

ELIZABETH YOUNG

FUGO

**TERROR FROM THE
SKY**

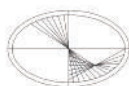


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TERROR FROM THE SKY



ELIZABETH L. YOUNG



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FUGO

Second Edition

Elizabeth L. Young

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Dedication

*For my husband, Robert,
and in memory of my parents,
Maude and Louis Young.*

Acknowledgments

This book could not have been written without the help of several people. First, my thanks to Dr. Thomas M. Harris, who provided valuable guidance on many details concerning chemicals and epidemics. At Divertir Publishing, my editor, Elisa, gave suggestions that have made the book much better. Mary Pettigrew has been my guide for my web site and creative details. Finally, my most sincere thanks to Dr. Robert Lovell, my husband, who collaborated on the original idea, helped with research, and provided technical guidance concerning the balloons and satellites. Any errors of detail are mine alone and not the fault of any of the friends or family who so generously helped me.

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PROLOGUE

June 22

In November, 1944, the Japanese began launching 9,300 unmanned bomb-carrying balloons (Fugo) that were carried east over the Pacific Ocean by the jet stream. The balloons were made of paper and tree parts; they were filled with hydrogen gas. The bombs were intended to drop over America and explode, causing forest fires, general panic and deaths. However, without a reliable guidance system, most of the balloons did not reach North America. The US Government suppressed information about the project, and fortunately most of the bombs fell into the ocean or exploded harmlessly. Only six deaths occurred. Japan stopped the launches in 1945.

§ § §

Melissa, a golden lab, did not notice the cloudless, blue Wisconsin sky that enveloped the farm. She was trotting from the house to the haystack by the barn. She had seen something drop into it a few days before. She was going back there since nobody was taking her hunting today. She liked retrieving for her master, but she was young and happy to think about discovering a small animal that she could chase or corner on her own.

The three boys had made a big hole in the haystack when they were playing in the yard, and the oldest one had thrown the youngest one's jacket into it, but then they had all been distracted and left the haystack. Later that day, during a loud thunderstorm, Melissa had seen something fall into the hole. She put a paw down as far as she could. The hay felt soft and dry. Nothing. But she knew she had seen something—and there was this hole...

CHAPTER ONE

December 5, the preceding year

Farley McDonald had secretly missed the long hours. When he sold his original company, FM Craft, to AeroProducts, a mid-sized company in Dallas, he and his wife traveled and visited their grown children. After a year of this, Farley was bored and contacted the owners of AeroProducts, offering to consult. They immediately accepted. They gave Farley a choice of where in the business he would like to help out, and he chose the research balloons.

FM Craft had started out in the business of making small boats for the inland lakes that dot Kansas, but Farley had seen a market in weather balloons. He won his first NOAA contract and more followed. So, for fifteen years, FM Craft had successfully manufactured balloons. When Farley became a consultant, he felt like he was building a start-up all over again. Maybe it was a coincidence or good luck, but three months after he went back to work, a man from the FBI showed up.

"Mr. McDonald," his secretary said, poking her head around the door of Farley's new office at the front of the balloon factory, "Mr. Ricotti is here to see you."

"Bring him in, please," Farley answered, closing out his computer screen.

"Mr. Ricotti, it's a pleasure," Farley said, shaking the hand of the powerful looking, dark complexioned man in the gray suit who stood before him. Without being asked, Mr. Ricotti closed the door and sat down in the chair facing Farley's desk.

"Mr. Farley, my agency has done its background checking on AeroProducts and on you. We have a classified program we would like to begin, and we need your expertise and your balloons. I cannot tell you the nature of the program, but I am here to ask if you are interested. If so, we will continue. If not, I will wish you success in your very fine business here." Farley could not quite place the faint accent. French Canadian, maybe. The man had shown all the proper credentials and it was true that the factory had done classified work in the past.

Mr. Ricotti continued. "I have, as you know, had two meetings with Mr.

Steelman and Mr. Goldberg at AeroProducts in Dallas. Last week, they told me that they will be pleased to accept the contract, but neither of them has a clearance, although you do, so I could not tell them anything other than the business details. They said they would take on the contract only if you personally accept working on it."

"Can you give me an idea of what we would be doing?" Farley inquired, without committing himself.

"Yes. We need a relatively large number of constant altitude helium balloons that will have a seven to ten day lifetime when operating at 55,000 feet, plus or minus ten percent. They must be able to attain a minimum nighttime altitude of 45,000 feet. The balloons must have a payload lift capability of slightly less than seven pounds, including a simple payload attach ring."

Farley, who had designed hundreds of balloons, began to move his hands in ball-shaped patterns as he spoke. "If we assume a balloon weight roughly equal to the payload weight, then it would take about fifty cubic meters of helium. That would give you a 15-foot diameter inflated pressure vessel. We could use Stratofilm-420 resin film like I used on one of NASA's research balloons to withstand the overpressure required to hold the upper atmosphere altitude limit you are specifying. This doesn't sound too hard, Mr. Ricotti. How many balloons do you need?"

"We need 600 balloons and we need delivery within six months. But there are some other requirements that may make this more difficult. I have included a complete list of them in the contract for your detailed review, but there are a couple of specific issues that I want you to understand. Your design must take into account that there will be a launch system that allows a maximum of three men to launch each balloon in a 10 mile per hour wind in no more than two minutes from out of the crate to release. And, because of payload sensitivities, the balloons must not have any metal parts or metalized fabric and should preferably be optically transparent."

"You are right—those are significant requirements. The quick launch specification may be difficult to achieve. The lightweight material that I would choose to withstand the overpressure is also quite fragile, but the smaller size is an advantage. Unfortunately, until I do some preliminary design work, I won't know how to price this job."

"I've negotiated a cost plus fixed fee contract with Mr. Goldberg, and a copy of that contract is here for you to look at." Mr. Ricotti pulled out the document and spread it in front of Farley. "It also contains more detailed requirements. Why don't I give you a day or so to review this and decide and

then let me know if you can meet our requirements? Time is of the essence here and we do have other options.”

“That’s fine,” Farley replied, as both men rose from their chairs. “I’ll be back to you tomorrow. Is using the phone to talk about this all right?”

“We prefer that you send a fax to this number,” replied Mr. Ricotti, circling a number on his business card, “and simply refer to this contract as ‘Party Favors’. Indicate that either ‘Party Favors’ can be delivered on time or that the project cannot be undertaken. If you need to speak to me, however, you may call this number—it is my ‘hello’ phone.”

Farley escorted Mr. Ricotti to the outside door, smiling at his secretary as he passed her desk. It was already after 5 p.m., but no way was she leaving before he did.

After “Mr. Ricotti” got into his black sedan and drove out of the parking lot, he stopped and shed his suit coat. He pulled a cell phone out of the glove compartment and turned it on. He dialed and waited a minute. No need to identify himself as Georges Labadie; the party on the other end knew his voice. “I think ‘Party Favors’ will be just fine for our children,” he said into the phone as soon as someone answered. “I’ll know tomorrow.” He hung up. Driving in Kansas reminded him of the desert where he had spent so many days and nights. “In another life,” he thought to himself.

CHAPTER TWO

The following April, first week

Rafik Muhaimin had flown to Los Angeles from Vancouver and rented a red Mazda. Known as “the chauffer” within the organization, his skills included desert driving. He loved going fast. He had two stops to make in the morning, both north of LA, and one later in the day in the San Francisco area.

He drove north from LAX for thirty minutes and then took an exit that led him to a squat, gray cinder block building with a sign saying “Electronic Parts and Supplies.” Checking himself in the driver’s mirror, he was pleased at how Canadian he looked—clean-shaven, wearing a conventional dark suit, white shirt and tie.

Inside the wholesale electronics store, a middle-aged woman with gray braids sat at the counter, working on her computer. “Good morning,” Rafik said to the woman. “I have an appointment with your owner. I am Silvio Franchetti from Vancouver.”

The woman looked up and smiled. “He’s in his office in the back. Let me be sure he’s in and I’ll show you back there.” She activated an intercom and a moment later came out from behind the counter to walk to the back of the building with Rafik.

The owner was half way out of his door when Rafik saw him. “Come in, come in! I’m so glad you decided to come down here and see our place,” the owner added, showing Rafik to a straight-backed chair in his neat but modest office. Rafik did not tell him that his trip had nothing to do with “seeing the place” since they had researched over 50 such places on the Internet and had decided on this one, along with a few others, because they offered the right products.

“Have you decided which brands of GPS’s you wish to carry and which models?” He had previously asked “Silvio” on the phone why an office supply store would be interested in ordering GPS units for retail sale. “Silvio” had explained that an increasing number of their clients had company vehicles, aircraft, and even boats, while some also wanted small hand-held units for

personal use. So, Vancouver Office Supply and Service Company was branching out into electronics.

"I'd like to see the Magellan Mite 300 if you have it in stock," Rafik replied. It was a new product on the market and they had not been able to see it until now.

"We have it—I'll ask my assistant to bring one in along with the product specs."

When an assistant came back with the Magellan, Rafik turned it over in his hands. It was the smallest GPS unit they had seen. It looked rugged. "How many of these can you get to us immediately?" he asked, and then added, "We want to begin our new retail lines as soon as possible—certainly before the summer season."

"Well, we can ship 100 this week and up to three hundred more by the end of the month."

"Good!" Rafik said and pulled out a checkbook. "I'll write you a check for the first one hundred today. After you check our credit, you can ship another hundred if that is convenient."

"Very convenient," the owner replied, surprised at the offer of the check for the first order—but cash was cash. "I'll have the warehouse package the first hundred immediately." They moved on to the necessary paperwork and in fifteen minutes had concluded their business.

When Rafik returned to his car, he programmed his GPS for his next stop, about an hour away. Rafik's second visit went much as his first. The factory manager was eager to show him the new products he had asked about, and this time, Rafik expressed interest in the Garmin AP Mini. "Our company will take 100 now and possibly more next month," he told the young proprietor who, with his sister, owned and ran the factory.

"It's the best!" he assured Rafik and happily took the check.

After the second purchase, Rafik sent a short progress message to Ahmed and then sped up to see how fast he could make the Mazda go, providing no highway cops interfered with him. It was mid-afternoon when he reached the third factory store, Bay Electronics, located in an industrial park in Palo Alto and selling to the public as well as to the trade.

Rafik was ushered to the back of the building and through to a smaller office where business customers were met. The head of sales, a short woman of ample build with bright red hair, smiled broadly at Rafik when they shook hands.

"I know you wanted to look at the Navigon-2G, but I can highly recommend

the Magellan Mite 300 and the Garmin AP Mini also,” she began bringing out units for Rafik to handle. Rafik refrained from saying anything about his other purchases. “Thank you, but my boss has specified the Navigon-2G, and we need two hundred of them immediately; we might need more later,” Rafik replied graciously. The check signing and paperwork followed smoothly.

Rafik drove to the modest motel near the San Francisco airport where he planned to spend the night. He would fly back to Vancouver early the next day. He sent one more text to Ahmed and included Georges. It said simply, “Mission accomplished.”

§ § §

After Rafik had left Bay Electronics, the head of sales pulled a chair up to her assistant’s desk. “Carmen, I want you to do something—not urgent but best done this week if you can. We just signed up a new customer: Vancouver Office Supply and Service Company. I’ve left the paperwork in your in-box, along with their check. But I want to know more about them.”

“You mean their credit rating?” Carmen asked. She had worked for Bay Electronics for ten years, learning many things and bringing them some of her skills from her former life in Colombia.

“Well, yes, check the credit rating, of course, but get me some background on the owners, the management, how long they’ve been in business, who else they buy from—in fact, see if you can tap into their customer data base. There’s something about this one that seems a bit strange, although I can’t put my finger on it.”

Carmen made a mental note to call her brother to ask for some help with her boss’s request. She could find many things on the Internet, and, of course, through the Agency, but Raul was better placed to tap those resources. And he might find the Vancouver company interesting as well.

CHAPTER THREE

April 21

Carmen had to wait three weeks to see Raul, as he was traveling on one of his missions. She wanted to see Raul in person for several reasons—and what better way than to enjoy an opera together? So since the San Francisco Opera was mounting a new production of “Carmen” that was where she asked Raul to meet her.

They made a handsome couple, Carmen with her black hair piled high on her head and Raul in a tux, a foot taller than she but with the same olive complexion and slender good looks. The Caballeros. Most people thought them to be husband and wife, but they were not. Carmen lived alone although she had many admirers. Raul was also unmarried. Privately, Carmen wondered if he would ever take a wife as he could do most things well for himself, including cook and entertain. His work also made lasting relationships difficult. He traveled often, and then, of course, there were aspects of his work that he could not discuss with anyone. Raul was a specialist on Latin America, working for the CIA.

Carmen, too, worked for the Agency, but only as a part-time consultant. Her fulltime job, with Bay Electronics, gave her access to the business world, which was valuable to them both. Raul maintained a cover as a consulting architect, and he had earned a degree in the subject from the University of Washington.

As soon as the curtain went down on the first act, Carmen said, “Come on, I’ll buy the champagne!” They went to the elegant bar in the south lobby and then found a relatively quiet corner where they could talk.

“Raul, we have a new client that my boss wants to know more about. They are called Vancouver Office Supply and Service Company. I have a copy of some paperwork from them in my purse. I’ll give it to you at supper.”

“All right,” said Raul, looking around the foyer. Perhaps for beautiful women, Carmen thought. “What is so special about them?” he asked, still letting his eyes roam.

“I’m not sure. My boss sensed something and she has good instincts. They

want to start selling GPS equipment and made a large order from us, and, of course, we may not be the only ones they are buying from.” Carmen paused, thinking back on the brief encounter with Rafik. “They sent a man—I think he may originally have been Algerian—as their buyer.”

“Algerian?” Raul asked, casually, still casing the lobby. “Why would that arouse any suspicions?”

“I don’t think it was the man himself,” Carmen replied, “but it may just be that we’ve never heard of this company before—and our marketing people are pretty good at finding prospects. Are you going to be home for a while, or traveling?”

“Not sure until tomorrow. There’s word of a special mission coming up. I’ll do some research on your Vancouver company as soon as I can and call you or send you an email.

Carmen smiled. “And what lovely lady will you be leaving in the lurch if you have to go off again suddenly?” She expected Raul to joke about this, but he did not.

“I’m not seeing anyone regularly now, but there is someone I could become more interested in.” Then he flashed his customary grin. “She’s about your size and height—must be I’ve always been in love with my sister!”

Carmen groaned. They would have no more serious talk tonight. “Come on,” she said, just as the intermission bell rang. “Let’s see if the second act lives up to your high standards.”

CHAPTER FOUR

May 3

Gerard parked his rusting blue Camaro at the back of the small parking lot outside the Vancouver seafood restaurant, which was closed. It faced the boat yard. He was still smarting from the lecture Luc had given him. “Rahmid knows nothing, nothing!” Gerard had angrily told his older brother. “He’s not a spy—he is just looking for work, and I like him and thought maybe we could use him.”

“He cannot be trusted,” Luc replied, in that even voice that meant he was mad. “I will take care of him.” So, Gerard had shrugged and decided to get on with his main task—lining up the boats.

The captain in charge of the fleet of the five boats Gerard was chartering stood on the dock waiting for Gerard. “I’m Gerard Dufee from the university,” the young man said, “and I have all the paperwork here for you.”

The captain, who had white hair and deep-set eyes in a surprisingly unlined face, took the clipboard from Gerard and examined it. “This all seems to be in order, except I don’t see the part about paying me more if we are out more than ten hours,” the older man asked.

“It’s here, on the next page—we pay you double for every hour beyond the ten,” Gerard replied, “but I don’t think the research team will need more than about eight hours unless we have unfavorable winds, in which case we will have to postpone the trip.” The captain continued reading. “Let’s go on board the *Filly* and I’ll sign,” he said, leading the way.

As they boarded the 50-foot fishing boat, which was clean and freshly painted, he turned back to Gerard. “You go with the students or are you just arranging this?”

“Sometimes both,” Gerard replied, “I assist in teaching the course. I am responsible for the observation equipment that we will deploy to measure the effects of photoelectric emissions. The information is needed to develop lightning protection on aircraft.”

The captain merely nodded.

Once the contract was signed, the deposit changed hands. “All five boats

will be here at the dock and ready to go out early June 2nd," the captain said. "I'll have two of my best men ready to work with your men and to assist the captains on each boat."

"Thank you for all your assistance," Gerard said politely, folding his copy of the contract. After they got off the *Filly* he looked back. Maybe a life of fishing would not be so bad, but this boat would not be going out in a few weeks to find fish.

After he left the parking lot, he drove a few miles further north to another boat yard. Again he met a captain who operated a fleet of five boats. Again Gerard presented himself as working for the university. The preliminary conversations, all conducted over the telephone, went well. This captain, too, was happy to sign the contract and seemed incurious about the purpose of the lease of his boats, all of which looked as if they spent considerable hours in the rough seas of the coastal Pacific.

Tomorrow he would conclude the leasing of five more boats at still a different boat yard from the first two. These last boats were part of their reserve fleet, in case something went wrong with any of the other vessels. He hoped they would not be needed, but the mission was meticulously planned. He knew that in addition to the boats he was leasing, five more would be leaving a port in Los Angeles for the same purpose on Saturday, June 2nd.

Gerard believed in the cause, but he also liked the money he was making. If it were not for Luc's constant suspicions and frequent anger at everybody in the group, including Gerard, things would have to be said to be going quite well. "I need to find Luc a girlfriend," Gerard muttered to himself the next afternoon, when all the leases were signed and filed. He thought about treating himself to a beer at the Bar Blu but feared he might run into Rahmid. "I hope I have not lost him as a friend," Gerard thought. His only friends these days were part of the cell, and most of them were humorless and intense.

CHAPTER FIVE

May 4

Rahmid Shalif, code name “Playboy,” had hoped to learn more from Gerard about the boats so he could pass on information to Colonel Diep. But when Rahmid went to Bar Blu the next night, Gerard was absent and his cousin, Luc, was waiting instead. Rahmid’s guard immediately went up when Luc said he could offer him a job with his garbage removal service. Rahmid’s cover story with Gerard had been that he needed work. Now, worried that Luc knew that he was an informant, Rahmid kept trying to turn the conversation back to working on the boats. Luc, however, was insistent that Rahmid visit the “garbage removal” company for a job interview, so Rahmid agreed and excused himself after he finished a coke.

In his car, Rahmid activated his mobile phone. “It’s me,” he said when someone at the other end answered. “Remember when I talked to you last night about sailing? I think the subject is more important than I thought. I will pursue it.” He clicked the power off. He checked his rear-view mirror. He was not being followed. Still, he would have to make good on his “looking for work” story. Just not today.

Colonel Po “Johnny” Diep weighed his options. Meeting Rahmid in person always involved risk, but he was feeling more and more that Rahmid needed guidance, maybe even protection. Johnny had a healthy estimate of his own abilities and value. He also believed the luck that first helped him survive as a young Vietnamese refugee in a new country still followed him. He could assume many guises and even worked once undercover as a cook for six months to infiltrate the Vancouver Chinese community. At least his wife, who was also in Military Intelligence, appreciated his vegetable chopping skills now! He reactivated his phone and dialed Rahmid’s number. He got voice mail. “Call me back, please, before you make any more dates—my sister may be interested.” It was one of the codes to alert Rahmid to call back immediately.

They met in a small park, frequented by mothers, children and dogs the next morning. Rahmid was dressed as a construction worker, in a blue jump suit. Col. Diep wore a baseball cap and tinted glasses. He carried a newspaper and

a book and sat on one of the most remote park benches, drinking coffee. Gerard sat down at the other end of the bench, also with a coffee.

"Who did you meet with yesterday? Was it Gerard again?" Col. Diep asked.

"I met him the night before at the Bar Blu; got him a little bit drunk. He talked again about his great responsibility to rent boats, and maybe I could get temporary work on one, but he doesn't know what they are going to be used for. He said there would be a fleet going out in early June. Then, yesterday when we were supposed to meet again, his brother, Luc, came instead. He seemed very interested in offering me a job." Rahmid gave Col. Diep all the details of the conversation. "I did not plan on seeing him, at least not until I talked with you. Do you think I should go to this company where he works so I can keep my story about wanting work?"

"No. Do not go. Do not see this Luc again, if you can help it, and if you encounter him try not to be alone with him. He has a reputation, and it is not good. We need you to keep in touch with Gerard. You are giving us valuable information. You can contact Gerard after a day or two; that would be natural, wouldn't it?"

Rahmid left first. Johnny Diep read his paper for a few minutes, threw away his empty coffee cup, and left the park. His wife would be surprised to see him home again so soon, but he had some research to do—he hoped his contacts in Washington were up to delving into their databases.

CHAPTER SIX

May 5

The day after Johnny met Rahmid in the park, he became “Ming Lew.” “Ming” had a solid resume as a kitchen helper, but he was out of work. Just after noon on Friday, Johnny rang the bell at the modest-looking building on Front Street that had a small plaque reading Best Removal Company. He patted his right leg. He felt good about the “job interview” to come.

A tall, lanky man with black hair answered the bell after a few minutes. “Yes?” he glanced down at the short Oriental man with unusually broad shoulders. Johnny noticed no obvious bulge in Luc’s clothing, no scabbard on his belt.

“Pardon me, sir, but I am Ming Lew, it’s my day off, and I’m looking for work. I’m going to all the businesses in this neighborhood. I used to work in the kitchen at Chan Palace two streets over, but they had to lay two of us off. Do you have anything? I can carry heavy loads.”

Luc frowned; he did not appreciate this distraction as he had to be prepared if Rahmid showed up today.

“No, no we have nothing. We are not hiring.” Luc started to close the door.

Ming looked down at his feet. “Then may I ask a favor—to use your bathroom for just a minute? I am sorry—I have been out all morning and all this afternoon.” Saying this, Ming inched a few steps into the doorway.

“This is not a public place!” Luc answered harshly, looking up and down the street, worried that if Rahmid came, there would be complications. He looked squarely at the Chinaman—or whatever he was—and decided it might be better to let him in and get rid of him quickly. “All right, the bathroom is just there,” Luc motioned down a dark hallway, “but hurry up. I have work to do.”

He let Johnny in, closing the door behind him. Johnny took a few steps down the hall; when he heard Luc begin to follow him, he turned back swiftly, with his right hand already inside the highest pocket of his cargo pants. He pulled out the long, curved-blade knife with one motion and aimed it at Luc’s neck.

Luc did not cry out, but the look of surprise on his face gave Johnny

much satisfaction as the knife sank into his skin. Luc collapsed to the ground. Johnny returned the knife to a heavy plastic pouch he carried in another pocket. He bent over Luc and retrieved a small ring of keys from Luc's side pocket. Johnny immediately went back to the front door and found the two that fit the two door locks. Stepping back inside, he dialed a number on his cell phone. "The cargo is ready for pick up," he said and hung up. It was tempting to search the building, but he suspected he would find little. He had his small revolver ready in his left pocket in case Luc had any friends on the premises, but he heard nothing.

A final search of Luc's pockets extracted some loose pieces of paper, a wallet, and a cell phone. These Johnny dropped into his ample side pockets. Then he reopened the front door, locked it, and checked the street. He moved quickly to the corner and walked the two blocks to his rendezvous with the minivan. When he saw it parked just behind a taxi stand, he went up to the driver's side. A middle-aged woman in a white uniform lowered the window. Johnny handed her the keys. "In the lobby," he said, and kept on walking.

The minivan pulled carefully into the thin stream of traffic. In a few minutes, two women medics entered a building on a side street in an industrial area and removed a body. They brought credentials in case anyone asked, and guns in case anyone interfered. But they were able to accomplish their work uninterrupted. They chuckled at the "Best Removal" sign. "We should have been the ones applying for jobs here!" said Mrs. Diep, the shorter one. Her friend, one of US Military Intelligence's best operatives for more than twenty-five years, smiled. It was all in a day's work.

CHAPTER SEVEN

May 7, in Washington, DC

President Elliott Bradley scrolled down to the newest “urgent” report that had appeared on his computer during lunch. In thirty minutes, he would convene the afternoon briefing with his National Security Advisor, Jeff Sanchez. The Secretary of Defense, Maya Tchernov, would accompany Jeff. President Bradley had requested this because of the report that Jeff had promised to send him. He began to read.

The essence of the report described a situation with which they had previously been threatened. Terrorists, nationality unclear, were up to something having to do with spreading deadly viruses and possibly poison gasses, this time staging the attempt from Canada. The information had passed through to military intelligence from an informant.

The report did not make it clear how the poisons were to reach the US or be spread. What gave the report urgency was the speculation that a key figure was Ahmed al-Kodari, who had escaped from Iraq after that country had emerged from its civil war and who had seldom been heard from in the past several years. The western world had assumed that during those years al-Kodari had been behind the bombings of US and British interests in Latin America and the minor disturbances at military bases in Australia and Norway, but nothing had ever been proved.

Elliott, in the third year of his first term as President after a successful career as a physicist and CEO of Markham Controls, continued to be grateful—both to the predecessor governments and to civilian leaders as well as to the military that no significant attacks had occurred on American soil since September 11, 2001. In the world at large, terrorism continued and al-Qaida still claimed responsibility for some attacks, but no single group seemed to have much central cohesion. More governments in developing countries were now democratic or at least less despotic. Elliott continued to support initiatives that would make the US safe and also help countries trying to rid themselves of terror and dictators. So far, the opinion polls showed the American people believed he was succeeding.

Promptly at three o'clock, Elliott's personal aide came through the door. "Sir," he announced, "Secretary Tchernov and Dr. Sanchez are here to see you."

"Thank you. We may take a little longer today, although I'll try to keep to my schedule."

The Secretary of Defense walked in and grasped the President's hand warmly. "How are you, Mr. President?" she asked in her deep voice. As always, the President heard the slight inflection that hinted at her growing up as a child of Russian immigrants in Manhattan. She stood a few inches taller than the President, and if anyone had ever thought that the first female Secretary of Defense would look like a dull gray retired soldier, they would have been wrong. Maya was tall, straight-backed and blond with large blue eyes, still youthful at 65. Her credentials included not only twenty-five years of military service, retiring as a four-star general, but a successful law practice on top of serving as Baltimore's mayor for eight years.

Elliott had appointed her shortly after his own inauguration; neither Democrats nor Republicans had opposed her. Toward the end of her career in the military, Maya had been responsible for overseeing US troops in several trouble spots in the world where no further serious disruptions took place. She had worked closely on the detente with North Korea that finally eased tensions in that part of the world. She shared with Elliott a keen intellect. He greatly appreciated Maya's skills and the two felt shared mutual admiration.

"Jeff," the President began, motioning Maya and Jeff to the chairs near his desk, "I've just finished the report about the possible poison attack. Can we calibrate the authenticity of this and possible timing?"

Dr. Jeffrey Sanchez's informal appearance, even in the White House, belied an exceptionally sharp mind, great wit, genuine respect for the Presidency, and a surprising ability to manage people, situations and—on occasion—the President's three dogs. He wore his trademark corduroy trousers—forest green today, but his beard was neatly trimmed and his loafers shined.

"Mr. President," he began, "I've brought Maya along to address the authenticity issue since her staff uncovered this, but I think we have to assume the timing of this possible attack could be very soon, perhaps in the next month or six weeks. If they're going to try something with some kind of poisonous substance, we have to assume there is no development involved, and they may have a plan to move into the country both by land and sea—that's where we are concentrating our efforts now."

Elliott nodded and turned without speaking to the Secretary of Defense. Maya adjusted her notes.

"We have an Army colonel in Seattle who frequently has liaisons with Canadian military officials in British Colombia. Two years ago, the CIA recruited a Canadian national, who has Middle Eastern ties, as an informant. They requested that our colonel be the 'handler' for this informant, and we agreed. He now maintains residences in Canada and the US.

Maya got up to pour herself a glass of ice water, sat down and continued.

"We believe the informant has tried to ingratiate himself with a variety of groups who may be working with al-Kodari, because apparently he has some kind of grudge against al-Kodari. It's because of this that he came across information that one group—he says they are in Vancouver—now wants to mount a major attack on the US. Our colonel questioned him closely as to why this would be happening now and he was vague on this. But he hinted that al-Kodari may be getting set to mount several major offensives around the world to show 'moderate' leaders in Arab and Middle Eastern countries that the US and Britain are still vulnerable and should not be thought of as models or allowed to further influence politics in the Middle East and other Muslim countries."

"How sure are you of this informant's motives?" Elliott asked, thinking about other similar reports he had seen over the past thirty months.

"We pay him, of course," Maya responded, "but his information has been accurate about much more minor events in the past two years."

The President nodded and turned back to Sanchez. "Jeff, unless you think we should take a different approach, let's go to 'Red Alert' at all airports and to level three security on all our ports. We must activate 'Code Cobra' for all immigration officers along the Canadian and Mexican borders. I'd like you to brief the Homeland Security people but make it clear that Defense and the CIA are to be involved—Maya, it's your decision how many resources you can put on this."

The Secretary of Defense nodded. "Mr. President, I'll coordinate with Jeff. Since I know you have other matters to discuss, I will excuse myself now. But, if it's all right, I will personally direct that the colonel be asked to stay involved as he may be able to extract more information from the informant."

When she was gone, Jeff remained standing and walked over to the window overlooking the spring green leaves on the maple and oak trees overhanging Pennsylvania Avenue. When he turned around again, he said, "Something about this worries me—it seems too pat. We get a report, arguably from a good source, but with information that sounds as if this particular group of terrorists is composed of amateurs. Either they are, or they wanted the information

leaked, or they are up to something quite different and that means this may be a smoke screen.”

The President was accustomed to Jeff's thinking out loud and waited without interrupting. Jeff sat down again and faced the President. “We've had threats of bioterrorism over the last three years. With your concurrence, I'd like convene a special team on this one.” The President nodded his agreement, and with that, they turned to the next item on the afternoon briefing agenda.

CHAPTER EIGHT

May 7, in Colorado

Two women in white lab coats were bending over a stainless steel sink at the first lab station Ahmed al-Kodari visited. One of them reminded him of his sister, Saleeth. They smiled, recognizing his face although they did not know his name. They thought he was a senior lab official who visited every few months. They knew their work was important and highly classified. It was enough. There had been confusion when they had moved all their operations out of Denver, but now they were working as a team again. All the secret work for the US part of the operation was now being done in this lab under Kamal Telal's direction, with its two separate sections, close enough to a major US city for convenience but quite camouflaged as to its real purpose. "What are you working on?" he asked in his soft, melodic voice as they both looked up.

"We have most of the material harvested, and now we are coating it for packaging," the more senior woman, who was tall and had penetrating dark eyes, replied to Ahmed. "See—when one of these breaks open, the material will be released and spread."

"Indeed," replied Ahmed, feeling a slight increase in his pulse rate. They were so close. So much to manage but so close. The lab outside Calgary, disguised as a metal parts shop, was completing work with the spores that had arrived in Canada one month ago. Ahmed had visited that lab, also, and determined they were also on schedule.

"Do not let me disturb you, then, and stay safe," he added as he and his companion, a smaller man with thinning hair and a preoccupied look moved down the aisle. "Can we go into the other section where the microorganisms have been harvested?" he asked Kamal.

"Certainly," Kamal replied as he led the way down a long corridor and through double doors, although he knew that Ahmed already memorized every inch of the laboratory.

Kamal never worried that his technicians were not doing their jobs properly. They were all well educated and committed to the cause. He was secretly

pleased that women were allowed equal status; that was very French and very right, and Ahmed agreed. "You see," he told Ahmed once, "they misjudge us because of our religion but we are not all fanatics or bigots or wedded to the old ways. We come from many countries and many of us are enlightened." Ahmed had again agreed, although with a sense of irony as he thought about how the results of the work at this factory would be perceived.

He and Kamal were still in the most secure part of the building and Kamal was saying, "We are very careful here with the packaging, and there have been no accidents."

"Nor must there be any—none!" Ahmed replied firmly. "We must have the substances packaged and ready in three weeks. The Canadian lab is on schedule," he continued, although he knew that Kamal was efficient and knew the schedule by heart.

As a manager, Ahmed knew that he should give Kamal some insight, some understanding so that Kamal would be even more vested in the mission. Ahmed had thought about this for some time, so he said, "We are going to use these substances very carefully, very specifically against people who have hurt us and who hate us. Some of them are in this country, some of them are not, but we must not let anyone know yet that we have this power."

Kamal nodded gravely. "I will do everything to ensure that we meet our schedules," he replied simply, not questioning beyond what he was being told.

"Thank you, Kamal, you have good people here and good processes," Ahmed told him warmly, and meant it.

CHAPTER NINE

The long drive from Kamal's lab back to the Denver airport should have given Ahmed time to think about the mission. But today all he could see in his mind was the young female lab technician—slight, dark-haired, intense—who reminded him so much of his sister. It was not just that he missed Saleeth or that his guilt for ever having let her go to the West grew with each passing month. No, the worst of it was that most of the time he actually hoped she was dead. "If you had come back right after graduate school, if you had not gone to work in their corrupt society, you would be alive still," he spoke to her silently many times a day. The man who had jilted her seemed almost incidental. To be sure, Ahmed was taking great care that this man's death would be assured if the man was found.

"Oh my sister, why did you not confide in me?" he asked himself for the thousandth time. They were twins, born to a wealthy family, liberal in its views but traditional in many ways. Because Saleeth was every bit as brilliant as Ahmed, their parents had seen to it that they both received the best educations possible. In Ahmed's case, that had involved universities in Paris and London. In Saleeth's, it was the US. She had always wanted to be a chemist. She graduated first in her class at The American University, and then she was Phi Beta Kappa getting her doctorate at the University of Southern California, so she had many job offers. By this time, Ahmed was resigned to her not returning to the Middle East. Ahmed worked in industrial planning in Syria as a cover, but he had early on joined the movement and grew more and more suspicious of the corruption of the West and especially America.

Ahmed and Saleeth communicated constantly—by email, phone, on Facebook and even by letters, although she was a better writer than he was. Her long letter about dating a fellow chemist had shocked him. Even though he knew she was not living as women did in their home country, he found it impossible to think of her as possibly marrying an American. He did not know the man's religion or background, but Ahmed knew he must meet him.

Just before planning his first trip to see his sister in two years, he received a terse email from her, telling him not to come—that she would not see him as planned. He could not reach her by phone, although he tried off and on for days. Finally, a letter came—long, somewhat rambling, but with a very clear message: her friend had rejected her. Her romance was over, and she was distraught. Perhaps she also felt guilty, he assumed at the time, and perhaps she also felt she could not go back to her family disgraced, for undoubtedly she had slept with the bastard.

He had decided that he must find her and convince her to return with him. Women worked in many countries in the Middle East, and he was not without friends who would be good to Saleeth. So, he made the trip anyway—and could not find her anywhere. At her laboratory they told him she had resigned with two weeks notice. Her apartment lease had four months to run but she had apparently moved out; it was almost empty. Ahmed made discreet inquiries about the man she had been seeing, but no one seemed to know anything about him. Ahmed found this odd as he assumed women confided in one another, but then again she had not seemed to have any really close friends at the lab, and he had little idea how she spent her time off work, although she often wrote about going to the theatre and to concerts.

After two frustrating weeks in San Francisco, he flew back to Syria, where a letter from Saleeth waited for him. It was short. She wrote: “Do not grieve for me. You have been the best brother anyone could have. My life as I would have had it is over. May Allah be with you.” There was no return address, and the postmark was smudged. There were no emails from her, and when he tried sending one his server bounced it back as “address unknown.” Her apartment phone and cell phone numbers were disconnected. Even her Facebook page was deleted. Much as he feared it, he gradually convinced himself that she committed suicide. Maybe the man had been married. Maybe she had become pregnant. Saleeth was a strong person, but she had been so alone. “If only I had been near her, if only I had gotten there sooner,” he told himself for weeks, and then recognized that his own guilt and despair were overwhelming him.

It was at this point that Ahmed sought out Abu and offered his services on a more direct basis. When he met the man in a nondescript café in Paris, Abu greeted him warmly. “We know what you did for us in Iraq and what you are doing in Syria and elsewhere. We know that you are working to defeat the great Infidel. So, I understand you would perhaps like to do more, yes?”

After some more conversation with Abu, Ahmed found himself volunteering for whatever would fit his background in physics, chemistry and engineering—but most of all in management, for he knew how to motivate people.

Finally, Abu told him, “We have a mission for you. It is in North America and it will not take place right away, but you are needed to prepare the work and if that goes well to oversee this mission. Can you leave soon?”

“In a week’s time,” Ahmed answered with enthusiasm and then hesitated—he wanted to ask many questions but he only said, “Who will be my contacts when I am there and am I to know what the mission is?”

Abu sat back in his chair, crossed his legs, sipped his strong coffee and smiled broadly. “I will be your contact, and in time you will have two people to work with you who will also know almost everything about the mission—as will you. There is also a man, a good man, Kamal, who runs one part of this project for us. He is in the United States. His cousin runs a similar operation in Canada. However, even they do not know the details of the mission. No one other than you and the two others I am assigning must know all the details about this mission or why we do it. I will give you the code procedures in six days—just before you leave, along with a letter, telling you more about this project. And you will have plenty of money. I have arranged for five million dollars to be deposited in a Swiss bank account for you. Both you and Kamal will have access to it, and I do this because I trust him. If any of the three of you gets in trouble, Kamal can help.” He paused, expecting a question; Ahmed was silent. He was not sure Abu trusted him yet, and he was skeptical of the motives behind the assignment.

As if sensing Ahmed’s thoughts Abu continued, “We want to show the Americans that their government, their entire country is vulnerable and can be brought to its knees by us, even though they murdered *him*. Then, when we have made them realize this, we will make them do certain things for which we have waited a long time—and give us money as well to finance our cause.”

“You mean blackmail them?” Ahmed asked with some surprise.

“If you want to call it that, yes, but we prefer to believe that we are exerting our holy purposes and making their power work for us,” Abu replied, still smiling. “Killing some of them is not enough; as we have seen, they are defiant. They have to learn to be afraid—that we have the power, we are in the right. We want them to get out of our countries. We want them to listen to us in the future and do as we say. If you can conclude our mission, you will not be in any danger, and you can help us in the next phase.”

“Please tell me where to contact you in six days,” Ahmed said respectfully,

and Abu stood to embrace Ahmed. A surprising knot of tension crept into Ahmed's stomach. "I am honored and excited," he thought to himself. He refused to acknowledge that he was also afraid.

The Denver Airport signs brought Ahmed back to the present. "And so, now, we begin," he told himself, and, strangely, all feelings of fear had vanished.

CHAPTER TEN

May 9

On Wednesday, Maya was in Jeff Sanchez's office in the Executive Office Building ten minutes early. She admired Jeff for his keen intellect, having graduated first in his class at Stanford, and his loyalty to the President made him stand out in an already distinguished administration. She enjoyed collaborating with him and shared his occasional impatience with the bureaucracy that had grown up in the NIA.

"Maya, before the others come, I want to tell you that I think we should get more assets on this Canadian business. If I go to NIA, it will take them days if not weeks to sort out whether it should be the CIA or some other division that should field the people. I have a few people in my stable I can tap directly, and I'm wondering if you do?"

"Do you think Col. Diep is not doing his job?" Maya asked directly.

"I don't have a problem with Diep or the reports he has been giving us—I just sense that we are sitting on something here that is going to grow and we don't seem to have a handle on what it is."

Maya silently concurred.

At that moment, Jimmy Buttero thrust his large frame into the office. He had been running the CIA with great skill for six years. A former diplomat with credentials in anti-terrorism, he was highly regarded and had experience inside three government agencies. Sometimes he was blunt and impatient, but Jeff and Maya knew him as an able partner. He was followed in by the recently appointed head of the FBI, Eileen Johnson.

"Let's get started." Jeff pulled up extra chairs to his large conference table. "I had a call from Homeland Security earlier this morning. Harold Harper is out of town and Paul Blake is tied up on a crisis related to the Gulf of Mexico, so Homeland isn't sending anyone to this meeting. I'll get back to them with whatever we discuss. Also, I'll make a report to NIA, as they didn't feel it essential for them to attend when I told them all the agencies would be represented. Eileen, could you review what we know to date about this case?"

Eileen was in her 40's, smart, intense and had been a popular choice to replace the former FBI Director. She had started as a street cop and was the first black woman to be promoted to the number two spot in the Bureau before becoming Director. She scrolled to a page on her notebook computer and looked up. "We know that there is at least one factory either in western Canada or in the western US—or maybe factories in both places—working on acquiring or harvesting some types of poison. We're not sure what they are. We had a low-level source, courtesy of the Agency, who found this out. And then our source disappeared. We think she was murdered."

She looked up at the group. "More recently, we have had reports that there is increased 'chatter' about spreading poisons, presumably in the US. We don't know where the attacks are planned or when this will happen. We've also found out, via Secretary Tchernov's office, that there may be an initiative in Vancouver to rent a fleet of fishing boats or other small craft, to be used sometime in the next eight weeks. We think there may be a connection with the poisons case, but we cannot be sure at this point."

Jimmy Buttero moved his chair slightly, leaning forward. "When you say you don't know if there is more than one plant, our information has been that the place we had under surveillance in the Denver area is now completely discounted, so doesn't that leave just the Canadian location?"

"The combined report doesn't mention Denver," Eileen replied smoothly, "but it suggests that there may be another US plant because NSA is reporting numerous cell phone and text messages about moving something. The messages are originating in Colorado, California, Oregon and Washington—as well as in Vancouver. We know two of the suspect Yemenis whom we have been tracking for the last two years are in Vancouver; one of them has chemical expertise."

"Tell us what is known about the boat leasing," Jeff said to Maya.

She glanced down at the written report she was holding. "At least five fishing boats of relatively modest size—nothing over 50 feet—have been rented by a man who calls himself 'Gerard'. He is one of two brothers who are naturalized Canadian citizens of Algerian background. We know he has one brother, who calls himself 'Luc', and who works for a trash company but is suspected of having been part of a gang responsible for selective murders of both moderate Muslims and others. Neither one of them has an actual criminal record. The date Gerard has given for needing the boats is June 2nd, and he pretends to be affiliated with Vancouver Technical College."

Maya again consulted her notes. "He has said he needs the boats for a

research expedition. He has asked for no special supplies other than for a reliable captain and one or two crewmembers on each boat.”

“And the chatter suggests that some kind of lethal attacks are likely to happen at about this same time?” Jimmy asked.

Jeff intervened. “As Eileen said, we don’t know anything specific, but right now I’d bet on poison gases—Sarin, maybe. But that’s just a guess. It may be that there are two operations that are going to take place at the same time to confuse or scare us. Jim, I’d like you to talk a little about what could be a related matter.”

Jimmy Buttero stretched his long legs and adjusted his glasses. “Yesterday, we linked up some of the chatter and communications Eileen mentioned with a man we thought had dropped out of the bad guys’ world. He’s Syrian by birth but with French parents. He has lived in Canada a long time and used to do some importing and exporting in the US, but never anything we could catch him at. He goes by several names, although his given one is Georges Labadie. We know he got as far as Kansas City last week before we lost track of him, and he resurfaced in San Francisco. There is nothing to connect him to any of the people Eileen and Mike have been talking about except this report from the NSA.”

Buttero held up a single piece of paper. “This is the report that I sent to you late last night, Jeff. We’ll work with Eileen’s people to get the name he’s operating under now and what he may be doing. And we’ll see if we can find anything to connect him to Al-Kodari. Is there anything else in all this to connect Kansas City?”

No one volunteered a connection.

Jeff looked around at the group. “Let’s go around the room and get best guesses of what we have here. Eileen, let’s begin with you and the Bureau.”

“It may be that this Georges is responsible for collecting the toxins and getting them to the boats. Possibly the boats are going to be met by some mother ship, bringing in the bad stuff from off shore. The boats must be going to move them into ports where the surveillance could be considered inadequate. After that, there must be some way to move them into the population, so we should be looking at trucking companies, even car rental companies and small aircraft. That’s an assignment I’ll make as soon as this meeting is over.”

“What about you, Jim?”

“I’m not sure I agree that the boats are related to all this. They may be set up for another mission. I think we should put all available resources on

the possible US lab—wherever it is—and try to find any other processing plants. We'll focus more assets in Vancouver. See if we can find out where al-Kodari is these days. If there is really a threat of a poison attack, can't we get cooperation from the Canadians to round up some or all of these people and restrict their movements for the time being?"

This was a suggestion Jeff Sanchez already discussed with the President and with Maya. Their consensus was that it would be more useful to let the known activities proceed. Stopping these people at any point was easy but finding out who was involved, and why, was critical. But Jeff did not want to cut off this discussion. "Maya?"

Maya weighed her words, recognizing that Jeff shared nothing with the group about the conversation they had with the President. "I think the boats are key to a scheme we don't fully understand yet," she began. "It may be that they are going to pick up illegals, or they could be a decoy. I'd like to find out more about Gerard and Luc as well as this Mr. Labadie. I also wonder who is behind all this. We can trace an Algerian connection, probably also Iraqi, Yemeni and Syrian, maybe Egyptian or Jordanian, and Mr. Buttero's 'Georges' is interesting—but we don't see any big name in this yet, unless it's al-Kodari, and that speculation is coming from one informant. If we knew who was sponsoring the poison developments, we might find motives and that would reveal more about the means."

Maya looked at Jeff, who nodded at her to continue. "Maybe we're seeing a trial run being put together. Maybe whatever they plan to do with the boats is just the beginning of a bigger plot, or an experiment to see if they can do something first on a small scale. If we found the other place, or places, where they are assembling the poisons that would help, too. And I think Ms. Johnson's idea about looking at other transportation systems is good. Do we have the resources to do that?"

"After I brief the President, I'm sure we'll have what we need," Jeff responded, taking in all the participants as he spoke. "Even if this plot is small potatoes, we need to find out and stop it. Thank you all for coming. I'll get back to you—and to Harold and to the NIA—with a formal memo on next steps. Oh, and just in case we should need it, let's give this investigation and our group a code name. Any suggestions?"

"How about Trial Run?" Eileen suggested, and everyone nodded. Then they stood up.

The meeting lasted 15 minutes and there would be clear assignments, thanks to Jeff. That was all they could expect at this point.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Maya's driver left her in front of Ruth's Chris Steak House in Bethesda at precisely 6:30 p.m. An early hour, but then she did not expect that the eating part of dinner with her Russian counterpart, Colonel Pyotr Olenshinsky, would begin immediately.

Pyotr arrived in an unmarked embassy limousine. After maneuvering his broad shoulders out of the car, he looked up to see Maya waiting for him just outside the door. Surprise and pleasure spread into a broad smile. "My dear, you need not have waited outside—I'm sure they would have shown you to our table!" He enfolded her in a bear hug. Exactly the same height but more powerful of build, he always thought of Maya as his "little friend." Pyotr was a few years younger than Maya, educated in Russia and France, decorated for his army service, and highly intelligent.

"Pyotr—so good to see you. *Kak pozhivaete?*" While they seldom spoke to each other in their native language, a few words now and then cemented their friendship. "I was hoping Elena would be with you!" Maya meant this sincerely as she always enjoyed Elena's sense of humor and stories of her upbringing in Ukraine. But, of course, this trip was all business.

Relations with Russia these days were cordial, despite some on-going ideological differences. Cooperation on such fronts as the Middle East cemented mutual admiration between the two Secretaries of Defense, and Maya planned to use this occasion to probe for information on several subjects.

After they were shown their red velvet curtained booth and Pyotr ordered Chivas on the rocks for himself and a bottle of Dom Perignon for the table, he took her hand. "Elena sends her love and says she is unhappy not to be with us. I spoke with her just before leaving the Embassy."

"How is she, Pyotr, and how is that book of hers coming?"

"Oh, I think she enjoys complaining about the writing, but she loves her teaching at the university, and she's been asked to guest lecture at the Sorbonne next semester, so we're both excited about that. She goes back to Ukraine often to continue her research for the book, so she gets away from me—she's there now, visiting her sisters."

"And the boys?" Pyotr and Elena had two sons.

"The older one is pursuing an advanced degree in physics and he still has the good job with Senemca. Someday, I think, he and his wife would like to move to France or the US. The sailor, the one like me, is getting another promotion. But I think he wants to go into politics in a couple of years. I tell him he needs to marry a rich girl to do that!" Pyotr laughed heartily. He often complained that despite his own distinguished career, first in the Russian navy and then in the Defense Dept., he and Elena lived on only modest means. Maya suspected otherwise.

There was a pause while their waiter deferentially described the specials. They listened politely, while Maya rehearsed Pyotr's likely next lines in her head, while a slight smile played over her face.

"I'll have the porterhouse, rare, with the broccoli, and a large baked potato with butter and sour cream—extra sour cream!" Pyotr ordered decisively. Maya was startled; no mention of extra bread. "And, another basket of this wonderful bread!" Pyotr added. Maya suppressed the rest of her smile.

Pyotr tactfully did not ask about Maya's personal life. With both her parents dead and only one sister, who lived in LA, there was not much family to ask about. He knew her early history. Shortly after joining the US military, she had married a young captain who had died three years later of acute leukemia. There had been no children. Why she had never remarried, Pyotr did not know.

During their drinks, they talked about mutual friends, news of other governments' current defense activities and other safe subjects. Then, Maya asked, "Pyotr, how are the GLONASS replacements coming—is the money still there?"

Pyotr leaned back with a slight grimace. "Yes, we are holding on to the money, but it's not easy. We are about six months behind schedule on the new construction. Our President keeps grumbling about the European Union's Galileo project—he thinks that it will interfere with our frequencies. I don't think the Europeans know what they are doing. They are still facing delays even though they have six satellites up."

Pyotr was feeling expansive after the drinks. "Let me tell you about our new heavy-lift air transport plane!" he said, smiling. "The Anatov is going to have a big brother!" With this, he launched into a description of the new plane that Maya had seen in classified briefings but was perfectly willing to hear Pyotr talk about.

After enjoying the superlative steaks, they had coffee, refused dessert, and Pyotr indulged in a Calvados. "My friend," said Maya, when it reached 11 p.m.,

“you and I have a formal meeting in the morning—and I must prepare for that. You never know what the Russian Secretary of Defense will bring up.” She was only half joking, since Pyotr was perfectly capable of being a wonderful dinner companion only to become hard-nosed in a formal meeting hours later.

They embraced outside the restaurant and got into their chauffeured vehicles. As the cars separated on Massachusetts Avenue, Maya thought, “I wonder if we will be able to keep this spirit of cooperation going. I wonder how much they would do for us in a crisis and when we are going to need it.” The presidents of the two countries currently were on cordial if guarded terms, but Maya had started her career when the Soviet Union was in full sway and she remembered strained relations. “Could I rely on Pyotr if it came to a crisis?” she thought to herself, and then hoped—as she always did—that such a crisis would never come.

CHAPTER TWELVE

May 16

Raul remembered his promise to Carmen to help with unearthing background information about Vancouver Office Supply and Service Company. After returning from another highly classified trip, he checked his home email account just before getting ready for what he hoped would be a very pleasant dinner in Palo Alto. His initial search uncovered little. The company started as a family-owned concern fifteen years ago but was sold three years ago to an investment group with a few other holdings in the Northwest, most in service businesses. The principals in the group were easily checked out and looked legitimate, but since it was a private corporation it was possible that others not listed on standard records were involved in the financing or management of the company.

Therefore, before leaving on his trip, Raul had passed on an inquiry to a researcher he often worked with at the Agency. Finally he got a reply. It simply read, "No special history on Vancouver Office and Supply. One of the principals in the initial investment, Philip Miller, was a former journalist who was kidnapped and held for a short time in 2005 in Iraq. Quit the journalism business. Let me know if I can help further." Raul took time to compose a short message to Carmen, noting his findings and concluding, "They seem legitimate."

He glanced at this watch: it was time for him to leave. Raul offered to pick up Judith at her apartment, but she said she would likely join him for dinner straight from work so he drove directly to Nola's in Palo Alto. As he had arrived a few minutes early, he asked to be shown to a table and immediately ordered a Campari and soda. Five minutes later he enjoyed watching the lovely young lady in the form fitting gray suit and black silk shirt walk towards the table. As he rose to greet her, he noticed that she had braided her long black hair and twisted the braid at the back of her head. Her only jewelry was exquisite gold double loop earrings in her delicate ears. She wore no rings. From what little he knew about her, she was never married.

"Judith, you look lovely as always—and straight from the office, too!"

He took her hand and held it briefly, then pulled out her chair, waving the solicitous maître d' away.

"I cheated!" she said with a laugh, giving his hand a squeeze. "I brought the suit in with me this morning and changed in the ladies' room. The light's not so good there for make-up, so I hope my lipstick is more or less on my lips."

Raul refrained from commenting about her lips which, he thought, were one of her best features—full and slightly bowed. He was not surprised about the lack of facilities in her office. She worked for a consulting firm that helped people in poor communities find land and money to construct homes and businesses. Their offices were in an old building in downtown San Francisco. Judith told him she worked with them for eighteen months, following a more lucrative career in banking. "But I couldn't stand not helping more—at the bank, we said 'no' so often. Now I can help people find the 'yes.'"

They met when she called his architectural consulting number, and he accepted the brief work assignment offered because he liked the sound of her voice. He always served a client or two for his business to maintain his cover. When he finally met her, in her dingy offices, he liked everything about her. Even if working with Judith Abrams and The Community Building Foundation started as a way to maintain his work cover, it rapidly became a personal pleasure.

"May I order a drink for you?" Raul asked as their waiter approached.

"Dry sherry," Judith said promptly, and it arrived within moments.

"And, how was your day?" Raul asked with real curiosity.

"Frustrating," Judith answered. "We have so many good projects waiting to be funded and the money is still hard to find, but we are gaining friends. Thank you, by the way, for your first report. We thought that particular building had possibilities, and the county just wanted to tear it down without an appraisal."

Raul smiled. He was charging less than 50% of his normal fee and was thinking about volunteering his services to the Foundation for future work. He preferred not to analyze his motives too closely.

Judith's sherry came in a cut crystal glass. Raul liked Nola's for all their elegant touches. "And how was *your* day?" Judith asked, smiling at him.

"I did some research for a friend, designed a new island for my kitchen, and I worked on your project, but I didn't bring any of the drawings. Can we schedule a meeting in your office later this week?"

"Of course," Judith replied, laughing, "even if my project ranks behind your friend and your kitchen island."

He had casually mentioned before that he had an interest in gourmet cooking,

which made Judith curious as he spoke very little about himself otherwise, although he once mentioned having a sister in California.

"Give me a couple of days and I'll call you about getting together at the office. We have a new woman starting Monday, Andrea Miller, and I will be responsible for training her, so I'm not quite sure of my schedule at the beginning of the week." Judith took a sip of her sherry, not seeing Raul's eyebrows rise slightly.

"Common name, Miller," he noted. "I ran across a story about a former journalist by that name today, some old magazine I unearthed. I hadn't heard of him but he was apparently held captive in Iraq at one time."

"And he's writing again now? For whom?" Judith said, eyeing the menus that had been discreetly placed before them.

"The story I read said he isn't. Maybe that experience soured him on journalism. Apparently, he invests in businesses and buildings now. Philip Miller. Not exactly a memorable name, but I'm surprised I don't remember anything he wrote if he covered the war."

Judith opened her menu and remained silent. There was a pause in the conversation, which Raul attributed to her not being very interested and wanting to order. "If you like stream-caught trout, it's excellent here," he offered.

She put down the menu, smiling, but there was something serious in her eyes. "Actually, I think I'll have the lamb," she replied, "and I'm fine with white or red wine, depending on what you are having."

Raul admitted to himself that he knew little of her dietary habits and had wondered if as a Jew she observed any restrictions, which was one reason he had suggested the fish. "I'm going with the filet mignon, so red will work—do you want to choose?"

"No, I'm very limited in my knowledge so you please do that!" Judith smiled again, this time seeming to focus more on him. He picked up the wine list and found one of his favorites—the Shotfire Ridge Shiraz.

The food and wine came promptly, with the wine smoothly decanted and allowed to breathe. Raul felt that the evening had become subdued, so he decided to ask her more about her family. He had, of course, checked her out via his own sources before ever asking her out, including with the Agency, which had no unusual information about Judith Abrams.

"My mother was quite liberated for her background—growing up in a traditional Jewish family with my grandparents emigrating from Russia—and she was the one who insisted I get a good education, learn a profession, plan to make my own living if a nice man did not come along." This time, Judith's

smile was broad and genuine. "My father adhered more to older traditions, but he, too, supported me. We had bankers in the family, so he was not too disappointed when I went into the profession instead of getting engaged right out of college."

"And was there someone to get engaged to?" Raul asked with another raised eyebrow. "Or am I being too personal?"

"Oh, no, that's all right. There was someone, but he went to the east coast for a job and we drifted apart. I wanted to stay in California, primarily to be near my parents."

"No brothers or sisters?"

"None, just some cousins I seldom see and don't really keep up with." Raul sensed that little bit of sadness or seriousness he glimpsed in her earlier. A small family, no one her own age that she was close to. He thought of Carmen and their relatively large, extended family and found Judith's hard to imagine.

For dessert, they each ordered the Pears Helene and espresso. "My rack of lamb was delicious—thank you for introducing me to this place!" Judith said enthusiastically.

Raul smiled. There were many more good restaurants he wanted to introduce her to, but he sensed that this relationship needed a bit of time to develop. They chatted about some of the architectural features of grand old buildings in the San Francisco area as they enjoyed their coffee.

Then Judith said, "You mentioned that this Philip Miller now invests in buildings and businesses. Is that here in the San Francisco area? Is he someone my company should perhaps get to know?"

Raul hesitated. It perhaps was imprudent to mention anything about his research project, and he certainly was not about to compound the error by revealing anything substantive to her. "I didn't get the impression he's in California, although maybe somewhere else on the west coast."

She nodded. Another lead for the company going nowhere, Raul thought. It must be so difficult to raise money for the work they were doing. He would have to try to help her more.

"Let me walk you to your car," Raul offered as they left the restaurant. The night was mild.

"I'm at the end of the second row," Judith said, pointing out her Volvo. When they reached her car, she turned to him. "I've really enjoyed this evening—thank you. I don't think I've felt this relaxed in weeks, and dinner was superb."

Raul took her face in his hands lightly. "And for me, it has been a special pleasure. May I call you next week, and not just about the office appointment?"

“Yes, I would like that,” she said, patting his right hand and turned to open the driver’s door with her remote. He held the door open for her.

“Watch for fog,” he ordered as she smiled up at him and started the car. He watched her drive away, and his most vivid memory of the evening was her beautiful eyes smiling at him. At least he hoped it was a smile.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

May 25

In Goodland, Kansas, Farley McDonald was closing up his office. The entire shipment of balloons was sent that morning by a convoy of special trucks to the two FBI drop points—one in Seattle and one in Los Angeles. Each of the balloons was packaged in a PVC piece that looked like a fishing rod tube with a screw top. Part of the requirement that the FBI gave Farley was that each balloon was to be fitted with an automatic fill valve—like a tire inflation valve—with a plastic hose barb fitting located about six and a half feet down from the top of the balloon. A pressure relief valve was located near the bottom of the balloon. Load spreading tapes and payload attach rings were also attached.

The most difficult part of the work had been to design a balloon that could be taken out of its shipping container and launched in two minutes in a 10-mile per hour wind. In the end, they had beaten the requirement: the ingenious packing solution involved the use of ordinary sewer pipe with built-in helium tanks. It turned out that the balloons could be launched in a 15-mile per hour wind in less than one and three quarter minutes.

Farley had beaten the delivery schedule by 24 hours, even though the quality control process took longer than expected, primarily because of the government man stationed at their plant who insisted on testing at least two balloons from every batch. Mr. Ricotti put this requirement into the contract; it was not unheard of when working with certain US government agencies, as Farley knew, and certainly the FBI had the right to request this extra step—they were paying for it, and price had not been an issue, either.

His secretary stood just inside Farley's weathered oak office door. "Do you think we'll ever see any of our balloons flying over Kansas?" she asked, with a twinkle in her eye.

"How's your distance vision?" Farley shot back. "When they're up there, they should be way above even where an airplane could find them."

After Farley was alone in the building, he picked up the phone and called the special number Mr. Ricotti had given him if they ever needed to

communicate directly. Farley had called it before, and it was always answered with a simple masculine, "Hello?" Today, he let the phone ring five times before a voice came on and said, "No incoming calls are being accepted at this number." The person on the other end hung up. When Farley redialed, the line was busy. "Odd," he thought to himself. All he wanted to say was that the last shipment had gone out, and they had sent a fax to this effect two hours earlier. "Probably won't hear from Mr. Ricotti again—if that even was his name," Farley thought to himself.

He decided to go home. Doris wanted to talk about going to Switzerland and Italy. Farley was getting into the swing of European travel and fine dining. He was even building a wine cellar in his basement.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

May 26-28

On Saturday by 10 a.m. at Kamal's lab the last truck was being loaded. He composed a text message on his cell phone: "The children have all left now and will be with you soon." The message was sent to his contact in Los Angeles. This was the signal that all had gone well. His next message would be to Ahmed with slightly more detailed information.

Vancouver Office Supply and Service Company rented two factory buildings in the US, one on the outskirts of Seattle and one in Long Beach, south of Los Angeles. When the trucks arrived on Monday at each location with the balloons from Kansas, a small group of men began their work. It was simple enough. Every balloon tube was mated to a helium filled tank. The moderate pressure tanks, approximately three inches in diameter and nine inches long, were loaded with ninety-nine percent pure helium to a pressure of 450 psi at sea level standard conditions.

Each tank contained a pressure gauge, a shut-off valve, and a two-meter length of surgical tubing, which was securely mounted into a second, twelve-inch long tube with an end cap and short coupling. Two meters of surgical tubing connected the helium shut-off valve and the barb fitting on the balloon fill valve. The men assembling the units then slipped the short tube coupling over the long (balloon) tube to complete assembly of the transportation and launch tube. The whole package, when assembled, weighed less than twenty-two pounds and was less than ten feet in length. It looked like a piece of sewer pipe or the pipes sometimes used to carry fishing rods.

The balloons assembled at the Seattle factory were loaded into trucks and driven to Port Moody, outside of Vancouver, BC. The boxes were labeled to indicate joint US-Canadian scientific weather balloons.

In the same modest building north of the Sea-Tac Airport in Seattle, where the balloons and helium tanks were being mated, a ground-floor section of the building was set aside for another task. At midday, the moving vans were arriving, carrying the packages originally shipped from Kamal's lab in Colorado. The previous day, the moving vans from a metal parts fabrication plant near

Calgary, run by Kamal's cousin, also arrived with special packages concealed under crates filled with metal parts intended for US factories. That shipment successfully passed US Customs as it entered from Canada; the supplying company shipped fabricated parts to the US for several years now and there was no special reason for the overworked US Customs agents to examine more than a few of the top layer boxes.

Kamal also arranged for a shipment of pallets loaded with what appeared to be Styrofoam cooler boxes. At the warehouse, Ahmed appointed a chief deputy, an American, one of his most trusted men in the movement. The deputy ordered that twelve work tables be set up in the special section and he selected fourteen men to perform the final assembly process. Twelve of them were to do the actual assembly and repackaging for final shipment, while the other two were quality control inspectors. They worked twelve-hour shifts for two and one half days.

Ahmed's chief deputy at the Seattle warehouse opened one of the Styrofoam payload containers to inspect it, exposing the electronic circuit cards, batteries, wires and electromechanical parts that were wired together and glued to various facets pre-casted inside the box. The boards included the circuit cards of the GPS units that Rafik so carefully selected. The deputy turned the box on its side and saw nine cylindrical cavities on the bottom. He noted the small switch lever and light emitting diode located in a depression near the outside of one corner of the bottom of the box.

He turned to the men. "Do not touch any of the electronics inside the box and especially this switch on the outside. It turns the electronics on and will run down the batteries if it is activated too soon. You will also notice that the inside of each of the cylindrical cavities is lined with a polypropylene sleeve and that there is a latching mechanism at the top of each hole. You will be attaching one of our scientific instruments to each of these mechanisms."

"Why are four of the holds outlined in red?" One of the workers asked.

"You will see in a moment, please." The deputy then opened one of the containers from the Calgary shipment and very carefully withdrew a cylinder that looked like it would just fit inside the holes in the bottom of the cooler. "The scientific instruments in these cylinders are extremely fragile and you must handle them with great care."

He motioned the men to step closer to the worktable. "You will notice the outside of this cylinder is encased in a hard plastic sleeve and that there are three fins attached to this sleeve at the top end. These fins can be bent over so that the package can be inserted in these holes. I will demonstrate that in a

moment. You will also notice that there is a small plastic rod with a ball machined on the end fixed to the centerline of the top of the package. This is the ball that you will insert into the latching mechanism inside the cooler box. I will also demonstrate the technique for you in a moment. First, I want you to look at the bottom of the cylinder. It is also rimmed with red paint. Later, you will see blue cylinders. Red cylinders go into red holes. Blue cylinders go into blue holes."

There were a couple of snickers among the workers.

"Be serious. Look at the bottom. You see in this indentation in the Styro-foam, another very small toggle switch handle with an off marking on one side. Next to it is a small red glass LED lens. This switch must always be left in the off position. Turning it on, even for a moment, ruins the expensive instruments inside." The deputy knew that if the switch was turned on before it was placed inside the cooler box it would immediately explode and shower everyone in the room with whatever was in the container.

"Finally, if you look carefully on the side of the cylinder near the bottom, you will see a round, black protrusion. This is a spring-loaded switch that must be pressed in during the mating sequence. I will be demonstrating this step." Once the cylinders were inserted into their matching cavities, the switch could be turned on because the spring-loaded switch kept the circuitry in a safe mode.

"You will also see two additional glass lenses on the bottom. Those only need to be kept fingerprint free. At the very center of the bottom of the cylinder you will also see a small plastic pull ring. This is for testing. Again, these instruments are extremely fragile. Do not touch the instruments or the switches. If you should accidentally drop one of the packages, even a short distance you must stop everything and call me for advice. You will not be punished. Do not hide anything."

At this point, the deputy walked the cylinder back to the pallet and carefully placed it back in its shipping box.

"I will now walk you through the assembly steps. We will work slowly and carefully. One of our inspectors will monitor your progress and offer suggestions. General rules are only one person at a table and only one action at a time. Never leave a cylinder on the table. It should always be in your hands until mating is complete."

"First, I retrieve a cooler box and open the cover. Since I already have this box here I will not repeat this step in this demonstration. Check the switch on the bottom to be in the off position. If it is not, call me. Examine

the insides to be sure everything is secure and in order. Then go to the open red pallet and retrieve an instrument cylinder.

“Second, I carefully unwrap a cylinder and immediately check the switch position to be off. I then carry the cylinder to my worktable and fold the fins tightly against the sides so that the package will just slip into one of the holes. Red into red. I carefully push the cylinder into the hole, fins first, and place one finger on the black spring loaded switch and slip it under the edge of the liner while continuing to insert the cylinder. Being careful not to touch the lenses or the switch on the bottom of the cylinder, I continue to push until I feel contact with the latching mechanism inside the box. I can see this contact and I continue to push until the pawls open and I hear and feel a distinct click. The mating is complete.

“Now, I test the mate by applying a two-pound load to the test ring using this simple fish scale test puller. One final look at the switch and lenses and one is loaded. Only now do I go to the pallet and extract a second cylinder. When I have inserted 4 red cylinders, I then go to the second set, the blue set, of cylinders and continue the process 5 more times. At this time the quality control inspector will pick up the whole package and place it on its corresponding shipping pallet. You will be expected to take a 10 minute break before continuing on to the second package.”

The twelve men were expected to complete approximately 200 balloon packages in each twelve-hour shift. It would take them three shifts to completely load all 600 packages with 5400 payloads. Each man worked one shift, then had twelve hours off, then began the next shift, each working three shifts.

If everything went well, they could be finished with their assembly by midnight Wednesday. There was a bonus for completing the work sooner. When they were close to finishing their work, the deputy called a special number. Trucks arrived, and the packages loaded into them. Then, on top of the crates with the newly assembled boxes, they would stack crates of medical instruments, quite clearly marked. One third of the trucks went south to Long Beach, California, while the rest crossed the border and drove to Vancouver, BC.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

May 30-31

Ahmed cleared US and Canadian border formalities at 2 p.m. Wednesday afternoon. His papers were in order. He had several letters of appointment, plus his fake British passport, to substantiate his identity. On the passport, he was listed as Kas Pradep. If anyone bothered to look up Dr. Pradep, he was listed as a faculty member in London, with a distinguished accumulation of publications and frequent appointments abroad.

He wanted to spend a few days checking locations in Vancouver, BC. On Thursday he expected that two convoys of trucks from Seattle would come to the border, declare their cargos of medical instruments and scientific weather balloons, and cross without incident into Canada. The actual medical instruments, which were purely for decoy purposes, would be carefully unpacked and saved at a Port Moody location where there was a former high-bay boat storage facility, now leased to a company listed as Marine Supply and registered in Seattle. The real cargo would also be unpacked, placed on insulated pallets, and locked up until the trucks from Vancouver Office Supply and Service Company arrived to off-load the balloons.

As they had planned, at the same time on Thursday, Georges Labadie would be overseeing the delivery of the payloads and the balloons in Long Beach. The people working in the Long Beach storage facility were also part of their movement, so Ahmed had few worries about security.

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On Thursday, at noon, as Ahmed drove up to the Port Moody depot, the first group of trucks from the US pulled into the parking area outside the former boat storage facility. Ahmed parked his rental car quickly and joined the team of men he had hired, who were already unloading the packages. The truck drivers had no idea about their cargo. When they loaded the boxes, all they saw was that each box was labeled "Medical Supplies," and the bills of lading simply identified the boxes the same way. The drivers were pleased not

to have to assist with the off-loading, and they were able to get signatures on their documents and leave within the hour.

Ahmed knew that the building was well equipped in case of an accident, and he instructed Raymond, the team leader, to take the team through several safety drills. “We want everything ready Friday night. May Allah be with you.” Ahmed shook hands with Raymond and watched as all fourteen men went immediately to their stations and began to unpack the cargo that had arrived. The balloon boxes would be arriving shortly, and they, too, needed to be checked out and stored. The next hours would be among the most critical in the program. Ahmed felt a degree of concern but also heightened anticipation and a rush of adrenalin. He hoped everything was on schedule in Long Beach. They came so far—soon, the world would know what they could do.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

May 31

On Thursday, Gerard made morning phone calls to two of the boat captains. His message to the first was that the boats would be needed to put out to sea on Saturday, weather permitting, and that they would be going out about thirty miles from shore, then returning. Since he had negotiated the original contracts the plans changed, and now he called the second captain to let him know his vessels were needed the following Tuesday but to deploy only as far south as Newport on the coast of Oregon. Both fleets were to operate in international waters during the critical part of the day. He left no message for the reserve fleet since he was not sure it would be needed at all.

Someone in the hierarchy—Gerard did not know who—made the decision that two northern fleet deployments were better than one, although there would be only one fleet in California. Everything depended on the weather forecasts. They needed the right prevailing winds at the right velocities, both at the surface and at altitude. Gerard checked the predictions on the NOAA weather site, which he was doing daily. Things were picking up. He felt good about that since he liked action.

One of the other things that made him feel good was that he had gotten his friend, Rahmid, a moonlighting job as crew on one of the boats in the first fleet and planned to talk with Rahmid about the second sailing, too. He vouched for Rahmid by telling a senior member of the team that Rahmid was a friend “from way back.”

“They’ll pay you cash, no complications with forms and things,” he advised Rahmid over coffee.

“I can use the money—my cousin needs help providing for his new son,” Rahmid told him.

Gerard nodded. “My brother, Luc, said he was serious about offering you a job at his trash hauling company, too. He had to go away, though, and we don’t know when he’s coming back.”

Rahmid smiled at Gerard. “You are a good friend. Where did Luc go—or is it a private matter?”

For a moment, Gerard stared at his coffee and frowned. “He didn’t tell me. He left a note. Luc does not always tell me what he does, but he’ll be back. His note said in a week to ten days.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

June 2

Morning in Vancouver, BC, dawned clear, cool and with moderate winds, eight to ten knots, from the west—perfect for the mission. Gerard arrived at the dock at 5:30 a.m. While an early departure was not really necessary, it was decided by those planning it that the fleet deployment should look as much like a normal fishing fleet departure as possible—and fishing boats went out early.

There were signs of crew movement on all five boats. The parking lot leading to the dock walkways had plenty of room open for the trucks that would be arriving shortly. Gerard made sure no one parked in front of the walk to the docks since the unloading had to take place there. He wished he could accompany at least one of the boats, but his instructions were to stay on land and continue to coordinate.

He was with the captain of the *Filly* when the first truck pulled up. At the same time, he saw a black Dodge Neon park next to the truck. Gerard excused himself to the captain and walked back to the parking lot.

"You must be Gerard!" said the slender man who got out of the Neon. He held out his hand. "I'm Kas. I'm in charge of the trucks and assigning the crewmembers their duties."

Gerard shook hands, noting that this slender, dark-skinned good-looking man had a very firm grip. He was dressed in Dockers, a plaid shirt, a light-weight jacket and boat shoes.

"All the boats are here and should be ready to load in a few minutes," Gerard told Kas.

"How many crew members does each boat have?" Kas peered over Gerard's shoulder toward the docks.

"The captain, one or two mates and three of our people," Gerard answered. "I interviewed all the captains personally, and they are all experienced." Gerard did not say that he had been given strict orders not to employ any boats that required more than three crewmembers. In two cases, the captains said they

could do the job with just one other man, provided that the scientists on board were able-bodied, and Gerard guaranteed this.

As they talked, the second and third trucks pulled into the parking lot. "There will be one more truck today," Kas noted, and as he spoke, the fourth truck rounded the corner and came toward them. "I will supervise the unloading. Please make sure your captains and crews are ready, and then we will start."

Gerard hurried down the dock to let the captains know that the cargo would be ready for loading in a few minutes.

Kas spoke briefly with each truck driver and then watched as they opened their trucks' rear doors to access the cargo. In the first two trucks, the balloons, integrated with their helium tanks inside the PVC sewer pipes, were in wooden boxes, ten balloons to a box. From the last two trucks, large crates were carefully removed and placed on the dock. Gerard knew only that the payloads for the balloons were in these crates, but he was not sure what was inside the Styrofoam boxes nested in the crates. Each truck driver brought one extra man to help with the unloading. The drivers and their helpers were not, however, going out for the voyage. Their job was strictly to move the boxes into position.

While the unloading proceeded, two white vans pulled into the parking lot next to the Dodge Neon and fifteen men climbed out. They were dressed more or less alike—in work pants, warm jackets, baseball hats, deck shoes. Gerard recognized Rahmid immediately and called out pleasantly to him. Kas stood nearby but did not ask for any introductions, though he noted Gerard singled out the man "Rahmid." All the crew milled about with Gerard, and there was some brief conversation.

Kas beckoned to Gerard, who came back down the dock from the boats. "Gerard, please have our crewmembers introduce themselves to the captains. They can also help with loading the boxes on the boats and securing them." Gerard nodded, smiling briefly at Rahmid, and then led the fifteen men down the dock. They were pre-assigned to the five boats and so separated into teams to help with the loading.

The movement of the boxes to the boats was swift. By 6:25 a.m., all the trucks were empty, the truck drivers and their helpers prepared to leave, and the men from the van stowed the boxes on board each boat, under the supervision of the boats' own crewmembers. Gerard watched with some curiosity as Kas spoke occasionally with the men doing the work, always appearing to give advice and encouragement. He noticed that Kas shook Rahmid's hand, apparently having realized he was a friend of Gerard. Gerard knew very

little about Kas other than that he had made some of the crew assignments and supervised the trucks and the loading.

"Would you like to go out on a boat?" Gerard suddenly asked Kas.

"No, I will remain here to stay in radio contact," Kas answered, producing his VHF radio and an Iridium Satellite handheld unit. Gerard planned to see that the boats got off the dock safely. Then he would return around the time the boats should be back. He offered to pay each captain upon his return, and all of them accepted that arrangement.

At 6:30 a.m., Gerard checked the weather reports on his Blackberry and saw that they were going to have ideal conditions. Winds were still at eight to ten knots, from the west, with no storms predicted. At 6:40 a.m., the captain of the *Filly* signaled that he was ready to leave the dock. Gerard quickly checked on the other boats. Only the crew of the *Little Miss* signaled that they needed a few more minutes. At 6:45 a.m., *Little Miss* indicated they were ready, and the fleet loosened lines and began pulling away from the dock, one by one. The waters were calm, and the temperature was 65 degrees Fahrenheit.

Gerard stood at the end of the dock with Kas as they watched the boats move into open waters. Gerard was curious about several things—who was actually in charge of the cargo deployment once the boats reached their designated spots, what the men from the van told the boat crew about what was happening, whether he would have any trouble with the captains or their crews being too curious after the trip was over.

As if reading Gerard's thoughts, Kas said, "We have a senior man on each boat and even he does not know all the details of the mission today—just that it is something scientific that will help us. He will make the final decision on whether the balloons should be sent up, based on the weather when the boats reach their assigned position. Just as you have told the captains, our men will say only that they are from the university and this is a scientific mission. It will be enough."

This final statement, said with quiet authority, intrigued Gerard. He suspected initially Kas was not merely a middleman, assigned to supervising the crew and the trucks. Now he was sure of it, although he could only guess at what role Kas really played.

"I will be back in eight hours—or earlier, if I get word that the boats are returning before schedule," Gerard told Kas.

Kas nodded and reached out his hand. "Thank you for all your work."

Gerard returned to his truck and drove off.

Kas placed a short call on his VHF radio to Nassir, the most senior of

the men on the boats. All was going well. Next, he activated the Iridium handheld unit and walked around the docks and the parking area for a while before settling down in his car. Later, he took a very short lunch break. He never wandered too far from the dock, although his communications systems permitted him some freedom. There was a minor problem to deal with, once he learned that Luc was missing, but he would find time for that later. If anything went wrong with the boats, he needed to be the first to know and to make decisions.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Rahmid was assigned to the *Filly* with Nassir and one younger man. “How long will we wait before we start opening the boxes?” Nassir, who appeared to be about 50 with shaggy graying hair and a weathered face, looked at his watch. “We got an assigned position, based on latitude and longitude. It’s off the coast a few miles, in international waters. The weather radio report and the wind indicator make it look like we got about two and a half, three hours to run before we reach the right spot.”

Rahmid nodded. He decided that this was not the time to ask more about the cargo. He already knew it was balloons with a scientific payload attached, but he planned to be very cautious about interrogating Nassir. He already learned by talking with the boat’s crew that they knew nothing of the mission, other than that it was connected with a university.

The winds stayed calm as the boats moved southwest further into the Pacific Ocean.

Rahmid looked over the side of the boat, watching the color of the water darken as they reached deeper waters when, just a few minutes before ten, he heard Nassir speak into his satellite unit. “We are nearly there. All the fleet in sight. You got a winds aloft reading?” There was a short reply that Rahmid could not hear. Then, “You want me to give the signal to the others?” Rahmid did not hear Nassir address anyone specifically, but he was sure the person being called was Kas.

Apparently the answer was affirmative. Nassir went into the cabin and said a few words with the captain, after which the boat slowed considerably. Nassir returned to the open deck and activated his VHF radio, choosing channel 72. “To fishing fleet from Ober Dock, Vancouver: please ask your captains to turn the boats and run with the wind. I repeat: all boats must run with the wind at the same speed as the wind. We make wind speed at eight knots. We deploy mission now. Repeat, we deploy mission now. Please acknowledge.” Rahmid heard the crackle of the radio as each of the other boats acknowledged the message. Then Nassir turned to him and the other helper. “Come on, we move the boxes out here and get started.”

The men had to work with two sets of boxes. One set contained the balloons packaged in their pipes with the helium tube caps. These boxes were already stowed on the aft deck. The second set contained the payloads, which were mounted in the Styrofoam carrier containers. It would be the first man's job to open the payload carrier crates that had been stowed in the cabin just ahead of the aft deck and to bring out each container individually to Rahmid and Nassir.

Several days ago, the fifteen men were trained on how to attach the payload carrier containers to the balloon lift rings. Since the actual payloads were already mated to the carrier containers at the factory in Vancouver, they unpacked them carefully and got them to the person assigned the task of hooking them on. Rahmid was the "hooker" on the *Filly*.

On the aft deck was a twelve by twelve foot square area in which to work. In that space, a small worktable, fitted with a pipe cradle, was placed in the middle of the launch area. A helper assisted with each balloon launch after he brought the hooker a payload container.

When they began the actual launch sequence, Nassir and Rahmid placed a balloon launch tube in the cradle on the table so that the tube lined up with the prevailing wind directions. Nassir was the designated "gas man." He removed the end cap and stretched the inflation tube out to expose the shell material of the balloon. Their helper became the "bag man," carefully pulling both ends of the balloon shell out of the container so that about six feet of material was exposed before he held up the top section of the balloon shell, so that a gas bubble formed when helium was released. Nassir then opened the helium shut-off valve to inflate balloon. Meanwhile, Rahmid hooked the payload carrier to the balloon ring.

As soon as the helium filling was complete, Nassir pulled the surgical tubing free from the balloon. "If we don't do this just right, there's not enough helium to let the balloon to get to its altitude. It will come down before it should—before we get our scientific readings," Nassir explained patiently.

Now, the other man walked the bubble away from Nassir in such a direction that the inflated balloon was horizontal to and off the deck. Nassir then extracted the remaining balloon material from the pipe and held all the slack material off the deck until it was taut. He held the balloon ready for release, and as soon as the balloon material straightened out and the balloon bubble rose above any obstacles, he let go. Afterward, the used pipe pieces were rejoined and moved to a storage area at the front of the boat while a new pipe assembly took its place in the cradle.

By the second launch, Nassir, Rahmid and the other man completed the entire process in two minutes per balloon. The goal for each boat was to have all launches completed within three hours. As each boat only launched forty balloons, the schedule gave them ample time. Rahmid remarked to himself after the first several launches, "These balloons go up fast!"

During their work on *Filly*, they could see that the other four boats were having the same success they were. Only one balloon, from *Dock Side*, appeared not to have inflated properly and fell back into the water. No one attempted to retrieve it.

They worked steadily for an hour, and then Nassir said, "Time for a break. I brought coffee." He went forward to the captain's station to report that all was going well and then he returned to sit down. The break was short, and then they went back to work. The pattern continued: swift, efficient launches while Nassir checked wind speeds with the captain every fifteen minutes. They were averaging nine knots. Rahmid also noted that there were no other vessels near them during the launching.

At 12:15 p.m., Nassir called the other boats. Within a few minutes, each boat reported that they, too, completed launching. After the last reply, Nassir again spoke into his satellite unit. "All payloads launched." There was an answer, and then he said, "Only one. Weather still good. We return unless there is something further." There was another short answer, and then Nassir walked forward to speak with the captain of *Filly*. He also spoke again into his VHF radio. "All clear. We return now."

The slow running engines of all the boats shot to life and the fleet turned toward a direction Rahmid assumed led back to Vancouver. He decided that this was the moment. "Should they have tried to get that balloon that fell into the water from *Dock Side*?" he asked Nassir softly, out of hearing range of anyone else.

"No, no importance," Nassir responded, still looking out over the water toward the rest of the fleet who were behind them but catching up.

"We won't get any less data?" Rahmid persisted, careful to keep his tone deferential; he was not even sure what Nassir knew.

Nassir barked a short laugh. "We get enough data on everything in and around the Pacific ocean with all these balloons!"

The answer confused Rahmid and made him wonder what was actually in the payloads. He decided to risk one more question. "Are those payloads fragile—what if a balloon went down on land?"

Nassir laughed again, but this time he looked directly into Rahmid's eyes. "Might be a lot of broken glass!"

The boats returned to their dock without incident. Several hundred miles south of Vancouver, BC, the Los Angeles fleet was also returning to its base in Long Beach. They, too, completed their mission, although on one boat there had been some difficulty with two of the balloons that resulted in their being under-inflated.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

When Rahmid got home Saturday night, his cousins were visiting. He excused himself after dinner and typed a text message to Col. Diep, detailing his day, including his final conversation with Nassir. Then he pressed “send.” He pocketed his Blackberry and rejoined his cousins and aunt, spent some time chatting with them and then said that he wanted to walk to the store to buy cigarettes. On his way down the two flights of stairs from the apartment, he remembered one detail of the day he forgot to put in his earlier text message. He stopped in the foyer, made sure no one was around, and typed two lines. Then, he hid the Blackberry by dropping it in a vase filled with silk flowers that sat on a high shelf near the entry. He used this safe place many times; Col. Diep warned him about taking the special phone anywhere that it could be stolen or lost. He would pick it up when he returned from the store.

Rahmid did, in fact, want some cigarettes and strolled two blocks to the small grocery store that was always open. After he purchased his Camels, he started back to his apartment.

“Rahmid! I didn’t know you lived in this neighborhood!” Rahmid turned at the touch of a hand on his back and saw Kas. Rahmid smiled and extended his hand.

“Yes, I live very near here—are you visiting someone?” They walked toward an intersection. The building beyond the crossing to their right was under construction.

“Yes, my sister’s cousin. I hope you had a good day on the boat?”

They crossed the street; there was no traffic. Rahmid started to reply when he felt a dull pain somewhere near his waist. He staggered, and Ahmed caught him, half dragging him toward the unfinished building.

“Here I will help you,” Ahmed said, and the pain in Rahmid’s back intensified. During his last conscious moments, he was aware of blood on the ground and realized it must be his. When Ahmed heaved Rahmid’s body into the construction hole, Rahmid was already near death.

Ahmed waited a moment and then climbed into the hole, buried the knife

as best he could in the soft dirt and rapidly searched Rahmid's pockets and shoes. In the top pocket of Rahmid's shirt, he found a crumpled piece of paper with a single number on it. He took this, pocketed it, and climbed out of the hole. He threw a tarp that he previously left lying near the hole over Rahmid's body.

He wanted to leave Vancouver then, but he needed to be "Kas" for three more days to see off the second fleet of boats. Luc was stupid and inept and probably got killed for it. They still received no word on him. Ahmed sighed; this was not what he enjoyed doing. Further, he was unsure how much Rahmid compromised their operation. He decided to find out where the number connected as quickly as he could. It might lead to another traitor who needed to be eliminated.

§ § §

Judith also made a decision late on Saturday. She had agonized for a few days since her date with Raul about sending a message that might embroil her in something she was not sure she wanted. But it needed to be done. Using her home email account, she addressed it to "Parker" at the FBI. The message simply said, "Are you interested in meeting Mr. Miller? Call me any time today or tomorrow night at home." She signed it simply "Judith," the name she always used now.

In Alexandria, Andy Shannon checked email just after midnight on his "Parker" account and found Judith's message. He decided to risk a phone call. When he heard her voice, a mixture of feelings hit him. Regret, for one, since he once hoped to be more than a friend to her but never was able. Anxiety, for another, since he knew the tightrope on which she walked and, as he cared about her, wanted her to be safe. Guilt, too, as he was responsible in a major way for how she lived now, but he knew as surely as he knew anything that she was better off than when he first knew her in graduate school.

"Judith—I got your message. Good to hear from you. Have you really seen Mr. Miller?"

"No, but a friend mentioned his name and that he may be investing in properties on the west coast. At least the name is right."

Andy paused. The conversation was one that should be held on a secure line. If the information was good, he was not going to take any chances. "Judith, can you be available at 6 in the morning your time and can you use your special phone?"

"I'll be awake and with the phone on," she answered quickly. And then, "I hope you are doing well—it's been a long time."

He felt gratified that she asked. "Yes, quite well, thank you. Work keeps me busy. I wish we could persuade you to come out here." He did not add "without your new friend," whom he suspected was male.

"Until tomorrow then," she said and rang off. "Well, Saleeth," she told herself, "you are involved now."

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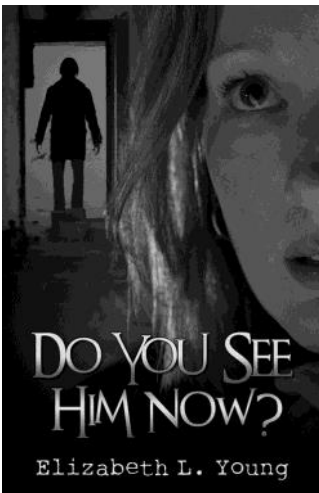
Elizabeth Young has worked in the telecommunications and satellite industries since starting her career in radio in Washington, DC. After serving as President of the Public Service Satellite Consortium, she joined COMSAT as VP and General Manager of Aeronautical Services and after a brief retirement spent teaching and writing, she became a General Manager SITA, the international company providing communications services to the aeronautical industry. She lectures frequently and maintains a consulting practice that includes clients in the US, Europe and Australia. She has held teaching appointments at The American University, The Ohio State University, Emerson College and Christopher Newport University. Her doctoral degree is from Columbia University.

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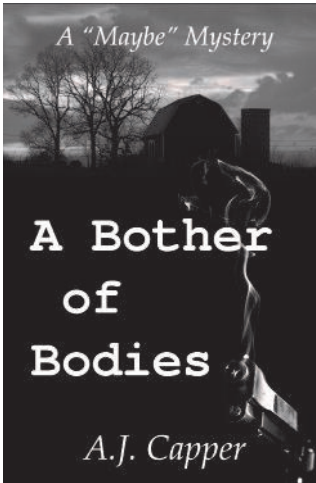
Do You See Him Now

(May 2011, Infinity Publishing)



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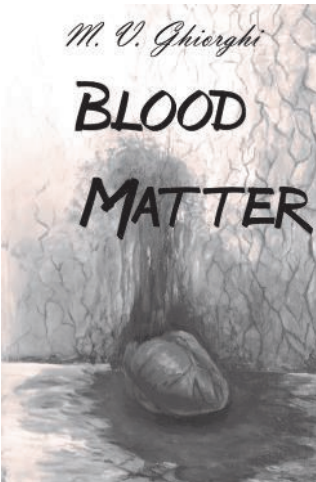
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In November, 1944, the Japanese began launching 9,300 unmanned bomb-carrying balloons (Fugo) that were carried east over the Pacific Ocean by the jet stream. The bombs were intended to drop over America and explode, causing forest fires, general panic and deaths. However, without a reliable guidance system, most of the balloons did not reach North America. The US Government suppressed information about the project, and fortunately most of the bombs fell into the ocean or exploded harmlessly. Only six deaths occurred. Japan stopped the launches in 1945.

Now, almost 70 years later, a group of terrorists using modern computer technology and the latest GPS guidance systems will try and succeed where the Japanese failed. It will be up to an unlikely group, including the President, the National Security Advisor, the Secretaries of Defense for both the United States and Russia, and the sister of the terrorist mastermind, herself a recent recruit for the CIA, to find a way to stop one of the deadliest terrorist attacks on US soil.

What people are saying about *Fugo*

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