

COMBAT

STEPHEN COONTS



COMBAT

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

STEPHEN COONTS



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

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To the memory of the seventeen sailors who
lost their lives on the USS *Cole*

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Thirty

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BREAKING POINT

Spring Xiamen, Fujian Province People's Republic of China

Two Months later The White House

Three Days Later CVN *George Washington*

1920 Local SSN 405 *Hekou*

1930 Local SSN 21 *Seawolf*

1940 Local *George Washington*

2015 Local SSN 405 *Hekou*

2020 Local SSN 21 *Seawolf*

2050 Local SSN 405 *Hekou*

United Nations Security Council

0405 Local SSN 21 *Seawolf*

0410 Local SSN 405 *Hekou*

0445 Local Taiwan

0520 Local SSN 21 *Seawolf*

Taiwan in Country

East Fleet Headquarters Ningbo

Taipei

YAK 38 Forger A Tail Number 13/13

1920 Local SSN 21 *Seawolf*

1945 Local SSN 405 *Hekou*

Chiang Kai-Shek International Airport

Taipei

2120 Local SSN 21 *Seawolf*

Keelung

2305 Local SSN 21 *Seawolf*

2310 Local SSN 405 *Hekou*

2320 Local On The Surface

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THERE IS NO WAR IN MELNICA

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INTRODUCTION

The milieu of armed conflict has been a fertile setting for storytellers since the dawn of the written word, and probably before. The *Iliad* by Homer was a thousand years old before someone finally wrote down that oral epic of the Trojan War, freezing its form forever.

Since then war stories have been one of the main themes of fiction in Western cultures: *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy was set during the Napoleonic Wars, Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* was set during the American Civil War, *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque was perhaps the great classic of World War I. Arguably the premier war novel of the twentieth century, Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, was set in the Spanish Civil War.

World War II caused an explosion of great war novels. Some of my favorites are *The Naked and the Dead*, *The Thin Red Line*, *War and Remembrance*, *From Here to Eternity*, *The War Lover*, and *Dr. Boot*.

The Korean conflict also produced a bunch, including my favorite, *The Bridges at Toko-Ri* by James Michener, but Vietnam changed the literary landscape. According to conventional wisdom in the publishing industry, after that war the reading public lost interest in war stories. Without a doubt the publishers did.

In 1984 the world changed. The U.S. Naval Institute Press, the Naval Academy's academic publisher, broke with its ninety-plus years of tradition and published a novel, *The Hunt for Red October*, by Tom Clancy.

This book by an independent insurance agent who had never served in the armed forces sold slowly at first, then became a huge best-seller when the reading public found it and began selling it to each other by word of mouth. It didn't hurt that President Ronald Reagan was photographed with a copy.

As it happened, in 1985 I was looking for a publisher for a Vietnam flying story I had written. After the novel was rejected by every publisher in New York, I saw *Hunt* in a bookstore, so I sent my novel to the Naval Institute Press. To my delight the house accepted it and published it in 1986 as *Flight of the Intruder*. Like *Hunt*, it too became a big best-seller.

Success ruined the Naval Institute. Wracked by internal politics, the staff refused to publish Clancy's and my subsequent novels. (We had no trouble selling these books in New York, thank you!) The house did not publish another novel for years, and when they did, best-seller sales eluded them.

Literary critics had an explanation for the interest of the post-Vietnam public in war stories. These novels, they said, were something new. I don't know who coined the term "techno-thriller" (back then newspapers always used quotes and hyphenated it) but the term stuck.

Trying to define the new term, the critics concluded that these war stories used modern technologies in ways that no one ever had. How wrong they were.

Clancy's inspiration for *The Hunt for Red October* was an attempted defection of a crew of a Soviet surface warship in the Baltic. The crew mutinied and attempted to sail their ship to Finland. The attempt went awry and the ringleaders were summarily executed by the communists, who always took offense when anyone tried to leave the workers' paradises.

What if, Clancy asked himself, the crew of a nuclear-powered submarine tried to defect? The game would be more interesting then. Clancy's model for the type of story he wanted to write was Edward L. Beach's *Run Silent, Run Deep*, a World War II submarine story salted with authentic technical detail that was critical to the development of the characters and plot of the story.

With that scenario in mind, Clancy set out to write a submarine adventure that would be accurate

every detail. Never mind that he had never set foot on a nuclear submarine or spent a day in uniform—his inquiring mind and thirst for knowledge made him an extraordinary researcher. His fascination with war games and active, fertile imagination made him a first-class storyteller.

Unlike Clancy, I did no research whatsoever when writing *Flight of the Intruder*. I had flown A-1H Intruder bombers in Vietnam from the deck of the USS *Enterprise* and wrote from memory. I had been trying to write a flying novel since 1973 and had worn out two typewriters in the process. By 1984 I had figured out a plot for my flying tale, so after a divorce I got serious about writing and completed my first draft of the novel in five months.

My inspiration for the type of story I wanted to write was two books by Ernest K. Gann. *Fate Is the Hunter* was a true collection of flying stories from the late 1930s and 1940s, and was, I thought, extraordinary in its inclusion of a wealth of detail about the craft of flying an airplane. Gann also used this device for his novels, the best of which is probably *The High and the Mighty*, a story about a piston-engined airliner that has an emergency while flying between Hawaii and San Francisco.

Gann used technical details to create the setting and as plot devices that moved the stories along. By educating the reader about what it is a pilot does, he gave his stories an emotional impact that conventional storytellers could not achieve. In essence, he put you in the cockpit and took you flying. That, I thought, was an extraordinary achievement and one I wanted to emulate.

Fortunately, the technology that Clancy and I were writing about was state-of-the-art—nuclear-powered submarines and precision all-weather attack jets—and this played to the reading public's long-standing love affair with scientific discoveries and new technology. In the nineteenth century Jules Verne, Edgar Allan Poe, Wilkie Collins, and H. G. Wells gave birth to science fiction. The technology at the heart of their stories played on the public's fascination with the man-made wonders of that age—the submarine, the flying machines that were the object of intense research and experimentation, though they had yet to get off the ground, and the myriad of uses that inventors were finding for electricity, to name just a few.

Today's public is still enchanted by the promise of scientific research and technology. Computer, rockets, missiles, precision munitions, lasers, fiber optics, wireless networks, reconnaissance satellites, winged airplanes that take off and land vertically, network-centric warfare—advances in every technical field are constantly re-creating the world in which we live.

The marriage of high tech and war stories is a natural.

The line between the modern military action-adventure and science fiction is blurry, indistinct, and becoming more so with every passing day. Storytellers often set technothrillers in the near future and dress up the technology accordingly, toss in little inventions of their own here and there, and in general, try subtly to wow their readers by use of a little of that science fiction “what might be” magic. When it's properly done, only a technically expert reader will be able to tell when the writer has crossed the line from the real to the unreal; and that's the fun of it. On the other hand, stories set in space or on other planets or thousands of years in the future are clearly science fiction, even though armed conflict is involved.

In this collection you will find ten never-before-published techno-thriller novellas by accomplished writers, a category in which I immodestly include myself. I hope you like them.

STEPHEN COONT

AL-JIHAD

BY STEPHEN COONTS

One

Julie Giraud was crazy as hell. I knew that for an absolute fact, so I was contemplating what a real damned fool I was to get mixed up in her crazy scheme when I drove the Humvee and trailer into the belly of the V-22 Osprey and tied them down.

I quickly checked the stuff in the Humvee's trailer, made sure it was secure, then walked out of the Osprey and across the dark concrete ramp. Lights shining down from the peak of the hangar reflected in puddles of rainwater. The rain had stopped just at dusk, an hour or so ago.

I was the only human in sight amid the tiltrotor Ospreys parked on that vast mat. They looked like medium-sized transports except that they had an engine on each wingtip, and the engines were pointed straight up. Atop each engine was a thirty-eight-foot, three-bladed rotor. The engines were mounted on swivels that allowed them to be tilted from the vertical to the horizontal, giving the Ospreys the ability to take off and land like helicopters and then fly along in winged flight like the turboprop transports they really were.

I stopped by the door into the hangar and looked around again, just to make sure, then I opened the door and went inside.

The corridor was lit, but empty. My footsteps made a dull noise on the tile floor. I took the second door on the right, into a ready room.

The duty officer was standing by the desk strapping a belt and holster to her waist. She was wearing a flight suit and black flying boots. Her dark hair was pulled back into a bun. She glanced at me. "Ready?"

"Where are all the security guards?"

"Watching a training film. They thought it was unusual to send everyone, but I insisted."

"I sure as hell hope they don't get suspicious."

She picked up her flight bag, took a last look around, and glanced at her watch. Then she grinned at me. "Let's go get 'em."

That was Julie Giraud, and as I have said, she was crazy as hell.

Me, I was just greedy. Three million dollars was a lot of kale, enough to keep me in beer and pretzels for the next hundred and ninety years. I followed this ding-a-ling bloodthirsty female along the hallway and through the puddles on the ramp to the waiting Osprey. Julie didn't run—she strode purposefully. If she was nervous or having second thoughts about committing the four dozen felonies we had planned for the next ten minutes, she sure didn't show it.

The worst thing I had ever done up to that point in my years on this planet was cheat a little on my income tax—no more than average, though—and here I was about to become a co-conspirator in enough crimes to keep a grand jury busy for a year. I felt like a condemned man on his way to the gallows, but the thought of all those smackers kept me marching along behind ol' crazy Julie.

We boarded the plane through the cargo door, and I closed it behind us.

Julie took three or four minutes to check our cargo, leaving nothing to chance. I watched her with grudging respect—crazy or not, she looked like a pro to me, and at my age I damn well didn't want to go tilting at windmills with an amateur.

When she finished her inspection, she led the way forward to the cockpit. She got into the left seat, her hands flew over the buttons and levers, arranging everything to her satisfaction. As I strapped myself into the right seat, she cranked the left engine. The RPMs came up nicely. The right engine was next.

As the radios warmed up, she quickly ran through the checklist, scanned gauges, and set up the computer displays. I wasn't a pilot; everything I knew about the V-22 tiltrotor Osprey came from Julie, who wasn't given to long-winded explanations. It was almost as if every word she said cost her money.

While she did her pilot thing, I sat there looking out the windows, nervous as a cat on crack, trying to spot the platoon of FBI agents who were probably closing in to arrest us right that very minute. I didn't see anyone, of course: The parking mat of the air force base was as deserted as a nudist colony in January.

About that time Julie snapped on the aircraft's exterior lights, which made weird reflections on the other aircraft parked nearby, and the landing lights, powerful spotlights that shone on the concrete in front of us.

She called Ground Control on the radio. They gave her a clearance to a base in southern Germany, which she copied and read back flawlessly.

We weren't going to southern Germany, I knew, even if the air traffic controllers didn't. Julie released the brakes, and almost as if by magic, the Osprey began moving, taxiing along the concrete. She turned to pick up a taxiway, moving slowly, sedately, while she set up the computer displays on the instrument panel in front of her. There were two multifunction displays in front of me too, and she leaned across to punch up the displays she wanted. I just watched. All this time we were rolling slowly along the endless taxiways lined with blue lights, across at least one runway, taxiing, taxiing ... a rabbit ran across in front of us, through the beam of the taxi light.

Finally Julie stopped and spoke to the tower, which cleared us for takeoff.

"Are you ready?" she asked me curtly.

"For prison, hell or what?"

She ignored that comment, which just slipped out. I was sitting there wondering how well I was going to adjust to institutional life.

She taxied onto the runway, lined up the plane, then advanced the power lever with her left hand. I could hear the engines winding up, feel the power of the giant rotors tearing at the air, trying to lift this twenty-eight-ton beast from the earth's grasp.

The Osprey rolled forward on the runway, slowly at first, and when it was going a little faster than a man could run, lifted majestically into the air.

The crime was consummated.

We had just stolen a forty-million-dollar V-22 Osprey, snatched it right out of Uncle Sugar's rather loose grasp, not to mention a half-million dollars' worth of other miscellaneous military equipment that was carefully stowed in the back of the plane.

Now for the getaway.

In seconds Julie began tilting the engines down to transition to forward flight. The concrete runway slid under us, faster and faster as the Osprey accelerated. She snapped up the wheels, used the stick to raise the nose of the plane. The airspeed indicator read over 140 knots as the end of the runway disappeared into the darkness below and the night swallowed us.

Two weeks before that evening, Julie Giraud drove into my filling station in Van Nuys. I didn't know her then, of course. I was sitting in the office reading the morning paper. I glanced out, saw her pull up to the pump in a new white sedan. She got out of the car and used a credit card at the pump, so I went back to the paper.

I had only owned that gasoline station for about a week, but I had already figured out why the previous owner sold it so cheap: The mechanic was a doper and the guy running the register was a thief. I was contemplating various ways of solving those two problems when the woman with the white sedan finished pumping her gas and came walking toward the office.

She was a bit over medium height, maybe thirty years old, a hard-body wearing a nice outfit that must have set her back a few bills. She looked vaguely familiar, but this close to Hollywood, you often see people you think you ought to know.

She came straight over to where I had the little chair tilted back against the wall and asked, "Charles Dean?"

"Yeah."

"I'm Julie Giraud. Do you remember me?"

It took me a few seconds. I put the paper down and got up from the chair.

"It's been a lot of years," I said.

"Fifteen, I think. I was just a teenager."

"Colonel Giraud's eldest daughter. I remember. Do you have a sister a year or two younger?"

"Rachael. She's a dental tech, married with two kids."

"I sorta lost track of your father, I guess. How is he?"

"Dead."

"Well, I'm sorry."

I couldn't think of anything else to say. Her dad had been my commanding officer at the antiterrorism school, but that was years ago. I went on to other assignments, and finally retired five years ago with thirty years in. I hadn't seen or thought of the Girauds in years.

"I remember Dad remarking several times that you were the best Marine in the corps."

That comment got the attention of the guy behind the register. His name was Candy. He had a few tattoos on his arms and a half dozen rings dangling from various portions of his facial anatomy. He looked at me now with renewed interest.

I tried to concentrate on Julie Giraud. She was actually a good-looking woman, with her father's square chin and good cheekbones. She wasn't wearing makeup: She didn't need any.

"I remember him telling us that you were a sniper in Vietnam, and the best Marine in the corps."

Candy's eyebrows went up toward his hairline when he heard that.

"I'm flattered that you remember me, Ms. Giraud, but I'm a small-business owner now. I left the Marines five years ago." I gestured widely. "This grand establishment belongs to me and the hundreds of thousands of stockholders in BankAmerica. All of us thank you for stopping by today and giving us your business."

She nodded, turned toward the door, then hesitated. "I wonder if we might have lunch together, Mr. Dean."

Why not? "Okay. Across the street at the Burger King, in about an hour?" That was agreeable with her. She got in her car and drove away.

Amazing how people from the past pop back into your life when you least expect it.

I tilted the chair back, lifted my paper and sat there wondering what in hell Julie Giraud could possibly want to talk about with me. Candy went back to his copy of *Rolling Stone*. In a few minutes two people came in and paid cash for their gas. With the paper hiding my face, I could look into the mirror I had mounted on the ceiling and watch Candy handle the money. I put the mirror up the

three days ago but if he noticed, he had forgotten it by now.

~~As the second customer left, Candy pocketed something. I didn't know if he shortchanged the customer or just helped himself to a bill from the till. The tally and the tape hadn't been jibing and Candy had a what-are-you-gonna-do-about-it-old-man attitude.~~

He closed the till and glanced at me with a look that could only be amusement.

I folded the paper, put it down, got out of the chair and went over to the counter.

“So you was in the Marines, huh?”

“Yeah.”

He grinned confidently. “Wouldn't have figured that.”

I reached, grabbed a ring dangling from his eyebrow and ripped it out.

Candy screamed. Blood flowed from the eyebrow. He recoiled against the register with a look of horror on his face.

“The money, kid. Put it on the counter.”

He glanced at the blood on his hand, then pressed his hand against his eyebrow trying to staunch the flow. “You bastard! I don't know what you—”

Reaching across the counter, I got a handful of hair with my left hand and the ring in his nose with my right. “You want to lose all these, one by one?”

He dug in his pocket, pulled out a wadded bill and threw it on the counter.

“You're fired, kid. Get off the property and never come back.”

He came around the counter, trying to stay away from me, one hand on his bleeding eyebrow. He stopped in the door. “I'll get you for this, you son of a bitch.”

“You think that through, kid. Better men than you have died trying. If you just gotta do it, though, you know where to find me.”

He scurried over to his twenty-five-year-old junker Pontiac. He ground and ground with the starter. Just when I thought he would have to give up, the motor belched a cloud of blue smoke.

I got on the phone to a friend of mine, also a retired Marine. His name was Bill Wiley, and he worked full time as a police dispatcher. He agreed to come over that evening to help me out for a few hours at the station.

It seemed to me that I might as well solve all my problems in one day, so I went into the garage to see the mechanic, a long-haired Mexican named Juan.

“I think you've got an expensive habit, Juan. To pay for it you've been charging customers for work you didn't do, new parts you didn't install, then splitting the money with Candy. He hit the road. You can work honest from now on or leave, your choice.”

“You can't prove shit.”

He was that kind of guy, stupid as dirt. “I don't have to prove anything,” I told him. “You're fired.”

He didn't argue; he just went. I finished fixing the flat he had been working on, waited on customers until noon, then locked the place up and walked across the street to the Burger King.

Of course I was curious. It seemed doubtful that Julie Giraud wanted to spend an hour of her life reminiscing about the good old days at Quantico with a retired enlisted man who once served under her father, certainly not one twenty-five years older than she was.

So what did she want?

“You are not an easy man to find, Mr. Dean.”

I shrugged. I'm not trying to lose myself in the madding crowd, but I'm not advertising either.

“My parents died twelve years ago,” she said, her eyes on my face.

“Both of them?” I hadn't heard. “Sorry to hear that,” I said.

“They were on an Air France flight to Paris that blew up over Niger. A bomb.”

“Twelve years ago.”

“Dad had been retired for just a year. He and Mom were traveling, seeing the world, falling in love with each other all over again. They were on their way to Paris from South America when the plane blew up, killing everyone aboard.”

I lost my appetite for hamburger. I put it down and sipped some coffee.

She continued, telling me her life story. She spent a few more years in high school, went to the Air Force Academy, was stationed in Europe flying V-22 Ospreys, was back in the States just now on leave.

When she wound down, I asked, as gently as I could, why she looked me up.

She opened her purse, took out a newspaper clipping, offered it to me. “Last year a French court tried the men who killed my parents. They are Libyans. Moammar Gadhafi refused to extradite them from Libya, so the French tried them in absentia, convicted them, sentenced them to life in prison.”

I remembered reading about the trial. The clipping merely refreshed my memory. One hundred forty people died when that Air France flight exploded; the debris was scattered over fifty square miles of desert.

“Six men, and they are still in Libya.” Julie gestured at the newspaper clipping, which was lying beside my food tray. “One of the men is Gadhafi’s brother-in-law, another is a key figure in Libyan intelligence, two are in the Libyan diplomatic service.” She gripped the little table between us and leaned forward. “They blew up that airliner on Gadhafi’s order to express the dictator’s displeasure with French foreign policy at the time. It was raw political terrorism, Mr. Dean, by a nation without the guts or wit to wage war. They just murder civilians.”

I folded the clipping, then handed it back.

“Ms. Giraud, I’m sorry that your parents are dead. I’m sorry about all those people who died on that airliner. I’m sorry the men who murdered them are beyond the reach of the law. I’m sorry the French government hasn’t got the guts or wit to clean out the vermin in Tripoli. But what has this got to do with me?”

“I want you to help me kill those men,” she whispered, her voice as hard as a bayonet blade.

Two

I grew up in a little town in southwestern Missouri. Dad was a welder and Mom waited tables in a diner, and both of them had trouble with the bottle. The afternoon of the day I graduated from high school I joined the Marines to get the hell out.

Sure, I killed my share of gomers in Vietnam. By then I thought life was a fairly good idea and wanted more of it. If I had to zap gomers to keep getting older, that was all right by me. It helped that I had a natural talent with a rifle. I was a medium-smart, whang-leather kid who never complained and did what I was told, so I eventually ended up in Recon. It took me a while to fit in; once I did, I was in no hurry to leave. Recon was the place where the Marine Corps kept its really tough men. The way they figured it, those guys were my life insurance.

That’s the way it worked out. The guys in Recon kept each other alive. And we killed gomers.

All that was long ago and far away from Julie Giraud. She was the daughter of a Marine colonel, sure, a grad of the Air Force Academy, and she looked like she ran five miles or so every day, but none of that made her tough. Sitting across the table looking at her, I couldn’t figure out if she was a fighter or a get-even, courthouse-stairs back-shooter. A lot of people like the abstract idea of revenge or getting even, but they aren’t willing to suffer much for the privilege. Sitting in Burger King

watching Julie Giraud, listening to her tell me how she wanted to kill the men who had killed her parents, I tried to decide just how much steel was in her backbone.

Her dad had been a career officer with his share of Vietnam chest cabbage. When they were young a lot of the gung ho officers thought they were bulletproof and let it all hang out. When they eventually realized they were as mortal as everyone else and started sending sergeants to lead the patrols, they already had enough medals to decorate a Panamanian dictator. Whether Julie Giraud's dad was like that, I never knew.

A really tough man knows he is mortal, knows the dangers involved to the tenth decimal place, and goes ahead anyway. He is careful, committed, and absolutely ruthless.

After she dropped the bomb at lunch, I thought about these things for a while. Up to that point I had no idea why she had gone to the trouble of looking me up; the thought that she might want my help getting even with somebody never once zipped across the synapses. I took my time thinking things over before I said, "What's the rest of it?"

"It's a little complicated."

"Maybe you'd better lay it out."

"Outside, in my car."

"No. Outside on the sidewalk."

We threw the remnants of our lunch in the trash and went outside.

Julie Giraud looked me in the eye and explained, "These men are instruments of the Libyan government—"

"I got that point earlier."

"—seventeen days from now, on the twenty-third of this month, they are going to meet with members of three Middle East terrorist organizations and a representative of Saddam Hussein's government. They hope to develop a joint plan that Saddam will finance to attack targets throughout western Europe and the Middle East."

"Did you get a press release on this or what?"

"I have a friend, a fellow Air Force Academy graduate, who is now with the CIA."

"He just casually tells you this stuff?"

"She. She told me about the conference. And there is nothing casual about it. She knows what these people have cost me."

"Say you win the lottery and off a few of these guys, what's she gonna tell the internal investigators when they come around?"

Julie Giraud shook her head. "We're covered, believe me."

"I don't, but you're the one trying to make a sale, not me."

She nodded, then continued: "Seventeen days from now the delegates to this little conference will fly to an airstrip near an old fortress in the Sahara. The fortress is near an oasis on an old caravan route in the middle of nowhere. Originally built by the ancient Egyptians, the fortress was used by the Carthaginians and Romans to guard that caravan route. The Foreign Legion did extensive restoration and kept a small garrison there for years. During World War II the Germans and British even had a little firefight there."

I grunted. She was intense, committed. Fanatics scare me, and she was giving me those vibes now.

"The fortress is on top of a rock ridge," she explained. "The Arabs call it the Camel."

"Never heard of it," I retorted. Of course there was no reason that I should have heard of the place. I was grasping at straws. I didn't like anything about this tale.

She was holding her purse loosely by the strap, so I grabbed it out of her hand. Her eyes narrowed as she thought about slapping me—actually shifted her weight to do it—then decided against it.

There was a small, round, poured-concrete picnic table there beside the Burger King for mothers

sit at while watching their kids play on the gym equipment, so I sat down and dug her wallet out of the purse. It contained a couple hundred in bills, a Colorado driver's license—she was twenty-eight years old—a military ID, three bank credit cards, an expired AAA membership, car insurance from USAA, Sears credit card, and an ATM card in a paper envelope with her secret PIN number written on the envelope in ink.

Also in the wallet was a small, bound address book containing handwritten names, addresses, telephone numbers, and e-mail addresses. I flipped through the book, studying the names, then returned it to the wallet.

Her purse contained the usual feminine hygiene and cosmetic items. At the bottom were four or five dry cleaning receipts from the laundry on the German base where she was stationed and a small collection of loose keys. One safety pin, two buttons, a tiny rusty screwdriver, a pair of sunglasses with a cracked lens, five German coins and two U.S. quarters. One of the receipts was eight months old.

I put all this stuff back in her purse and passed it across the table.

"Okay," I said. "For the sake of argument, let's assume you're telling the truth—that there really is a terrorists' conference scheduled at an old pile of Foreign Legion masonry in the middle of the goddamn Sahara seventeen days from now. What do you propose to do about it?"

"I propose to steal a V-22 Osprey," Julie Giraud said evenly, "fly there, plant enough C-4 to blow that old fort to kingdom come, then wait for the terrorists to arrive. When they are all sitting in the fort plotting who they are going to murder next, I'm going to push the button and send the whole lot of them straight to hell. Just like they did to my parents and everyone else on that French DC-10."

"You and who else?"

The breeze was playing with her hair. "You and me," she said. "The two of us."

I tried to keep a straight face. Across the street at my filling station people were standing beside their cars, waiting impatiently for me to get back and open up. That was paying business and I was sitting here listening to this shit. The thought that the CIA or FBI might be recording this conversation also crossed my mind.

"You're a nice kid, Julie. Thanks for dropping by. I'm sorry about your folks, but there is nothing on earth anyone can do for them. It's time to lay them to rest. Fly high, meet a nice guy, fall in love, have some kids, give them the best that you have in you: Your parents would have wanted that for you. The fact is they're gone and you can't bring them back."

She brushed the hair back from her eyes. "If you'll help me, Mr. Dean, I'll pay you three million dollars."

I didn't know what to say. Three million dollars rated serious consideration, but I couldn't tell her she had what it takes to make it work.

"I'll think about it," I said, and got up. "Tomorrow, we'll have lunch again right here."

She showed some class then. "Okay," she said, and nodded once. She didn't argue or try to make the sale right then, and I appreciated that.

My buddy, Gunnery Sergeant Bill Wiley, left the filling station at ten that night; I had to stay until closing time at 2 A.M. About midnight an older four-door Chrysler cruised slowly past on the street for the second or third time, and I realized the people inside were casing the joint.

Ten minutes later, when the pumps were vacant and I was the only person in the store, the Chrysler drove in fast and stopped in front of the door. My ex-cash register man, Candy, boiled out of the passenger seat with a gun in his hand, a 9-mm automatic. He and the guy from the backseat came charging through the door waving their guns at me.

"Hands up, Charlie Dean, you silly son of a bitch. We want all the money, and if you ain't ready

goddamn careful I'm gonna blow your fucking brains out."

The guy from the backseat posted himself by the door and kept glancing up and down the street to see who was driving by. The driver of the car stayed outside.

Candy strutted over to me and stuck his gun in my face. He had a butterfly bandage on his eyebrow. He was about to say something really nasty, I think, when I grabbed his gun with my left hand and hit him with all I had square in the mouth with my right. He went down like he had been sledgehammered. I leaped toward the other one and hit him in the head with the gun butt, and he went down too. Squatting, I grabbed his gun while I checked the driver outside.

The driver was standing frozen beside the car, staring through the plate-glass window at me like I was Godzilla. I already had the safety off on Candy's automatic, so I swung it into the middle of the dude's chest and pulled the trigger.

Click.

Oh boy!

As I got the other pistol up, the third man dived behind the wheel and slammed the Chrysler into gear. That pistol also clicked uselessly. The Chrysler left in a squall of rubber and exhaust smoke.

I checked the pistols one at a time. Both empty.

Candy's eyes were trying to focus, so I bent down and asked him, "How come you desperate characters came in here with empty pistols?"

He spit blood and a couple teeth as he thought about it. His lips were swelling. He was going to look like holy hell for a few days. Finally one eye focused. "Didn't want to shoot you," he mumbled, barely understandable. "Just scare you."

"Umm."

"The guns belong to my dad. He didn't have any bullets around."

"Did the driver of the car know the guns were empty?"

Candy nodded, spit some more blood.

I'll admit, I felt kind of sorry for Candy. He screwed up the courage to go after a pint or two of revenge, but the best he could do for backup help was a coward who ran from empty pistols.

I put the guns in the trash can under the register and got each of them a bottled water from the cooler. They were slowly coming around when a police cruiser with lights flashing pulled up between the pumps and the office and the officer jumped out. He came striding in with his hand on the butt of his pistol.

"Someone called in on their cell phone, reported a robbery in progress here."

I kept my hands in plain sight where he could see them. "No robbery, officer. My name's Dean; I own this filling station."

"What happened to these two?" Spittle and blood were smeared on one front of Candy's shirt, and his friend had a dilly of a shiner.

"They had a little argument," I explained, "slugged each other. This fellow here, Candy, works for me."

Candy and his friend looked at me kind of funny, but they went along with it. After writing down everyone's names and addresses from their driver's licenses while I expanded on my fairy tale, the officer left.

Candy and his friend were on their feet by then. "I'm sorry, Mr. Dean," Candy said.

"Tell you what, kid. You want to play it straight, no stealing and no shortchanging people, you come back to work in the morning."

"You mean that?"

"Yeah." I dug his father's guns from the trash and handed them to him. "You better take these home and put them back where they belong."

His face was red and he was having trouble talking. "I'll be here," he managed.

~~He pocketed the pistols, nodded, then he and his friend went across the street to Burger King to call someone to come get them.~~

I was shaking so bad I had to sit down. Talk about luck! If the pistols had been loaded I would have killed that fool kid driving the car, and I didn't even know if he had a gun. That could have cost me my life in the pen. Over what?

I sat there in the office thinking about life and death and Julie Giraud.

At lunch the next day Julie Giraud was intense, yet cool as she talked of killing people, slaughtering them like steers. I'd seen my share of people with that look. She was just flat crazy.

The fact that she was a nut seemed to explain a lot, somehow. If she had been sane I would have turned her down flat. It's been my experience through the years that sane people who go traipsing out to kill other people usually get killed themselves. The people who do best at combat don't have a death grip on life, if you know what I mean. They are crazy enough to take the biggest risk of all and not freak out when the shooting starts. Julie Giraud looked like she had her share of that kind of insanity.

"Do I have my information correct? Were you a sniper in Vietnam, Mr. Dean?"

"That was a war," I said, trying to find the words to explain, taking my time. "I was in Recon. We did ambushes and assassinations. I had a talent with a rifle. Other men had other talents. What you're suggesting isn't war, Ms. Giraud."

"Do you still have what it takes?"

She was goading me and we both knew it. I shrugged.

She wouldn't let it alone. "Could you still kill a man at five hundred yards with a rifle? Shoot him down in cold blood?"

"You want me to shoot somebody today so you can see if I'm qualified for the job?"

"I'm willing to pay three million dollars, Mr. Dean, to the man with the balls to help me kill the men who murdered my parents. I'm offering you the job. I'll pay half up front into a Swiss bank account, half after we kill the men who killed my parents."

"What if you don't make it? What if they kill you?"

"I'll leave a wire transfer order with my banker."

I snorted. At times I got the impression she thought this was some kind of extreme sports expedition, like jumping from a helicopter to ski down a mountain. And yet ... she had that fire in her eyes.

"Where in hell did a captain in the air force get three million dollars?"

"I inherited half my parents' estate and invested it in software and internet stocks; and the stock went up like a rocket shot to Mars, as everyone north of Antarctica well knows. Now I'm going to spend the money on something I want very badly. That's the American way, isn't it?"

"Like ribbed condoms and apple pie," I agreed, then leaned forward to look into her eyes. "If we kill these men," I explained, "the world will never be the same for you. When you look in the mirror the face that stares back won't be the same one you've been looking at all these years—it'll be uglier. Your parents will still be dead and you'll be older in ways that years can't measure. That's the goddamn truth, kid. Your parents are going to be dead regardless. Keep your money, find a good guy, and have a nice life."

She sneered. "You're a philosopher?"

"I've been there, lady. I'm trying to figure out if I want to go back."

"Three million dollars, Mr. Dean. How long will it take for your gasoline station to make three million dollars profit?"

I owned three gas stations, all mortgaged to the hilt, but I wasn't going to tell her that. I sat in the corner of Burger King working on a Diet Coke while I thought about the kid I had damn near killed the night before.

"What about afterward?" I asked. "Tell me how you and I are going to continue to reside on this planet with the CIA and FBI and Middle Eastern terrorists all looking to carve on our ass."

She knew a man, she said, who could provide passports.

"Fake passports? Bullshit! Get real."

"Genuine passports. He's a U.S. consular official in Munich."

"What are you paying him?"

"He wants to help."

"Dying to go to prison, is he?"

"I've slept with him for the past eighteen months."

"You got a nice ass, but ... Unless this guy is a real toad, he can get laid any night of the week. Women today think if they don't use it, they'll wear it out pissing through it."

"You have difficulty expressing yourself in polite company, don't you, Charlie Dean? Okay, card on the table: I'm fucking him and paying him a million dollars."

I sat there thinking it over.

"If you have the money you can buy anything," she said.

"I hope you aren't foolish enough to believe that."

"Someone always wants money. All you have to do is find that someone. You're a case in point."

"How much would it cost to kill an ex-Marine who became a liability and nuisance?"

"A lot less than I'm paying you," she shot back. She didn't smile.

After a bit she started talking again, telling me how we were going to kill the bad guys. I didn't think much of her plan—blow up a stone fortress?—but I sat there listening while I mulled things over. Three million was not small change.

Finally I decided that Julie's conscience was her problem and the three million would look pretty good in my bank account. The Libyans—well, I really didn't give a damn about them one way or the other. They would squash me like a bug if they thought I was any threat at all, so what the hell. They had blown up airliners, they could take their chances with the devil.

Three

We were inside a rain cloud. Water ran off the windscreen in continuous streams: The dim glow of the red cockpit lights made the streams look like pale red rivers. Beyond the wet windscreen, however, the night was coal black.

I had never seen such absolute darkness.

Julie Giraud had the Osprey on autopilot; she was bent over fiddling with the terrain-avoidance radar while auto flew the plane.

I sure as hell wasn't going to be much help. I sat there watching her, wondering if I had made a sucker's deal. Three million was a lot of money if you lived to spend it. If you died earning it, it was nowhere near enough.

After a bit she turned off the radios and some other electronic gear, then used the autopilot to drop the nose into a descent. The multifunction displays in front of us—there were four plus a radar screen—displayed engine data, our flight plan, a moving map, and one that appeared to be a tactical display of the locations of the radars that were looking at us. I certainly didn't understand much of it, and

Julie Giraud was as loquacious as a store dummy.

~~“We’ll drop off their radar screens now,” she muttered finally in way of explanation. As if to emphasize our departure into the outlaw world, she snapped off the plane’s exterior lights.~~

As the altimeter unwound I must have looked a little nervous, and I guess I was. I rode two helicopters into the ground in Vietnam and one in Afghanistan, all shot down, so in the years since had tried to avoid anything with rotors. Jets didn’t bother me much, but rotor whop made my skin crawl.

Down we went until we were flying through the valleys of the Bavarian Alps below the hilltops. Julie sat there twiddling the autopilot as we flew along, keeping us between the hills with the radar.

She looked cool as a tall beer in July. “How come you aren’t a little nervous?” I asked.

“This is the easy part,” she replied.

That shut me up.

We were doing about 270 knots, so it took a little while to thread our way across Switzerland and northern Italy to the ocean. Somewhere over Italy we flew out of the rain. I breathed a sigh of relief when we left the valleys behind and dropped to a hundred feet over the ocean. Julie turned the plane for Africa.

“How do you know fighters aren’t looking for us in this goop?” I asked.

She pointed toward one of the multifunction displays. “That’s a threat indicator. We’ll see anyone who uses a radar.”

After a while I got bored, even at a hundred feet, so I got unstrapped and went aft to check the Humvee, trailer and cargo.

All secure.

I opened my duffel bag, got out a pistol belt. The gun, an old 1911 Colt .45 automatic, was loaded but I checked it anyway, reholstered it, got the belt arranged around my middle so it rode comfortably with the pistol on my right side and my Ka-Bar knife on the left. I also had another knife in one boot and a hideout pistol in the other, just in case.

I put a magazine in the M-16 but didn’t chamber a round. I had disassembled the weapon the night before, cleaned it thoroughly, and oiled it lightly.

The last weapon in the bag was a Model 70 in .308. It was my personal rifle, one I had built up myself years ago. With a synthetic stock, a Canjar adjustable trigger, and a heavy barrel custom-made for me by a Colorado gunsmith, it would put five shots into a half-inch circle at a hundred yards with factory match-grade ammunition. I had the 3x9 adjustable scope zeroed for two hundred. Trigger pull was exactly eighteen ounces.

I repacked the rifles, then sat in the driver’s seat of the Humvee and poured myself a cup of coffee from the thermos.

We flew to Europe on different airlines and arrived in Zurich just hours apart. The following day I opened a bank account at a gleaming pile of marble in the heart of the financial district. As I watched Julie called her banker in Virginia and had \$1.5 million in cold hard cash transferred into the account. Three hours after she made the transfer I went to my bank and checked: The money was really there and it was all mine.

Amazing.

We met for dinner at a little hole-in-the-wall restaurant a few blocks off the main drag that I remembered from years before, when I was sight-seeing while on leave during a tour in Germany.

“The money’s there,” I told her when we were seated. “I confess, I didn’t think it would be.”

She got a little huffy. “I’d lie to you?”

“It’s been known to happen. Though for the life of me, I couldn’t see why you would.”

She opened her purse, handed me an unsealed envelope. Inside was a passport. I got up and went to the men's room, where I inspected it. It certainly looked like a genuine U.S. passport, on the right paper and printed with dots and displaying my shaved, honest phiz. The name on the thing was Robert Arnold. I put it in my jacket pocket and rejoined her at the table.

She handed me a letter and an addressed envelope. The letter was to her banker, typed, instructing him to transfer another \$1.5 million to my account a week after we were scheduled to hit the Cameroons. The envelope was addressed to him and even had a Swiss stamp on it. I checked the numbers on my account at the Swiss bank. Everything jibed.

She had a pen in her hand by that time. After she had signed the letter, I sealed it in the envelope and then folded the envelope and tucked it in my pocket beside the passport.

"Okay, lady. I'm bought and paid for."

We made our plans over dinner. She drank one glass of wine, and I had a beer, then we both switched to mineral water. I told her I wanted my own pistol and rifles, a request she didn't blink at. She agreed to fly into Dover Air Force Base on one of the regularly scheduled cargo runs, then take my duffel bag containing the weapons back to Germany with her.

"What if someone wants to run the bag through a metal detector, or German customs wants to inspect it?"

"My risk."

"I guess there are a few advantages to being a well-scrubbed, cleancut American girl."

"You can get away with a lot if you shave your legs."

"I'll keep that in mind."

That was ten days ago. Now we were on our way. Tomorrow we were going to case the old fort and come up with a plan for doing in the assembled bad guys.

Sitting in the driver's seat of the Humvee sipping coffee and listening to the drone of the turboprop carrying us across the Mediterranean, I got the old combat feeling again.

Yeah, this was really it.

Only this time I was going to get paid for it.

I finished the coffee, went back to the cockpit, and offered Julie a cup. She was intent on the computer screens.

"Problems?" I asked.

"I'm picking up early warning radar, but I think I'm too low for the Libyans to see me. There's a fighter aloft too. I doubt if he can pick us out of ground return."

All that was outside my field of expertise. On this portion of the trip, I was merely a passenger.

I saw the land appear on the radar presentation, watched it march down the scope toward us, as if we were stationary and the world was turning under us. It was a nice illusion. As we crossed the beach, I checked my watch. We were only a minute off our planned arrival time, which seemed to me to be a tribute to Julie's piloting skills.

The ride got bumpy over the desert. Even at night the thermals kept the air boiling. Julie Girard took the plane off autopilot, hand-flew it. Trusting the autopilot in rough air so close to the ground was foolhardy.

I got out the chart, used a little red spotlight mounted on the ceiling of the cockpit to study the lines and notes as we bounced along in turbulence.

We had an hour and twenty minutes to go. Fuel to get out of the desert would have been a problem, so we had brought five hundred gallons in a portable tank in the cargo compartment. Tomorrow night we would use a hand pump to transfer that fuel into the plane's tanks, enough to get us out of Africa.

when the time came.

~~I sat back and watched her fly, trying not to think about the tasks and dangers ahead. At some point it doesn't pay to worry about hazards you can't do anything about. When you've taken all the precautions you can, then it's time to think about something else.~~

The landing site we had picked was seven miles from the Camel, at the base of what appeared on the chart to be a cliff. The elevation lines seemed to indicate a cliff of sixty or seventy feet in height.

"How do you know that is a cliff?" I had asked Julie when she first showed the chart to me. In reply she pulled out two satellite photos. They had obviously been taken at different times of day, perhaps different seasons or years, but they were obviously of the same piece of terrain. I compared them to the chart.

There was a cliff all right, and apparently room to tuck the Osprey in against it, pretty much out of sight.

"You want me to try to guess where you got these satellite photos?"

"My friend in the CIA."

"And nobody is going to ask her any questions?"

"Nope. She's cool and she's clean."

"I don't buy it."

"She doesn't have access to this stuff. She's stealing it. They'll only talk to people with access."

"Must be a bunch of stupes in the IG's office there, huh."

She wouldn't say any more.

We destroyed the photos, of course, before we left the apartment she had rented for me. Still, the thought of Julie's classmate in the CIA who could sell us down the river to save her own hide gave me a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach as we motored through the darkness over the desert.

Julie had our destination dialed into the navigation computer, so the magic box was depicting our track and time to go. I sat there watching the miles and minutes tick down.

With five miles to go, Julie began slowing the Osprey. And she flipped on the landing lights. Beams of light seared the darkness and revealed the yellow rock and sand and dirt of the deep desert.

She began tilting the engines toward the vertical, which slowed us further and allowed the giant rotors to begin carrying a portion of our weight.

When the last mile ticked off the computer and we crossed the cliff line, the Osprey was down to fifty knots. Julie brought the V-22 into a hover and used the landing lights to explore our hiding place. Some small boulders, not too many, and the terrain under the cliff was relatively flat.

After a careful circuit and inspection, Julie set the Osprey down, shut down the engines.

The silence was startling as we took off our helmets.

Now she shut down the aircraft battery and all the cockpit lights went off.

"We're here," she said with a sigh of relief.

"You really intend to go through with this, don't you?"

"Don't tell me you still have doubts, Charlie Dean."

"Okay. I won't."

She snapped on a flashlight and led the way back through the cargo bay. She opened the rear door and we stepped out onto the godforsaken soil of the Sahara. We used a flashlight to inspect our position.

"I could get it a little closer to the cliff, but I doubt if it's worth the effort."

"Let's get to work," I said. I was tired of sitting.

First she went back to the cockpit and tilted the engines down to the cruise position. The plan would be easier to camouflage with the engines down. We would rotate the engines back to the vertical position when the time came to leave.

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