you and the two commies were on the other end of the earth."

"Well, tell it like it is, Davie. Tell it like it is."

"You got your wife and a good family, Stebi. I want that. I need that."

“Give it time, man. It’s gonna happen. You are going to meet that right chick some day...and then BAM! Diapers, going to the mall, taking out the trash...you are going to love it.”

“Is that all that marriage is to you now, Stebi? I remember you used to talk differently of it.”

“No, Dave. That’s just me blowing off. I love Dawn and being married to her. And I love the way she loves me. We pick at each other some, but I want her to have her own opinions and her own way of doing things and her own...well, you know what I mean. I want her to be free from me so that when she chooses me, it really counts. I want her to have a choice in all things and hope that she always chooses me. It keeps me on my toes and keeps our marriage hot.”

Stebi continued. "But one thing I have learned about marriage...and really about life in general...is that you can pretend to care, but you can't pretend to be there. And in our business, Dave, being there can be a challenge. Air Force sends us to the ends of the world on a whim, and that can put a real strain on any relationship...whether it's Dawn and me or you and Miss Nancy. Look at the mess you are in...or that I put you in. Yeah, you can pretend to care, saying all the right things, sending a gift or flowers, you know what I mean. But there's no confirmation of your love and respect for a woman than simply being there."

“Dave, I used to work for this old Major who told me that he always trained his wife to be a widow. Now that’s a bit weird...and so was he. But his point was well taken. In the military, one never knows what the future holds. Even if she does not become a widow, with us always gone or about to be gone, she needs to know how to survive alone. And our line of work is not always the safest, you know.”

“Yeah, you never know when someone might send his sergeant to whisk you out of a football game, load you on an unmarked airplane and drag you halfway around the world...without any notice...or chance to tell his hot date goodbye.”

“Dave, in a week, this will all be over and you can return to patch up any mess I made in your love life. She’s been around the military enough to get it...and if she doesn’t, she probably isn’t the right one for you. I think I did you a big favor. Don’t you want to thank me?”

“Stebi, why do I have a feeling that this may not be the last I see of you?”

“Life is full of choices, my man. Life is full of choices. If you want to sit at home all of your life and count cans at the commissary, go for it. I don’t know you well, but I know that life isn’t for you. You’ve already shown me that. You’d rather be ashes than dust. You intentionally bail out of a fighter over enemy territory to go

save your friend. You could have cried in your beer back at the O Club and kissed him off. You had the best job in the Air Force flying the hottest jet we have...and that wasn't enough. You were bored. You find out about this nuke...and you could have ignored it. But no. You have to threaten me and make me deal with the devil to get you halfway around the world to check it out...and to take out two guys who did in your friend. Hell, I seem to remember that you set me on fire when we were Cadets. You didn't think I knew that was you, did you? Well, you'd better be careful, Dave. You're a different breed of cat. You'll never again settle for the easy life...and you'd better pick a mate who is into that. If not, you are cursed with a bad marriage and a sad life."

"You know, Stebi, I don't think I am any different from any of the other high school hot dogs that came to the Academy and suffered through those four years...and that includes you, too. The Academy may have had the cream of the crop to choose from, but after we all entered and got into the routine, I think we were pretty much all similar. Now if someone were just a bit weird coming in, those four years could grow the weirdness exponentially. But those guys were few. I think most of us grew into some pretty good officers who were ready to fight for our freedoms, defend our country, and in general, do what's right. Those four years made us a lot different from our high school buddies, but I don't consider you and me to be any different from other grads. Do you?"

"Dave, I remember coming home on leave after I'd finished my first year at the Academy. I ran into a bunch of my old friends at the local drive-in one night, and they all wanted to know about what I'd been doing. It was a short conversation, for they were more interested in talking about parties when we were seniors, or how drunk they'd been the night before, or what girls were putting out...all local stuff. And here I was worried about going to war with Russia, the proliferation of weapons in space, whether I could survive another year of the Academy stresses. We just really had nothing in common to talk about any more. I never went back."

"I know what you mean. You can never go home. You can never climb the same mountain twice. I have always loved my mountains back in Montana, but now I see them differently. They've changed; I've changed. I have always wondered what my life would have been like if I had not gone to the Academy. Where would I be today? What would I be doing? It dragged me out of the mountains and a life where I basically only had to think of myself, where I was my own best friend...and maybe my only friend. It made a man of me and taught me how to think and how to survive. It gave me a mission in life, and better than that, it gave me a love for country and for the Air Force. I get despondent sometimes when I don't see the path clearly in front of me and wonder why. But I'm getting used to that. I am trying to learn to love both the journey and the destination...but I'm a work in progress. I'm certainly not there yet."

"And that, my friend, is why we are out here in the middle of nowhere babysitting two terrorists and a nuke."

"And why they are still alive..."

"Say nothing, do nothing, be nothing, eh?"

The drone of the engines, the cool ocean air and the events of the past few days were all taking a toll on Dave. "One of us needs to be awake and alert for the next few days with these guys. Why don't you grab a couple hours of shut-eye. I'll wake you if I need you."

"I'm good, Dave. You take a break. I'll wake you in a few hours."

"Okay. But you wake me if our passengers start stirring...or if you start getting sleepy. Just maintain this course. It should parallel the coast line."

"Aye, aye, Captain. And sweet dreams."

Stebi could tell from Dave's breathing that he was asleep and altered course a few degrees to the right.

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Night had fallen by the time they had reached the north end of Honshu, the main Japanese island and the La Perouse Straits between Honshu and Hokkaido main islands. Dave was again at the helm after three hours of appreciated rest. It appeared that Stebi's watch had gone without incident. Dave noted that fuel consumption was a bit higher than planned, and that they were a bit behind on their time. But all else was well, and the seas were fairly calm. It was time to turn their course to the west through the Straits and toward the Sea of Japan and Vladivostok. The channel was only a few miles wide, but shore lights and a marginal radar unit encouraged Dave to continue the trip. He was anxious to clear Japanese waters as soon as possible.

The two Georgians had drunk their dinners along with some tripe out of an unmarked can and a loaf of black bread and had bedded down on the sail cloth on the forward deck. Their snoring was louder than the drone of the two engines, but that didn't seem to interrupt Stebi's nap in the chair at the console. Dave stepped out of the cabin to sample the cool evening sea air and to check the setting of the main sail since they had altered course. The number of Milky Way stars visible through the unpolluted sky took him back to his back-packing days along the Colorado Front Range with Pete. "What the hell am I doing, Pete?" He wasn't expecting an answer, but certainly hoped for one. Pete was never that far away, but always silent. Nevertheless, Dave could always feel his presence and his guidance.

"Is that the light at Ohma Cape?"

"You startled me. I thought you were asleep."

"Are you okay navigating through here at night? It gets pretty narrow up ahead here in a few miles."

"Please don't tell me you've been here before, too."

"Dave, I've been about everywhere. Let me tell you something interesting about these La Perouse Straits. Even though we can see lights on both shores, we are in international waters. By their Constitution, the Japanese do not allow nuclear weapons in their country. But the U.S. Navy needed a way to move their nuclear subs between the Pacific and the Sea of Japan...so the Japanese released their claim to these waters and made them international waters."

"So even if they caught us out here smuggling a nuclear weapon, they couldn't do anything about it?"

"Don't press your luck, Davey. Don't press your luck."

“Geez, Stebi. Do you just know everything? Where do you come up with all of this?”

“Learn as if you were going to live forever.”

“Gandhi, right?”

“Yup...but he learned it from me.”

“Maybe in another life. Let’s see...it was you and Gandhi and Einstein hanging out at the Hogan sharing a pitcher of beer.”

“Of course not. Al preferred red wine.”

“Stebi, you are so full of...”

“So once you pass the light at Ohma Cape, turn southwest toward Tappimisaki Lighthouse. We should be able to see it soon. Then just keep it on your left and we’re home free...or is it on the right?”

"Minor detail, right?"

"No, left."

"Don't be insulted if I check the charts myself."

The eastern sky was beginning to lighten as they passed the lighthouse and set course across the Sea of Japan toward Vladivostok. If the prevailing easterlies held, they should approach Russian territorial waters by sundown. Dave tuned in Russian music on an AM radio station on the low frequency navigation radio, and the needle pointed straight at the bow. Vladivostok...and whatever the future held for them...was straight ahead.

Maybe it was the lightening of the sky. Perhaps it was the sound of the Russian music...but Yuri began to stir on the forward deck. He scanned the horizon ahead, then looked aft to the cabin, waving politely to Dave and Stebi. He poked his brother with his foot to arouse him, and picked up his pistol from the sail cloth and stashed it in his jacket pocket. Dave instinctively felt for his, still stuffed in his belt.

“Good morning, gentlemen. Bon jour.” Yuri looked about in the cabin, perhaps hoping to find a coffee pot. “Where are we?”

“If you look aft, you might be able to see Japan disappearing behind us. This heading ought to take us directly to Vladivostok...maybe by the end of the day...at least by midnight.”

“So do we have plenty of fuel to make it into port?”

Dave wondered about that question, for that was the first time Yuri had shown any interest in the details of the trip. “Sure...and even enough to make it back to Japan. It’s just not that far.”

“Hmmm...well, in that case, gentlemen, please step out to the forward deck.” And he pulled his pistol from his pocket and pointed it straight at Dave’s face. “This is the end of the trip for you two gentlemen.”

Both Dave and Stebi had their Berettas stuffed in their belts. Yuri failed to notice when Dave reached down and pulled back the hammer...the click muffled by the growl of the engines..

Yuri followed Dave and Stebi out of the cabin and walked over to his sleeping brother and kicked him again. This time, seeing Yuri with a drawn pistol, he sprang to his feet and tried to clear his head.

“What are you doing?” protested Dave. “We agreed to your terms and intend to honor them.” He was trying to buy time with the distraction.

“Things are not always as they appear, sir. You have been gracious hosts to Alexi and me, but we must continue this trip without you.” He pointed the pistol directly at Stebi. Dave knew he must act and act now.

"Wait. There is something I need to know," Dave shouted.

Yuri's attention and aim turned back to Dave. "And what would that be?"

"Shut up, Dave," Stebi interrupted.

"What's your question? And make it quick. We are behind our schedule."

"The old man...why did you have to kill the old man?"

"What old man? What do you know about an old man?" queried Yuri. You could see the startled confusion in his face, but it was buying Dave and Stebi some time. "Who are you?"

"Who I am is not important, but I want to know why you had to kill the old man." Dave moved slowly toward Yuri and stood between Yuri and Stebi...hoping to give Stebi some cover and some distraction. Alexi just stood stupidly staring out at the ocean, paying no attention to his brother or what was transpiring on the deck next to him.

Yuri pointed his pistol directly at Dave's face. "I want to know who you are and why you know about the old man."

Dave had to think fast. What would Stebi do in this situation? Dave stepped closer to Yuri, giving him a poorer view of Stebi. Yuri's pistol was but inches now from Dave's face. Dave whispered, "Why is it important to you to know why I know about the old man? Why?" Dave reflected on his conversation with Stebi on the difficulty of killing someone standing face to face with you...and was gambling on his hope that Yuri was not an experienced killer. He could see in Yuri's eyes that his nerves were failing him and his gun hand was shaking. "Do you believe in angels, Yuri?" again whispered Dave.

"What? What are you talking about?"

Dave whispered again, "Do you believe in angels, Yuri?"

"Why are you talking about angels? Get away from me." Yuri was obviously quite nervous and agitated by Dave's truculence.

"Tell me, Yuri. How many people are on board this boat? How many do you see?"

"Are you crazy. There are only four of us here. What are you talking about?"

"No, Yuri. there are six. Can you see the two angels standing next to your brother? They wanted me to ask you about the old man you killed. You are unclean so they cannot talk directly to you." Again Dave whispered but this time with a hiss in his voice, "Do you believe in angels, Yuri? They want to know why you killed the old man."

"He did it. My brother did it. I don't know why. He was just an old man dying in the hospital, but he said something to my brother that angered him. He did it. Not me." Yuri was coming unraveled.

"The angels said he was a good man and are here to avenge his death. I will speak to the angels, Yuri. I am a Catholic priest; perhaps we can work something out. Wait here." With folded hands and bowed head, Dave moved slowly toward the distracted Alexi faking some Gregorian chant. Dave was about to run out of ideas and wondered why Stebi had not drawn on Yuri. Dave had certainly given him plenty of opportunities and distractions.

Dave circled the confused brother and chanted. He observed Stebi just standing there with a weird smile on his face. Yuri watched Dave intently in his exorcism performance. As he circled behind Alexi for the third time, in one quick motion, he drew the cocked pistol from his belt and jumped on Alexi's back...holding the barrel to his head.

Realizing abruptly that he had been duped, Yuri pointed the pistol back toward Dave. "Both of your pistols are empty...empty! My idiot brother took care of that. You are unarmed." Alexi grabbed Dave's pistol and ripped it from his hand...throwing Dave across the deck into the folded sailcloth near the winch. His thoughts turned to the concealed M-16.

"Empty...empty!" shouted Alexi...dancing around in a circle with his hands in the air like a winner of a boxing match. In his exuberance, he pulled the trigger, and the pistol discharged into the air. Startled, Alexi dropped the smoking pistol to the deck. Stebi started down for his own pistol, but Yuri pointed his pistol back at his head.

Alexi looked in disbelief at the pistol lying on the deck before him. "Empty, empty," he muttered as he picked up the pistol and held it flat in his huge hands. "Empty, empty." He pulled the trigger again, and again, it fired...this time sending a round into Yuri's right knee.

Yuri fell to the deck, writhing in pain, screaming Russian expletives at his brother, the pistol still in his hand. Stebi grabbed for the gun and was attempting to wrestle it from Yuri when Alexi pointed the gun at Stebi and pulled the trigger. The gun was now spent. Alexi threw down the pistol and lunged toward Stebi...but Dave got to the cable cutter first and planted it with all the strength he could muster into the back of Alexi's skull. Alexi stood erect, swaying slightly like a pine tree in a mountain breeze...looking back at Dave but with no focus in his eyes. Dave swung the cable cutter again with the strength of a long-ball hitter and connected with the sweet spot on Alexi's left temple. His lifeless body crumbled to the deck, and with one quick motion, Dave kicked it off into the sea.

"Awesome performance, Father Plowboy. Would you like the honor of finishing off this asshole?"

Dave picked up his pistol from the deck and held it to Yuri's nose, slowly pulling back the hammer...and waited. He wanted this murderer to suffer. Yuri closed his eyes and muttered something in Russian. "Do svedanya, asshole." Slowly he pulled the trigger, and the hammer clicked down on an empty chamber. Dave smiled at Stebi. "I've always wanted to do that. I saw it in a movie one time."

"You are one sick cowboy, Dave. You scare me."

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Yuri regained his composure though writhing in pain from the wound in his knee. For reasons unknown to Dave, or perhaps for no reason at all, Stebi treated the wound from the ship's first aid kit. He handed Yuri what was left in the bottle of vodka from the night before.

"Thank you, sir. I do not know why you have spared me. I would not have done the same for you. But this does lead me to an interesting proposition."

"You want to proposition us?" challenged Dave. "We just killed your brother and will soon kill you...and you want to proposition us. I don't see that you have much to bargain with. I think I will just throw your ass overboard with your bloody clothes and let the sharks finish you off."

"Hear me out. What you do not know is that my idiot brother and I would have been dead within this day regardless. Please hear me out. May I continue?"

Stebi nodded.

"First of all, this is a very delicate situation for each of us. I am not a Russian, and that canister is not nuclear waste."

"And..."

"I am from the state of Georgia, part of the old Soviet Union. We have been in civil war with Russia since the break-up of the USSR. They have slaughtered our people and pillaged our country. We are fighting back as best we can, but we are getting no help from the UN or anyone else. But we will continue to fight to the last man or woman...but we are losing."

"And the canister we are carrying is not nuclear waste. It is actually a nuclear weapon...a bomb. Our goal, Alexi's and mine, was to get it into the harbor at Vladivostok and detonate it. It was going to be a one-way trip for us. Maybe we could escape before the blast...but maybe not. But that is why we hired your boat."

"And just how did you intend to detonate this...bomb?" asked Dave.

"I am a nuclear engineer, sir. I know how they work. And I have the equipment and the explosive in these crates to set it off. Trust me."

"So you were going to set off a nuke in the center of several million Russians?"

"I have no love for Russians...for what they have done to our country...and my family. They raped and murdered my wife. They murdered my father and my son. I have no reason to live...no place to go."

"But even if I cannot get this bomb into the harbor, if they stop me at sea, I will detonate it there. It will draw attention away from our situation and buy us time. The Russians will not know whom to blame. They will blame the US and maybe China...maybe North Korea. And the radiation will close the area and the harbor for years to come."

"So you spoke of a proposition..."

"Obviously, I need your help...now that I am wounded and bleeding. My brother is dead. I cannot do this alone."

"But you were going to kill us. Why should we help you?"

"We were never going to kill you. We were still within sight of the Japanese islands. We were going to set you off in the power boat atop the cabin...with provisions, of course...enough to make it back to land. We would have completed our mission before you could have reported us."

"I'll ask you again...why should we help you?"

Yuri continued. "You would greatly help the people of Georgia. You can help stop the violence and the murder. And if it is money that motivates you, I can tell you where there is much more back in Japan. I will not be needing it."

"So what is it that you want us to do?" asked Stebi. Dave looked at Stebi, not believing that he was actually considering aiding the Georgian.

"I want you to arm the weapon. I can tell you how. Then set me on a course for Vladivostok. You can take the little boat with anything you want or need...including, of course, the valise with the money in it. You can find your way back to Japan, and claim that your boat sank or was pirated. I am sure that you have it insured. There will be no evidence of it when I detonate the weapon."

"Okay," said Stebi. "We're in. Let's get this thing armed before we get any further from Japan."

"What do you mean, we're in?" countered Dave. "I'm not having part in killing millions...even if they are Russians. Remember that I know somebody who tried...and it never set so well with him. I want no part of this."

"Dave, this would be a good time for you to shut up. You are on my turf right now, and I don't need your opinion...or your help."

"Stebi, this ain't right...and you know it."

"Dave, what I need from you right now is silence. You don't have to like it...just do what I tell you. Go pull both throttles back to idle, then check our position and our heading into Vladivostok. Go. And keep an eye on our friend here. If he tries to do anything weird, just kill him!"

"You can see that my friend and I disagree strongly on this...and that he would like to see you dead...now. So don't try anything on us. Now you tell me how to set up your bomb."

"It's really quite simple. There are three parts in that second crate. The detonator is built into the green canvas bag. The bag will slide down over the nose of the weapon and hold the detonator in the right position. Make sure that you slide it on all the way. Tighten the straps to keep it there. Be careful to get it in the right position. That is absolutely critical. It has twenty pounds of high explosive in it. Then there is a black box that will allow me to either ignite the weapon immediately or set a timer. Leave it on the console in the cabin next to the throttles. Make certain that no lights are showing on the panel."

"Now there is a black cable that connects the detonator to the black box. You will see where it plugs into the detonator...but do not plug it into the black box. I will do that just before ignition. That's all there is to it. Now go."

"Dave, I'm going back to arm the nuke. Keep a close eye on this guy. I've checked him out; he's not armed...now. When I finish, I'll get the dingy in the water and check its gas. Get the M-16s out, and think about what else we need to take with us. Water, the valise. Rip out the radios and throw them overboard. I'll ditch the M-60. Let's go."

"Stebi, I..."

"Dave, this is not open to discussion. Do what I tell you. Just trust me. We'll talk later."

Dave was not happy...neither with Stebi's choice of action nor with his taking control with no regards for his opinion. But Dave had learned to trust him and complied.

It didn't take Stebi long to finish his work. "The black box and the cable are on the console. Let me help you in to the cabin." Dave stood by with Yuri's pistol in his hand as Stebi loaded Yuri into the chair at the console and checked his wounds one last time. "Wait until we are clear in the dingy, then set the throttles at 2500 RPM. This needle will lead you directly to Vladivostok."

"By the way, sir. I have never met anyone so willing to sacrifice their life for such a noble cause. I, for my own reasons, also detest the Russians. I salute you."

Yuri just nodded his acknowledgement.

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As soon as the dingy pushed away from the cat, Dave and Stebi heard the engines spool up and watched the cat disappear in the haze. "Crap, I don't even know if this motor will start. Did you think of that, Stebi? You seem to be in charge of everything else." Stebi could hear the anger in Dave's voice from being pushed aside in making the gigantic decisions of the past fifteen minutes.

"Dave, don't bother starting the motor. Sit down a minute."

Dave obviously wasn't very happy with Stebi and his decisions of late...not just being ignored in the decisions...but the decisions themselves. He objected to Yuri's being released. He objected to what Yuri was released to do with the nuke.

"Dave, you've instructed in jets. Right? You've taught others to fly?"

"You know I have, Stebi. You know all about me. Remember?"

"Now don't get your whities in a tightie, Dave. Hear me out. Did you ever teach flying to someone not from America?"

"Yeah, I have a couple of studs who were camel jockeys...and one from South America. So what?"

"Think about this. Did you teach them everything you knew?"

"Well, of course. I made them the best pilots I could. That was my job."

"Really, Dave. Really? Everything?"

"Of course." Dave paused. "Okay, maybe not everything."

"And why not? You knew your job was to teach them. Those were your orders...your mission. Yet, you chose not to do your job completely. And why not, Dave."

"I think you know the answer, Stebi. No pilot would ever teach everything he knew to someone whom he did not fully trust...someone who might someday be his enemy."

"Bingo! And that's why I never tell everything I know to anyone. And it's not because I don't trust you, Dave. But I never know what you might do with the information I share...or how you might compromise it accidentally. I need to control the flow of info for my own safety...and yours."

"Information is power, huh?"

"Yup, man's flight through life is sustained by the power of his knowledge. Remember?"

"I want to know one thing. Why didn't you take out Yuri when he was pointing that gun in my face. God knows I was doing everything I could do to distract him. You were just standing there smiling. Where the hell were you?"

"Dave, it was pretty obvious to me that he didn't know much about his gun. He didn't even have it cocked. If he had pulled the hammer back, I would have dropped him in a heartbeat. You saw how his hand was shaking; so did I. By the way, that was awesome. I couldn't believe how well you read him and how you pulled that off. Just bloody awesome!"

"Yeah maybe, Stebi, but I still cannot believe you sent that terrorist off with a nuke that he's going to use to kill perhaps millions of innocent people. Who made you God? Who gave you the right to decide the fates of all those people that you neither know nor hate? I know we are warriors for our country...that we are sworn to protect our folks back home...but that was a stupid thing to do. I thought I knew you better than that. Sometime I'm sorry I ever met you."

"Well, listen to you, plowboy. Why don't you say what you think?"

"Oh, I've got more, you asshole. I'd like..."

"Dave, shut up a minute before you have a coronary...or you say something you can't take back. What has pissed you off the most? Let's deal with this one thing at a time."

"I'm pissed because you gave that SOB both a nuke and a way to deliver it. And I figure he knows how to detonate it. That's number one!"

"So if I changed that, you'd still think I'm the greatest guy in the world? Right?" Stebi paused, but continued with that damned sly smile that drove Dave nuts. "What if I told you he didn't have a nuke under that cat? Would that make you happy, plow boy?"

"Of course, that's the nuke. I saw it. I secured it to the boat. And you armed it."

"Dave, do you remember that first night at sea? You three were sleeping and I was at the helm."

"Yeah, so?"

"I went a bit further out to sea than you expected...right over one of the deepest trenches in the Pacific...and cut the cable. Blockbuster is currently under four or

five miles of ocean...and probably crushed from the immense water pressure. First nuke I ever dropped," Stebi mused. "Colonel Tibbbets, Major Sweeney, Pappy, and now me."

Dave was seldom speechless. Now was one of those times.

"Now I'm guessing you're pissed about not getting to extract your revenge on Pappy's killers. Well, as I recall, you already took care of one of them. I believe you smashed in his head...from behind. Note to self...never turn your back to this farmer. And then you pushed him off into the ocean only to be eaten by sharks. Right?"

Stebi continued. "So what is the worst thing you could do to his brother? How could you make him suffer the most for what he did to Pappy? You could have just shot him and made it quick. No, that would be too easy. What could be the worst thing you could do to him? Shoot him in the knee and let him bleed to death nice and slowly...after, of course, just having seen your brother die. That's not bad. How about shooting him in the knee, let him watch his brother die...and then patching his wounds so he can stay alive long enough to let the Russians get him and torture him into some confession? And if he survives all of that, he gets to spend the rest of his life in a stinking Russian prison. Now we're talking about real revenge! If he survives this day, he will dread every other."

"What the hell are you talking about, Stebi? What else do I not know?"

"Think about it, Dave. He's going to go sailing boldly right into Vladivostok Harbor thinking he is going to light the place up and become a martyr for the cause. And the KGB will be waiting to greet him...and believe me, they will take care of the rest."

"And just how do you expect the KGB to know about all of this?"

"I owe a favor to a Russian operative. When he breaks this case, he'll probably get another red star on his lapel. He'll be awaiting our terrorist. Believe me...and we'll probably even get our boat back."

"You cooperate with the KGB?"

"Only on the minor stuff that doesn't impact national security...like this. We share all sorts of info. You never know who is lying, but there are always ways to check. And lying doesn't help either in the next case that comes up. Honor among thieves, you might say."

"And just how do you intend to talk to your commie buddies? We're a long way from a pay phone, you know."

"Oh, I'll send out a coded message as soon as we get aboard the sub. Oh, I'm sorry. Did I forget to tell you that, too?"

"Sub, what sub?" Dave was overwhelmed by all the info coming his way.

"Look behind you...about a hundred yards. That's the periscope of a US Navy sub. They've been there ever since we left Tokyo Bay. They will pick us up as soon as the cat is completely out of sight."

"Jesus, Stebi, is there anything else I need to know?"

"Naw, I guess that's about it...for now."

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The plane carrying them back to the US was considerably larger than the one that took them to Japan...and nicely appointed. But Dave and Stebi were the only passengers. Dave's thoughts bounced from the Med Evac that had brought Stebi and him back to Brooks Army Medical Center and the conversations they had shared there, then to the times on the cat and in Yokohama. They had grown close...but much like the Odd Couple. Stebi had always been tough on Dave, but deep in his heart, Dave knew that Stebi would die for him...and he for Stebi. Such a friendship between warriors was singular, but Dave felt safe loving and being loved by a man of Stebi's courage and integrity and mettle. Yes, Stebi was his hero...and his friend. Little did he know that Stebi shared similar feelings...but would neither ever share them nor display them for outsiders to see. Where he thought it to be a strength, Dave figured that for Stebi the display of feelings or emotion was a sign of weakness...and he accepted that and honored that. It was just the way he was wired up.

It was still dark when the Flight Steward roused Dave. "We're on Final Approach, sir. I need for you to bring your seat backs up and check your lap belt."

"Final?" queried Dave. "Final to where? Where are we, Sergeant?"

The Flight Steward looked over to Stebi for approval. "Andrews Air Force Base, Washington DC. Did you have a nice flight, sir?"

"I guess so. I think I slept all the way. What's the local time?"

"Twenty one thirty...and three quarters...now."

"I was kinda hoping I'd wake up in the Rocky Mountain Time Zone. What are we doing in DC, Stebi?"

"Oh, the usual debriefings after an adventure like this."

"The usual debriefings? You've done stuff like this before."

"Of course not...remember...parking tickets in the commissary parking lot."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah."

"You will have several people interviewing you, most likely. Sometimes it will be with both of us...and sometimes not. Just tell them everything you know. They are on our side...most of the time."

"Do you tell them everything you know, Stebi?"

"Let it go, Dave. I'm not changing...and neither are you."

There were only a few security lights casting eerie shadows across the Andrews parking ramp. There was no band or cheering crowds to meet Dave and Stebi as they walked down the steps from the plane to the tarmac below. The only sign of any life was the lighted sign over Base Operations..."Welcome to Andrews Air Force Base." Something within Dave encouraged him to get on his knees and kiss the concrete. He had always been so grateful to get back on American soil. "One of these days," he thought to himself, "I'm never leaving again."

"That black limo is probably waiting for us, Dave."

"Must be nice to have rich friends, Stebi."

"One must learn to adapt to current conditions, Dave. Get in on the other side."

It was difficult to adapt to the dim light within, but they were not alone. "Good evening, Mr. President."

"Good evening, Charlie. Good to see you again."

"Sir, may I introduce you to my friend, Captain David Edwards?"

The President extended his hand to Dave. "Captain Edwards, my pleasure, sir. I understand that you and Charlie have been out on another one of his little adventures."

For the first time in his memory, Dave was speechless.

"Dave, Mr. President is the first Air Force Academy grad to become President of the United States."

"Jesus, Stebi, I know who my Commander-in-Chief is; I just don't know why. I mean I know why he is President, but why am I sitting in a dark limo with the President of the United States in the middle of the night? I mean..."

"I'm sorry, sir. Dave doesn't get out much."

"Captain Edwards...Dave...due to the nature of your adventure, shall we say, what you and Charlie have accomplished over the past few days must never be publicized. The history books will never tell the story of the third bomb. You two have done the United States a great service...at great personal risk...and we, the citizens of the United States, are truly grateful. And I, as your Commander-in-Chief, wanted to thank you personally. And that's why we are sitting in a dark limo out here in the middle of the night. I couldn't exactly invite you to the White House without the press asking a lot of questions."

"Yessir, I understand. All of this kind of caught me by surprise. I mean I have never sat in a limo with the President of the United States, sir."

"Well, Dave, neither have I...but the First Lady has."

"I get it, sir." And both smiled.

"So here's the deal, gentlemen. I can't give you a medal. I can't throw you a State Dinner...because what you accomplished never happened. But what I can do as Commander-in-Chief is to promote you right here, right now. But understand that when I do, your file will be permanently marked PI, Political Influence. No one will ever know or can ever question why you got promoted...but they will always wonder, and you will be treated differently by the Military Personnel Center in the future. If you accept, I will make the phone call."

"Thank you, sir."

"Yes, thank you."

The President picked up his phone and spoke quietly. "Bill, promote two Air Force officers for me...John Charles Stebinski to Lieutenant Colonel and David Tristen Edwards to Major. Yes, their folders are on my desk. Yes, tonight. Thank you."

"Now what else can I do for you, gentlemen? Charlie? If it's my power, how can I reward you?"

"Nothing, sir. That promotion is more than I deserve. I am just happy to be of service to you and to our country."

"Oh, bullshit, Charlie. Rub the magic lantern and make a wish. What can I do for you?"

Dave interrupted, "There is one thing he wants, sir."

Stebi objected. "Shut up, Dave."

"No, I won't, Stebi. If you don't tell the President, I will...about flying...about getting back into a cockpit again. Tell him, Stebi."

"Dave, I'll fight my own battles, thank you. I don't need anybody's help."

"Come on, Charlie. What's Dave talking about?"

"Okay." Stebi glared at Dave, but inside, he was happy it was out. "Well, when I was injured in Korea, I was grounded from flying. And that ripped my heart out. I want to fly again, and I think I am physically qualified. I want back on flight status."

"Charlie, I can't heal you from whatever injury grounded you, but maybe I can help." Again, the President reached for the phone. "Bill, I want Colonel Stebinski back on flight status. Make it happen. What's that again? Got it."

"Okay, Charlie. Be at the Flight Surgeon's office here at Andrews tomorrow at 1300. A full medical evaluation will be set up for you. You will see Colonel Colin Michaels, one of my close friends and my personal physician. If there is any possible way, he will find it. If he can't get you back on flight status, you don't want to be...or need to be...back in a cockpit. Of course, if you go back to flying, Charlie, I don't know how we are going to replace you on the wall, but if that's what you want..."

"Thank you, sir. I will always be in your debt and at your service."

"I know, Charlie...probably better than anyone. And for you, Dave. What can I do for you?"

"That's very kind of you, sir, but there is nothing I need your help with. But thank you."

"Dave, I know the President, and he will only ask you once. Isn't there a plane you really want to fly or a base you want to be assigned to...or someone you'd like to be assigned near?" Stebi looked at Dave with that sly little grin that always carried a thousand messages.

Dave pondered Stebi's words for a few seconds and smiled. "Sir, is there any way I could get assigned back to the Academy...to teach history?"

"History, huh? Dave, I'm offering you Baked Alaska and all you ask for is a Tootsie Pop...but if that's what does it for you, whom am I to question. It's a noble endeavor, and I'm certain you will add a great deal of value to the Academy and to the Cadets. There is no telling where I would be today if I had not gone through the Academy...probably selling mutual funds or girdles. But why do I suspect there's a girl involved in this?" And again, he reached for the phone. "Bill, connect me with my little brother...yeah, Colonel Greg Frederick at the Air Force Academy."

AND IN CONCLUSION...

There are no guarantees in life...not even death. Each of us is immortal until the day we die. And that was Dave's philosophy. He didn't live each day as if that would be his last...but then he wasn't about to miss anything that came along naturally or as a result of his choices. He always assumed the total responsibility for each choice...and his life, as anyone's, was full of them. He knew he could never control everything that life presented him, but he could fully control how he responded to those...just a matter of choice and discipline. He respected the wisdom of others, but never more than his own. And he chose to live life as full as it could be for as long as his body would support it.

Two weeks earlier, Dave's philosophy was being tested. He knew he was in trouble. His standards had lowered. His energy and drive had dwindled. He was checking out on life...and he knew it. Yet one fairly insignificant decision, to return to Colorado for his class reunion, had opened a variety of doors that would greatly change his life and how he viewed it. Behind the first door was Nancy, and even though there was much left to develop in this relationship, Dave was, for the first time, looking at a future that included another soul...quite a sea change for our young Spartan.

The next door revealed Pappy, who within the few hours they spent together had developed into friend, mentor, hero and idol...and changed Dave's life forever. Oh, but what a relationship Dave anticipated if Pappy had survived. Just as he had felt when he lost Pete, Dave was still angry with Pappy's loss.

Behind another door was the reintroduction into his life and into his heart of his old nemesis, John Charles Stebinski. When Pete died, Dave lost not only a dear friend, but also for the first time in his young life, someone he could trust without consideration...and Dave only discovered that need through his relationship with Pete. Though Dave was at first reluctant to transfer that trust, he knew that he truly wanted to and needed to. And as the odd relationship blossomed with Stebi, he became comfortable with that.

And behind the final door was the adventure itself. Dave was always ready for about anything new and interesting. He found that draw toward adventure amplified by Stebi's life and career. And in a way, he was a bit miffed with his new friend when he gave up that life to return to the cockpit.

How would the opening of these four doors impact Dave's life? He really did not know yet, but he accepted the fact that they would and anticipated the unknown opportunities and challenges that were before him. Where would he be in five years...in ten...and who would be with him?

Dave honored the past, but only as a source of wisdom and preparation for the future. He knew not the destination nor the path, yet awoke each day with a smile

on his face and anticipation in his heart, ready to meet each challenge and make the most of it. This is the Dave that Nancy, Pappy and Stebi loved...as well as Pete. Dave was an easy guy to like and admire. Dave knew instinctively how to be a good friend.

When Pete died, Dave volunteered to collect up his personal belongings and return them to his family in Philadelphia. One item he did not return was a poem in an envelope addressed to Dave. He assumed Pete had written it about Dave. He was right...

INNER STRENGTH

He paid the price his entire life,
Yet still he holds so true.
Was it one of a kind, his state of mind,
So strange to me and to you?

What did he seek that was so unique
And alien to all of the rest?
Where did he win that strength from within,
So confidently meeting each test?

A strange way to live, so sensitive,
His numbers are many too few.
Manly indeed, a different breed,
And is he too good to be true?

Here is a man trying hard as he can
To feel the pulse of us all.
He even dares to tell us he cares,
That it hurts him whenever we fall.

Macho be damned, he is a gentle man.
He sets a pace of his own.
He has no doubt what his life is about,
Not expecting to make it alone.

Is it so queer that he is shaken by fear
Or avoids the unneeded pain?
Is being the best, better than all of the rest,
Really considered a gain?

He talks of believings and innermost feelings.
He is seldom embarrassed to cry,
Sensitive to need, gentle in deed

And always so willing to try.

Wherever he goes, sensitivity grows.
From his credo, he will never depart.
He will always abide by his trustworthy guide.
He is best led by following his heart.

None is above the needing of love
And he gets his by giving away.
He shows his caring by generously sharing
And expects you soon to repay.

But if you don't or if you won't
He simply then gives again.
The art of sharing and caring and daring
Is uncommon in today's common man.

Is it so rare for the big man to care
And to share with you how he might feel?
For in the end, he knows he will win,
Hence winning is not a big deal.

Just for a start he will win your heart
With that boyish, non-challenging smile.
You find then you must surrender your trust
To his friendly yet confident style.

Soon you are aware of desires to share
And enjoy the contentment within.
But is it too late? Why hesitate?
In this game, we all can win.

Ahead of his time, this gentleman so fine.
He loves women, cats and close kin.
Unusual that is not, but the magic he has got
Is in how he relates to us men.

Though we are soon to abort, he is quick to support
And sets us back on centerline.
He relishes in the victories we win,
And is joyous in our doing fine.

He shares in it all, although we might fall.
He will lend us his strength to the end.
Though successful or busted, his support can be trusted.
On his steadfastness you can depend.

A successful man will do what he can
To help others seeking high goals.
When success then we earn, he expects no return,
For he now owns a piece of our souls.

He has invested a part of his life in our heart.
Our own man we will be never again.
He will live there forever and now we can never
Be alone nor apart from our friend.

Yet the price he has paid for the gift he has laid
At our feet on our trip of success
Is that now he must live up to that trust,
Showing undaunted strength in each test.

Man's history shows that inner strength grows
When man faces problems, and yet,
When stubbornly greets them, he soundly defeats them.
His challenges always are met.

A man of strong heart who perfected the art
Of growing by giving his gains,
He gives love by sharing, he gets love by caring.
He is twice blessed, like heaven-sent rains.

Such a man can provide that long sought-for guide
To triumph, whatever our quest.
He is my master and friend, he is my strength from within.
He is God-sent and I am heaven-blessed.

...Pete Benedetto