

Prologue

September 1, 2011

Wakkanai, Hokkaido, Japan. Curtis Foxx removed his shoes one at a time, balanced on one leg and then the other as he peeled off his socks. It was late afternoon and the black sand between his toes felt cold but not unpleasant; the violent winter that would eventually sweep down from Siberia was still months away.

The man he'd come to meet was already down by the water's edge, quietly chanting a prayer to his gods. It had been on a boat off this stretch of sand, exactly one year after the terrible event, that a bond was forged between them. He watched as the man threw his hands high in the air, tossing chrysanthemums into the waves rolling in from La Pérouse Strait, the bleak stretch of water that separated this far northern tip of the Japanese island of Hokkaido from Russia's Sakhalin Island.

The chill breeze carried with it a few words of the Shinto prayer. More flowers were thrown into the waves, which immediately tossed them right back as if the man's prayer had been rejected, the stems eddying around his ankles. Curtis walked to the water's edge and into the man's peripheral vision.

'Yuudai-san,' Curtis said, his voice a coarse whisper.

'Shh . . . let me finish my goodbye,' Yuudai Suzuki replied.

Curtis took half a step back. He'd stopped believing in any kind of

god long ago. He folded his arms in an attempt to capture some warmth. Theirs was an odd friendship, bound by a secret. The day was September 1, the anniversary of the crash that had simultaneously joined their lives and changed them forever.

‘How long have the doctors given you?’ Curtis asked when his Japanese friend had finished.

‘Long enough. Four months. Perhaps more, perhaps less.’

The ravages of cancer were easy for Curtis to see. Yuudai’s face was bony, the cords in his neck plainly visible. Several bandaids covered sores on his forearms where his paper-thin skin had torn. The clothes he wore hung off him as if they were borrowed from a much larger person. Indeed, when they first met, Yuudai Suzuki had been a big man and his friends had called him Sumo.

‘And you, Curtis?’

‘Less.’

‘You look okay. They might be mistaken.’

‘Perhaps.’

When Curtis happened to catch his reflection in the mirror, what he saw was a virtual cadaver—yellow, gaunt and dying. With a shot liver and no hope of a transplant, there wasn’t much of anything the doctors could do for him. Still, nothing would have stopped him from making this journey.

‘You having second thoughts about going through with it?’ he asked.

‘No. We agreed and it is time,’ Yuudai said. ‘You?’

‘No.’

‘Is your son ready?’

Curtis shrugged. ‘How do you get anyone ready for this?’

‘It’s a big responsibility. The knowledge will be a burden.’

‘I know his mother. She’ll have brought him up right. He’ll figure out what to do.’ Curtis pulled the zipper up tighter under his neck. ‘No way is this secret going to die with us.’

Yuudai had no children and had never married. As an only child, his line would finish with his death. His private shame was that he had no one to pass anything on to—good or bad.

‘What about the girl?’ Curtis asked. ‘You still stalking her?’

‘I moved out of her building six months ago. Watching over someone is not stalking.’

‘You haven’t changed your mind about her?’

‘I got to know her quite well. She has inner strength, as well as every book ever written on the subject. Yes, together, Akiko and your son are our best chance.’

Curtis, like Yuudai, had signed secrecy agreements. He had sworn to honor them. But on his death, that pact of silence would expire.

‘The nightmares are getting worse,’ said Yuudai, changing the subject.

‘It’s just your medication.’

‘No, I don’t think so.’

The sun was setting, the temperature dropping with it. Neither man spoke as the stiffening late afternoon breeze sliced through their clothes. A wavelet rolled over Curtis’s feet, the sudden cold snap-freezing his blood. It numbed his toes but focused his mind. The event that had brought them together had happened twenty-eight years ago today. He still remembered it with piercing clarity. On that day, also, his son had been born, making it the very best and the very worst day of his life. In time, Curtis thought, perhaps the man his son had become would understand. He hoped so.

‘Did you bring it with you?’ he asked.

Yuudai dug an envelope out of his pocket and passed it to Curtis, who broke the gum seal and peered inside. There it was: twenty-eight minutes and six seconds of tape. Only two men in the world knew for certain of its existence. Soon, his son and Yuudai’s protégée would take possession of it, but not before Curtis and Yuudai were gone from this world.

BOOK ONE

THE TIMES

October 5, 1981

Soviets Shoot Down President's Plan

Washington DC—The Soviet Union announced today that it has formally rejected the 'Zero Option' plan proposed by United States President Ronald Reagan to limit the proliferation of nuclear intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBM) on the European continent.

In broad outline, the plan called for the scrapping of US IRBM Pershing II and ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCM) in exchange for the Soviet elimination of the SS-4, SS-5 and SS-20 intermediate-range missiles.

Pentagon sources say the Soviet Union has completed the deployment of more than 330 of the new mobile SS-20 missiles, each with three independently targeted warheads, aimed at population centres as well as military sites and storage facilities across Western Europe.

In response to the Soviet rejection, NATO has announced that it will bring forward the modernization of its intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF), deploying 108 single-warhead Pershing II missiles throughout West Germany and 464 of the single-warhead GLCMs in Great Britain and in Sicily.

Missile deployment is scheduled for December 1983, despite European fears that introducing the new missiles will make the continent a nuclear battleground.

THE NEW YORK TIMES

March 5, 1983

Protest Blocks US Army Base

Neu-Ulm, West Germany—Medium-range Pershing II missiles are set to be deployed in West Germany, but the several thousand protesters who blocked the main entrance gate at the Neu-Ulm US Army Base today were determined to prevent that from coming to pass.

A further series of protests is scheduled to take place this month, culminating in an attempt to ring the base with a human chain of interlocked arms. This would symbolize unity and defiance, said a spokesman for the anti-missile movement. He added that more than 150,000 people were expected to take part, dwarfing even the massive demonstrations organized by British anti-nuclear protesters at Greenham Common recently. The spokesman said 30 special trains and 800 chartered buses would transport the demonstrators to the base, people from all walks of life, and from all over West Germany.

Today's protest started peacefully, but the mood deteriorated later in the day when a convoy of army trucks arrived at the base and the police riot squad was called in to clear the road of protesters. The US Army is responding with indifference to the public show of disquiet, maintaining a facade of business as usual. When asked if the new missiles would arrive on schedule later in the year, a US Army colonel who asked not to be identified said it was not the American military's habit to pass out delivery dates, nor was it policy to either confirm or deny the presence of nuclear weapons.

March 4, 1983

US Army Base, Neu-Ulm, Bavaria, West Germany. It was a fine early spring day, but noisy as hell. The uproar from the besieging hordes beyond the wire was so loud that National Security Agency analyst Roy Garret could feel the vibration through the soles of his boots. He took a deep breath then started heading off the base through a secondary gate. He was joined almost immediately by a spook who'd introduced himself earlier as Hank.

'Mind if I tag along?' Hank asked.

Garret shrugged.

The two men gave the army sentries a nod as they passed beneath the boom towards the barbed wire coiled across the road. A group of demonstrators spotted them leaving and identified them as the enemy.

'He! He sie . . . !' they called out.

Garret and Hank ignored them, and once off the base were enveloped by the chanting, dancing, swirling crowd, becoming just another couple of guys among those with 'Ban the Bomb' patches on the pockets of their jackets and hand-rolled cigarettes drooping from their lips. Teachers, doctors, merchants, clerks—the middle-aged mainstream—had all been drawn into the protest. Garret observed that many had even brought their kids. This wasn't just a bunch of

hippies, although they were also here in numbers. This was a groundswell, just as he'd predicted.

They continued to push their way through into a more conventional peacenik sideshow dominated by incense, patchouli oil and body odor. Garret smelled marijuana. Sinewy hippie types were dancing to Janis Joplin. Other demonstrators painted like skeletons towered over the crowd on stilts. A man dressed as Uncle Sam darted here and there, thrusting his palms smeared with fake blood into people's faces. Costumed Grim Reapers with scythes prowled among cardboard coffins lying on the ground.

Placards were everywhere, ranging from the unimaginative 'Missiles Out' and 'Down with the USA' to the more inventive 'Smoke the Weed, Not the Ground' and 'USAssholes Out!' A large banner had been painted with 'USA' and 'USSR' combined to make crosses in a graveyard.

Above the commotion Hank shouted, 'These people have no idea.'

Garret agreed. They didn't realize that the only barrier between them and a few thousand Soviet T80 tanks rolling across their deluded pacifist asses was the determination of the United States to stop Ivan dead in his tracks. And yes, okay, with nukes. The protesters only saw the mushroom clouds. They didn't see that the bombs were far more potent just sitting around, *detering*.

At the main gate, the crowd was more condensed and more determined. There was no carnival atmosphere here and the front lines of the protest advanced with arms interlocked.

'It's like those Vietnam demonstrations, the ones in DC,' Hank shouted. 'All those pissed moms and dads, remember?'

Garret remembered. Disenchanted moms and dads made politicians nervous.

'You know,' said Hank, 'I was at Greenham, and this ain't no isolated event. What we've got here is a trend. And a trend, my friend, is hard to defend.'

This Hank guy was getting on his nerves. Garret stopped, the protesters whirling around them. 'You're CIA, aren't you?'

Hank turned. 'Nope, State,' he said with a grin. 'And you? NSA, right?'

‘Peace Corps.’

‘We’re both professionals, then,’ said Hank.

Garret took a moment to give the spook the once-over. He was five eleven, average build. Maybe 180 pounds. A narrow, pinched face with brown hair, brown eyes, skin grafts on one side of his neck, a deep scar on the other. A ’Nam vet, probably.

‘Who sent you to spy on me?’ Garret asked, walking toward a patch of less crowded higher ground.

‘You’re paranoid.’

‘You flew in last night,’ said Garret. ‘A C-130 with no tail markings. I’m guessing it’s a Company plane.’

‘Okay, you got me. Think of me as your security.’

Hank craned his neck to look over the heads of the protesters and watched the crowd flow back and forth like compacted trash in a rolling swell. A water cannon had arrived, along with five buses, all painted black. The bus doors opened and a riot squad surged out.

‘Spy, security—same thing. You’re what, early thirties?’

‘Close enough,’ said Hank.

‘So your pay grade is probably O-4 and therefore too senior to be muscle. And I’m bigger than you, anyway. I could be *your* security.’

Hank grinned. ‘Don’t flatter yourself, pilgrim.’

The Polizei, all in black with clear shields and brandishing long riot sticks, advanced in lock-step toward the protesters, escorting the water cannon. A roar went up from the crowd as a convoy of US Army semi-trailers appeared further down the road, heading for the base at a crawl. The riot police were there to clear a path. People passed around the word: ‘*Raketen*’. It swept through the crowd like the wind. ‘*Raketen*’, ‘*Raketen!*’

‘Rockets,’ Hank yelled over the noise and the chanting. ‘The Krauts think those trucks are carrying fucking missiles. Don’t these morons know we’ll be *flying* them in? Probably just truckloads of pizza and ice-cream down there.’

Hundreds of demonstrators turned away from the base, swarmed onto the road and lay down in front of the trucks. In the rush, Garret saw two of the skeletons on stilts fall and become trampled by the swirling masses.

A hover of helicopters arrived to film the action for the evening news. The riot squad cut off the main body of demonstrators while the water cannon went to work on the human speedbumps. The truck convoy inched forward.

‘Let’s cut the crap, Hank. Are you going to tell me why you’re looking over my shoulder, or do I have to make a formal complaint?’

‘No need to be a fuckwit, Garret. I’m just doing what I’ve been paid to do, which in this case is to keep you out of trouble. I’m not here to wipe your ass or be your whipping boy, so bottom line . . . keep a leash on your attitude, okay?’

‘You still haven’t answered my question. I want to know who sent you here and why.’

‘You have friends in the administration.’

Garret snorted in disbelief.

The riot squad were hammering away with their truncheons, raising the heavy sticks high over their heads, way back behind their shoulders, and then swinging them down like pickaxes. Several demonstrators, faces covered in blood, were hauled from the mob by their fellow protesters. The crowd retaliated, swallowing a couple of police officers on the outer end of the line. The uniformed men disappeared beneath a torrent of fists and boots as another water cannon truck knocked down people before sluicing them away with powerful water jets.

‘You wrote a discussion paper,’ Hank said.

Garret blinked. The paper he’d written was an internal one. As far as he was aware, it had gone no further than his section head.

‘Roy, frankly I’m surprised. Being such a bright spark, I thought you’d have figured it out by now. I work for the office of the National Security Advisor.’

Garret was stunned. ‘You work for Clark?’

‘No, I work for the guy who works for Clark.’

Hank paused as a unit of riot police sprinted past them and tackled a Grim Reaper to the ground for poking at another cop with a scythe, which was a cardboard blade, taped to a roll of cardboard. ‘So when you’re done here, that unmarked plane you saw will whisk you Stateside.’

‘What for?’

‘You’re wanted back in Washington. Whatever it was you wrote in that paper, pilgrim, some hombres with some serious fucking weight want a word with you about it.’

January 2, 2012

The Florida Keys, Florida, United States. Ben Harbor propped himself up on an elbow in the sand and admired the woman as she tied the bikini string on her hip.

‘I used to think leopard-skin print only looked good on leopards,’ he said, grinning, lying naked beside her on a large beach towel.

‘You want me to take it off?’ she asked.

‘No, put it on. I’d like the opportunity to take it off you again. Just give me a little while to get my second wind.’

‘What’s a little while?’

‘Ten minutes.’

‘I’ll give you five.’

Ben grinned. ‘You’re a tough negotiator.’

‘Growing up in New York will do that to a girl.’

The girl in this instance was twenty-three, tall, blonde, and maybe a thirty-four B cup. Her name was Joan, and Ben had met her only yesterday. Joan’s parents had booked an island discovery flight with Ben; her old man was keen to see a few of the best marlin and wahoo spots from the air before hitting them in a Riviera. It was the wrong time of year, but it didn’t matter. The guy was loaded. Joan said nothing the entire flight, just gazed out the window, her oversized white-framed sunglasses obscuring most of her face from view—either hiding or way

too cool to communicate. Ben had also noted, when she walked down the dock, that she wore no underwear beneath her blue cotton sun-print dress. He hadn't expected to see her or hear from her again, but she surprised him by calling first thing the following morning to book a joy flight. Ben wasn't sure which of them was getting the most joy out of it, but so far the scores seemed about equal.

'Have you been to New York?' she asked over her shoulder as she stood up and tiptoed into the water lapping at the coral sand.

'Nope. One day, maybe.'

'A guy like you could have a lot of fun in New York.'

'What's a guy like me?'

Joan porpoised under the water and came up smoothing her hair back. She trotted up the sand, tan breasts bobbing. 'Okay, let's see. Six two, six-pack, and *way* more than six inches. The blonde surfer-dude hair and green eyes wouldn't hurt your chances, either.' She regarded Ben in a detached way, as if appreciating a sculpture. 'Good short-term prospects.'

'Short term?'

'Not a lot of seaplanes in New York. Actually, come to think of it, there aren't any.'

'There's more to me than seaplanes.'

'Yeah, you've got the cutest buns I've seen in a long time.'

'Didn't I tell you? I split atoms in my spare time.'

'Sure,' she said, giving him a sympathetic smile. 'Hey, no offense, right?' She knelt beside him and kissed him, her cold wet hair falling over his sunburned shoulders. 'How're we doing here?' she whispered. 'Your five minutes are nearly up, buddy boy.' She took him in her wet hand. 'Hmm . . . looks like we'll be going into extra time.'

'Are all New York girls as pushy as you?'

'It's a tough town. Push comes with the territory. *You'd* get eaten alive.'

'If it's so tough, why don't you get out?'

She laughed. 'Get out? Look, after you've lived in New York, everywhere else is a trailer park. Besides, it's not that tough for me.'

'What do you do? What's your day job?'

'I was an art history major, which qualifies me to answer the boss's phone. Junior PAs don't earn a lot of money. But my daddy's rich, as

you know. He pays off my credit cards. And he takes me on amazing holidays once a year, like this one, though I'm sure he didn't see *this* in the brochure.' She leaned sideways, fondled Ben's testicles and kissed his half erection. 'And then, when the time is right, I'll marry one of the men I know who has as much money as Daddy and then I suppose I'll spend the next twenty years doing what everyone else does—charity work and fucking the hired help.'

'And you think *I'm* aimless?'

She sat up on her knees. 'Say, have you got anything to eat or drink in that plane?'

'Depends on what you want. I've got sandwiches, ice water, energy drinks . . .' Ben started to push himself up.

'No, I'll go,' Joan insisted. 'You relax. Save your strength.'

She walked down to the water's edge and then cut left, heading for the blue and white De Havilland Otter nosed onto the beach. Stepping up onto the float, she opened the door and bent over. A bitch with a real nice ass, Ben thought. A moment later, she held up two bottles of water and gave them a waggle. He answered her with a wave.

'Is this yours? Or does it belong to . . . Key West Seaplanes?' Joan called out, reading the name on the side of the plane's fuselage.

'Mine. And the bank's,' he said when she trotted up the beach toward him.

'Well, that's something. I'm impressed.' She gently pitched a bottle underarm at him. 'What would you do if you didn't have it? Get a job with the airlines?'

'Those guys don't fly, they manage systems. And they wear dumb uniforms.'

'I love a uniform.'

'Why am I not surprised.'

'Hey, there was a chopper lifting off back at Key West. I've never been in one. Can you fly those, too?'

'Yeah. Back to what-ifs . . . What if your daddy ran off with the maid and took all his money? What would *you* do?'

Joan laughed. 'She's Mexican. She was also born when T-Rexes walked the earth. Come to think of it, she even looks like one.'

‘Then maybe his private fitness instructor? Does he have one of those?’
‘Hmm, yeah. Monica. She’s kinda cute . . . And I’m assuming in this “what-if” scenario that Mom didn’t manage to clean him out with the divorce settlement—which would happen by the way.’

‘Whatever, canceled credit cards for you, baby.’

‘Well, New York’s expensive. I guess I’d probably do what most girls my age do who don’t earn enough.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Have six or more boyfriends.’

‘For sex?’

‘Hey, it’s not always about sex, you know. Most New York girls spend their money on rent and clothes. Boyfriends are necessary if you want to *eat*. You can diet on the weekend so one for each night of the working week is best. Nothing elaborate, just something hot and served by a waiter, with a glass of wine.’

‘Maybe I’ll give New York a miss.’

Joan snuggled into Ben’s arms. A couple of pelicans soared overhead on a course for Key West, while high above them a jet drew a furrow like a speedboat across a pink lake. New York was a long way away.

‘You wouldn’t have to worry,’ she said. ‘I’d look after you as long as you looked after me, if you know what I mean . . .’

Ben reached around from behind and cupped a breast, which had the effect of making Joan coo and wriggle her ass against his erection.

‘Happy New Year,’ he said.

She giggled. ‘It’s starting to shape up nicely. I was beginning to think you were all talk.’

His fingers picked at the spaghetti strap on her hip, the knot dissolved and her bikini bottom peeled off as she rolled onto her back. Ben admired her lithe, shaved, waxed, plucked and tan body. No doubt about it, Joan was one spectacular—and spectacularly spoilt—creature.

‘You love your job, don’t you?’ she said with a smirk, watching him watching her.

Ben grinned shamelessly.

‘Someone’s gotta do it, right? So can you hurry up and *do* me? The sun’s going down. We have to go and I’m getting impatient.’

Ben scooped her in his arms and stood up.

'Hey . . . what are we doing?' she squealed.

He carried her to the water's edge, the setting afternoon sun having turned the sea into a pond the color of orange juice.

'This time, Joan, we're gonna do it like fish.'

She wrapped her arms tighter around his neck and said, 'Um, Ben . . . the name's Jane.'

Half an hour later, the Otter was approaching the landing pattern dictated by the winds. Ben banked hard over Key West until he could make out the windsock waving at the end of the dock.

'Are you showing off? You're making me sick.'

Ben reassured her with a gentle squeeze of her bare brown knee. On this approach, when the sea breeze was rising over the spine of the key, the air could get lumpy. He glanced in the direction of the sun, a glowing rind vanishing below the horizon. The night was half an hour away. Time to deposit Jane on the dock and move on to the next adventure. Captain Tony's Saloon was calling.

'Is that where we're landing?' Jane asked. The inlet off the wingtip looked no bigger than a bathtub in the growing dusk.

'Yeah.'

Minutes later, the aircraft flared a couple of feet above the water and then the floats kissed the wavelets. With their speed washed off, Ben tweaked the rudder pedals and taxied to the dock.

'That was fun,' said Jane over the engine noise and propwash, her calm returned.

'No, *you* were fun,' Ben replied.

'I'm here another couple days. Shall we, you know, get together again?'

'Sure, key in your number.' He took his cell from a door pocket and handed it to her, his mind already running through the after-landing checks.

The water around the berth was dark and smooth. Ben closed the throttle, pulled the mixture and the engine died. The prop came to a stop with a *chug* and the Otter slid silently sideways, toward the pontoon. He opened the door, jumped out of his seat and hopped down

onto the float, all in one fluid motion. Cecilia, the owner of Key West Seaplanes, was waiting on the pontoon.

‘Yo, Cecil!’ he called out.

‘How was it?’ she asked as Ben passed her the rope to tie off.

‘Flying won on the day,’ said Ben as he jumped onto the pontoon.

Jane’s door opened and she tentatively stretched a toe down toward the float, nervous about falling into the black water.

Ben came around and gave her a hand across.

‘Where do I pay?’ Jane asked Cecilia.

‘Up at the office—where you came in. Good flight?’

‘Amazing,’ she said, giving Ben a sly glance.

‘You go on up and I’ll be there in a minute, honey,’ Cecilia told her. ‘Help yourself to a soda.’

‘Thanks.’

Jane climbed up onto the dock and then strolled toward the shore in a sarong split to the top of her thigh.

‘Free sodas? There must be something wrong,’ Ben observed.

‘Where’d you go?’

‘The tide was low, so over to N313.’

‘That little island’s a pretty public spot. Lots of fishermen call in there. You should watch yourself. One day you and a customer might find yourselves providing free, R-rated entertainment on YouTube.’

Ben flashed her a grin and passed over a bag of trash.

‘I had a call from a lawyer in Miami—a guy by the name of Kayson Bourdain. You know him?’

Ben shook his head. ‘Nope, never heard of him.’

‘He wants you to give him a call.’

‘And why’s that?’

‘It’s about your father.’

Ben stopped what he was doing and closed the log. ‘My father? What about him?’

‘He died.’

Something caught in his chest. ‘What!? Frank’s—’

‘No, not Frank. Your *other* father.’

March 5, 1983

The Old Executive Building, Washington DC. There was no nameplate on the heavy oak door, which Garret figured meant that if you didn't know whose office this was you probably weren't meant to open it.

Hank paused, hand resting on the brass knob. 'You set?'

Garret swapped the briefcase from one damp palm to the other and nodded. Hank opened the door. Behind it sat a thin middle-aged secretary. Her powdered face was accentuated by hair dyed fire-engine red. A purple vein wriggled in her temple. A cigarette smoldering in an ashtray on the desk curled smoke into shapes like bent wire. She glanced up from an IBM typewriter. With a voice dry as old sawdust she said, 'Go straight on in, Hank. They're expecting you.'

'You're a doll, Deirdre.'

Hank moved to another oak door opposite, knocked, and opened it. A conversation on the other side stopped mid-sentence as they walked into the sprawling sunlit office.

'Hank. Always good to see you,' said a man in his mid-fifties with red suspenders, a ruddy face and several chins. He was leaning back on a comfortable couch that hugged the floor, hands clasped behind his head. Garret recognized him instantly. Ed Meese III. He knew him by reputation: a lawyer and a Lutheran, the President's best friend and

chief counselor, a member of the President's cabinet. Meese had been responsible for calling in the National Guard to quell the People's Park Protest at Berkeley back in '69—one dead student, many wounded. He had a seat on the National Security Council.

'You must be our author,' Meese said, unclasping his hands and holding one forth for Garret to shake. 'Thanks for coming in on a Saturday.'

'No problem at all, sir,' Garret replied as they shook. 'Glad to meet you.'

'And this is William Clark,' Hank said behind him.

Garret turned. The National Security Advisor sat behind a broad, simple wood desk. With his dark, neatly combed hair, lined face and conservative suit, Garret thought he looked like a history teacher at exam time, an impression strengthened by the neat stacks of paper and folders organized in front of him. Four phones, each a different color, were arranged in a semicircle on the desk's right-hand side.

'Some analysis you've written here, Roy,' Clark said, picking up a sheaf of paper from one of those stacks. 'Congratulations on some great work.'

'Thank you, sir,' Garret said as Clark's CV ran through his mind. Clark was the President's most trusted aide and former justice of the California Supreme Court—indeed, his nickname was 'the Judge'. He was also a former army counterintelligence officer, a former Catholic seminary student, and known to be deeply religious. Up on the wall behind him hung a framed square of calligraphed parchment—a law degree—and a photo of a smiling Ronald Reagan haloed by the seal of the President of the United States. Dominating the wall, and in line with Clark's deeply held beliefs, was a large porcelain Christ nailed to a cross, purple blood welling from a bleeding heart and his many wounds.

A man in an expensive tailored suit occupied a chair in front of the National Security Advisor's desk. Garret didn't know him.

'And this is Des Bilson,' said Hank, filling the gaps. 'Des, meet Roy Garret.'

'*The* Roy Garret,' said Bilson with the hint of a smile. 'I've heard a lot about you.'

Bilson's tan face and blond perm reminded Garret of a porn star, except that the man's eyes were the color of ice build-up on a fridge freezer—cold on top, colder below. He was mid-thirties, Garret guessed, and a narcissist.

'Des is my go-to guy,' said Clark.

'For the last six months, the Judge has been heading up a working committee looking at ways to turn around public opinion on these missiles,' said Meese. 'And then out of the blue your paper comes along and blows our thinking clean out of the water.' There was a chuckle mixed with gravel in his voice. 'Sit down, Roy, and take a load off.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Garret, moving to the couch opposite Meese. He caught the view out the window: the south gardens of the White House and the tips of the pencil pines screening the President's swimming pool.

'Are you a God-fearing man, Garret?' Clark asked.

'Yes, sir. I go to church regularly,' he replied.

'Then how do you think He feels about the Soviet empire?'

Garret had never thought about the USSR in religious terms. 'He probably doesn't like it, sir, I'd say.'

'And I'd say you're right. We're dealing with what the President likes to call the Evil Empire: 280 million atheists covering a huge swath of His earth, led by a regime hellbent on world domination. We believe that God has given us the mandate to once and for all rid the planet of the Soviet menace.' Clark pounded his fist into his palm. 'Ed and I think your paper provides us with a potential strategy to do just that. Or, at the very least, give the Soviets a heck of a shake.'

'There are big plans afoot, Roy,' said Meese, sitting forward, his elbows propped on his knees. 'The President is not a fan of détente.'

Garret had heard that.

'The Soviets are envious of our wealth, our technological edge. It's making them increasingly nervous. Right now, with their SS-20 intermediate-range missiles on mobile launchers roaming the East German countryside, they enjoy a window of superiority. The United States is vulnerable. They know it, we know it. And I'm sure you know it. As long as they have that window, we believe they might do the unthinkable.'

Meese leaned further forward. ‘General Secretary Yuri Andropov has forced the KGB and the main intelligence directorate of the Soviet Armed Forces, the GRU, to cooperate in a worldwide intelligence operation codenamed RYAN. That’s an acronym for *Raketno-Yadernoe Napadenie*, which means “Nuclear Missile Attack”’

‘Right now,’ Clark interjected, ‘RYAN has the KGB out hunting for the remotest confirmation that we’re about to go to war. They’re even checking our blood banks to see if they’re paying more for donations. They want to know if we’re stockpiling supplies to meet wartime demand. They’re looking at our religious leaders, taping their speeches and sermons, analyzing them for signs that Washington has brought the church into our warfighting loop. Andropov thinks that because we believe they’re about to push the button, we’re going to push it first and go for a pre-emptive nuclear strike.’

Garret knew the Politburo had mobilized its agents in an urgent renewed drive to infiltrate the west, but he hadn’t known why.

‘We need to get our Pershings into Western Europe and restore that balance, offset those SS-20s, and we need to do it fast,’ Clark continued. ‘But as you know, the anti-war movement over there is strong and growing stronger by the day. It is now *the* most important tool of propaganda and disinformation in the Soviet arsenal.’

‘Those damn hippies are even poisoning the minds of the United States Congress,’ Meese added.

‘Roy,’ said Clark, ‘we need bills approved for the manufacture and deployment of the new Peacemaker missiles—’

‘I know you like that name, Judge—Peacemaker—but I don’t think it’ll fly,’ Meese chuckled. ‘The President wants to call MX the *Peacekeeper*.’

‘Just as long as it does the job.’ Clark stood, walked around his desk and sat on the corner. ‘As I was saying, Roy, what’s hanging in the balance is the development and deployment of America’s defenses into the future. Congress is baulking at the funds required for the new Bigeye binary gas weapon. And we need money to arm the Contras so they can help us stop the spread of communism in Central America. But those peaceniks in Europe are convincing everyone, even the folks at home,

that Moscow's evil intent is a figment of this administration's imagination. People seem to have forgotten about Stalin, the Red Army's push through Europe, the Cuban missile crisis. *We're* being blamed for the arms race. But you understand that, Roy. From what you've written here, your analysis of the European peace movement, you see it with a clarity that has eluded even a lot of the folks Americans have elected to protect them.'

The National Security Advisor flicked through the paper in his hand. 'Ah yes, here it is . . . You wrote in your analysis that we need "a unifying calamity to regalvanize international antipathy toward the Soviet menace". Beautiful. In one sentence you've managed to clarify and focus months of internal National Security Council confusion. "A unifying calamity";' he repeated, nodding and smiling.

'There's a lot at stake,' said Meese. 'No less than security, peace, freedom. Recently, at a meeting of the full National Security Council, President Reagan gave us a vision to work toward—a missile shield encircling America and her allies. We think it will capture the nation's imagination—a purely defensive shield to protect our loved ones against incoming missiles. It'll be called the Strategic Defense Initiative—SDI. But if it's to work, we're going to need the Russians to take their intermediate-range missiles out of the Warsaw Pact countries. Those damn things fly too fast. An intercontinental ballistic missile gives you roughly thirty minutes from launch to warhead detonation, but, depending on the target, it's down to a handful of minutes with intermediate-range missiles—too quick for any shield. The only way we'll get Moscow to take their missiles *out* is if we get our missiles *in*. And the peace movement is our biggest impediment to making that happen.

'Now, as you know, our Pershing II IRBMs are scheduled for deployment on West German soil in December. With the level of disquiet out there, we have no confidence that the deployment will go forward as scheduled. We've had a number of back channel conversations with our NATO allies and the whole deal is looking shaky.'

'Your paper helps us formulate a clear campaign to achieve the President's dream—a world at peace,' said Clark. 'The question for us now is

how to put your strategy into practice. You don't make any suggestions. I see in your record that back in the navy you were counterintelligence. Do you have any thoughts of a more *practical* nature that you chose not to commit to paper?'

Garret's heart was racing. As an analyst at the NSA, he was party to secret information, but mostly he had no idea how the fragments fitted into the overall picture. It was just information. But what he was hearing now encompassed the world. These guys sat on top of the mountain with an unobstructed view over the whole.

'No, sir, I haven't,' he replied, then hurriedly added, 'but whatever the incident, it would have to engender public outrage, even horror.'

'Go on,' said Clark, who had left the corner of his desk and was moving about his office, arms folded.

'Something like an attack on the USS *Maddox* in the Gulf of Tonkin wouldn't do it.' Despite what he'd said, Garret had in fact given the notion of 'a unifying calamity' a lot of thought. The pretext under which the United States had committed itself heart and soul to the Vietnam War wouldn't be enough in this instance. 'A nuclear warhead accident might do the trick. *That* would outrage the world, but the Soviets are too careful to let that happen. As I'm sure you know, they're actually a very conservative leadership . . .'

'We agree with you wholeheartedly,' said Clark, massaging his chin thoughtfully. He walked slowly into an adjoining room and around an antique Civil War-era conference table, before coming back and picking up where he had left off. 'I'm even more confident now that we're in complete accord. How about you, Ed?'

'Yes, I think we've found our guy,' agreed the counselor.

'"Take now your son, your only son, whom you love . . . and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you." Does that quote mean anything to you, Roy?' asked the National Security Advisor.

'Genesis 22:2, sir. It's God commanding Abraham. It's about sacrifice.'

'Do you think the nation would be prepared to make a sacrifice?' asked Clark.

Before Garret could answer, there was a soft knock on the door. It opened and a bald head ringed with a thatch of white hair filled the gap. Garret had only seen this face on a wall in Langley. It was William Casey, director of the CIA.

‘How we doing here?’ Casey asked.

‘Come on in, Bill, and meet Roy Garret. He penned that analysis on the peace movement you read earlier.’

‘Really?’ said Casey, stepping into the room. ‘Let me shake your hand, son.’

Garret stood and they shook.

‘NSA, huh?’ said the CIA director, looking Garret up and down. ‘If you ever want a *real* job, Roy, there’s always room in the Company for a bright young man with big ideas.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ said Garret.

‘Well,’ said Casey, addressing Meese and Clark. ‘You two old soldiers ready? We’ve got a meeting with the President in ten. Time to hustle.’

Ed Meese got up off the couch and reached for his suit jacket, plucking it from the coat stand. Clark’s was hanging off a hook on the back of the door.

‘It’s been great to meet you, Roy,’ said Clark as another round of handshaking ensued. ‘We’ll speak again soon.’

‘Looking forward to it, sir,’ said Garret.

‘Take care of this man for us, Hank. He’s valuable government property,’ said Meese.

‘Yes, sir,’ replied Hank.

‘Oh, and Roy,’ said Clark, pausing mid-stride, ‘why don’t you stay around for a while longer. I’d like you to have a word or two with Des. He has a few thoughts he’s going to take you through.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Garret.

The National Security Advisor gave a final wave as he closed the door behind Meese.

‘Please . . .’ said Bilson, stepping into the vacuum left by Clark’s and Meese’s departure and motioning at Garret to retake his seat on the couch. ‘So tell me, Roy, what do you know about commercial aviation?’

January 3, 2012

Sapporo, Hokkaido, Japan. Yuudai Suzuki lay dying, monitors beeping metronomically to the rhythm of his last moments. His body was light, consumed by cancer, yet he felt heavy, so heavy. His long bony fingers were like sticks of dried bamboo. They held a letter—stamped and addressed—which had been written three weeks ago when he still had the strength to guide a pen. In it was everything he had agreed on with Curtis, everything that needed to be said.

Ah, Curtis, you beat me to it, he thought. Warm the sake. I will be with you soon.

A nurse entered the room. She inspected the equipment, read the chart and departed. She never acknowledged Yuudai. He was a DNR and therefore her relationship was solely with the machinery, not the patient. It was the machinery that governed her responses. If the beeping became a continuous drone, she would simply turn off the machines and pull the sheet over his sightless eyes. This is what happens, Yuudai told himself, when your line ends with you; when you are all that is left.

He gathered his strength, lifted his head from the pillow and raised his hand, the one holding an old, creased newspaper clipping, yellowed like his skin. His fingers shook, the clipping fluttering like a frightened bird. He managed to smooth it on the bedclothes without

tearing it, and slide it into the envelope. He knew the article by heart. It had been cut from the *Hokkaido Shimbun*, the local newspaper, in September 1983—a follow-up on the crash of the airliner, a human interest piece. The headline read, ‘The Tragic Survivors’. The article discussed the plight of husbands who had lost wives, wives who had lost husbands, of brothers separated from their sisters by death, and best friends who would never meet again. Mostly, though, it focused on a girl, little Akiko, whose mother had been one of the passengers. The story included a photo taken at Anchorage airport shortly before the flight boarded. It showed Akiko asleep in the arms of her mother with the husband standing beside her. Both parents were smiling. It was a photo that belonged in a private album, or on the fridge, or even in a wallet. Instead it was on the front page of a newspaper, highlighting the anguish of loss.

Yuudai closed his eyes and that awful night came to life. The blips on the screen. The panic in the radar room; the horror that came with the realization that the blip was a 747, a civilian plane, 200 miles inside Soviet airspace, heading toward Sakhalin Island and its hornet’s nest of fighter planes.

‘I could do nothing,’ he whispered.

The machines beeped.

Yuudai squeezed shut his eyes so tightly that they burned, but the pictures and the sounds remained in his head as he saw the 747 once again dive from 35,000 feet. What must it have been like inside that plane, rushing toward the sea, death accelerating toward them, the airframe screaming?

The machines beeped.

The blip flickered. And then it disappeared. It was on his screen and then it wasn’t.

‘Airman Suzuki. Airman!’

Yuudai was suddenly aware that he was being spoken to. He turned and announced, ‘They’re going to make it. They’ve got a chance.’

‘We don’t know that,’ said a lieutenant colonel, an American.

‘Yes, we do. Didn’t you see?’

‘I didn’t see anything,’ the colonel insisted.

The metronomic beep was now a continuous tone, triggering a silent alarm at the nurses' station. Yuudai's last breath leaked away like a slow puncture.

The nurse walked into the room, her efficient steps squeaking on the linoleum. She checked Yuudai's pulse, switched off the machinery and noted the time of death on his chart. As she pulled the sheet over his face, a letter slipped out of the folds and dropped onto the floor.

June 7, 1983

Sheraton Hotel, Seventh Avenue, New York City, New York. Roy Garret was taking a breather, looking down on pedestrians from a fifth-story window, having a smoke. This wasn't the hotel that Korean Air Lines used for flight crews, and neither did any other carrier, which was just the way he wanted it. Most important, it was central, comfortable and discreet.

He drew back on his cigarette, cheeks hollowed, as he watched a woman with three children and an armful of shopping bags brave the afternoon traffic snarl. They made a run for it across Seventh Avenue. A cab screeched to a halt, but not before it hit one of the kids and knocked him to the road. A horn blared, distant, beyond the double glazing. Garret raised an eyebrow. The fact that the sound reached him at all way up here was surprising.

He glanced over his shoulder. The air in the suite's dining room was thick with smoke. Korean Air Lines 747 captain Chun Byung-in had started to pace. First Officer Sohn Dong-hwin and Flight Engineer Kim Eui-dong sat hunched over the dining room table holding their heads in their hands. Kim was making an odd humming noise, like catgut before it snaps.

In the adjoining lounge room, a couple of spooks from the Korean Central Intelligence Agency were sitting on the couch, chain-smoking

and flipping through magazines on the coffee table in front of them. The one named Pak was fat. The other, Lee, was rake thin. Both had faces flat as ironing boards.

The mission lead, Colonel Eric Hamilton—a retired USAF full colonel now working for the CIA—sat at a writing desk in one corner of the dining room reviewing his notes, the overhead light bouncing off his polished bald head.

Suddenly, there was an unexpected knock at the door. Everyone froze. The KCIA agent Pak, the fat one, slid his hand to the pistol in his shoulder holster. A ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign had been placed on the external door handle. Calls had been made to reception and housekeeping to make sure it was heeded. Watergate was still fresh in everyone’s mind and there were parallels: they were in a hotel room; they were talking conspiracy; the trail led to the highest levels of government. Garret went to the door, tensing for whatever was behind it, and threw it open.

‘Jesus Christ, Hank,’ he said, breathing hard.

‘Who were you expecting? Miss February?’

The KCIA guy with the trigger finger shrugged and said something to his compatriot. They shared a laugh followed by a pack of Lucky Sevens, each plucking out a cigarette.

Garret led Hank to the privacy of a connecting suite for a hurried conference.

‘What the fuck are you doing here?’ he whispered.

‘Always good to see you, too. How’s it going?’

‘It’s going well, all things considered.’

‘Considering what?’

‘Considering what we’re asking them to do.’

‘Which group do we have here?’ Hank enquired.

‘Group Delta—I think these are the guys we want.’

‘Are they putting up any resistance?’

‘Some.’

‘But they know they have to do it, right?’

Garret nodded. As citizens of the Republic of Korea, what choice did they have? The Soviet empire was close, hanging over them like smog. North Korea was next door. And over *their* back fence were the millions

of commies in the People's Liberation Army itching to help the North have another crack at moving in. No doubt about it, the ROK was in the middle of a pretty crummy neighborhood. If you could relocate, you would. So of course Chun Byung-in and his crew would do it, but that didn't mean they wouldn't have to be convinced.

Hank followed Garret back into the dining room. He chose a chair next to Hamilton, spun it around and straddled it.

There were no handouts, just slides, and they'd be destroyed at the conclusion of the briefing. A map of the mission area was projected onto one wall. Clearly identified were the landmasses of Alaska, Japan, the Korean Peninsula, and the Soviet territories of Kamchatka and Sakhalin Island. Threading them all neatly in international airspace was Romeo 20, one of the five commercial aviation routes connecting South East Asia with Alaska. The normal course taken by aircraft flying from Anchorage to Seoul along Romeo 20 was marked. A dotted line indicated another course, one that diverged from Romeo 20 and overflew the USSR on a course roughly parallel to Romeo 20.

'I have thought about it—we all have—and there are serious concerns,' said Captain Chun, loosening his tie.

'I'd be surprised to hear otherwise,' said Garret.

'Why do you think the communists will believe us?'

Hamilton fielded the question. 'You won't need to explain anything to Soviet air traffic controllers because you'll be observing selective radio silence—when they call you, you won't answer. Also, your transponder will be switched off so you won't be broadcasting your call sign, altitude, heading or carrier details. If they pick you up at all, they won't know who or what you are. At first, they might even think you're one of theirs.'

'We will have to explain these things to the US and Japanese air traffic authorities afterwards. What will we tell them?'

'Everything will be put down to a combination of human error and malfunction, each compounding the other,' Hamilton said.

'Human error?' First Officer Sohn appeared bewildered, like a kid lost in a crowd.

'Human error is not plausible,' said Captain Chun, speaking slowly, his

English near perfect. 'Let us begin with the divergence from Romeo 20. I am not sure which aircraft you flew, Mr Hamilton, but our 747-200B uses three inertial navigation system computers to get it from point to point. After I cross-reference the flightplan with an independent en-route chart, as the captain I would then enter into a keyboard the aircraft's gate position at the airport in latitude and longitude, followed by the waypoint coordinates. These coordinates are immediately displayed on two other panels for the first officer and flight engineer to cross-check. And then each INS checks the other for errors. With respect,' Captain Chun shook his head, 'human error? No, I don't think so.'

First Officer Sohn and Flight Engineer Kim nodded.

'We will be asked why we didn't spot these errors,' the captain continued, 'why we were so far off course. There's no acceptable answer.'

'This will ruin our careers,' said Sohn.

'No, it won't,' interrupted Pak, the fat KCIA agent. 'We have influence with your management.'

'There's also the precedent of Korean Air Lines Flight 902,' Garret said, tag-teaming with Hamilton.

The flight engineer grunted. 'Right, the 707 back in '78 that departed from Paris heading for Seoul and somehow ended up in Russia.'

'The crew didn't suffer for their mistakes,' Garret said. 'I believe the captain went on to command 747s.'

'Yes, I know him. And you're right, he did,' Chun agreed. 'But only because demoting him would have been an admission of fault by the company administration.'

Garret had studied every facet of KAL Flight 902. In fact, he was using it as a template for the mission now on the table. In the 902 incident, the flight crew had executed an inexplicable 180-degree turn above the North Pole, passing over the Soviet submarine base at Severomorsk, Murmansk.

'The Russians shot it down,' said Kim.

'They *forced* it down,' Hamilton countered. 'The plane landed safely on a frozen lake.'

'Passengers were killed,' Kim grumbled.

'902 was flying into the heart of the USSR,' Garret reminded him.

'You'll be skirting the edges. In and out.'

'And then back in again,' said Sohn. 'Was 902 also on a mission?'

'No, it was not,' Garret lied. 'Look, don't be concerned about how to explain your flightpath once you've landed. We will be controlling the flow of information and verification. When it comes to substantiating your actions, the relevant information will either become lost, we'll fog it up, or the tough questions just won't get asked.'

More silence.

'The point is, you won't be doing this on your own. We'll be with you every step of the way. When you land in Seoul, no one will know what happened, not exactly. And the facts that are released will be done so judiciously, and by us.'

'The course you want us to fly will have us deviating to the north almost immediately we depart Anchorage airport,' said Chun.

'Yes,' said Hamilton.

'But this deviation will be noted by air traffic controllers before we leave the Alaskan coastline,' Chun continued. 'The Regional Operations Control Centre in Anchorage will see our radar track. They will know instantly that we are way off course and ask us to correct it.'

'That facility is at Elmendorf Air Force Base and we can therefore control it,' Garret informed him. 'In fact, that issue has already been taken care of. We also intend to decommission the Anchorage navigation beacon—put it offline for routine maintenance. The civilian controllers you report to will simply assume that you'll correct your position at Bethel, the first mandatory reporting waypoint along Romeo 20.'

'You have reminded me,' said Sohn, lighting a cigarette with trembling fingers. 'As we deviate further north, we will eventually fly beyond the range of our VHF radio. We will not be able to make any of the mandatory reports along Romeo 20—at NABIE, NEEVA, NIPPI and so on. The authorities will have to investigate.'

'You can use your HF radio, which has more range, and we'll give you a relay,' said Garret.

'A relay?' asked First Officer Sohn, confused.

Captain Chun nodded. 'He means another KAL flight. We often fly

the route with a KAL aircraft either just ahead or just behind us. This plane can relay our position reports. And if it flies behind and varies its speed, there's a chance it could even be mistaken for us. The confusion would help.'

'This is madness,' said Flight Engineer Kim.

Captain Chun said nothing, his face a mask of calm.

'What about the Shemya radar facility?' the first officer murmured.

'It won't be a problem,' Hamilton assured him.

'Why not? It is company policy to take a fix on Shemya,' Sohn said.

Garret was aware of the procedure. Korean Air Lines required its flight crews transiting Romeo 20 to get a fix on a type of radio navigational aid called VOR/DME, which was located on Shemya, an island at the end of the Aleutians chain jutting into the Bering Sea. The aid enabled an aircraft to verify its position relative to the NEEVA waypoint adjacent of Shemya. Obviously, if the aircraft was 200 nautical miles to the north when it was supposed to be passing within a mile or two of NEEVA, this procedure would alert the flight crew to the fact that they were way off course. And the flight crew would then take steps to get back on course. At least, that's what an *innocent* flight crew would do.

'You will make your report at NEEVA as usual,' said Hamilton. 'And if you are out of range of the Shemya beacon, the relay aircraft will simply pass on your transmission.'

'Yes, exactly,' said the flight engineer. 'But the reality is that we'll be in one place while we're claiming to be somewhere else. Surely you are forgetting the huge radar facility also on Shemya Island—Cobra Dane. It will detect our location, and our lie.'

Garret lit a Chesterfield off the embers of another. 'You're very well-informed, my friend,' he said, drawing deeply.

'I have to be.'

Garret had to admit, these were excellent questions—just what you'd expect from an experienced, top-class 747 crew. He exhaled smoke through his nostrils. Cobra Dane, the giant phased-array radar on Shemya Island, kept a constant eye on Soviet military movements

across the Sea of Okhotsk. With it you could count the maggots on a carcass 2000 miles away.

‘Cobra Dane has two modes—surveillance and tracking,’ he said, carefully considering what he could say that wouldn’t compromise national security. ‘The facility is shared with a number of federal agencies and organizations. I can guarantee you that on the night of the mission, Cobra Dane will be in tracking mode, searching the skies for Soviet and other foreign satellites on behalf of the North American Aerospace Defense Command—NORAD.’

‘So, you have told us what you want us to do but not *why* you want us to do it,’ said Captain Chun, who’d begun pacing again.

Garret glanced at the others. After interviews with three alternative crews, Hamilton and the KCIA spooks knew the drill. They got up and filed out of the room.

‘I think I’ll stay,’ Hank said.

Garret wasn’t going to argue about it in front of the flight crew. He waited until the door closed and said, ‘Drink?’

Captain Chun and First Officer Sohn said no. Hank shook his head.

‘Scotch,’ Flight Engineer Kim replied.

Garret fetched a brace of Johnnie Walkers from the minibar and poured them into a couple of glasses. He opened the fridge. ‘Rocks?’

‘Please.’

‘Let me just remind you of the secrecy agreement you signed before this briefing,’ said Garret, as he handed Kim his drink.

The flight crew nodded almost imperceptibly.

‘President Reagan believes that Moscow is planning something. Their anti-aircraft defenses are being bolstered in and around the Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky Naval Base, home of the Soviet Pacific submarine fleet, as well as the defenses at Sakhalin Island. Without a doubt, this activity is all related. And we don’t like the picture when we connect the dots. In the event of war, the President’s concern is that Moscow will undoubtedly target South Korea with its new SS-20 medium-range nukes. The proximity of the ROK to the launch sites on Kamchatka Peninsula means your country would have barely minutes to react.’

‘Moscow may even use the Korean Peninsula as an example,’ Hank interrupted. ‘Burn it to a crisp just to let everyone see that they mean business.’

Garret glared at Hank, then continued. ‘Frankly, we need to know what’s going on down there. If we send a military plane into Soviet airspace, it’ll get shot down.’

‘What makes you think that won’t happen to us?’ asked Kim.

‘You’ve accidentally strayed off course. You’re a civilian aircraft.’

‘If we’re darkened and not showing cabin or navigation lights, with no transponder transmitting, they will know we are trying to hide from them,’ said First Officer Sohn. ‘They will fire on us, just like they did on 902.’

‘Obviously, we don’t think it will come to that. We estimate you’ll be flying over the Kamchatka Peninsula for approximately thirty-three minutes. We believe you’ll be back in international airspace before Soviet air defenses can react.’

‘Thirty-three minutes is a long time. How do you know they won’t shoot first and ask questions later?’ Sohn asked.

‘The Russians are inquisitive. They’ll want to know what’s flying around in their airspace. They’ll launch interceptors to have a closer look at you. And then they’ll see that you’re a civilian passenger plane.’

‘That’s if they ever get the interceptors up,’ Hank said. ‘Our intelligence leads us to believe that the Soviets are a spent force, a rusted-out hulk. Most of the peasants out on those Far East bases are drinking the glycol out of their air-con units ’cause they’ve already drunk their month’s supply of vodka. Their pilots are damn lucky if they can *find* their planes, let alone fly them straight.’

Garret regretted not pushing Hank out of the room when Hamilton and the others had left. He took a breath and continued. ‘Thanks to your mission and the interrogation you’ll receive from the Soviet air defense network, our signals-gathering assets will collect a rich harvest, vital intelligence that will enable us to prevent the enemy’s first strike—at least from the Far East at the ROK. You’ll be helping to secure the peace and prosperity of your country and the world.’

‘What about Sakhalin Island?’ Chun stood and approached the

projected map on the wall, still unconvinced. The islands of Japan rippled across the back of his shirt. 'The defenses on Kamchatka will be able to call ahead. They will know we are coming. They will wait. How long will we be over Sakhalin?'

'Approximately thirteen minutes,' Garret said. 'Just thirteen minutes.'

'You'll be gone before they know it,' Hank added.

'Ultimately, your defense is the truth—you *are* a civilian plane that wandered out of the commercial lanes,' Garret reminded them.

'Yes, intentionally,' said Sohn. He turned to speak with Chun and Kim. 'It will seem as if we took off from Anchorage, put our feet up on our instruments and went to sleep.'

'The world will know we have lied,' said Kim. 'No one will be fooled. It will look like a spy mission and they will point the finger at you—the CIA.'

From his seat, Sohn followed the intended course across the map on the wall. Far out over the Sea of Japan to the southwest of Sakhalin Island, they were to alter course abruptly, turning forty degrees to the southeast, and announce to Tokyo Radio that they had suffered unspecified navigation and equipment failures. 'At least you're not asking us to overfly Vladivostok.'

'This is an intelligence sortie, gentlemen, not a suicide mission,' Garret said as he polished off the Johnnie in his glass, avoiding eye contact. Vladivostok was the home of the Soviet Pacific fleet, one of the USSR's most secret cities and closed to all foreigners. It was also ringed with air defenses.

'This is something we all have to think about,' said Captain Chun. 'Korean Air Lines has many crews. Why have you chosen us?'

'Your government says you're the best men for the job,' Garret replied, neglecting to inform them that CIA shrinks had also earmarked three other crews for the same mission. 'You've all flown high-stress military sorties for your country, in addition to which there are well over 20,000 hours of flying time between you, much of it on 747s. You have all flown this route many times. You're also patriots, and right now your country needs you.'

‘When would this mission take place?’ Kim asked.

‘Very soon,’ Garret said, fetching his suit coat. ‘Gentlemen, I know this is a lot to take in. Why don’t we break for half an hour or so? Feel free to talk it over without us looking over your shoulders—no one’s expecting you to agree to this right now.’

‘Thank you,’ said Chun.

Sohn and Kim came to their feet and exchanged wan smiles and slight bows with Garret and Hank.

‘I’m assuming this area’s clean,’ said Hank, scoping the hallway as he followed Garret to the elevator.

‘Swept every hour, random pattern. The elevators and shafts as well as floors four through seven. Standard practice.’

‘Do you think they’ve figured out what we’re really asking them to do?’

‘The real objective? No, but those boys aren’t stupid. We have to be careful what we say to them.’

‘What about the media?’

‘We’ll have plausible deniability,’ said Garret. ‘We can also play the national security card if the questions get hot.’

‘What if the mission doesn’t go to plan?’

‘You really need to ask? If this goes in the shitter, our Washington buddies will be looking for fall guys. I’ve already bought my one-way ticket to a small South American dictatorship. I’d do the same if I were you.’

The elevator arrived with a chime.

‘Where are we going?’ Hank asked as they stepped inside the empty car.

‘Sixth floor.’

Hank pressed the button. ‘What about compartmentalization?’

‘The only person who knows everything is me,’ said Garret. ‘Next on the list is you.’

‘What about Hamilton and those KCIA gooks?’

‘Watch your mouth, Hank,’ Garret warned.

‘Oh, don’t be such a fucking hypocrite, Roy. I see the way you look at them.’

‘Then do what I do and keep it to yourself. Those “gooks” are our allies. As for Hamilton, he’s retired but totally committed to the cause. The mission profile is his baby. And your KCIA pals have the highest clearance.’

‘They’re still weak links.’

‘What are you suggesting, Hank?’

The elevator pinged and the doors slid open. Garret got out and stopped, patting down his jacket.

‘Not what you think I’m thinking, Roy. Times have changed. Can’t throw people out of helicopters any more,’ Hank said with a grin. ‘The more people have got to lose, the more they’ll do to keep it. Hamilton will find himself getting some lucrative contract work, maybe even a board position with a major military contractor. He might even wake up chairman. And we’ll make sure the Koreans go home to corner offices.’

‘And what are they going to do for me? Give me Des’s job—make me the apple of the Judge’s eye?’

‘Pull this thing off and Ronny himself will bend over and let you fuck him.’

Garret’s lungs hurt. He took out a pack of Chesterfields and searched for a light.

A metallic ‘clink’ sounded and a flame appeared. Hank held the lighter.

‘Thanks,’ Garret said, sucking the fire into the cigarette. Hot kerosene fumes filled his nostrils. The tobacco crackled. He offered the pack to Hank, who pulled one free and then lit up, a hand cupped around the flame.

‘You get that in ’Nam?’ Garret enquired, indicating the zippo.

‘Yeah.’

‘Mind if I take a look?’

Hank gave it to him.

He turned the lighter over a couple of times. The zippo’s brass edges were worn smooth from years of use. On one side was a black horse’s

head and a diagonal stripe inside a yellow triangle. On the other, an inscription.

‘First Cav,’ said Hank. ‘I was a gunner on Hueys.’

Garret turned the lighter over again and read the inscription. *Killing is my business and business has been good.*

‘A mamma-san gave us twenty of those for ten bucks, pre-inscribed. For an extra two she’d blow you.’

‘Those were the days,’ Garret said, handing it back.

‘They certainly were,’ sighed Hank as he pocketed the lighter.

Garret led the way, turning to his left. He stopped at a door, pulled out a key, and opened it. The room on the other side was identical to the one directly below, where the briefing had been held. There was, however, one big difference. In this room, the KCIA men were seated with headsets at a bank of black boxes with flickering lights and the needles of sound-level meters.

‘No one looking over your shoulder, eh?’ Hank said with admiration.

Hamilton appeared from the washroom.

‘How are they doing?’ Garret asked him.

‘Chun is undecided, Kim is against, and Sohn is waiting on Chun. Whichever way Chun jumps, Sohn will follow. Kim won’t want to be left outside on his own.’

The skinny KCIA man, Agent Lee, slid back his headset and addressed Garret. ‘Sir, they’re talking about fuel loads, insurance policies . . .’

‘That’s a good sign,’ said Hamilton.

‘Flight Engineer Kim is still not convinced,’ Lee said, adjusting one of the headset cups over his ear. ‘He could be trouble . . . wait . . . Kim is talking about the Soviets, reminding the others that they have many surface-to-air missiles, fighter jets and other defenses in the area. Many radars, too. He says it is one of the most heavily defended areas on earth.’

‘And he’d be right,’ Hank said.

‘Should I put them on speaker?’ enquired Special Agent Lee.

Garret gave him a nod.

Voices came through, speaking Korean. Lee translated.

No one will believe it. And I don't believe them. Saving our careers? We will never fly again.'

'Who was that?' asked Hank.

'Kim, I think,' Garret said.

Look, this is dangerous, but we live in dangerous times. Our country is surrounded by enemies. Every Korean is still part of the fight . . .'

'That was the captain,' said Hamilton, with nods from Garret and Hank.

'We should go somewhere else to talk about this. They will be listening for sure.'

'Kim again,' said Hamilton.

'That guy has seen too many movies,' Hank added.

'What does it matter if they are?'

'Sohn,' Hamilton said, Garret agreeing.

Silence for a long period.

'So you really think we should do this?' said the flight engineer, suddenly speaking English.

'Do we have any choice?' Sohn replied.

'How about those names: Chun Byung-in, Sohn Dong-hwin and Kim Eui-dong. Sounds like someone dropped a xylophone, don't it?' Hank said, grinning, extinguishing his cigarette with a hiss in a half-empty coffee cup.

Garret and Hamilton glanced anxiously at the KCIA agents but got nothing from their eyes.

'What's the usual ethnic make-up of the passenger list on the intended route?' Hank continued. 'I got asked that this morning. I'm going to get asked it again.'

'KAL's 747-200s are configured for more than 300 passengers,' Hamilton said. 'For the flight between Anchorage and Seoul-Kimpo, we can expect roughly two-thirds to be Korean, one-third American.'

'That many Americans?'

'Anchorage is a US airport. You were hoping for Canadians?' said Garret.

'What about a passenger manifest?'

‘Not yet. We’re too far out.’

Hank extracted his Marlboros and pulled one out with his teeth. ‘So you got a mission date in mind, Roy? We’re running out of time.’

‘A couple of options in mind, but the odds on the early morning of September 1 are firming. That’s a Thursday.’

‘What’s the flight number, so I can be sure to miss it?’

‘007.’

Hank grinned. ‘And here I was thinking you had no grasp of irony.’

January 4, 2012

Miami, Florida. ‘Coffee?’

‘No, thanks,’ Ben replied.

‘Please make yourself comfortable, sir. Mr Bourdain won’t be long.’

The receptionist was sleek, her skin the color of milk chocolate, and she resumed doing what Ben’s arrival had interrupted, her fingers caressing a slim Apple keyboard. He glanced around the room, which was dominated by the high-altitude panorama of downtown Miami and the beach beyond. The furnishings were stark and modern, and on the wall behind the receptionist was a striking painting of colorful squares and triangles that he vaguely recognized from a book. Ben gave the letterhead in his hand another examination. *McBride, Sweeney, Sweetman & Bourdain LLP*. Wealthy respectability certainly wasn’t what he’d associated with his estranged father, but from the address, the hot receptionist, the artwork and the minimalist décor, this was clearly a high-end firm.

He took a chair beside a middle-aged, silver-haired man in an expensive suit who was sipping a cappuccino and reading the *Wall Street Journal*. There were no other clients in the room. Ben picked up a *Time* magazine and began to flip through it.

An African-American man walked out from behind the wall of

modern art. ‘Ben,’ the man said, walking toward him, hand outstretched. ‘Kayson Bourdain.’

Ben stood. They shook.

‘Let’s go into my office.’

The fifty-something year old attorney led the way. He swiped a card and a glass security door slid open.

‘Nice office,’ said Ben.

‘We like it.’

‘The receptionist come with the lease?’

Bourdain smiled over his shoulder.

They continued past a buzzing open-plan office populated by young lawyers and legal secretaries before entering a corner office. The view was the same as the one in reception. Bourdain closed the door behind them. Ben noted a couple of tall bookshelves containing various green and red leather-bound volumes. The mushroom-colored walls were hung with framed degrees, diplomas and awards.

Bourdain motioned at Ben to take a seat on the sofa, a collection of interlocking black leather shapes. ‘You look like him.’

‘Look like who?’ Ben asked.

‘Your old man.’

‘I wouldn’t know.’

‘You’ve never seen a photo of him?’

‘They were thrown out when I was a kid.’

‘We served together in the air force, y’know.’

‘How nice for you.’

Bourdain picked up a stack of folders from his desk and sat opposite Ben in a matching armchair version of the sofa. ‘Do you know much about your father’s military career?’ he asked, placing the folders on a low frosted-glass coffee table between them.

‘No,’ Ben replied. ‘I’ve been going out of my way to give the guy no thought whatsoever.’

‘Curtis was one of the best pilots in the air force. I met him at Offutt Air Force Base—in Nebraska, just outside of Omaha. I was a maintenance engineer back then, a ground pounder. Then Curtis got assigned to Eielson AFB in Alaska.’

'Gee, that's great,' said Ben, glancing around distractedly. 'Is there something you wanted to see me about?'

Bourdain cleared his throat and said, 'Well, I guess we should dive straight into it then.' He opened one of his folders, sat a pair of gold-rimmed bifocals on his nose, and picked up a sheet of paper. "I, Curtis Eugene Foxx," he read, "am making this will in the presence of witnesses. My son, Benjamin Curtis Harbor, is my sole beneficiary. To him I leave all my possessions to do with as he pleases. Inclusive is the total of all money in any bank accounts, minus any debts I may have. I ask only that my remains be cremated and scattered over Chena Lake, Fairbanks, Alaska. I want no headstone, no memorial, no religious service. I leave to my son, Ben, my service dress, which I want him to preserve for only as long as he wishes. Ben, I am proud of you and I will be prouder still if you embrace the truth. Yours sincerely, Curtis Foxx."

Two words stuck firmly in Ben's craw: *My son . . .* And then the final paragraph, the change in tense: *I will be prouder still if you embrace the truth.* It sounded weird, like the man was actually in the room. 'Is that a legal document?' he enquired, rattled.

'You asking because there's no Hollywood baloney about being of sound mind and body and so forth?'

'I guess.'

'Curtis drafted this will in my presence with Jim Sweetman, my partner here, as witness. It's a legal and binding document.' Bourdain opened another folder. It contained an unsealed envelope, which he handed across. 'This is yours.'

The envelope was weighty, thick with paper. 'For Ben' was written on the front, neat and precise.

'Curtis prepared the package himself,' Bourdain said as Ben examined it.

'So he knew he was going to die?'

'Yes.'

Ben opened the envelope, removed the contents and sifted through them. The first item that caught his attention was a photo, an old washed-out Kodak color print. He flipped it over. On the back, '1983' was penciled in the bottom right-hand corner. The picture showed five

young men from waist to shoulder, the nose of a large aircraft behind them. The men were all in flight suits, smiling, enjoying the sunshine. Bourdain was right. The guy at the far left could have been Ben's twin, except for the whitewall haircut.

'Who are these others?' he asked.

'His crew.'

Ben put the photo on the table and looked at another item—a postcard. 'Relax at Chena Lake' was written in the top left-hand corner. It showed a man, his back to the photographer, standing waist-deep in clear green water, whipping a trout fly out over the lake. The postcard was hand-colored, the blues, greens and purples pushed beyond reality.

'What's this about?' Ben asked.

'I wouldn't know, but he wanted you to have it. The place was important to him. He wants his ashes scattered there.'

Ben frowned and put it down. There was also the man's birth certificate, his medical discharge from the United States Air Force, an official copy of his death certificate and a copy of the medical autopsy performed on his remains at the Northside Hospital mortuary in Atlanta, Georgia.

'Is that where he lived, Atlanta?'

'No. As far as I know, Curtis had no fixed address.'

'Why not?'

'I don't know.'

Ben examined the birth certificate: Curtis Eugene Foxx, born San Antonio, TX, July 19, 1950, at 7:42 a.m. in Wilford Hall Hospital, Lackland AFB. His mom and Curtis had met each other in San Antonio, he knew that much. What had his mom told him? That they'd both grown up in San Antonio but had gone to different schools. Nikki had met her future husband when she'd gone back to visit her parents, a PhD in English Literature from Louisiana State University in her suitcase. She was thrown together with Curtis at a mutual friend's pool party and they had something in common: Curtis was heading to a new assignment at Offutt AFB and Nikki was also going to Omaha, to take up a posting as an assistant professor of English Literature at Creighton University. Four years later, they were married.

Ben picked up the autopsy report. Here was something new. 'It says he died of acute liver failure, cirrhosis. Was he a drunk?' Ben asked.

'For a while,' Bourdain said. 'But Curtis eventually pulled out of it. The cirrhosis stemmed from a blood transfusion that came with a dose of hep C.'

'Why'd he need a transfusion in the first place?'

'He got mugged.'

'You seem to know a lot about the guy.'

'Curtis would drop me a line from time to time.'

'More than I got.'

The lawyer made no comment.

Ben flicked through to the medical discharge. 'How'd you get to be his lawyer?'

'I left the air force, went back to school. A couple of years down the road, he looked me up.'

Ben went back to the photo. 'What did he fly?'

'RC-135s.'

'What kind of plane is that?'

'Reconnaissance—spy planes. Basically a Boeing 707.'

'If he was such a hot shit pilot, why'd they kick him out?'

'Curtis had some problems he couldn't deal with. I believe he suffered from severe post-traumatic stress syndrome, back when no one knew what that was.'

Bourdain pulled a second envelope from the folder and slid it across the table. 'And this is also yours.'

Ben took the envelope. It was unsigned and unsealed. A weight inside it was causing the envelope to bend. He tipped it up and a key dropped into the palm of his hand. There was a number on it.

'007. Is that a joke?'

'Yeah, license to open. Ha!' Bourdain said, amusing himself. 'He left you a safe deposit box.'

'What's in it?'

'Wouldn't have a clue. Not my business to know.'

'Where is it?'

‘At a branch of the Bank of America, up in Orlando. The address is on the back of a sheet of paper in the envelope.’

Ben dropped the envelope back on the table with an air of indifference.

‘I really think you should have a look for that sheet of paper,’ Bourdain advised. ‘Make sure it’s there.’ The attorney leaned back in his chair and interlocked his fingers on his stomach, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Ben picked up the envelope again, held it upside down and gave it a shake. The sheet fluttered into his lap. There were figures on it, and when he saw the amount in bold at the bottom of the right-hand column, his jaw swung open.

‘The tax accountant here has completed the reconciliation and we’re holding the balance in escrow. Just email me your bank details and I’ll make an EFT.’

‘For . . .’ Ben examined the amount again, ‘\$96,112.90?’

‘You’ll have to pay his burial expenses out of it,’ the lawyer told him with an apologetic shrug. ‘But my fee was taken care of in advance.’

‘Curtis had money?’ Ben asked, stunned.

‘Yes, he had a small armed forces pension, a casual job here and there. I guess he saved.’

‘Jesus. We never saw a cent.’

‘Never too late to make things right.’

‘Ya think?’

‘Well, that’s up to you, I guess.’

Bourdain sat back again and regarded Ben. ‘You’re a pilot, too, aren’t you? Just like Curtis.’

‘No, nothing like Curtis,’ he said, his anger flaring.

After a few moments of silence, Bourdain said, ‘The burial. What would you like to do?’

Ben shook his head slowly. He felt trapped by the sudden responsibility for a man he’d only ever resented. ‘I’ve never had to bury anyone before.’

‘It’s easy. Choose a crematorium and let them know the body’s at the Northside Hospital mortuary in Atlanta. I’ve taken care of the obituary and all the legals. The crematorium will look after everything else.’

‘What if I just leave the bastard where he is?’

‘If you like, I’ll get my assistant to handle it.’

‘Works for me.’

‘Obviously, a lot of this has come as a shock,’ Bourdain said. ‘That’s understandable. You know, despite your experience with Curtis—or should I say, lack of it—he was a good man. Troubled, yes, but decent.’

Ben flipped back and forth through the documents as Bourdain got up and walked behind him.

‘There’s one more thing he wanted you to have.’

Ben glanced over his shoulder. Hanging on the door was a pressed blue USAF coat, encased in clear plastic. He caught a glimpse of a major’s gold oak leaf clusters on the epaulets. He put the key and all the documents back in the envelope and then stood up. Bourdain lifted the uniform off the hook and gave it to him with some reverence. The uniform was heavy.

‘Those ribbons on the blouse tell you a lot about his military career,’ Bourdain said.

‘Blouse?’

‘The jacket—the Air Force calls it a blouse.’

‘Mr Bourdain—’

‘Call me Kayson.’

‘Do you have any idea what he might have meant when he said he’d be prouder if I embraced the truth?’

‘I’m a lawyer,’ Bourdain grinned. ‘What the hell would I know about truth?’

Ben worked the keyboard. His own image shrank to one corner of the laptop’s screen as a woman’s face filled it. She was in her early fifties, her skin still smooth and remarkably line-free. A handful of light freckles sprinkled her small straight nose. She smoothed her hair, hooking a tawny lock behind her ears. A dead leaf hung from her fringe, which she hadn’t noticed. Nikki had been gardening.

‘Hey, Mom,’ said Ben.

‘Hi, Benny. You okay, honey?’

‘Yeah, why wouldn’t I be?’

‘Oh, you know . . .’

‘Hey, Ben,’ a man interrupted, his face suddenly crowding the frame. ‘How they hangin’, pal?’

‘Like Sweet Chariot’s, Dad.’

‘What’s the weather doing down there?’ Frank asked.

‘The usual perfection. I heard it’s raining in Norfolk.’

‘I’m not complaining. It’s good for the garden,’ Nikki said, reclaiming the computer. ‘Now go away, Frank.’

Frank disappeared.

‘So, what happened? How’d the reading go?’

Ben began with the money, which elicited genuine astonishment, then followed with a run-down of the documents and the uniform. ‘It’s weird. I feel like he’s trying to communicate with me. You know, make up for lost time. I found out more about him in one hour than I’ve known over the last twenty-eight years. Like, I didn’t know he drank.’

‘Yes, he drank,’ his mother said flatly.

‘That’s because he was a *loo-set*,’ Frank called out from somewhere in the room.

‘*Shoosh*, Frank. Curtis had a breakdown,’ Nikki told Ben. ‘He went through some kind of hell—real or imagined, I don’t know—but the point is, he changed.’

‘Into a jerk!’ Frank interjected.

‘Frank!’

‘The kid should know!’ shouted Frank. ‘It’s time. He’s twenty-eight, for Christ’s sake.’

‘Don’t make it out to be more than it was,’ said Nikki.

‘And what was it, Mom?’ Ben asked.

‘He came back from a mission rotation. And he was damaged.’

‘So he had a bad day at the office,’ Frank said. ‘That’s no excuse.’

‘Do you want to tell it, Frank, or shall I?’

Silence.

‘Thank you.’ Nikki fumed, looking off screen, and then to Ben she said, ‘At first I thought he might have been having an affair, but it wasn’t that—it was something worse, if that’s possible. He’d seen or done

something he just couldn't come to terms with. He wouldn't talk about it, so he just ended up in this downward spiral. What did the lawyer say about it?'

'The same, pretty much.'

'Booze amplified the problem. He refused to fly. The Air Force psychs back then weren't what they are today. They couldn't help him. One day, Curtis and I had a fight. Every couple has them, but we'd become dysfunctional. It was over his drinking, the lack of emotional support he was providing you—and me. I pushed him. And he hit me.'

'He *hit* you?' Ben said, shocked.

'It wasn't hard, but that's not the point, right? Curtis was deeply depressed and distracted in ways I can't begin to understand, even now. Something *happened* to him. But when he hit me, we both knew he'd stepped over the line. It wasn't the beginning of the end, it was the full stop. He just walked out. I never saw him again. I took you to my parents' place here, met Frank—'

'The man of her dreams,' Frank called out, walking back in the room.

'And you know the rest,' she said.

Ben had heard bits and pieces of this story over the years, but not all of it. He wondered what else he'd never been told.

'This photo was with the documents,' he said, holding up the shot of Curtis as a pilot with his buddies.

Nikki peered at the photo. 'Amazing . . . I'd forgotten how much you look like him.' She gave a heavy sigh. 'Such a waste. Nearly everyone in that photo is dead.'

'What happened?'

'They were in a transport plane that went down.'

'There was a survivor?'

'Tex Mitchell, the guy on the end. He was on vacation at the time. Tex was Curtis's navigator.'

'Do you know where he is these days?'

'Why?'

'I might want to talk to him.'

'About what?'

'I don't know.'

'I doubt you'll get anything out of Tex.'

'Because . . .'

'Because he signed the same secrecy agreement that Curtis signed. And those guys stick to the agreement.'

'Mom . . .'

With a sigh Nikki conceded. 'Tex used to own the Radio Shack in Homestead. I don't know if he still does. Listen, you don't owe Curtis anything.'

'He just gave me a whole bunch of money.'

'He owed you that and a lot more. If I were you, I'd consider the account closed.'

'Hey, I almost forgot,' said Ben. 'There was also this.' He held up the postcard.

'Oh . . .' said Nikki, bringing her hand across her mouth.

'What?' Ben asked. It had obviously moved her.

'Brings back memories—the summer of '83. I was pregnant with you. Curtis was stationed at Eielson, Alaska. We were living in Fairbanks and it'd been raining, sleeting, snowing, drizzling—every kind of falling wetness you can imagine—for eight long months. Everyone was going nuts. And then suddenly the sun came out for a whole month. We couldn't believe it. Curtis took leave. We spent three weeks at Chena Lake. It was our favorite place—so beautiful. We swam a lot. Curtis fished. It was often just like that postcard—heaven.'

'He wants his ashes scattered there. It's in the will.'

'Really?' Nikki seemed disturbed by the news.

'Are you okay?' Ben asked.

'Yes.'

'So he gave this to *me* to remind *you* that it wasn't all bad?'

Nikki frowned. 'Yeah, maybe . . . I don't know.'

'You want me to mail this to you?'

'No. No, thanks.'