

J A M E S M C K E N N A



GLOBAL RAIDER

JAMES MCKENNA



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The Unseen
The Uncounted
The Unwanted

James McKenna also writes for young readers

The Mind Traveller is the first in a trilogy of action/adventure stories for 10-
15 year olds

CHAPTER 1

Sweat trickled on Seb's face. In the still night a fly buzzed, stopped, buzzed again then settled on the barrel of his AK74 rifle. Lying in a hollow scooped from the desert floor, he squinted through his night optic sight, drawing a line of vision over the ambush square, waiting on the enemy, waiting on advanced warning from the UAV twelve miles in the sky.

Since hitting the dropping zone at 2300 hours and burying his parachutes, Seb had felt his adrenalin slowly gain in pressure to feed tension over fear. Fear would come later, when it was done and over. For now he blocked all negatives from his mental preparation. The Combined Agency Taskforce, CAT taught all or nothing and the eight-man ambush team from the Anti-terrorist Warfare wing would expect nothing less of him. He just prayed the outcome would not demand a cold blooded execution. This he knew was his trial for acceptance amongst the elite. These guys were ex-SAS, 9 Para, SBS, Airborne and Commandos, the very finest of British Special Forces; except ambush via US ground control in America and an unmanned aerial vehicle somewhere amidst the stars was untried. Tucked in his hole, Seb knew he was central to the operation's success, his orders deciding whether he and others of the CAT team lived or died. Tension in his body sparked every muscle and nerve which in turn pumped his sweat into the desert heat.

He brushed at another fly and heard Jock Anderson flick away the same irritation in the adjacent scoop, heard him puff when one settled on his lips. Seb considered him the babyminder but it did not detract from responsibility. Young he might be, but Seb was still the commanding officer. If he messed up, no one would forgive him. The outcome was a steel flask of anthrax en route to London, courtesy of one very dangerous al-Qaeda agent.

From the slit of the sand covered hole he looked up to a star scattered heaven, the crystal air allowing vision thirty metres into the hot, velvet night. To his right lay undulating desert, to his left sand rock hills rose in stark silhouette, the tops shimmered by moonlight. On the lower slopes he had set the team's RV point and a two-man comms post manning the radio link to base. The team link was through UHF sets. More important was Seb's own link by satellite-com direct to Global Hawk ground control. Somewhere high above, an unmanned aerial vehicle watched over them like a guardian angel.

Again Jock shuffled his solid bulk, farted and set the flies buzzing.

"What the fuck you been eating?" Seb put a forearm to his nose, glad of the disturbance and the ease of tension.

“Beans.” Jock turned his big square face and grinned. “I always eat beans before an op. Gives more velocity when I run.”

Seb lifted his head and noticed all the flies had deserted. “You’re more lethal than the bloody anthrax.”

“In Al Razi’s face, evil bastard.” Jock laid the crook of his arm over the butt of a Barrett M82A1 sniper rifle, its .50 round capable of piercing an engine block.

“You think the Yanks are up there?” Jock asked.

“Somewhere.” Seb rested chin to forearm and stared at a million stars. “They’ve been watching these guys by satellite for months. The stupid prats are still using mobiles. They’re watching them now. Technology, that’s what wins wars. When it works,” he added in after thought.

“Still takes squaddies on the ground, some poor bastards to sort out the mess.”

“For now. But it will change.”

“We’ll be dead by then.”

“Hope not.” Seb looked back to where a sand track wound its way around the hill at a hundred metres distance. He knew that four miles on the other side an al-Qaeda training camp held three hundred men. Somewhere over the track four of his own team lay waiting, each huddled in a scoop from the desert floor, each listening for his command to open fire. During the protracted silence the earpiece of Seb’s sat-link whispered warning.

“Global Hawk to Desert Snatch. Convoy preparing to leave compound. Three vehicles, estimated enemy strength, eighteen. ETA, ten minutes.”

Seb listened to the American voice of the UAV ground control, someone in a far distant place who watched this patch of desert through darkness and space.

“Roger that.” Seb switched mikes and spoke to his team over UHF. “Eighteen players, three vehicles, ETA ten minutes. Pete, Mike, you take lead vehicle. Dave, Rich, end vehicle. Jock and I will do middle. Everyone to mop up runners. Barretts to stop vehicles,” Seb paused. “Priority is the flask, probably in the central vehicle. Try not to cause fire. We don’t want it red hot or broken. Some poor sod has to carry it.”

“Guess who?” Jock grinned.

Ruperts do have their uses, Seb thought as he listened to the team’s radio acknowledgement. In his mind he knew each person was aware that if a convoy took just ten minutes to arrive, so could three hundred al-Qaeda. A Puma helicopter with a second on standby would have been alerted for their run to the RV, waiting on his order to pick up when safe. For a clean

withdrawal the time factors became crucial. He remembered words from his boss, Colonel Fox, that to lead men you had to be at one with them, mentally and physically. To give them confidence and get them the hell out of any position when they were being shot to pieces. "Stand to," he said and looked back to the night. The tension left his body under a surge of adrenalin. This was his life, what he had trained for. He felt totally focussed. The target was Dr Al Razi, a British mullah and long known supporter of al-Qaeda. Left to preach his hatred in London and travel at will, Al Razi had just collected some of Syria's stolen anthrax. His intended place of distribution, the British populous.

Seb shifted the butt of his rifle and took grip of the stock. As Rupert it was his duty to ensure Al Razi stayed in the desert. Long, silent minutes passed which left him time to think. Execution would need anger, hatred.

"Hawk to Desert Snatch, convoy now traversing hillside to your position. ETA three minutes."

"Roger that," Seb answered. He felt calm now, an inner control filled with solid determination. Every sense became alert to the stillness, the slow encroaching sound of engines. He wanted these bastards, this little shit Al Razi who would kill thousands in satisfaction of self-righteous bigotry.

"All positions fire on my action." Seb gave his last order and squinted through the night optic sight, watching the lead vehicle come round the hillside, a Toyota FWD with twin mounted machine guns over the cab. Full blaze headlights cut across their position and the desert floor, sweeping down the track as the second vehicle came into view, an enclosed landcruiser. Target vehicle, Seb was certain. He felt Jock shift the Barrett to aim at its engine cover. Last vehicle was an open truck carrying a dozen armed men.

"See you in paradise," Jock whispered.

"No way, we'll piss this." Seb took first pressure on his trigger and listened to the sat-com earpiece come to life.

"Hawk to Desert Snatch. A tracked vehicle has also left the compound, possibly an APC, repeat, armoured vehicle ETA your location eight minutes."

"Shit." Now or never. Seb squeezed the trigger and put a series of three round bursts into the landcruiser's side windows. Beside him the heavy calibre discharge of the Barrett imploded on his eardrums.

A crescendo of ear stunning noise came instantly amidst flickering darts of light. Flame spat across the black velvet sky from the single rounds of the massive Barrett sniper weapons while the snatched, chattering fire of HKG3s and AK74 assault rifles gave constant barrage. Seb shouted the last message from Global Hawk over his UHF.

Return fire from the convoy terminated within sixty seconds. Sergeant Pete Shaffer on the opposite side of the track called ceasefire. The sudden cessation of noise returned the desert to stillness, the silence only disturbed by the crackle of flames from the rear truck and intermittent cries of the wounded.

Seb pushed up from the dugout, Jock beside him, the heavy Barrett cradled in his arms. Half a dozen bodies shadowed the desert floor, fanned out from the vehicles like scattered clothes bags.

“Move it.” Seb heard the order from Pete Shaffer as he came out of his hole. Figures emerged from the desert floor, all running at a crouch, all knowing they had minutes before an enemy armoured vehicle arrived.

Seb was within twenty feet when the fuel tank on the rear truck exploded. In the shock of fire, three of the supposed dead stood up and ran, four more figures leaped from the back, two of them ablaze. The team’s response came immediately, their weapons raking the night with fire, twitching bodies as they scattered and fell. Seb kept running for the landcruiser, his sole objective to secure the canister of anthrax, the rest was now Pete Shaffer’s; except for Al Razi, whom he hoped was dead.

The landcruiser sat fat and dark on deflated tyres, the windscreen and front side window shattered. Smoke and steam drifted from under the bonnet. Seb threw open the rear door and stood ready to fire. The driver was dead, so was the man beside him. In the back a thin bearded guy sat in petrified silence, eyes and mouth wide open, hands raised.

“Where is it?” Seb jabbed with his rifle barrel. Sitting in the back of the only air-conditioned vehicle this had to be Al Razi.

“I don’t know what you mean.” The cleric spread his hands.

“Then fucking die.” Seb took aim.

“Here.” The guy grabbed a briefcase from behind the seat and held it in offering.

Seb snatched it onto the ground, flipped the catches and pushed up the lid. Inside lay a steel flask wedged by polystyrene. Jock had the tail open, throwing aside items while searching through other baggage.

“Is this it?” Seb took out the canister and pushed it into his shirt. “Tell me or I kill you now!”

“All of it, no more. They kept the rest.”

“Nothing here,” Jock said.

“Out, out.” Seb grabbed the cleric’s shirt, hauling him over the seat, trying to think of him as a mass murdered. He had never killed in cold blood.

Global Hawk sounded in his earpiece. “Sit-rep.”

“Anthrax secure,” Seb answered.

“Execute courier. Then immediate evacuation, additional firepower imminent,” Hawk replied.

“Roger that.” He turned the AK74 back to Al Razi. Seb wished to hell he had no conscience. He had to do this, had to. He took first pressure on the trigger, swallowed hard and paused, paused long enough to know he couldn’t finish it.

“I have human rights. I am from London, British citizen, you cannot shoot me.”

The air rocked and Al Razi’s body jerked as his head disintegrated under impact from the single round out of Anderson’s rifle. “Citizenship revoked.” He looked to Seb and grinned. “Perks of being Rupert’s nanny.”

Seb looked to the splatter of brain and blood covering his hands and weapon but his relief was huge and thankful. “Withdraw to RV. Let’s get the fuck out of here,” he shouted, pushing the flask so it wedged against his skin under the strap of his belt kit, the same time counting heads as his team made a tactical withdrawal from the shattered convoy. No one down, he thought and called on his UHF link. “Pumas to pick up. Two minutes.”

The clatter of a tracked vehicle became audible and a searchlight beam cut through the night. Seb answered with a snatched burst from the AK. The resulting darkness lasted moments before a parachute flare burst overhead. An APC stood ten metres back from the smouldering truck, its turret swinging before a heavy machine gun clattered round towards their retreating line.

Seb dropped simultaneously with the team. Again the night became a crash of noise, the ground pocked and chopped by the strike of rounds as the APC searched for range. Seb rolled, pulled a weapon propelled grenade from his kit, fitted it to the barrel of his rifle and fired. He was shouting, shouting as his men were shouting, their voices momentarily lost under the exploding grenade. This wasn’t meant to happen. The al-Qaeda camp would be swarming by now.

Amidst the torrent of gunfire between APC and Seb’s team, two silver bolts cut the black sky and turned the APC to molten metal. The eruption shuddered the ground, the sound vibrating through the air, impacting on Seb’s eardrums so even his own voice sounded as if called from a distant place. Blood red flames billowed out across the desert floor, a rolling fireball veined with black acrid smoke. Within seconds the eruption had evaporated back into the stillness of night leaving small isolated patches of burning oil. The APC no longer existed.

Anderson stood. “Fucking hell, God’s on our side. Where did that come from?”

Seb also stood. “I can guess. Additional firepower received,” he said into his mike, transmitted by CP and sat-com to Global Hawk control.

“Hope it did the trick. Service courtesy of USAF.”

“It did the trick.” Sean looked to the star encrusted sky.

“Well yer ain’t seen nothing yet. Just wait for Global Raider.”

CHAPTER 2

General Jake Hammerton cast no shadow on the busy New York pavements. In the grey evening light he moved amidst the noise and glare of its human beings while keeping his concentration on events across the street, his mind on the kill.

Both he and the traffic stayed the same pace as Perry, his target, who strolled the opposite side of West 49th. Traffic clustered then stretched, rolling in a slow shuffle towards the intersection. The truck trailing Perry matched his progress, the driver carefully maintaining position to the rear, his wheels eighteen inches from the kerb. Training, Jake knew, brought perfection.

Amidst the congestion Perry occasionally drifted from sight, then Jake whispered into the mouthpiece of his body set, ensuring the two-man team that followed kept the target in view. Perry walked with positive steps, the black briefcase clutched in his right hand. Jake checked time and position. The target was five hundred metres from enemy contact and five metres from termination point. Lights on the intersection turned green and Jake took the opportunity.

“Execute immediately,” he again spoke softly into the microphone on his lapel, stopping at the corner to watch the truck move forward, knowing four men from Walsh Security would be clustering in Perry’s path. Somewhere ahead a siren wailed, a long, angry shriek cutting over the city noise.

Jake saw the annoyance on Perry’s face and watched him side step in the apparent confusion of pedestrian confrontation. Next moment he was sprawling in the road, his head between the front wheels and those which followed, his body stretched facedown before the next set of wheels humped slightly. Jake heard the distinct pop of calvarium bone above the fading siren and watched the truck clear the corner to drive down 5th Avenue. He saw no sign of the four-man team. A woman screamed and people started to gather.

“Target down, briefcase swapped.” Jake heard the whisper of one of his men over the earpiece and responded with a grunt of pride. Good men all of them, he thought, and strolled away in the opposite direction.

Henry Taylor had the Buick idling at the kerbside, his unlit pipe clenched between teeth, his expression bland. He released the locking mechanism and Jake slid his solid bulk into the back seat.

“Twenty seconds from time of command to execution. That team is superb,” Jake said.

“Crowded sidewalk, just ain’t safe no more.” Henry sucked on his pipe.

“So perish all traitors.” Jake lowered the rear window and took the black briefcase passed by one of his men from the pavement. “Fireback is rolling, Henry. One year down the line and Khalid is coming into target.”

“You are now twenty minutes to rendezvous.” Henry checked his watch and drove out into the traffic.

Jake opened the briefcase and looked through the contents, unfinished sandwiches, New Scientist magazine, business cards, correspondence. “Boring life he lived, Henry.” Jake parted the magazine and found sheets of figures inside. “Flight details, we got evidence.”

“You going to tell Mr Walsh?” Henry asked. “He’ll find out.”

“Only what I want him to know. Best he’s kept out the frame. He’s got problems enough.” Jake looked to the pavement as they passed over the intersection. He saw police there, someone taking pictures of the uncovered body, a second policeman lifting a black briefcase. “Did you hear his head pop?” Jake asked. “Like a firecracker on the 4th of July. Real patriotic.” Jake smiled and sat back in the comfort of his leather seat.

Twenty minutes later he slid shut the side door of a grey panel van. A fixed table and four swivel chairs filled the centre floor. He nodded greetings to the three occupants but received scant acknowledgement in return. Forward of the enclosed cargo deck an FBI agent clicked the van into drive and pulled away from the kerb. Jake steadied himself, opposing the momentum as he sat in the empty seat. A tall, hooked nosed block of a man with cropped hair and lined face, he gave the image of being stone cut. His smile held no mirth and was not returned by the senior security agents opposite. Jake considered them Government hackers, pension men, eager for glory, scared of retribution. He saw the three as scavengers, hooded crows, hunched and ready to pluck the eyes from any opponent.

“I must inform you, gentlemen, Operation Fireback is now active,” he said, watching them flicker in apprehension as they realised the binding commitment.

“You could have told us.” The speaker was Dalvarral of the Defense Department.

“We agreed the operation would be run only on a need to know basis. You didn’t need to know, till now.”

“You certain Khalid bin Qasem will bite?” Ratner, an assistant director with the Science and Technology Directorate of the CIA said, observed Jake with convex eyes.

“You told me your department was getting a lot of electronic chatter, that’s al-Qaeda worried over the money they put in,” Jake said. “Well, thirty minutes

ago I terminated Khalid's source of information. To obtain lock-on, he must act before any navigational codes are changed. That's effectively after GR4's penultimate test flight. If he obtains lock-on during the test, he'll siphon enough information to strike again on the inaugural flight."

"Are we sure?" Ratner asked.

"Defeat or humiliation of American's ultimate weapon will give him world acclaim. Every country supporting Islamic militants will fund him. To win he has to bite, because if he doesn't, al-Qaeda will bite him."

"Then why arrest Perry, for God's sake?" Dave Shalk of the FBI pointed his finger, the nail manicured, his hand white and soft. "I threw you the guy because the FBI knew him as an Internet paedophile, ideal for blackmail. If you've arrested Perry, he'll talk, Khalid will find out. He may back off or sell the information we passed. That's long term damage."

Jake resisted the temptation to snap the man's finger off. "I said, his information source was terminated. I saw no point in creating paperwork over this." Jake watched the FBI man shrink back, saw him realise. The finger wavered.

"We have no jurisdiction over the police," Shalk warned. "If you commit a crime, don't get caught."

"We are at war." Jake looked between them. "That's total commitment. You've all given input. FBI finding Perry as the patsy, CIA's infiltration tipping him to al-Qaeda for blackmail. But it was me who had to set the sting while limiting damage. I placed two guys in his department, guys of his sexual inclination, which made it easier for him to recruit them, security men who could smuggle stuff out. That way Qasem only got what we wanted. Both Perry and his boss, Crawley, had access to lift classified data from the loop. The fact they're both shirt lifters makes it look like a faggot conspiracy. And you're right, Perry would have talked. So exit Perry, job done. I had to protect my men and our own interest. And you did hint at Heaven's approval."

"I said Heaven had been informed of a covert operation to wipe Khalid bin Qasem out, to destroy a group central to the terrorist circuit," Dalvarral said. "They made no comment. You might note, this meeting is not held in a Government office. Don't that tell you something?"

"Deniable operation, glory or bust. Perry got run over by a truck." Jake watched the three crows draw down their hoods. Knowledge compromised them. He felt nothing but contempt. "If you join battle, gentlemen, ain't no point pussy-footing behind the stockade. Since 9/11 we've been at war. If a traitor hands secrets to the enemy, he pays the consequences. You don't like it, you're in the wrong game."

“Don’t doubt us, Jake,” Ratner said. “But on home ground we got limitations.”

“Al-Qaeda brought the battlefield here and set the ground rules. Let’s not forget, we play a double game using a double-edged sword. With Government approval the security of Walsh Industries is my responsibility and as Walsh developed Global Raider or GR4, so security on the aircraft is also mine. On your suggestion and with your co-operation I’ve allowed a controlled leakage of information to ensnare an enemy. That puts us into a conspiracy, gentlemen. And those in a conspiracy stay close, or fall by their own hand.”

“Double-edged swords cut two ways, Jake. We have to ensure it doesn’t bounce back. We are all involved,” Dalvarral said.

“In that case, I suggest we all take a firm grip. Perry is dead. Fortunately I lifted the documents he carried and replaced them with others to which he had sole access. The upside is Dr Max Crawley, Perry’s boss, is going to shit himself when he learns his chief assistant is the source of a major leak. That leaves him vulnerable as planned. The downside is, Wat Walsh will also hear. That causes problems.”

“So we cut Walsh in.” Ratner tapped the table and sat back. “He’s a patriot and it will make our lives easier.”

Jake shook his head, listening to the grind of traffic as it passed outside. “Last time Khalid crossed with Walsh, you guys let Khalid execute the man’s wife. That’s a lot of rage to suffer, even for a patriot. Wat Walsh don’t forgive or forget. Your agency’s got no credit with him, that’s why he’s paranoid over the safety of his daughter. He don’t trust the security services. The first hint of Khalid and he might well lock down, ground GR4 and kill our operation. He has that power.”

Shalk made to speak but Dalvarral interrupted him.

“Walsh and his daughter are important, but small fry. Expedience surpasses them both. What do you advise?”

“Perry’s death will out the supposed impossible, enemy infiltration. If Khalid is suggested I’ll need to satisfy Daddy Walsh over the absolute safety of Juliet Walsh. I’ve been planning to shift her to a secret place under maximum security, but now I’ve only got nine days to persuade her, otherwise this could fold.”

“You saying the whole operation is dependent on some spoilt brat?” Shalk’s finger was outstretched again. “For God’s sakes, lock her up.”

“Juliet Walsh don’t lock up or shut up easy. Of course, I could remove her father’s paranoia by throwing her under a truck. Alternatively, you guys could

use influence in your departments and get me some co-operation from Heaven. And I mean immediately.”

In the Back Bay district of Boston, USA, Lisa drove the Mercedes away from the elegant, brownstone house Lucas Kean had rented solely for Juliet’s visits. Settling for the long drive Juliet curled both legs beneath her, tugged ineffectually at the hem of her mini skirt and half turned towards her bodyguard. She knew Lisa wanted comment, something to report if questioned by Papa. Papa always wanted to know, Papa had expectations.

“He has nice eyes and a cute butt,” Juliet said finally, rewarding her friend’s patience. “And he kissed me, twice.”

“Eyes for you only, Sweetpea, you have him at your beck and call.”

Juliet shrugged and let the darkness of night hide her grimace. “I’m not sure I want to call. My father sees himself as emperor, Lucas the power. Truth is, I’m just the trinket in between.” She fondled the gold cylinder hanging on a chain around her neck, the metal encasing an emergency pull switch and transmitter.

“Come on now baby, lighten up.” Lisa glanced momentarily from the road, the city lights reflecting over her blue eyes and short blonde hair. “You have yourself a maestro. He’s clean, sharp and flying so fast others burn in his tail fire. He’s in your palm. Number one bachelor of America. Every female socialite wants his name in her diary.”

“But would you marry him?” Juliet asked, twisting the tracking bracelet on her wrist. “A white President with a black wife. I’ll be the symbol of a united America. After the first black President that’s what Lucas is after; and all very noble. But I don’t want to be a symbol, I want to be a woman, a wife and a mother.”

“And First Lady! I tell you, Sweetpea, if I were in your place I’d swallow the guy. But I’m from the wrong side of the track and I ain’t pretty like you.”

“Yes you are. Even Lucas eyes you up. You’re striking, you have presence.” Juliet smiled and touched Lisa’s shoulder, leaving her hand there for reassurance. Lisa was tall with razor cut blonde hair and boyish features. Years of training had developed a solid but statuesque figure, one hundred and twenty pounds of silken muscle capable of flooring three assailants in as many seconds. Sometimes Juliet allowed herself the mental and physical capitulation of being encapsulated by that strength, not the brute power but the essence of domination which lay beneath. It came with tenderness, a touch, a caress, a kiss that lingered seconds too long. Over the years while Lisa had guarded her

during time at the university, Juliet had exercised the boundaries of intimacy and friendship in tandem with caprice. To hide her own uncertainties and to maintain the bond of intimacy, she made frequent play of platonic, sisterly union. She knew this was cruel to Lisa but she did not know how to cope with her own tangle of emotions. She had few people to love and Lisa was her rock in isolation.

“You’re kind, Sweetpea,” Lisa said. “But what I generate is simple lust. You’re different. You have that essential feminine sway, that prettiness which draws men. They want to protect you, yet same time find themselves captivated by your little girl smile. Men see me as fantasy sex. You’re the girl they want to marry. I watch men, the way they watch you. And Lucas watches you with an open need. I see it in his eyes. For him, you’re the perfect partner for his perfect marriage.”

“His perfect marriage, Papa’s perfect marriage. But you ain’t got anything unless you’ve got love. And I don’t love Lucas.”

“Love! You’re kidding me, Juliet. What’s love got to do with it? In the perfect marriage, love is what the P.R. men pull out of the package when you go before media. Love is messy. You have to show clean, be snappy.”

Juliet shrugged. “Maybe I’m old-fashioned ... husband and kids, a family.” She suddenly wanted to busy herself and found superficial distraction by unpinning her long black hair before shaking it to fullness.

“Come on, Sweetpea, let’s stay real. Love is for dough-heads. Super couples don’t love. They have sex and try not to bite each other.”

“Momma always talked of marriage and love.” Juliet fished a white, elasticated ribbon from the glove compartment and slipped it over her wrist, pulling her hair to form a black, gleaming ponytail which she twisted through the band. She listened to Lisa’s lapse of silence before feeling friendly fingers squeeze her arm.

“S’OK, baby, I understand.”

Clear of central Boston, Lisa turned the Mercedes up onto the freeway, heading south towards Plymouth and Cape Cod. Juliet did not want silence, she wanted Lisa’s counsel.

“The truth is, I don’t have a choice. I’m Juliet Walsh, daughter of Wat Walsh, richest nigger in America, probably the world. I’m as much a part of his empire as any other commodity. There for use or disposal in securing or expanding the greater whole. But if forced, I want Lucas on my terms, not Papa’s. That’s why I need to stay here this summer I want to know the man I’m expected to marry.”

Lisa's hand came up over the back of her neck, gently massaged between thumb and forefinger.

"You want my advice," Lisa said. "You're right. But you been going with him four months now. Time to take a break and reflect. Listen, Jake Hammerton's been on the line, he asked if you've considered the proposed trip to England. It'll mean two weeks out of the cage. Also time to look up universities for your PhD."

"Tempting, but I'm determined to sort Lucas. I have to do this, Lisa. Lucas wants Papa's money for his campaign. Papa wants a son-in-law who will be President of the United States. Little Sweetpea is the connection. When Lucas asks me to marry, I'm going to face a lot of pressure. I can only handle that if I know we have a chance."

"And who says romance is dead?" Lisa moved her hand back to the steering wheel, a soft smile on her lips. A sad smile, Juliet thought. She stared to the roadside emergency lane, vision and thoughts lost in the blur of passing darkness and light. Now she felt bitter, her own words having explained her position as the bartered bride. Lucas was charming, kind and courteous, but also fifteen years her senior. He treated her like a child bride in waiting, the pretty princess being groomed for the media. During that evening in their one brief moment of privacy, he had embraced and kissed her, then set her aside as if duty done and courtship satisfied. She would have been happier taking him to her bed, warming him, discovering him woman to man as she had done with other boyfriends during moments of freedom. She wondered if Lucas had ever been a boy, or always a hard-boiled contender for the presidency of the United States.

"You'd think he'd want me in his bed," she said out of her thoughts. "Any man would want to try the goods." She shrugged and grinned. "But maybe he ain't got the balls for it. Next time I'm close, I'll grab the senator's jumbo; see if I get a reaction."

"That's my baby. You're beginning to see the light."

Juliet began to giggle. "As my best friend and confidante, you can have the honour of judging. I'll move in close and give a come on squeeze. You watch his face, see if his tongue pops out, then we'll know he's for real."

"Sweetpea, for that show I'll carry a surveillance camera."

"And I'll let you know if the future President has balls enough for the job."

Juliet laughed, then put her head on Lisa's shoulder, clasping hold of her arm as she closed her eyes.

Jake brooded as the Sikorsky helicopter juddered its way towards Cape Cod, its turbulent frame stimulating memories of Iraq and Afghanistan. A time he remembered when a soldier knew his duty, knew the meaning of patriotism and endeavour, a time he considered the most important in any man's life, a time of war. Ten minutes after his call from the mortuary, he dialled Wat Wash on their personal link. Jake dispensed with pleasantries.

"We have ourselves a situation. Max Crawley's chief admin officer, Luke Perry, got himself run over by a truck; dead and gone." Jake listened to the silence of shock, then Wat's gravelled voice came over the transmitter, no hint of African origins, just moneyed New England.

"Does his family know, does Max know?"

"Nothing out yet. But when the police found Perry's security pass they called the FBI who called Walsh Securities on account of his briefcase. Inside were copies of classified documents."

"You check their grade?"

"They originated from somewhere high. Looks like we got enemy in the compound."

"Shit. Has Max Crawley been informed?"

"I'm about to relay the news."

"If the FBI are onto this, we need to contain damage. I suggest we put the towers on maximum security."

Jake imagined the dapper little man pacing his Philadelphian mansion, his fists clenched, his eyes closed as he calculated the cost to his bank balance.

"Negative, Wat. Let's keep this wrapped. Maximum security would have the media on our ass. I'm putting the doctor and his department under twenty-four-hour close watch surveillance. If we can identify an accomplice, we can interrogate."

"God damn, this had to happen right near completion. Where's Juliet?"

"The tracker bracelet puts her heading for Humarock after a visit with Lucas. She's safe, but I think we need her in deep cover, at least until Raider is handed over."

"Agreed, but I can't force her. She's determined to stay and her liaison with Lucas is important."

"Kids sometimes need direct persuasion," Jake said, and looked out into the darkness.

"Get a meeting set up with Max, my office 0800 hours," Wat said.

Jake listened to the contact go dead and knew he'd torn the great Mr Walsh apart, divided between the safety of his two loves, GR4, unmanned stealth bomber extraordinary and Juliet his daughter, an exasperating female. Jake

pressed buttons for Dr Max Crawley, wondering if the little faggot was lying on pink satin.

“Bad news, Doctor. Your chief exec just got himself run over, dead.” Jake smiled down to the scattering of lights two thousand feet below and heard Crawley gasp in disbelief.

“How in God’s name?”

“Tripped on a kerb. Now he’s slabbed out in the city morgue with a head like a pancake.”

“This is awful.”

“Worse, he was carrying classified documents from your department. We got a meeting in Wat’s office at 0800 hours tomorrow. I know you and Perry were close,” he paused. “That will mean awkward questions. I’ll be in my office from 0700 hours if you want to look in, it may save you grief.”

Jake switched off and returned the mobile to his pocket whilst smiling. Across the cockpit, Navro jockeyed the craft through the glow of silver moonlight. “You know,” Jake said. “I think I upset the guy.”

“Are we rolling, sir?” Navro asked.

Jake felt real pleasure in his smile as he looked to his subordinate. Navro was a sculptured mass of muscle who kept the light in his eyes hidden behind dark glasses. Ex-marine captain and expert in martial arts, he was the kind of man Jake trusted. A good soldier, from a good army. Jake took pride in hand picking his men. No one would push Walsh Securities, not even Delta Force. “We will be, Navro,” he said. “I’m just about to apply a little direct persuasion.”

“Stop!” Juliet’s scream came the same instant she saw the flash of feline eyes, then the Mercedes was over it. In reaction, Lisa swerved into the emergency lane, stopping amidst a squeal of brakes and rubber.

“Did I hit something?” she asked. They were stationary beneath a high, concrete rampart. Juliet was out of the car even before it stopped, running from Lisa’s frantic warning.

“For Christ’s sakes, get back into the car. We’re on the fucking freeway.”

Juliet ran twenty metres before she found the cat crouched under a cable duct. It appeared in a state of bewilderment, its belly down flat, its teeth bared in retaliation to fear. She was unable to judge if it was hurt. The animal hissed warning.

“Come on little thing,” she coaxed, keeping her voice gentle, her hand in offering, not touching. “You’re going to get squashed out here. Come to

Juliet.” Taking a chance, she tentatively stroked the animal’s head.

“What the hell are you doing, girl? Will you get back in the car!” Lisa came beside her waving a Glock automatic.

“Don’t yell, you’ll scare the cat,” Juliet said, trying to maintain gentleness in her voice.

“Fuck the cat. You’re in a high-risk zone. You want me fired?”

“I don’t think it’s hurt.” Juliet slowly reached and carefully scooped the frightened creature into her hands. Lisa was on one knee, automatic at arm’s length, threatening any passing traffic which slowed.

“Return to the car, Miss Walsh, or God help me, I’ll strap your ass so hard you won’t sit for days.”

“Take no notice of her, she’s only bluffing.” Juliet gently turned the cat to cradle its back. “Maybe it’s sick. Do you think it’s sick, Lisa?”

“Are you listening to me, girl? For Christ’s sakes, move it.” Juliet was grabbed by her arm and dragged upwards. The cat seemed content to remain cradled as both were marched back to the Mercedes. Fifty metres ahead, a second car had stopped, its driver leaning on the roof, looking towards the approaching traffic. In the darkness, the myriad of passing lights flickered his silhouette. Lisa only took her eyes from him during the seconds she checked the abandoned Mercedes and thrust Juliet inside.

“Don’t you like cats?” Juliet adopted her best little girl smile, watching Lisa climb in opposite before slamming her door.

“Don’t you butter me up. You had me shit scared.” Lisa returned the automatic to its holster then swung back into traffic, checking the parked car as they passed. The driver was out of sight. “You might have got run over, snatched, shot. Did you see that guy watching? Jesus, I’m going to give you such a spanking.”

“I think I’ll call him Lucas,” Juliet said.

“It’s probably got fleas. Anyway, how do you know it’s a boy?”

“Because he’s smiling at me.”

Lisa answered with silence, increasing speed, continually swapping lanes and checking her rear mirror for a tail.

“Sorry,” Juliet said finally and touched her arm. “Didn’t mean to upset you.”

“You forget young lady, you’re the most precious thing in your daddy’s life. If he ever hears I let you out on the freeway, my butt will be down the road and you confined in your gilded cage.”

Juliet stroked the cat, not looking at Lisa as she held up the tracker bracelet locked around her wrist.

“I’ve never been out of my gilded cage; not since Momma died.” She heard Lisa’s protracted sigh of resignation and knew she’d won. She stroked the cat and took comfort from its acceptance of her while lights from other people’s lives and houses passed in the night. She let silence calm Lisa’s mood.

A month previously her father had rented a summerhouse overlooking the ocean near Humarock, Massachusetts. It was, he said, a place of her own to entertain friends. But her friends were all hand picked from the empire, approved by security and never allowed to break the rules of conduct. If they did, they were out, whether Juliet liked it or not. Neither did she believe the house was hired for her personal benefit but to allow an exchange of visits between herself and Senator Lucas Kean far from New York’s social gossip.

In truth, she liked the place. The views were magnificent while the grounds were surrounded on three sides by forest. She frequently swam in the ocean, trying hard to ignore the flotilla of ex-navy seals who bobbed around in diving gear or high-powered inflatables. On the estate, ex-Delta men patrolled the woods and hid in the shrubbery when she strolled through the grounds. The only place outside in which she had privacy was an enclosed courtyard containing the pool. To rebel against those beyond the wall she had taken to swimming naked, waving if any patrolling helicopters infringed her air space. She enjoyed the sense of wickedness in deliberately exposing herself to those who guarded her vulnerability. Lisa scolded her, but Juliet just pouted and encouraged her to do likewise. At least Humarock provided a measure of freedom and peace to organise herself. She had space to research, to write her thesis and more important, escape the tension smothering her father and Walsh Towers, tension emanating from Jake Hammerton and his Draconian security. She kept the rules, stayed obedient under the dark memories of her mother’s death and saw no reason why Jake Hammerton should send her to England. The cat began to purr and Juliet switched on the radio, searching the stations until she found a Mozart concerto.

“Love seeketh not to please, nor for itself to bare, but in another give its ease, and build a heaven in hell’s despair,” she quoted to the cat.

“What? You say something?” Lisa asked.

“William Blake; I was quoting a poem,” she said.

Lisa activated a hands-free mobile over the dashboard then eased the Mercedes off the expressway to a state highway. “This is J one,” she called base. “We’re heading route one hundred, twenty-three, towards Green Bush junction and ocean, ETA thirty minutes.”

“Would you please ask them to ready some milk and a little supper for Lucas.” Juliet stroked the cat, which purred in contented lethargy, its eyes