



# Deseccration

Nature's teeth just became sharper...

The new novel by P G McKenzie

**Desecration**

**by**

**Paul McKenzie**

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## **Foreword**

Mother Nature has a way of self-regulation; she manages her business efficiently to ensure a natural balance in the world. However, mankind is trying to tip the natural balance of life in his favour - and it will almost certainly end in tears unless we change both the way we expand our societies and the way we treat each other and our planet.

Governments and global corporations are finally jumping on the green bandwagon, sometimes because it's the 'right' thing to do and sometimes because the green issue is a marketing tool - one of many used to make us feel good about our choices. Political and commercial organisations can achieve a great deal of good on behalf of each and every one of us. However, ultimately, we all have an individual stake in the welfare of our planet and a personal responsibility to make a difference in the way we live our lives to safeguard the welfare of future generations that will be dependent on Mother Earth just as we are. This doesn't mean we have to live a perfect life: choose the causes and make the changes that suit your way of life and will impact directly on the people and environment around you.

What's in it for me, you and every other man woman and child? Not every benefit equals instant gratification, but the good news is that whatever steps we take to minimise the damage we all do to our environment and ultimately our health and quality of life will make a difference, provided enough of us DO something.

And if you're still not convinced, remember that there's always that feeling of personal satisfaction, that quiet sentiment of virtue you get when you know you're doing the

right thing, for the right reasons and you believe in it - especially when the benefits are not immediately obvious. It takes some effort, but often in small ways, such as taking fewer flights, recycling more of your household waste or creating your own vegetable patch. Whatever makes sense for you and your life; any contribution you can make - it's worth it.

## **FACT**

The population of the world has grown from about 3.85 billion people in 1972 to 6.1 billion in mid-2000 and is currently growing by 77 million people year-on-year. As life expectancy rises around the globe, world population will grow and age faster in the next 50 years than during the past half-century.

The ever growing needs of a burgeoning global population, living in an increasingly industrialised world, inevitably lead to a greater demand for energy. The resources of planet Earth are finite, however, and the requirements for energy production and consumption cause environmental problems, which in turn threaten human health and quality of life. Increasing industrial pollution results in changes to atmospheric composition, deforestation leads to soil erosion and silting up of water bodies and we are running out of sites for the disposal of household, commercial and toxic wastes.

**The effects of global warming and climate change are now being felt. Severe hurricanes, tsunamis, heat waves and flooding are occurring more frequently and in regions previously unused to such 'freak' forces of nature.**

## **1 Persecution**

The engine revved gently, delivering its poisonous cocktail into the occupant's tainted blood stream. Her pulse became erratic as her body fought its losing battle with the carbon monoxide. Outside the vintage Bentley, the large garage contained the noise of the deadly motor as the arriving estate workmen passed by, still discussing the previous evening's football results.

'Ronaldo was a bit special last night. Still, he needs some support out on the left hand side,' the resident Estate Supervisor, Ritchie Blacklock, explained to his uninterested hired help, Nigel Roth.

'That Chinese bloke - just there to make up the numbers ain't he. Runs around like a headless chicken. Don't you think?' continued Ritchie, failing to involve his vacant companion.

'Don't talk much do you?' Ritchie stated, pulling his green overalls over his bony shoulders.

By this time Nigel was busy surveying the finely manicured lawns whose edges hemmed the solitary garage. He was thirty years old and never tired of grass. Long, short, fat and even thin, it all met with his pleasure and he sighed with frustration as the luxuriant green spread was brutally cut short at the perimeter of the lavish fourteen-bedroom house four hundred metres away.

'Nigel, do you want to keep your fucking job or what?' exclaimed Ritchie, glaring at the back of Roth's head.

'Not really,' Roth replied, to his boss's astonishment.

'What?' he asked, scratching his boyish bumfluff.

‘No. Not really,’ Nigel repeated, now turning to face his employer.

Momentarily, they regained eye contact. Ritchie quickly averted his scowl, choosing instead to ignore the familiar insubordination from this most recent of a succession of transient labourers.

‘Yeah, as I was saying. Ronaldo, you see, he’s... Where are you going now?’ Ritchie moaned as Roth began to walk towards a ploughed field that beckoned in the sunny distance.

Roth began removing his restrictive overalls as he strode away from the revving engine, now heard only within his wildly spinning mind. Ritchie fought to control the reckless anger that had let him down on many occasions in the past but, failing to do so, he ran to the nearby Land Rover and grabbed the keys from the ignition switch.

‘Oi! Where d’you think you’re bloody going? We’ve got to dig those drainage ditches this morning and I ain’t doin’ ‘em on my own,’ Ritchie raged, running to the garage door and frantically slamming one key after another into the worn keyhole.

The distance between the two men increased considerably before Ritchie eventually found the correct key and wildly swung open the garage door, ever more conscious of the engine noise from within. Ritchie stepped inside and took a lungful of the deadly fumes that had filled the vintage Bentley and then spilled out to overwhelm the air. Choking uncontrollably, Ritchie forgot all thoughts of retrieving the spare shotgun shells that he had hidden in the garage. He shot out of the doorway even more rapidly than he had entered, gagging convulsively as his lungs fought to expel the poison.

‘What the fuck?’ was all he could whisper as he dropped onto all fours and struggled to recover.

The gas mask was a snug fit on the face of the intruder hiding in a dark corner of the garage. Emerging from the



shadows, the figure did not bother to remove the black rubber and glass device when stepping into the fresh morning air. The immaculate black suit and white collar would have looked more at home on the steps of any number of Catholic churches. But it was the well-worn military boots that betrayed their wearer's true vocation.

Ritchie began to retch, then vomit, as the inhaled fumes seeped into his blood. Not enough to harm him seriously - but more than enough to cause his breakfast kippers to leap from his guts like spawning salmon. The intruder walked forward boldly until he was behind Ritchie and with calculated precision removed the shotgun from the rear of the open vehicle. In one of his black gloves nestled two of the elusive shotgun cartridges for which Ritchie had been about to search. Placing them safely on the Land Rover's roof, the dark figure slowly cocked the shotgun. Deliberate movements slotted the ammunition into place and the first noise that Ritchie heard was the weapon snapping shut. Perplexed, Ritchie looked up, only to see the fast-approaching twin barrels stop millimetres from his mouth.

'Open wide,' the muffled voice ordered.

Ritchie obeyed without hesitation, confusion diluting apprehension almost before it could be felt.

'This'll teach you to turn up early for work,' the intruder said an instant before Ritchie's head exploded.

The blast, somewhat stifled by the insulating effects of the bone and flesh, alerted Nigel to the threat. He had been worried ever since he had agreed to supply information to an unknown stranger for fifty quid. Without turning, he began to run, rapidly at first but the ploughed field soon slowed him down. Unable to resist checking the distance between hunter and hunted, Nigel craned his head to the left, tripped and fell onto the hard lumpy ground.

'Shit!' Nigel bleated.

Gingerly getting to his feet, he began to edge forwards - swinging each foot forward onto the next solid piece of

ploughed earth - as if he were walking on stepping stones teasingly placed on a riverbed. The cool summer's morning did nothing to abate his fearsome perspiration and the sweat began to drain annoyingly into his eyes and mouth.

Out of sight, the black-clad figure circuited the difficult terrain of the ploughed field seeking a rendezvous with Roth where he could guarantee the outcome of the pursuit. Quickly passing over the crisply desiccated August lawn, his battered boots continued their easy passage towards the gate that led to the safety of a passing road. Meanwhile Nigel had neither the courage nor the breathing space to risk looking back again.

The boots were crossed in a casual manner by the time that Nigel reached the five bar gate, his utter exhaustion inversely proportional to the assassin's deadly calm. Nigel stopped in a forlorn attempt to regain what little composure he had started the day with. He had only wanted to help; make a statement for the green lobby and earn a few quid in the process. Murder was never on the agenda - nobody should die. *I'm trying to save lives, not take them*, he thought naively. A pretty straightforward piece of low-key espionage was how it had been sold. And now it had come to this: struggling to escape a death sentence. Nigel rested his forehead on the tall wooden post by the exit gate, breathing heavily, fatigue overriding the terror that had driven him on earlier. The panic soon returned though and eventually Nigel moved to his left, grabbed the top of the gate as firmly as his trembling hands could manage and straddled the wooden barrier. The sinister movement of an obscure shadow caught his attention and he frantically checked for imminent danger. Then he heard the pleasant whistling of an unseen passer by. *Safety in numbers*, he thought and, relieved, dropped heavily from the gate onto both feet. Checking both ways, Nigel scanned the road as far as he could see for the cheery walker but without success. *Strange*, he thought, *where's that damn whistling*

*coming from?* Nigel shuffled his way to the middle of the road, unsure which way offered the best escape all the while on the lookout for the source of the annoying yet reassuring melody.

‘Where are you God damn it?’ Nigel whispered under his breath.

‘I’m here,’ whispered a voice out of nowhere.

## **2 Retribution**

The furrier on the *Boulevard Winston Churchill* appeared permanently closed to any unconcerned passer by. The *Fermé* sign had long since fallen to the floor as the neglect of eight weeks without opening had taken its toll. The proprietor, Monsieur Hurtado, had no family to speak of and his regular customers had sadly assumed that the ageing furrier had passed away and been buried without any of the conventional ceremonies. The back street upon which the shop sat uneasily had kept the distasteful trade that operated within unpublicised to all but a few long-standing clients. The window cleaner had long since given up on the unpaid bill and the glass's coating of dusty Paris summer grime bore witness to the fact that it had not been cleaned for some weeks now. Smear patches of dirt dotted over the glazed door marked the comings and goings of customers who had tried to obtain a response without success and now the only intrusive interest came from unpaid creditors.

A telephone rang from the study in the living quarters on the first floor of three above the shop. It was not the powerful ring of a landline phone but the sharp plastic tones of the latest encrypted mobile. The handset cried out for its owner's attention until, tardily, the battered brown-glossed door opened and the black-suited man entered at a leisurely pace. Seemingly unbothered by the mobile's grating bleats, he checked the caller's displayed number before eventually completing the connection with a fleeting press of the small green phone icon on the keypad.

‘Skinner speaking,’ the jump suited man offered by way of identification, his soft French accent making short work of the unglamorous English words.

‘Skinner, Cuckoo here. Are you free to speak?’ the Texan asked in his deep southern drawl.

‘Yes of course! You know I’ve not moved from here for the last two months,’ Skinner replied, frustrated by his employer’s stupidity.

‘How’s your assignment shaping up? We really need to move the project on to the next phase.’

‘These things can’t be rushed - you should know that better than anyone Cuckoo,’ he replied evasively, annoyed by the unreasonable demand.

Cuckoo did indeed know that these things could not be rushed. He had worked with Skinner for many years and although they did not see eye-to-eye all of the time, Cuckoo was painfully aware that his French agent was as methodical and skilful as they come. They had met fifteen years earlier, both low-ranking soldiers, fighting with the French Foreign Legion mission somewhere in a forgettable and lawless part of the African continent. Cuckoo had been the young recruit - having escaped the death sentence in the US after the rape and murder of a woman and her twenty-year-old twin daughters. Conversely, Skinner was a career soldier with expensive tastes. However, the salary of a junior officer could not support the cost of his extravagant standard of living. Eventually his innate corruption and greed began to manifest themselves in his routine. At first it was just petty crime, mainly helping out Cuckoo by shifting the odd crate of whisky or demanding protection money from any business where they saw an opportunity.

Cuckoo had been the catalyst - expediting Skinner’s metamorphosis into a callous and egocentric civilian. Nevertheless, after a near death experience, Skinner began to reflect on his four years in the Legion and he very quickly decided that his existence would always be fatally flawed

while Cuckoo was able to exert his immoral influence upon him. Deciding to leave the Legion, Skinner tried to reclaim his perished soul by living a simple life working in a French farm far from where he had been raised.

It took many years for the townspeople of Rouen to inflame the evil streak in Skinner. After a two-day drinking binge driven by self-doubt, Skinner furiously retrieved the hunting knife from his redundant legionnaire's kit. A transient farm worker had taunted Skinner about the origins of his nickname and questioned his sexuality. Incensed, Skinner wildly explained that it had been bestowed upon him by his first commanding officer, who had decided that he had far too many men named 'Jean' in the Legion unit that he commanded. He then rambled on that this officer had witnessed Jean expertly slice the scalp off another man in a short but violent fight. The commanding officer, who had been of British origin, had subsequently used Jean for any knife work. Animal, human, or vegetable, it did not matter - Jean's skill with any form of sharp blade was consummate and he had been tagged with the name *Skinner* ever since. The farm hand, still unimpressed, had laboured the point and, after a short break in proceedings, Skinner returned to the hostelry with the infamous knife. The farm hand was offered no chance to defend his portly and quite frankly rather repulsive features before Jean removed both ears, his nose and his mop of sun-bleached blond hair, with scalp attached.

Locked away for his crime, Skinner resigned himself to the fact that he would see a lot more of the walls that held him. That was until the handful of witnesses to the vicious assault changed their statements in unison. The revised testimonies were clear and precise - what Jean had been guilty of was merely self-defence: a right that any man was entitled to exercise, especially those of French extraction. The presiding magistrate at the trial had been assured by an unknown businessman that upon Skinner's conviction for

involuntary manslaughter and his immediate release for time served the defendant would not just leave the country, but the continent. And for good...

'You're in France for the first time in what? Five... or is it six years? We wouldn't want that mess in Rouen to come back to haunt us now would we?' Cuckoo threatened, clueless as to how to handle the situation.

'He might die if we move too fast. You said you wanted him alive - an example you said,' Skinner replied, unmoved by the hollow threat.

'An example not a martyr! We need to make headlines and build up a head of steam in the media or it'll mean trouble for all of us in the IMF. Your victim was supposed to be the next. Why do I always have to wait while you do things your way!'

Cuckoo, so named for his propensity to enter and then dominate an alien environment, had been expelled from the Legion after another unfortunate episode of rape and murder. Forced to remain in the African state of Uganda because returning home meant a certain jail sentence, he stumbled across his true vocation in the shape of the 'International Missionary Fellowship' a mere twelve months after absconding.

'Alive as an example of our relentless determination to inflict severe suffering on the immoral people of this world. Is this not correct?' Skinner persevered.

'Okay, okay! Have it your way, but how much skin's left to remove? We really do need to push on with the project,' Cuckoo asked witheringly.

'The face only. I do not want the eyes to dry out too much before his delivery and I have some sewing to do before the unveiling.'

'Take them out?'

'Too much pain is bad for the constitution. Deprivation of sight is a deed only for God to command.'

Cuckoo decided not to dissect Skinner's previous statement. It was his own fault - placing him with a religious order in Tibet had been a mistake, he concluded. Cuckoo had tried to expedite Jean's exit from France as soon as he had been released. However, trying to find a place for his future investment was not unproblematic and the hideaway that had eventually taken Jean had had a profound effect upon the French man's demeanour.

'You're going to take his fucking life aren't you? Who gives a fuck about his eyes?' Cuckoo moaned at the moral contradiction of the statement, knowing that the only way to bring Jean back into line was to be by his side - and he knew that was out of the question.

'He will live - of that you can be sure. Just long enough to explain to the police the perseverance and determination of the terrorists to strike fear wherever ethically flawed people feel safest. This is what you requested. No?'

'Jean! We're going in circles here. Bottom line. How much longer before you're ready? A week? Two?'

'Ten days, *mon ami*, should see the completion of my task,' Skinner replied. He never seemed to concur with anything Cuckoo suggested.

'Ten days it is my friend...'

Cuckoo, who had taken as much insubordination as he could stomach in one conversation, severed the call. Everything had changed drastically for this insignificant Texan when the money had begun to pour into the fellowship's coffers. The IMF had just been a stopgap for Cuckoo at first, something to be discarded or sold on when he got bored, or the pressure became too intense. He had never seen himself in the big time - just enough money for a few of life's simple pleasures was all that he needed. Nevertheless, the position that he had attained in the international underworld could not be discarded so lightly, or for that matter without previous clients becoming nervous about his intentions. No, he knew he was in to deep



to navigate his way safely and as such would make the best of a non-negotiable position.

Cuckoo stared long and hard at the mobile in front of him before beginning to scroll through the myriad stored numbers and names in it. His newest and highest paying client wanted to make worldwide news headlines within the next few days, so he would have to arrange for one of his other operatives to provide them. The blue tinged screen finally settled on his Canadian operative, Jim Sayer, or *Slayer* as Cuckoo referred to him. The ringing tone fizzed as the encryption device set to work again and by the time Sayer answered the line was as sharp as any cable could offer.

‘Yes?’ Sayer simply said.

‘Can you proceed with your job?’ Cuckoo asked without the need for introduction.

‘When?’

‘Tonight okay?’

‘I don’t see why not. If there are any delays I’ll let you know. But assume it’s as good as done.’

‘Okay. Check in when you’re done,’ Cuckoo said, pleased that at least one of his associates took his authority seriously.

Sitting alone, Cuckoo glanced around the vast veranda that partially overlooked Beverly Hills. This terrace was probably worth more than all of his other properties put together. Maybe that was why he spent so much time away from here - he didn’t want to take for granted the pleasures of his wealth. No, one month spent in each of the world’s six major continents and would suffice - and then he would start all over again. It kept everything fresh and also made it difficult for his enemies to know where to find him.

Finally, after contemplating his next move, the one after that and several more beyond, Cuckoo stood and stretched. Clothing was one thing he did not have a penchant for and his ten-year-old, ‘seen better days’ shorts hung inelegantly

on him. At forty-two, he was still fit but his body displayed many scars of previous close and violent encounters. Taking one final swig of the iced tea that he had developed a thirst for in the many tropical countries in which he had fought, Cuckoo plunged into the outsized swimming pool and made for the opposite end underwater. The slowly expelled air jauntily bubbled to the surface before he finally raised his head above the cool water's surface to inhale the fresh morning air and frowned. Still he was troubled. This job had consumed all but a few pockets of his worldwide operation and he was more than pleased to be making a healthy profit. Nevertheless, something was not quite right. *Ecologists? Idealists? Save the planet and all its creatures, except for humankind?* he mused. No, he was happy to kill for anyone who paid the necessary funds - whatever their gripe. But these morally driven groups normally did it in-house, not with hired guns - they needed to feel good about their struggle for whatever it was that they were fighting for. That meant getting your hands dirty and spilling a little, or for that matter a lot, of blood. Cuckoo swam back, this time on the surface in a lazy breaststroke. He climbed from the pool and dripped his way back towards the table and chairs. Picking up the phone once again, he dialled a good friend of his at the CIA headquarters in Langley Virginia.

'Brian? It's Mac here. Can you talk?' he asked.

'No problem, Mac,' De Palma replied, rather more casually than the situation should have allowed.

'Do you know of any eco-terrorist groups in Europe with some heavyweight financial backing - who might have been animal rights terrorists in a previous life. In fact, any groups of that nature looking to make their presence felt globally.'

'Have you seen the light at last Mac and want to join?' De Palma replied humorously, or so he thought.

Cuckoo waited for the mocking laughter to cease before he continued, 'Yeah *right*. So have you heard anything?'

As De Palma sensed the charged tension of the question his mental constipation puckered his brow to a frown.

'Well?' Cuckoo prodded.

'No sorry, Mac. Nothing that springs to mind. But that's not to say there *is* nothing. I'll speak to a few people. Tell my superiors I've unearthed some shit on the internet - there's plenty to blame it on you know.'

'Are you in town at the moment?' De Palma added as the expected reply failed to materialise.

'Sort of. Can you meet me on the yacht at eleven tomorrow night? Near that dive site you swear by?' Cuckoo replied: an order disguised as a question.

'Can you make it twelve? I'm working on an op till eleven and it'll take me an hour to get there. I take it scuba gear's *de rigueur*?'

'Yep, usual routine. See you at twelve,' Cuckoo said, before ending the call.

De Palma was not so much a friend as a paid acquaintance but he was as close to a respected friend as anyone Cuckoo had ever known. De Palma would only help out with work carried outside their beloved United States of America; this was just enough to satisfy the CIA man's half-baked sense of probity. They had met on an operation in Panama, working for different organisations that ultimately required an identical outcome. The Colombian drug cartels and the CIA had more in common than they would ever have known, were it not for the chance meeting of the two men. Cuckoo had been hired to take down the emerging drug traffickers from Panama by Emilio Kempes - the head of the most powerful of all the world's drug co-operatives. The CIA had become aware of the massive production potential of such a government-backed manufacturing centre and decided to nip it in the bud before the income generated from such nefarious activities made them invulnerable to eradication. Ultimately, both parties coveted the same outcome: both knew that the drug problem could

never be wiped out. So their strategy was to keep the prices high by reducing production and therefore decrease the seepage onto the streets. More profit for the Colombians; less affordable coke for the ordinary masses of America.

De Palma, sent as a CIA observer with Delta Forces to the Panamanian jungle, sat amongst the seething foliage that engulfed the area for hundreds of miles. Hidden deep in the undergrowth, he observed the production centre through field glasses and as he did so spotted the high-powered rifle sights trained directly upon his green and black camouflaged forehead. Cuckoo had held his fire on the gut instinct that a shot would bring more trouble down upon him than even he could cope with. His instinct had been correct and after a protracted and deadly stand off, Cuckoo instigated a meeting between the two clandestine forces within earshot of the intended target.

The Delta Forces commander had registered his displeasure at making deals with the proverbial 'Devil' and was duly overruled by the civilian De Palma. De Palma reasoned that there was a common goal to be achieved and that Cuckoo and his three other operatives located around the target site could, should and would help in taking down the drugs processing plant.

Two days later the jungle canopy signalled the end of the production plant and its surrounding crop with the intermittent expulsion of clouds of dense black smoke. The noise of the explosions and gunfire barely cleared the treetops. But before the Panamanian Army could arrive and see the destruction for themselves, the contamination caused by the cocktail of chemicals released into the previously fertile soil was complete. The perpetrators had evacuated the scene of devastation - with De Palma and Cuckoo going their separate ways - but it did not take the mercenary long to realise the full potential of such an unholy alliance. Meanwhile, De Palma had arrived at the very same conclusion as Cuckoo and, after meticulous

planning by the CIA man, De Palma crossed paths once again with Cuckoo and became his most prized informant. The relationship over the years had developed markedly, with their distorted perception of corruption allowing both to sleep easily at night - and before their association was a year old it was hard to distinguish who was nestled in whose pocket.

### **FACT**

Forests both affect, and are affected by, climate change; they perform a vital role in the global carbon cycle. Their survival, or destruction, could significantly influence the course of global warming in the 21st century.

We are losing earth's greatest biological treasures just as we are beginning to understand their true value. Rainforests once covered 14% of the Earth's land surface; now they cover a mere 6% and experts estimate that the remaining rainforests could be wiped out in less than 40 years.

**Almost half of the world's species of plants, animals and micro-organisms will be extinct, or on the verge of extinction, over the course of the next 25 years due to rainforest deforestation.**

**In real terms, one and a half acres of rainforest are lost every second - the equivalent of destroying 73 football pitches every minute of the day...**

### **3 The Garden of Eden**

The military Chinook hovered high above the rainforest as if strung from an invisible thread to the heavens. Charlie Kitson, its USAF pilot, casually controlled the unwieldy beast while furtively eyeing the suits in the back. He was unfamiliar with the practice of the military chartering out its services to civilian organisations but apparently that was exactly the task he had been set for the next two weeks. Up front with him was the suits' preferred hired pilot. No matter who you were, you did not get to fly military hardware without being 'on the team' in a manner of speaking. So, Kitson flew under this ageing pilot's direction, much to his disgust, and wondered when he would return to his safe posting on the North American mainland.

'Keep your fucking eyes up front. We don't want an early exit on this trip!' Ralph Turner, the superannuated aviator, ordered.

'Boy we've really hit it off now haven't we,' Kitson replied provocatively. He was wearing full USAF regalia just to annoy the would-*be Top Gun* and smiled without removing his standard issue USAF mirrored sunglasses.

'Listen up sonny. I was flying combat sorties against the Japanese and for that matter the Vietnamese before you were spilled from your daddy's pants and somehow found your momma's wet pouch. So don't give me no shit boy or I'll have you off this assignment before your arse hits hard ground!'

Turner was just the wrong side of fifty and had lied dramatically about his combat experience. Sadly, at the tender age of twenty-seven, Kitson was in no position to

shoot down Turner's tall tales. All that modern military history was lost to him in a swirl of playing hooky from school and Laura Johnson's pink thigh flesh, revealed between her knee-length socks that ever so nearly met with the matching hem of her plain grey skirt.

'Okay Pops. You de boss. Where we gonna go now Massa?' Kitson mocked as a surfeit of adrenaline coursed through his veins and piqued his frustration.

'Quadrant 330.'

'No chance, Pops. No Mil 'copter goes down that way. It ain't done. You see it's marked with this big black cross...' Kitson began to explain, grasping the oversized map with both hands and beginning to point out the detail.

'We do.' Turner replied, ignoring the fact that Kitson had pointedly left the reins unattended.

Immediately, Turner grasped the controls unconcernedly and slammed the craft into free fall. The all-encompassing green monster below rose alarmingly towards the windshield, rearing upwards gleefully to devour the lives on board. Kitson's bladder betrayed his stiff upper lip and wet his pants from crotch to toe. Turner expertly pulled the nose up to avoid the tree canopy's deadly embrace, just as the undercarriage began to clatter and tangle with hard wooden branches that clutched like tentacles until the slowly ascending Chinook finally broke free and soared, breezing easily along a hundred feet clear of the tree tops.

Turner rotated the mike on his headset, so that it met perfectly with his flush lips and began to lie like a professional,

'Sorry, gentlemen. We just had to take evasive manoeuvres to avoid a flock of migrating birds there. Normal flying procedures will be resumed as quickly as possible.'

The grin that followed was wasted on Kitson. The suits in the Chinook's payload remained silent as Turner headed for Quadrant 330.

‘There she blows, on the horizon there!’ Turner exclaimed and pointed ahead through the windshield without ever really gaining Kitson’s attention.

‘Jeeessuss! Look at that! What a fucking mess,’ Turner said shaking his head in disbelief at the massive brown scab that scarred the previously unblemished green skin ahead.

Ten minutes later they arrived at the epicentre of the devastation and now the dead zone stretched as far as the eye could see in all directions.

‘Look at my trousers Pops. That’s your bloody coffee that is! You could’ve warned me, or for that matter drunk it before you pulled that crazy stunt,’ Kitson moaned as he regained his composure after an extended bout of silence.

Turner was almost sure that the blossoming stain on Kitson’s trousers was more than just the dregs of his coffee but decided to let it pass to avoid any further embarrassment to the young man. Before he could contemplate the accident still further, Turner was distracted by the voice on his headset originating from the rear of the Chinook.

‘Ralph, put her down on the ground. Some of the guys back here wanna go walkabout and empty a few tight bladders. Good job we had ‘em all strapped in place; we might’ve lost a few otherwise. By the way, what exactly was the species of bird that caused all the aerobatics?’ Michael White, the PEC Director of Security asked nonchalantly. He’d known Turner fifteen years - in fact ever since Turner had started working for the Pharmaceutical Ecology Corporation after his honourable discharge from the navy.

‘Just birds of the feathered variety, you know the type, Sir,’ Turner replied cheekily.

‘Well that seems clear enough. Thought they might have been of the flying pig variety. Anyway, just put us down on the ground gently, my stomach won’t take any more acrobatics.’

‘Yes Sir. Reading you loud and clear. Gently it is, Sir.’



The Chinook tenderly lowered itself through the air while Kitson resumed his sulking. Turner in due course gestured to him to take over the controls again and Kitson did not need asking twice. After descending for what seemed an eternity, dust from the ground began to cloud the air, obscuring the pilot's previously crystal clear view. The undercarriage settled upon the dark brown soil and now Kitson could see that the earth was devoid of any shrub, seedling or even the residual weeds that usually infest any unattended piece of fertile land.

'Could be the moon for all the life on it,' Kitson commented, forgetting his earlier embarrassment, and fascinated by the moonscape outside.

'You ain't kidding. Nothing for miles and miles. Don't seem right somehow. This ain't just deforestation of the comprehensive type,' Turner said, aghast at the brown and blue horizon that shimmered in the distance.

'Not a bean to be seen! Your guys in the back - they got anything to do with this?'

The two rotor blades finally ground to a halt and a deathly silence invaded the Chinook's interior. Somehow it seemed to cool the temperature in the cockpit.

'Quiet ain't it?' Kitson continued, all the dramatics now forgotten.

'No animals you see. Nowhere to shelter, no food, no water, no nothing. And in answer to your question - I'd have thought it likely that the suits in the back are here to look at ways of fixing this mess. They own lots of replenishable forests around the world. Maybe they're gonna turn this place around,' Turner hypothesised.

'They getting out or what?' Kitson asked.

'Yep, they said they were. I'll go take a look. You just wait here and do nothing.'

Turner unclipped his belts and slung them to one side. He made his way to the back of the AH-64 Chinook and was surprised to see the occupants dressing in contamination

suits. The ten men, including Michael White, were all busy sliding into white plastic overalls: the kind that have the boots moulded into the trousers, Turner noticed. Unaware of his presence, the men continued with their dressing until White heard Turner's gentle suggestive cough.

'Yes Ralph?' White said sternly.

'I take it you're all going outside?'

'Yes,' White replied, nodding his head.

'How long are we gonna be here for? I wanna start filling in the flight log.'

White looked directly at the senior biologist.

'Tim. Any thoughts on how long we're going to be outside?' he asked.

'Maybe an hour or so - can't really tell. Dr Maier... Any thoughts on time scales?' Professor Tim Hanson asked.

'No, as long as it takes I suppose. We need soil samples from a one-mile radius, fifty in all should do it, but how long that'll take is anybody's guess. An hour should be enough maybe - I'm not quite sure,' Dr Maier rambled confusingly in his clinical Germanic accent.

Maier was in his early forties but could easily have passed for sixty and he always dressed in grey. His deep sunken eyes were framed by the thick black rims of his spectacles and his long greying hair ran riot all the way down to his shoulders. Turner smiled inwardly at the eccentric character and wished he had never asked the question in the first place.

'An hour it is then!' Professor Hanson summarised simply.

Hanson was the complete opposite of Dr Maier: an African American, youngish at thirty-one, well groomed, six-foot tall and extraordinarily focused. This was exactly why he was heading up project 'Alchemy'.

Turner was about to return to the cockpit when White spoke again, 'Ralph! You and the pilot are not to leave the aircraft in any circumstances. These suits are just precautionary but I don't want to be responsible for any

adverse side effects if you did go outside. Just sit tight and we'll be back as soon as we can.'

It was all beginning to make sense now. The Chinook was specially modified to cope with battlefield contamination. *A bit over the top*, Turner had thought initially. But now he saw why they had demanded this particular chopper. As the white rubber-suited men put their hoods on and began to waddle out of the aircraft one by one, he scuttled back to the safety of the cockpit.

'About an hour, Mr White said,' Turner said uneasily, isolated beads of sweat percolating from his forehead despite the climate control's constant maintenance of a comfortably cool air temperature.

'About an hour what?' Kitson asked, confused.

'We should be down for about an hour... Did you see the gear they're wearing?'

Just as Turner finished his statement, the first group of scientists came into view through the dusty windshield. Kitson's eyebrows immediately assumed the query position and suffused his face with bemusement.

'Yeah I know. Caught me by surprise as well.'

'What they so scared of?'

'Beats me. I only fly them around. I never get to hear what it is exactly that they're doing.'

'You seen 'em geared up like this before? Contamination suits and all?'

'No, can't say I have. It's normally tedious business trips, Meetings here, there and everywhere. First field trip I've made with them is today. Not sure I wanna make any more to be honest. I don't need this shit at my age. What about you? You must've seen your fair share of this sort of shit.'

'Nope! Bit like yourself now. I only fly the top brass around. Never flown a combat mission in my life and I never want to,' admitted Kitson.

'Don't blame you. Gets a bit messy, shooting at real people with real bullets if truth be told. I can't say I miss it.'

‘Who are this lot anyway?’ Kitson asked, trying to move the conversation on after seeing the old guy swell with emotion.

‘Not sure exactly, but they get about. I think it’s some sort of Brazilian ministry force working with my company. You know, these days it pays to stay ecologically astute if you wanna stay in government. This ozone shit’s put the wind up them all. From London to Washington and on to Beijing. They all wanna know how best to market themselves and get the very most from the media coverage when it comes to the end of the world.’

‘Yeah, like it’s gonna matter. We’re all fucked when this one goes pear shaped!’

The gaggle of men outside continued to slowly wend their way from the Chinook, collecting their critical samples as they went. Two groups of three were in clear view and both Turner and Kitson wondered how the remaining four suits had split up. Silence again drifted around them as they independently observed the good work being carried out against the brown lunar landscape’s backdrop and Turner closed his eyes in automatic obeisance to his customary afternoon siesta.

## **4 Without Mercy**

The Chief of Police for the province of British Columbia, David Taylor, drove despondently down the long gravel drive to the gaudy mansion belonging to the Canadian Fisherman's Co-operative's President. Try as he might, he could not to clear his wildly spinning mind. The CFC was sick; some would say terminally. The disastrously bad PR generated by seal culling in past years had taken its toll on the group - largely because President Raymond Franks had staunchly defended the co-operative's position when all about him were losing their heads. That blinkered intransigence had earned him - and by association, the CFC - a special place in the annals of animal butchery.

The peaceful early hours of the morning afforded Franks little comfort as he sat on the battered marbled steps that led to his jemmied front door. Franks watched miserably as the car drove towards him, the headlights momentarily blinding his now tearless eyes. Taylor slipped the dark blue Lexus automatic into neutral and slowed to a stop without applying the brake. He sighed heavily before beginning his pre-exit routine. First, he extinguished the lights and then grabbed his cigarettes - for he would most definitely need them this morning. Finally, he dragged the palm of his left hand up from his tired eyes through his thinning brown hair, before eventually sliding it down to knead the back of his tense neck. The sharp icy air did nothing to revive his fuddled senses as he slid from the air-conditioned vehicle. Still unsure how to handle the situation, he walked forward until he loomed imperiously over Franks.

'Mr Franks - wouldn't you be more comfortable inside?' Taylor asked.

'Uh?' Franks replied wearily after an uncomprehending pause.

'I think you'd be more comfortable inside,' the other persisted.

Taylor always hated these jobs. Public relations had never been a game he liked to play, especially in circumstances like these. Nevertheless, somebody had to do it. And anyway, when his commander asked for a personal favour, refusal was not an option unless you had another job lined up. The call had come at three in the morning. Now it was four-thirty. He had put off setting out on the twelve-mile journey to the crime scene as long as he could while he pondered how to handle the sickening state of affairs. Taylor waited patiently for a reply while Franks struggled to channel the desperate thoughts that ebbed and flowed and eddied in his traumatised mind. All around, flashing patrol car lights bleached the darkness blue and police officers thronged in and out of the private residence with business-like efficiency. But this was nothing like normal business - not something any of the policemen who were working in the crime scene's inner sanctum were remotely conditioned to or, given the choice, would ever wish to be.

'Mr Franks! Is there anyone I can call for you?' Taylor persisted, trying to speed things up.

'Who are you?' Franks asked, meekly raising his head.

'Oh, sorry. I'm David Taylor - BC Chief of Police. Rene Hersant asked me to call on you personally. Is there anything I can do for you or your wife? Anything at all?'

'You know Rene?'

'Yes, he's my boss, Sir. He asked me to come down here to support you personally. So... /s there anything I can do for you?'

'Just get the bastards who did this.'