

Death in Tomorrow's Shadow, Chapter 1, Edge of Tomorrow

"Damn you, Lucifer! If I must die here, I refuse to go without a fight! Show your ugly self and let's get this bout underway!"

"Who's there?"

Was that my voice shouting to the icy wind? It seemed to come from behind me. It was a stranger's voice. But no one else is about. Only me, alone, having foolishly trekked out in this dreadful Arctic blizzard. I have only myself to blame, like bowing my head under a fifty-ton hammer mill.

What the hell! What is happening to me? Ha! Must just be vertigo. Sure, that's it. Ice crystals whirling thick in the wind like grains of sand in a sandstorm. Like my choices in life, there's no black and white here. Everything's gray, the sky overcast ugly gray, the ground covered with packed ice, and crystalline snow in faint light. All grays. I can't tell up from down. The elements of this surreal scene are consorting against me, taunting my old brain to dizziness. This could be a silly Twilight Zone television episode. It's quad-zero conditions, just as that old veteran fighter pilot joked, "Zero ceiling, zero visibility, zero warmth, and zero brains for being out in it." Ha, what an irony. I'm cracking jokes while flirting with the angel of death, and the bitch won't even offer me a cocktail.

If I just stand here a minute, lean into the wind, and keep my footing, I can regain my senses. Surely this dizziness will pass after a steadfast moment. Hell's bells, it's cold! Admit it, Bradley, you're in real trouble here. Vertigo? Vertigo be damned, I'm hallucinating!

Get ahold of yourself! You're not that drunken soldier in Brussels twenty-five years ago...or...or a spaced-out hippie on acid...acid! Damn! Of course, that's it! I've been drugged! It was that cup of acrid coffee the bartender gave me. He said with the grin of a hog eating slop, "This will keep you warm along your way."

As I drank that poison coffee, I saw a man peering at me from across the otherwise vacant tavern. If not for the mustache and completely bald head, he could have been Jack Benny's double. He had a facial expression that denied interpretation. Was it curiosity, amusement, concern, or anger?

That scene is now churning in my erratic mind, a nightmarish confusion, the bartender, the bald stranger, the old war pilot, and me. The four of us together in a spinning barroom, a barroom in the fuselage of that DC-3, the airplane that delivered me to this wretched island. This surreal airplane has a barroom inside. It's spinning out of control, twin radial engines screaming, accelerating in a spiral dive, a dive toward the icy Arctic Ocean.

This hallucination is tormenting, but I can't shake it. The dull gray landscape I perceived moments ago, the sky and the earth, are now exploding in a kaleidoscope of churning colors, colors I can smell, colorful sounds, sounds I can see. Am I going insane?

"Mind over matter, Private Bradley. Snap out of it."

"Sergeant Moony! What're you doing here!"

"Get tough, soldier, or you'll die here. Fight back, Private Bradley. Get angry! Use that anger for strength."

"Yeah, I hear you, Sergeant. I got it, Sarge. Now go shout spittle in some other sad sack's face. Leave me be!"

Where'd he go? Mercy Myrtle, it's so cold it hurts. Feels like a thousand ants stinging, and it's not letting up. My face, arms...damn, my hands too, all stinging to the bone. Even my thighs. Feels like lying naked in a bed of cacti, needles piercing my clothes. But my feet are okay...or... oh crap! I can't feel my damned feet! But I can kick my legs... Yeah, I'm okay. Laying on the ground now. Wind must've blown me off my feet. And...and my arms are clutched tight around my chest...and they feel strong. How long have I been laying here, curled up in a fetal position and nearly covered

with snow? Snow...this isn't snow. It's too cursed cold for snowflakes. This precipitation is ice crystals, fine grains of ice, like ground glass, chafing my nose and cheekbones.

Thank heaven, the spinning and churning has finally subsided. And those screaming oises...they've vanished to ear-ringing silence. I just might pull through this. Anxiety has let up. I only feel sleepy now, and that's nice. Wonderfully sleepy. It's so tempting to give in and accept the tranquility. This must be the onset of my freezing to death. It's a pleasant way to die, so they claim. Who claims this is pleasant? The Eskimo who takes his old toothless mother-in-law out to die? An arrogant scientist in a cozy laboratory? Yup, that's who. That grumpy old college chemistry professor that gave me such a hard time. He ridiculed me in my confusion between CO₂ and 2OC. I had never heard of dyslexia then. Throughout schooling, from the first grade, I had to tortuously strain to not transpose letters and numbers. Teachers scolded me for tracing with my fingertip. Reading slowly, reading forward, reading again backward, tilting my head, and jerking my eyesight. Eventually, I all but completely overcame my difficulty in discriminating the order of things, although those observing my reading assumed I had several nervous tics.

Yeah, that professor was a brainiac with formaldehyde in his veins. I can imagine him, sittin' on a stool, peering through a little glass window, watching scrawny and helpless monkeys caged inside a big freezer, a degenerate voyeur watching the little rascals freeze to death. Wires and tubes are stuck into every natural and several more punctured holes in their flea-bitten bodies. Well, I ain't a damned laboratory monkey, Professor Crowder! I'm going to crawl out of here and shove you in this freezer to take my guinea pig place.

Funny, I feel warmer now. Ha! Crowder must've heard my threat and turned off the refrigeration. I feel better, comfortable, warm...no, not warm. I feel nothing, only sleepy. It's so enticing, drifting into restful sleep.

"No! Dammit, Private Bradley! Recruits are not allowed to sleep! Get your sorry ass in gear, Bradley! You have got to move, soldier! If you can't get up, then crawl! Crawl like a lizard! Crawl, soldier! Crawl on your belly like a slimy allegator!"

"Shut up, Sarge! I'm crawling."

But I can't see anything, just darkness and a haze of wind-blown ice crystals, powdered ice blowing like a sandstorm. My eyelashes, nostrils, all coated with ice. I've never been so miserable, not even in that damned basic training camp, almost thirty years ago.

I believe I see a faint glow in the gray sky. My eyes may have adjusted to the darkness. I must get control of my thoughts! I gotta concentrate! Oh, that horribly stubborn cold wind.

"Shut up! Stop howling."

The wind refuses to relent. Howling like a mangy wolf, blowing like...like that blizzard in the Oklahoma panhandle that time...out on that miserable mule-deer hunt. But even that wasn't as cold as that night in the forest outside of Bastogne. And lying wet in the snow on Christmas Eve in Belgium wasn't nearly as cold as this godforsaken alien world. Ha! And none of those frigid places were as cold as times during my marriage with my second wife, Freida.

"Ah ha ha! Frigid Freida!"

"Keep the level's bubble on center, Bradley. Maintain control. Kick and crawl toward that light."

I hope that's not the renowned light recounted by near-death victims. I gotta keep crawling. Where did that damned light go? Whoa! What the...another hallucination...I'm falling...ugh!

Where in hades am I now? Ugh, but I believe I am okay. Why, Alice in Wonderland! I'm in a deep hole in the ground. I can see the faint sky above. I must be ten feet below the surface. It's damp and muddy here. But that's a good sign. Halleluiah, it's wet down here! That means it's above freezing in this hole. I might survive after all. Survive? Perhaps not. Now I'm trapped in a hole, and I might not be able to climb out. My situation may have just deteriorated from near hopeless to fatal,

as if the guillotine blade was released and is now accelerating down to sever my stupid head from my hapless body.

I feel soggy, slimy tundra beneath me. That accounts for the soft landing. Guess I fell through the tundra. I was warned to beware of tundra-covered sink holes. "Stay on the pathways, or you could fall through the tundra and might never be seen again." That's what Phillips told me. "Always sign out if you're going alone outside of the main compound, even in tolerable weather, because there are too many life-threatening hazards on this island. Under blizzard conditions, no one is to leave the compound area alone, signed out or not." Damn! Curse my stubborn confidence. I broke that rule too. No one knows where I am except that grimy grinny bartender. What was his name? Had something to do with that sanguinary movie...the murdering barber. Sweeney? No. Sweeney Todd? That was it, Todd! Todd what? Bart? Burk? Bernie! Bernie Todd was the creep who promised to sign me out of the NCO Cub. He gave me that putrid and acrid coffee, coffee that he had surely laced with acid, LSD.

How did I get into this mess anyway? I suppose I could blame Skip, my old army buddy, for my being in this predicament, but it wasn't his fault. Skipper was as much of a victim as I am now, a victim of either a fatal accident or murder. He asked for me to come to his deathbed, a mere coincidence to the miserable mess I now find myself entangled. In perfect irony, Skip died while I was en route during those exhausting thirty-six hours of rearranged flights, across four thousand miles.

But now, no time for us sergeants, soldiers, or policemen. My acceptance and understanding of my oldest and best friend's death will have to await another time, a time when I'm not struggling against my own peril.

My mind is desperate to make sense of this madness, from the time I arrived at Anchorage up to the instant I fell in this hole. Ha! I feel like a child caught in some fantasy world, like Treasure Island or the land of Oz. How did I get from Anchorage to this torture chamber?

As I recall, my mood began to sour, like old milk in a broken-down refrigerator, as soon as I stepped off the plane and into the Anchorage winter. The weather was depressingly dark, wickedly windy, and cruelly cold, but something less identifiable was disturbing me. I began to smell the stench of rot soon after I arrived at that dingy hotel in Anchorage. I suppose I suspected that the delayed flights and layovers at the two intermediate airports had usurped Skip's final hours on this earth. I curse it all, all that resulted in Skip's last minutes spent in anxiety, wondering if I would ever arrive.

There must have been something he wanted to tell me. Or perhaps he just didn't want to die solely in the company of strangers. And now, less than forty-eight hours later, I've gotten myself into this icy pit.

Regrettably, painfully, now I remember how I got here. So, this is indeed reality, not a harmless nightmare soon to awaken from. I remember...

"Here's your hotel, buddy."

Yup, that must be it, the Gables. Looks old and neglected. Dear Becky, our good and faithful office secretary, she did just as I asked. Booked me into a hotel as best she could, given my limited personal bud get. The chief even told her to stay late at the office, without any over time compensation, as he emphasized, to arrange for my "nonbusiness" personal travel. And her difficulty was complicated by the hyperinflated prices of this region.

Becky tried to explain and apologize to me. "There are excessive demands on Anchorage businesses, much due to the ramping up of military transport operations and the massive transport of military personnel and materiel for waging the Vietnam War. But that demand is compounded by the extensive new development of the petroleum industry, exploration, drilling, production, and

pipeline operations. Those exceptional demands contend for beleaguered supplies in one of the most remote and expensive regions of the world to live and work."

"Here's a twenty and a five, bud. Keep the change. And if you don't mind, I'll wait in the cab until you've set my luggage out."

It's the devil's deal here, without reason, and his game is freezin'. Frigging frigid Freida. I gotta do a little shoppin' tomorrow. Get me a fur hat with big fuzzy earflaps, a wool sweater, and a thick scarf. Together with my overcoat, I would then have five layers of garments over my torso. I'll need wool socks, too, and a pair of fur-lined gloves. This wretched Arctic weather is torturous for a guy who has acclimated, during most of the last twenty years, to the Texas Four H-- hot, humid, hustling, Houston. What a predicament, on the edge of retirement, my old bones aching from the chill. I should get a pair of long flannel underwear too.

The hotel looks grubby on the inside as well, but I don't mind. I'm desperate to crawl under several thick blankets and go soundly to sleep.

The spring-mounted bell on the lobby door should have alerted a desk clerk. Uh-oh, there's shuffling behind the curtained doorway. Ha, devil teased me again. That's not fair, Lucifer, while my old brain is in a stupor. But that could be a beneficial impulse, subconsciously reaching for my holstered .38. I've gotta relax, unwind, and get some sleep,

"If yuh don't have a reservation, mister, we're all filled up."

"The name's Bradley. Everett Bradley. I have a reservation, and I paid extra to guarantee it for late arrival."

"Hmm. Oh yeah, Bradley. Hey, I got a message for yuh. It was urgent. 'Bout six hours ago. Uh, here 'tis: 'Call Op'rator 14.' That's all I wrote, but I am supposed to tell yuh that it's important and yur supposed to call 'mediately. Ain't no pay phone here, but you can use the desk phone. But I gotta hear yuh tell the op'rator to reverse the charges. Calls back to the low-down forty-eight cost more a minute than a high-class peep show."

"Okay, bud. Set the phone over here. Operator 14, please. And reverse the charges. Sure. Rhet Bradley here. Yeah, I'll wait."

Dear God, and I'm not cursing here, Lord. I'm praying. Please don't let this be bad news about my son or his mother or, I should add, about my second ex-wife either, bless Freida's deceitful heart.

"Bradley?"

Oh, damn. It's Scallon.

"Yup, Bradley here. What's this call about, Chief?"

"Hell, Bradley, it's four in the morning here in Houston! Did you not get the message until now? I lined out Premble to wrap up all the messaging business by ten o'clock last night."

"Sorry, Chief. I just now arrived at the Anchorage hotel, directly from the airport."

"Hotel! Damn! Premble was supposed to have you paged at Sea-Tac between your flights. A military driver was supposed to pick you up at the airport. Premble has botched up the arrangements. What time is it there, Bradley? Why did you not call in?"

"The airline delayed my flight out of Houston due to a mechanical problem. Then I was rescheduled for a later connecting flight out of Denver. When I finally reached Seattle, I had missed my original flight to Anchorage and had to wait for a later flight. I'm sure it was not any fault of Becky's. And as for the local time, if the clock at this hotel is correct, it's ten after one in the morning here."

"Okay, Bradley, whatever. Listen up. I am not going to chat at length here, even if I wasn't groggy from lack of sleep. Besides, this situation is only to be discussed in detail in a secure area and on a secure communication channel."

“Chief, I’m on vacation up here. On my own nickel. I don’t have time for an assignment, at least not for a day or two. I told you before I left the office on Monday. This fellow I have known since the war began, twenty-eight years ago, is on his deathbed. He asked for me. Said it was important. He has no immediate family and no other close friend. Besides, why isn’t the local field office taking care of your *situation*?”

“Stop arguing, Bradley. You are not retired yet, and I am still your supervisor. Now pay attention and take notes. Premble has already butted in on your behalf, with her concerns for your personal plans. All a bit too melodramatic for my office protocol, I might add, even for a secretary. At any rate, she made several calls, talked with a doctor at the hospital up there, or maybe it was a nurse...oh, whom ever, and she made other calls as well. Hell, she was on the phone for most of the afternoon yesterday. Here’s the bottom line, Bradley. That sick man died while you were en route there from Houston. The body will be shipped back to his hometown. No funeral is planned up there. Besides, I read that the ground is so frozen up there, they can’t bury the dead until early summer. Oh, what the hell. Premble can wise you up later. End result, Bradley, you no longer have much, if anything at all, of personal business up there.

“So there, Bradley. You have no excuse to refuse this assignment. And besides, the circumstances are fortunate for you and for our Houston office as well. Now don’t you see, Bradley? The bureau will pick up the tabs on your travel expenses, and to the benefit of our field office, you become our Johnny on the spot to work this special assignment. Do you understand me, Bradley?”

“Okay, Scallon. What do you want me to do?” “Well, Bradley, if you and Premble had not messed up the arrangements, all would be transpiring already on schedule. Now you are late. The Air Force was on schedule to meet you at the airport when your original flight arrived there at Anchorage. But you failed to answer your page at Sea-Tac, and you did not call in, as you should have done.

“Now, Bradley, you must get your butt to Elmendorf Air Force Base immediately. There is no time to dally. Take a taxicab if you must. You must meet with a military officer there at the base. I don’t recall his name. Premble had all the names and telephone numbers. Hell, that’s her job, tracking all those petty details. She provided me with information, let me see, uh, yeah. If the military did not find you at the airport, some soldier, or are they called fliers? Anyway, some military man is supposed to meet you at your hotel if all else fails.

“If there’s time later at the air base, they will give you a proper briefing. When you get to the base, then you can call Premble on the secure telephone device. What is it called? An STD?”

“*STD! That would stand for sexually transmitted disease. You should poke fun at him, Brad.*”

“*Keep quiet, Walter Wego!*”

“Uh, that would be a STU, Chief. A secure telephone unit.”

“Stop feeding me trivia, Bradley. This is important. Stop interrupting. Now let me see. So Premble agreed to remain at the office for your call. It’s after four in the morning here. Premble might be asleep on the office couch, so tell the operator to keep ringing until she wakes up. Premble will clue you in on the sensitivity of the situation. Then that military officer at Elmendorf will brief you on the case.

“This case is important, Bradley. I had to bite the bullet and step up to the challenge. The assignment came to me directly from DC. Now note this. I expect you to call Premble each day and provide a briefing on your progress. Alternatively, send a facsimile, but all must be via secure transmissions. You can addendum your daily reports with any necessary requests, requests for information research and such. I will decide if your requests are necessary, and I will make any assignments to those tasks.

“Keep a low political profile on this one, Bradley. Don’t go traipsing off on tangents, chasing after some hairbrained idea of your imagination. If you trip over an old skeleton, just leave it to rest.

Stick to this case. This is a political spook house, like a carnival ride. Keep your cool. Do not screw it up. Good luck. Sorry about your uncle's death." Click.

So that's it! Scallon got a call from DC, and as usual, he bent over backward to impress someone at HQ, heroically volunteering me and Becky, and whomever he could command to do the extra work, just so he could appear brilliantly capable and especially to grab the spotlight away from the Anchorage field office. Did he just carelessly refer to my deceased friend, Skip, as my uncle?

Two coincidences here, and I am paranoid of coincidences. In my twenty-five years of experience, three coincidences ultimately prove to have been contrived and not arbitrary coincidences. Co-ins, I call them. The two co-ins here? First, my being in Alaska at the time of an incident of FBI purview. And second, the situation being mysterious, such that the local bureau station cannot work it. Apparently, this peculiar situation was unexpected, acute, not having anyone previously assigned to investigate whatever shenanigans were transpiring behind the curtains before this final act. Two co-ins are suspicious, but three are statistically 85 percent for certain to have been concocted. At this point, I am suspicious of this coincidence. A third co-in will virtually prove that events have been contrived.

Maybe I need not fret. Scallon isn't mentally capable of contriving three co-ins, even if he wanted to cause me trouble, either out of his selfishness or for his delight. So, if one more co-in enters this situation, it will prove that the devil himself is plotting against me.

Perhaps Becky can give me some insight on the putrid politics. I hope this is not an assignment mired so deep in political muck as to be a circus. Or worse, transpiring with the two station chiefs engaging in a pissing contest, with me appointed to stand between them to measure the urinary squirt distances. Such damnable politics usually prove more troubling and complicated than the crime itself, assuming there is a crime. Hopefully, I'll be so lucky as to discover this is just a task to scrutinize and confirm there was no foul play.

"Mister! If you're done talking there, then hang up the phone."

"Uh, okay. I was just collecting my thoughts."

"I'm suppose' to tell yuh, mister. When that gov'ment lady called 'bout yur message, she also gave me a voucher number to charge for the cost of yur hotel room. So you won't be payin' fer tonight 'cause the gov'ment will pay. An' I'm suppose' to cancel the other four nights. Here's the bill for yuh to sign yur 'proval."

"Thanks. Sorry for the change of plans."

"Oh, I won't have no problem fillin' the room for those other nights 'cause, yuh see, that wicked bitch of the north is brewin' a monster Arctic storm up above Siberia. Air flights northwest were canceled. Oil tankers and fishin' trawlers comin' in fer safe harbor. And other people in transit—contractors, military, oil field workers—are all hunkered down hereabouts to wait out the storm. Oh, looks like yur ride is here already, cowboy."

"Mr. Bradley? Staff Sergeant Conners here, Elmendorf, Air Force Security Service. I need to check your identification and then take you to the air base. Major Barnes is expecting you there."

Conners looks too young to be a senior airman or a senior of anything beyond a high school class. But he is probably near the same age as my son. Compared to the day I saw Kyle off for Vietnam just a year ago, in the photos I received from him last week, Kyle appears to have aged ten years in one. I suppose there's a lot of differences between serving in chaotic war-distorted Vietnam versus having a peaceful duty assignment, even in a miserable deep freezer like this.

"Here's my badge and ID, Mr. Conners. Be advised. I'm carrying my bureau-issued firearm. How did you get here so quickly, Mr. Conners?"

"I was dispatched as soon as your flight landed at the airport, sir. Since the hotel is located closer to the commercial airport than it is to the air base, you arrived at the hotel just ahead of me."

"Ah, that would explain it."

There you go again, Bradley; never refraining from questioning, inquiring, and suspecting. Even carefully observing Conners's ID badge, noting his photograph, name, rank, and unit...all was as he claimed. The United States Air Force Security Service? I was expecting the United States Air Force Air Police. I never heard of the United States Air Force Security Service. If no one explains, I'll ask about that later.

"Don't show ignorance, Brad. The brass here may wonder if you are capable or acceptable for this job. Just pretend you are wise to whatever comes up."

"Quiet, Walter. I don't need or want your advice."

I suppose now I can cease my attempts to adjust to a vacation mode. I can just reassume my usual suspicious, cynical, miserable self. Meanwhile, I'm going to snooze along the way. This warm sedan makes me feel like a slice of buttered bread in a toaster.

Damn, that was an intense and short nap.

"I'll get your suitcase, Mr. Bradley. The ice and packed snow are slick, and the wind has grown fierce, so mind your footing along the path and up the steps to that door. Wait for me inside the entrance foyer. I'll park the car and be there promptly."

Typical of a military base. Big block letters painted on the corner of the building designate its number, 33F. Just as Conners mentioned earlier. But my suspicious alter ego requires me to make certain. Once inside the doorway, the clutch of bitter cold dissipates. The closing door silences the howling wind, like lifting the needle from a phonograph record howling in static off track.

Oh, if I could be only that cold again, warm and cozy compared to these conditions. Indeed, as Albert declared, all is relative. Ten degrees above zero compared to fifty below is relative to twenty degrees above compared to a balmy eighty. But there must be a nonlinear relativity there because it feels much worse of a contrast and...

"Hey! Is someone out there?"

I thought I heard a shout from above this cave! But all I hear now is the wind howling across the opening above the hole I made through the thick tundra as I fell into this cavern. No, there must not be any rescuers shouting out there. It would only tax my strength and cause me to inhale more frigid air if I were to continue to shout from down here. Little sound could emit from this deep tundra-padded hole in the ground. Like a timid puff of smoke from a chimney, the blizzard would absorb my feckless sounds like sprinkles of rain into the ocean.

I must stay awake, or I'll certainly freeze to death. I should also exercise my muscles now and again. I was rethinking how I got into this mess. I was trying to convince myself that this surreal nightmare is reality. I'll move my arms and legs as I recount my journey here.

Inside building 33F, I found myself facing a second door. There was a stenciled sign on the door: "Joint Operations, Air Force Security Services and Army Security Agency, No Unauthorized Admittance, All Personnel Must Display Proper Badge at All Times."

A small, engraved plaque above a doorbell button read, "Ring for a Security Guard." Below the doorbell button, a keypad was mounted to the wall. A small hood above the keypad prevented observers from seeing the code as it was finger-punched by their escort. The device was similar to those at the secure file room at our Houston office.

As I stood there, staring at the windowless door, I felt depressed, sleep deprived, tired, and in a foul mood. Nevertheless, I still habitually double-checked minor details. Maybe the reemergence of that obsession was my subconscious way of avoiding troubling thoughts, Skip's death, my vacation commandeered, my being assigned to this altered universe, a place like hell in reverse, tormenting cold instead of torturing heat.

"Where in my recollection was I? Oh yeah, now I recall..."

Conners burst through the door behind me, carrying my suitcase and accompanied by a brief blast of screaming icy wind. He quickly entered a code into the keypad, and the heavy door

seemed to jolt with a sound, as if struck by a sledgehammer. I imagined a powerful electrical solenoid withdrew the steel locking-bolts. Simultaneously, a loud buzzer announced our entrance.

A security guard, seated behind a desk in the hallway, scrutinized us. Conners held his badge up under his chin. I noticed that the guard compared the face to the photo. Security here was much more particular than that of our field office or even our DC HQ.

Despite my FBI credentials, the Air Police guard handed me a bright red badge to hang around my neck, like a goat at the state fair. The badge read, "Visitor, Escort Required."

Sergeant Conners led me down the hall, through a door, and into an office area. On the opposite side of the office area were two adjacent rooms. Peering through the open doors, I discerned one as a private office and the other as a conference room.

I was led past the scattering of desks, file cabinets, other office furnishings, and into the conference room.

"Have a seat here, Mr. Bradley. Major Barnes is on his way from another office just down the hall."

Mr. Conners remained standing. I observed that the chalkboard had been washed blank. Like a missing witness, the chalkboard would not tell me anything. The walls were bare. No posters, no bulletins, not even a calendar. There were no windows. Two desk phones were on the otherwise empty table, one black and the other red. A sign at the front of the room read, "This Room Is Cleared: Secret."

"Mr. Bradley,"

It was a bold, strong voice from a man with a big beaming smile. I had to be quick to grab that handshake, coming at me like a baseball bat swing abruptly stopped to bunt the ball.

"I'm Major Andrew Barnes, Army Security Agency. Welcome to Elmendorf. I understand that you recently lost a close friend and a fellow veteran soldier. I am sorry for your loss, Mr. Bradley."

"Thank you, Major. I have put that aside for the time being. Now I am anxious to learn about this purported urgent situation."

"I apologize to you, Mr. Bradley, for the haste and informalities, but we are short on time. I must have you on an airplane in less than an hour. Your flight must race against an approaching storm front. The plane will be fighting fierce headwinds and high fuel burn rates. You will be flying beyond the western tip of the Aleutian Island Chain to a small island named Qiviut. A remote US Air Force base is located there."

It seemed peculiar that an Air Force enlisted man, Conners, would be reporting to an Army major, Barnes. It also seemed odd for an Army officer to be assigned a significant function on an Air Force base. I did not recognize the unit patch on the major's left upper arm. It appeared to be an eagle's talon grasping lightning bolts out of the sky. I did recognize the brass on the major's left lapel. It was the US Army Military Intelligence insignia.

I recalled, during the war, meeting a tech sergeant assigned to MI. It was amid the Allied advance into Germany. Both of us were at the end of our weekend passes, forty-eight hours of R&R, far removed from the ill-defined battle front. We were sitting at a little sidewalk café in Cherbourg, France, across the street from an ancient harbor, slurping strong coffee to stay awake and not miss the deuce and a half truck, our transportation back to our units. Skip missed that weekend pass, nursing a flesh wound that earned him his first Purple Heart, but he was not excused from our next combat engagement.

Oh, I had better listen now!

"Let us get directly to business, Mr. Bradley. My staff has compiled a dossier for your convenience. I call your attention to the classification of the dossier. These materials are classified as Secret. To help you keep these sensitive materials under wrap, Staff Sergeant Conners has a government-issue briefcase for you. We will assign the briefcase to you. If reasonably possible, the

briefcase should be returned to this office before you depart Alaska. Alternatively, you can request to retain the government-issue item, in which case an interdepartmental property transfer order will be processed.”

Conners placed the briefcase on the conference table. A pair of handcuffs were fastened to the briefcase handle. Conners handed two sets of duplicate keys to me. Obviously, the keys were for the briefcase and for the handcuffs. Conners opened the case. A ruled legal tablet, pocket notebook, and a couple of government-issue ballpoint pens were inside the briefcase.

“We were informed that you were on vacation when you were assigned to investigate this incident, Mr. Bradley. Consequently, we assumed you would need a few basic items to get back on the job. I understand that you are carrying your FBI-issued revolver with you. Of course, as a federal agent that poses no problem here at Elmendorf or at Qiviut. But on the other hand, it is highly unlikely that you would have need to use a firearm here at Elmendorf or at Qiviut. Our AP at both bases are well trained and fully armed. Also, our military bases are generally much more secure than any city in the world.

“You will be given a complete copy of this dossier to take with you, Mr. Bradley. You will not necessarily need to take notes of what I read to you. Also, if we run short on time here, you can finish reading this and the other briefings during your flight to Qiviut. Do not allow anyone to read classified documents over your shoulder, and do not leave these or any classified documents where they could be compromised.”

“Compromised, Captain?”

“Excuse me, Mr. Bradley. Those of us who routinely deal with military intelligence tend to use uncommon jargon. Compromised classified information would be that which was carelessly or accidentally disclosed, left unattended, or exposed, possibly or actually seen by unauthorized persons, stolen, copied, overheard, or discovered by anyone without proper clearance and need to know. If a benign and law-abiding person happens onto compromised intelligence and can be identified, we can debrief that person and mitigate the risk.

“If the compromised information is obtained by a foreign agent, a criminal who might sell the information to a foreign government, or a thoughtless and unscrupulous journalist who might publish it, then the situation becomes severe. The severity is relative to the security level and nature of the compromised information. The worst such scenario would be the compromise being unknown or at least not discovered for a length of time. Then extensive and expensive actions are required and will be less effective in mitigating damage to national security.

“You will recall, Mr. Bradley, the general advice for World War II: Loose lips sink ships.’ In the cold war of today, compromised intelligence information can cause our overseas agents to be arrested, tortured, imprisoned, and executed. Also, years of planning, activities, and high costs of developing and placing agents in sensitive positions can be destroyed overnight by leaked, stolen, or mislaid intelligence. Double agents and foreign moles may be exposed, uncovered, interrogated, imprisoned, or executed. Exposed surveillance systems and decoding schemes of years of development at great costs can be rendered obsolete. Safeguarding our national defense information is, indirectly, as critical as intercepting inbound nuclear ballistic missiles.

“The AP commander at Qiviut, Captain Osbourn, will, then and there, ensure you understand these briefings as well as the national defense information classifications under 18 CFR, Code of Federal Regulations, and 18 USC, United States Code, for the various documents you may encounter. The captain will then require you to sign the standard USC forms. Do you have any questions at this point, Mr. Bradley?”

“None at this time, sir. Please proceed. If I have questions, I’ll speak up.” “Very well. This briefing is classified as National Defense Information, Secret. Situation brief number USASAU-01-005, 3 January 1969, commencing at, uh, 0510 hours, local time, Elmendorf Air Force Base,

Alaska, Major A. R. Barnes, USASA, presenting. Briefing recipient, Special Agent Mr. Everett C. Bradley... and so forth. Please verify that your FBI badge number and your identifying information are all correct, Mr. Bradley.”

“It’s all accurate, Major.”

“Good. I’ll continue.

“Notice: Given time constraints, this briefing was compiled from preliminary and incomplete information. Consequently, this information must not be assumed to be complete. Also be advised, at this time, these data have not been thoroughly verified.

“I have three tasks to conduct with you, Mr. Bradley, time permitting. Task 1 is a quick and general briefing, just to give you some perspective and prepare you for task 2. The second task is for you to use that STU-1 encrypted phone in front of you to converse with your office secretary, Rebecca Premble, at your FBI field station in Houston. Rebecca Premble is prepared to give additional information and direction for proceeding with your investigation.

“Task 3 will follow immediately after your telephone conversation. Task 3 has two parts. Part A is a more detailed and thorough briefing of the preliminary facts of the case that you will be investigating. Part B is a cursory briefing of military and civilian intelligence operations performed at Qiviut Island. All three briefings are assembled into the dossier...”

I suppose the major is required to read every word of this briefing to me, a standard military procedure, to prepare the hangman’s noose and have it at the ready, should I screw something up, big-time, even having Connors here as a witness. And I saw on the final page that I will have to sign acknowledgment that I understand, according to CFR’s, I am subject to fines of...imprisonment for...or both...should I disclose...violate...commit... It appears they have covered all the bases and the CYA, to boot.

“Mr. Bradley.”

“Yes, Major.”

“Off the record now, Mr. Bradley. Your Houston office verified your security clearance at the Secret level. Apparently, your duties never required any higher level, although the Top Secret clearance for you as an FBI agent in good standing would probably be no more than an administrative action. I understand that you joined the FBI some twenty years ago. FBI agents today are routinely hired pending investigation for a Top Secret clearance. Does this match with your understanding, Mr. Bradley?”

“Yes, quite so, Major. I worked cases of banking, finance, and monetary security and financial exchanges, in association with local law enforcement and often with the SEC, FDIC, and sometimes the DEA and ATF, where illicit trade and money transfers were involved. I do not recall a single case where the DoD or any intelligence agency was significantly involved.”

“That is understandable, Mr. Bradley. Your field office special agent in charge, Mr. Scallon, has stipulated that your investigation of this case should not involve any information above the Secret designation. Therefore, no one should provide information to you above the Secret level. If you believe you require Top Secret information or if you are inappropriately introduced to Top Secret information, you must immediately inform the CO of Air Police at Qiviut, Captain Osbourn. In such a case, debriefing and other administrative measures will be required accordingly.”

As the major talks, my mind meanders. Exhaustion from extensive travel has diminished my concentration. If this briefing on the operations at that remote island is laden with numerous acronyms, code words, military jargon, and highly technical terms, then my sleepy brain won’t absorb much of it. Except for snoozing on the flight up here from Seattle, I haven’t had any stretched-out sleep for about thirty hours now.

I can review this briefing later, maybe after I get a good night’s sleep. Oh, Barnes is talking directly to me now.

“The secure connection is preestablished. Just pick up the handset. Staff Sergeant Conners and I will leave the room to your privacy. Your airplane will be taking off soon, so try to limit your call to ten minutes or less. We will be in the adjacent office. Inform us as soon as you have finished your telephone call.

“Oh! Please heed an unofficial hint, Mr. Bradley. You should assume every transmission in association with this military organization, even secure transmissions, are possibly being Monitored by one US government intelligence entity or another. For nonsecure transmissions such as the public telephone, assume that an eavesdropper operating for a foreign government, that of a friend or foe, might also be monitoring your conversation. This STU-1 is a secure network but trust absolutely no transmission for privacy and no other than scrambled or multiplexed communications for security.”

“Oh, Rhet, it’s good to finally hear your voice. I’m sorry for the loss of your lifelong friend. I know from your mentions of Skip that you and he were close. I hate that this case has spoiled the time for you to grieve, to talk with his friends and associates, and to have some assemblance of closure. I also must apologize for having to hurry on to business here. I wish I could assure you that this case will be a slam dunk, as you say, but it appears rather to be a trek into a dark and dangerous political jungle. On the positive side, if this case had not sprung up, your personal travel expenses would have been for not, at least for not being able to see Skip before he died. I am so sorry for your loss, Rhet.

“I tried incessantly to reach you earlier at the Denver terminal and again at the Seattle-Tacoma terminal. I inquired to discover that your connecting flight was delayed. I then tried to explain that to Mr. Scallon, about why you missed my page at Sea-Tac, but he would not listen.

“Rhet, I have more information about Skip’s death, something I learned from the emergency room doctor and what the surgeon told me. But all that, I suppose, should wait.”

“Yes, Becky, I understand, and I do sincerely appreciate you. Indeed, we are pressed for time now. What can you tell me that I need to know about this case? Please be quick.”

“Okay, Rhet. I sent a secure facsimile to Qiviut. The fax headers are addressed to you, in the care of one Captain Osbourn, Air Police. They are marked “Confidential” and strictly for you. I included all that I could dig up and put together about the victim, so I will just give you an overview now. I sent other information, also via facsimile, to Qiviut AFB. I have numbered each fax consecutively so you can be assured not to miss any or review them out of sequential order. You can read the background information later.

“What you cannot read from the records is the politics that I am reluctant to place in print. I am concerned for you, Rhet. Ralph Scallon has handed you a sack of rattlesnakes. If anything proves politically explosive, you will be the requisite scapegoat. Your being on the verge of retiring increases your vulnerability, rendering you readily expendable. What I am telling you is off the record, Rhet. Much of this is unofficial, only what FBI agents in Seattle recalled from memory and what they still had in their personal notes. The official files were purged.

“Your case concerns an uncanny death. The deceased, possibly a murder victim, is the son of Senator Robert Tedford. I’m sure you have heard of him. He is chairman of the powerful Armed Services Committee. He is literally filthy rich, and he carries a big stick, as Teddy Roosevelt would say. He wields that big stick ruthlessly in his best interest, and fortunately for the Pentagon, to their advantage also. He has influence, informants, and avid supporters throughout the military and the intelligence communities. So be cautious, Rhet, and be hesitant to trust any bureaucrat above GS-7 or anyone in military intelligence above the rank of buck sergeant, of any service branch or bureau.

“The senator was not up for reelection at this midterm, but in an unexpected upset his political party lost their majority in the Senate by a significant margin. When the new Congress convenes, he will no longer be the ranking chairman of the Armed Services Committee. Until then,

he may be intent on exercising as much power as his lame-duck party allows him. You will recall, Rhet, Dwight Eisenhower's farewell warning: 'Beware the military-industrial complex.' Well, gossip claims that Senator Tedford is a quintessential military-industrial magnate.

"The victim, Wilburton Tedford or Wil, has a colorful background, and the colors are not all pretty. There are reasons to suggest young Tedford may have been murdered, but Mr. Scallon has not disclosed details to me, and he himself may be in the dark on the specifics.

"Wil was often in trouble with the law as a teenager, speeding, resisting arrest, drunk and disorderly, assault and battery, but his influential father kept him from serving any jail time. In college, Wil flunked out of a prestigious East Coast Ivy League university. Following that, he was suspended and later expelled from the state college, despite his father's wealth and influence. Although Wil lost his student exemption status, he somehow avoided military draft.

"Whether in or out of colleges, Wil was described by his youthful political activist associates as 'a party animal dedicated to little else.' Those activists complained that he was not devoted to any cause or political movement but merely engaged for excitement and to make friendships for fun and short-term romance. He even joined an unruly protest in Seattle at the corporate headquarters office building of his father's timber and lumber enterprise. That group was protesting the environmentally damaging practices of clear-cutting forests.

"Some of the various protests that Wil attended spawned violence, destruction, and injury. Whether or not sincerely devoted to any cause, Wil associated with known agitators and felons of radical organizations, including Students for a Democratic Society and the Weather Underground. About a year ago, Wil was arrested in an FBI raid on a Seattle apartment. The raid netted a group of mostly young adults, radicals, and militants of various affiliations. In addition to protest signs and posters calling for violence, the police found distribution quantities of marijuana, cocaine, and LSD. Even worse, they found bomb-making materials, including explosives, as well as triggering devices, hidden in the attic of that apartment.

"Everyone in the apartment was arrested, booked, and held for questioning, bail hearings, and so forth, except for Wil and a college coed, Deborah Whitworth. Wil and Deborah, his steady girlfriend at the time, were released that same night, soon after booking. Following investigations and intensive interrogations, the tares were eventually separated from the wheat. The partygoers were separated from the bomb makers, but again, except for Wil and Deborah, those cleared of involvement with the explosives were all booked on other charges, mostly of possession of illegal drug substances.

"Wil's senator father promptly got him out of that pickle jar, but here's a peculiar twist. There is not a typed word of police or FBI records on Wil or Deborah, from the moment they were released on personal recognizance. There are court records and so forth on the others arrested in that raid, but nothing of record on Wil or Deborah Whitworth.

"Deborah Whitworth is the daughter of Benjamin Whitworth, a highly successful and highly paid Seattle business lawyer. Whitworth is the principal partner of the law firm Whitworth, Bickleton, and Associates. The firm represents the senator's personal and business concerns, including the enormous Tedford timber and lumber empire.

"Are you following me with this, Rhet? Any questions?"

"No questions yet, Becky. Just keep going. I'm listening...and conjecturing."

"The deeper I dig, the dirtier the politics. Never mind how I dug this up. I'm reading some of this from my handwritten notes which I will shred as soon as we hang up here.

"The Seattle FBI Field Office chief at that time, Harold Casey, persisted in leading a thorough investigation, without excluding Wil and Deborah. He and his agents screened photographs and film footage of news reports and of police surveillance. In that canvassing, they identified two foreign agents in the company of the rioters and protesters. When Casey requested

warrants for additional surveillance, he was told to stand down. Supposedly, he was interfering with an intelligence agency operation.

“Harold Casey insisted that the FBI had jurisdiction, and he refused to pull out of the larger investigation and merely concentrate on the bomb makers. Local law enforcement and the DEA were prosecuting the other individual charges. Ultimately, Chief Casey was reprimanded for refusing to follow directives. He was then reassigned to head the FBI field office at Anchorage. That was less than a year ago.

“The inside satire is that Anchorage serves for America’s political offenders, as does Siberia for the Soviet Union, which is to put troublemakers on ice. Anyway, that background may explain why the Anchorage office was restricted from this case. Senator Tedford has a personal grudge against Chief Casey. So, Rhet, you happened to be the sitting duck at the improbable intersection of time, place, and suitability to be vexed with this assignment.

“Now here is some interoffice gossip, and I have no evidence to support it. Apart from the ill-fated investigation of Wil’s anti-American activities, coincidental suspicions were raised that the senator might be abusing his powers of office, having serious conflicts of interest, to benefit his international timber and lumber industry. That industry is grossing hundreds of millions of dollars in annual sales. Perhaps something suspicious was incidentally noticed during the investigation of activities of the anti-American groups, which coincidentally involved Wil Tedford and Deborah Whitworth. After all, Whitworth’s law firm is at the center of this mire, including legal maneuvers to excuse Wil’s run-ins with the law, the legal affairs of Tedford’s industry, and Benjamin Whitworth’s daughter, Deborah, being loosely entangled as Wil’s coed girlfriend. Incidentally, Wil and Deborah apparently parted ways following the FBI raid on the bomb makers’ apartment.

“You will have to forgive me, Rhet. I have been giving you jumbled, disorganized, and unfounded information. But we are pressed for time, and this hearsay cannot be included in any official report.”

“I understand, Becky. I can sort it all out later as my work progresses, like fitting together pieces of a jigsaw puzzle from a grocery sack, having no image of the scene. I will eventually sort these bits to separate the mundane background from the center and primary subject. Then I will concentrate on the relevant pieces and solve the scrambled mystery. So, Becky, just keep talking...and hurry.”

“Is this line still connected, Rhet? There was some static, and I heard clicking sounds.”

“Yes, I’m here listening and scribbling notes.”

“There’s one more thing I should tell you, Rhet. Speaking of jigsaw puzzles, I only gleaned this from bits and pieces. We secretaries do have our underground information streams, didn’t you know? Well, even though this conversation is probably being monitored, I must inform you of this. Another federal agency, an intelligence agency, I don’t know which, invested much attention into Wil’s activities during the past year. They might now be closely monitoring you and scrutinizing every rat and snake you stir from the underbrush. So be careful, Rhet. You could, only weeks from retirement, still be fired and lose much of your retirement benefits, and that might not be the worst possibility. Anyway, for once in your career, for this, your final assignment, you should place your personal well-being ahead of the job. Won’t you?”

“Yeh, I hear you, Becky. Thanks for your concern. I will be cautious.”

“Okay, Rhett. I believe that’s all I have for you at this time.”

“Thanks, Becky. I gotta go now. I’m being summoned at this moment. Compile a background report for me on Ben Whitworth, his daughter, his law firm partner, and the law firm in general. See if you can find out more about the senator, his family, any disgruntled employees, or any offended business contacts, and so forth. The fellows there at the office will know where to check, such as any complaints filed with law enforcement, any police dispatches to the senator’s

home or offices, and such. Also, see if the fellows can discover anything about the intelligence agency's activities relevant to the broader case. I fully expect, though, that they will only run into blank stone walls.

"Thanks again, Becky. I'll call you from Qiviut, or I may send a fax within the next twenty-four hours to officially submit my first daily report, as Scallon requires, and perhaps I'll append an unofficial report strictly for you. Bye."

Without giving me a moment of time to collect my thoughts, Conners is rushing me out of the building to a passenger van parked at the curb, engine running. It's so cold that the van's tailpipes are spewing enormous clouds of fog, but the wind is so strong that the exhaust cloud disappears as rapidly as it is being formed.

What a quandary. The concrete steps and sidewalk are covered in ice, and the wind is so strong that I feel compelled to walk slowly, but at the same time, I feel the urgency to get to the airplane. And besides, it is too damned cold to not hurry. It is uncanny how drastically and quickly the weather deteriorated. The wind must have doubled in velocity since I arrived here, and the temperature feels another ten degrees further below freezing.

En route to the runway tarmac now, I have a few seconds to ponder. It is such a shame, Becky being so underappreciated, diligent, and intelligent as she is. She makes agents like me and bureau chiefs like Scallon appear much more productive and capable than we are or than we would perform without her help. But she doesn't earn a quarter as much in wages as Scallon or a third as much as I earn. And to add to the irony, Scallon seems to resent her more than he appreciates her. He seldom gives her gratitude and never any praise.

I should put office politics aside for a moment. I need to mull over the mass of information I received in the previous hour. I'll try to use this little time and scant concentration to scribble a few notes. The van is already pulling up alongside a DC-3, twin prop. The engines are running, eager, like a thoroughbred in the gate, anxious to sprint. The engines sound as if they are hitting on every cylinder, humming like a well-tuned Shelby Cobra. There's no sound quite like finely tuned radial aircraft engines, a sound of rhythmic power ready to whisk the passengers away on an adventure, like an ideal romantic partner, strong, beautiful, and adventurous.

Out here on the airfield, the wind seems even more treacherous. Whatever the weather, heat, rain, cold, wind, it always feels more extreme out on a barren and wide-open tarmac. The wind feels as though it might blow my legs out from under me. Someone is hovering inside the doorway, gesturing, offering me a hand up.

This is the trick, Bradley. Lean into the wind and plant each foot forward. Step flat and solid before slightly lifting and sliding forward the foot behind.

The man is shouting against the roaring of the wind, the prop wash, and the radial engines.

"Welcome aboard, Mr. Bradley. I'm your pilot, Tom Dithers."

He's pulling me in like a salmon on a trident spear. He's closing the door now. What a relief it is that the wind, the noise, and the cold have been shut out. I can feel, I can hear, and I can think now.

"Sit here, right behind the cockpit, and strap yourself tight. This is going to be either the most exciting ride you ever had or your worst nightmare. You decide which. If you have too much fun, we are obliged to charge you an extra fee. I'll talk to you later, weather permitting. In the meantime, try to relax, but keep your seat belt fastened. The turbulence will be relentless."

A Douglas DC-3. I haven't been aboard one of these trusty old air wagons since I caught an air hop home from Fort Dix, after the war. That was a ride on the military version of this bird, the C-47. I guess, if I must fly into the storm from hell, there is not a better plane than this one. It feels like we are taking off. Loud rumbling, bumps and jolts, uplifts, downdrafts, and sideslipping, what a roller-coaster takeoff and climb out. Worse than a roller coaster, with sideslips, it is like riding a

bobsled on ice-covered mountains, up, down, slipping sideways, and turning on all three axes. Still clamoring for altitude. Will this torturing turbulence ever lessen? This old bird might have been built strong and sound, but how long ago was that, and how many storms have twisted and pulled every rivet joint to near failure? Guess I would rather not contemplate.

Hey, we've leveled off.

My ears just popped, but they feel okay. No earache yet. The ride is still jumpy, but much better now. This is an unusually outfitted airplane. The main cabin is arranged with half the space for cargo and half for passengers. A peculiar haul this is, only two passengers, me, that sailor in a thick wool peacoat, and a jumble of net-covered strapped-down cargo bags and crates.

I don't believe there will be any stewardesses interrupting me, so at last, I can try to sleep.

"Mr. Bradley! Sorry to have to wake you. We are descending to land at Adak. You must cinch up your seat belt now. Down from altitude in this storm, it is going to be another rough ride."

My fellow passenger, a Navy Petty Officer, is standing up and pulling his duffel bag from the seat behind, where he had strapped it in like a fat passenger pig. Now he is stooped, peering out the window. This is his destination, and he doesn't seem as pleased as a tourist arriving in Rome.

"If you go down in the big drink, those cold Artic waters will sap your body heat to your death in only a few minutes. Ocean water can be almost two degrees below zero Celsius before it begins to freeze. Wave action can keep it liquid at even colder temperatures."

I feel draggy. I am not very attentive to this visit to Adak. Now we two passengers are being jostled in a six-passenger van over rutted ice to a small terminal building. Miraculously, my sleepy mind has led me to a thick hot coffee and a thin cold sandwich. I had expected to see a harbor cluttered with Navy vessels and a large airfield hosting numerous military aircraft, but the weather is too severely obstructing visibility.

Somewhere amid the conversations, the copilot is telling me that the plane's fuel tanks are being topped off. He is explaining that having to confront the strong headwind on the outskirts of the Siberian storm makes it prudent to have extra fuel, because there is no place to land for another eight hundred miles before reaching Qiviut, and if landing at Qiviut should prove impossible, it would be another eight hundred miles back to Adak. Even then, the weather there might have degraded to deny a landing, requiring a return all the way back to Anchorage.

We are now on the last leg of the journey out, like Star Trek, just somewhere out there. Having finished reading the brief Major Barnes gave me, I am unable to get back to sleep, and I need to keep my mind off the disturbance. Despite the persistent turbulence, the pilot has turned control over to the copilot and is joining me in the cabin.

"I thought I would stretch my legs and pass the time with small talk."

The pilot is summarizing his background in quick responses to my idle questions. He is telling me that he was an Air Force veteran of post-World War II and the Korean War. Although our military experiences in our respective wars were very different, we are finding much in common to chat about such as regrets, fears, and remorse, but most favorably, humor, the veteran warrior's most effective psychological treatment. After a time, having exchanged several exaggerated and enhanced spun yarns, the pilot is now returning to his left seat in the cockpit, still chuckling as he fastens himself in, puts on his headsets, and begins flipping switches.

He is shouting at me back over his shoulder.

"Descending for landing at Qiviut. Tighten up that seat belt and hang on to those armrests!"

This descent on approach to landing is even worse than the previous at Adak.

"Walter, I recall, in the previous precarious descent, I made a bet with you. I wagered, for two shots of fine Scotch whisky, that if extreme turbulence, or drastic recovery from such as a spiral dive, caused in-flight structural failure, then my passenger seat would detach from the deck before

a wing or an engine broke away from the airplane. You then argued, Walter, that any payoff of that bet would necessarily have to be made in our afterlives.”

“Ha, Rhetorical Rhet, if there’s whiskey drinking in our afterlives, we will both be in hell. Ha, ha! What a realization!”

“Walter! Don’t call me Rhetorical. It is Everett to you, or Mr. Bradley. Besides, I have long lost track of my winning and losing tabulation. I recall a bet wagered against a steak dinner, and I won. But then I had to buy the dinner myself and account for it with another of your IOUs. Perhaps in that hereafter life, there will be a means for me to finally collect against you, Walter, surely, if the streets are paved with gold. But we are making assumptions here that we will both have the same afterlife destination. I highly suspect, Walter, that the devil has already made reservations for you. As for me, old Lucifer must be as uncertain as I am. Now while we are diving and aerobating toward a spec of land in a vast dark ocean, I’ll make another bet with you, Walter. If we crash, I bet we will smash into the rocky peaks of the island rather than plunge into the subfreezing Bering Sea.”

The airplane has finally come to a stop. The pilot is again shouting back over his shoulder.

“Welcome to Qiviut! It’s not the end of the world, but it’s nearly so. I’m glad you enjoyed the smooth flight, Mr. Bradley. Be thankful that we arrived a half hour ahead of the worst of the Arctic storm front.”

“What the hell!”

Oh, it was just a chunk of half-frozen tundra that fell from above and landed on my face. That was a good thing too. It woke me from my daydreaming. My limbs were growing numb. I must keep moving my legs and arms to keep my blood flowing. It is a little warmer in this pit than it was up above in the wind, but it is still cold enough for serious frostbite in the short term with death by hypothermia soon to follow.

I was dreaming before the cluster of tundra hit me in the face. Or was it a nightmare? No, it was a weird flashback in time. Probably those drugs are still affecting my brain. I do recall that I was trying to reflect and make sense of how I literally fell into this trap. I will continue my remembrance to keep my mind occupied and thus be less apt to panic. Besides, I need to put those events in sequential order and make sense of this fiasco.

I remember now. We had just landed. As the copilot emerged from the cockpit, I silently thanked God. Then I stood on wobbly legs, collected my briefcase, and headed to the rear side exit door. As the copilot noisily unlatched the door, I enthusiastically and loudly thanked the pilots for the successful flight. The unlatched door swung out and downward from its hinged bottom. As such, the door, with stair steps fabricated into its interior side, doubled as a short and narrow set of steps, the same as served for my egress at Elmendorf and Adak.

“That last step is tricky. Watch yourself.”

Estimating an eighteen-inch gap between the bottom step and the icy runway skirt, I held on to the spindly handrail on each side. My outstretched arms allowed the frigid wind to inflate my overcoat, extracting all warmth from my clothing and down to my skin, even before I reached that last step.

The radial engines continued at fast idle, adding prop wash to the ground wind. Airmen were already unloading bags of mail as I stepped onto the tarmac and into a colder and more forceful blast of wind than I could have imagined the worst on earth, surely only shy of the wind at the peak of Mount Everest.

Again, I had to lean into the wind to avoid a windblown back flip. I was leaning so far forward that I could surmise, “If I had Scallon’s nose, it would be dragging on the tarmac.”

An airman ran out of the terminal shack, grabbed my briefcase with one hand, and gripped my arm with the other. I realized then that I had not bothered to use the handcuffs attached to the briefcase. That seemed a bit excessive anyway, I justified to myself.

In from the cold, I was almost as grateful to have the entrance door closed behind me as I was moments earlier to again stand on terra firma.

The terminal building was a simple wood-frame single-story structure with heavy plate glass windows facing the runway and on either side. An airman first class, standing behind the counter, caught my attention with a nod before he began talking.

"Welcome to the end of today, Mr. Bradley. Captain Osbourn will be here in a minute to get you squared away."

"The end of today?"

"Yeah. The international date line is due west of here, between Qiviut and Siberia. On a clear day, you can literally see tomorrow. But there are very few clear days at this edge of today. If there were any clear sunsets over the Kamchatka Mountains, we could literally be in the shadow of tomorrow. You see, that's tomorrow just west of Qiviut. If it's Monday noon here, it's eleven a.m. Tuesday there."

"Oh yes, I should have caught that. I'm afraid sleep deprivation has rendered me dull at this hour of the night. I've been traveling now for almost forty-eight hours, with only a few catnaps."

"I apologize, sir, for throwing that curveball. But here's a straight ball. Despite the darkness and your apparent jet lag—or should I say, propeller lag—it is now 1420 hours. That is two twenty in the afternoon here. You can set your watch to the wall clock there. Everyone here is particularly painstaking about maintaining accurate time. Some units operating here track events down to...well, if you have a need to know, you will be briefed on such details."

"I see, airman. There are peculiar aspects to your island that I need to learn."

"Oh, here's a trite visitor's information brochure you might find interesting."

The Qiviut information sheet was a barely legible photocopy of too many reproduction copies of copies. It described the island as originally occupied as a World War II outpost. The outpost was hastily established after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, in fear of a Japanese invasion from the northwest. That invasion was anticipated as a leapfrogging approach, like a game of checkers, crossing the game board, jumping from Japan to Korea, and then island-hopping and peninsula trekking another 1,800 miles, from the Kamchatka Peninsula to the Aleutian Island chain, across the Alaskan Peninsula, and on to Anchorage, thus establishing a psychologically daunting "Invasion of America."

I had just finished reading "Qiviut: The Very Cool Pacific Island," when an Air Force captain greeted me.

"Hello, Mr. Bradley. Welcome to Qiviut Island. I'm Captain Osbourn, the air police commander. I'll be your primary liaison officer while you're here. I'll assign members of my unit to assist, transport, guide, and advise you around and about this remote base."

"Thank you, Captain. I'm sure I will require your assistance, and I am grateful."

Just then, double doors swung open at the rear of the terminal, and an invisible avalanche of cold air rushed in. A four-wheel cart noisily emerged through the doorway. Through the opening, I discerned a low-roofed, long, and narrow warehouse abutted to the rear of the terminal building. An airman pulled the cart from a handle in front while another airman pushed from behind.

The aluminum case on the cart was unmistakable. It was a military coffin, suitable for shipping a body, not for a funeral ceremony. The metal surface was covered in frost. The screeching of the cartwheels was soon obscured by the howling wind and aircraft engine noise as the cart was shoved and dragged out through the two sets of front doors. Apparently, the body was being transported back to Anchorage on the same aircraft that brought me here. Three additional cart loads, including bags of mail, packages, and crates, were also transferred from the warehouse, out to the waiting aircraft.

"Captain, was that the body of Wilburton Tedford?"

“Yes. The body was thoroughly frozen when we found it. We kept it frozen to subdue deterioration of any evidence and to allow for a more rigorous forensic analyses at the medical examiner’s facilities in Anchorage. We are ill-equipped here for highly detailed examination and analyses.”

“This airplane flight of yours was timely, both to get you here just ahead of the blizzard and to promptly transport the body back to the mainland for examination. We packed the body bag with dry ice. It will be transported in the aircraft’s unheated cargo bay.”

“Just curious, Captain. Was this a chartered flight?”

“No, a routine flight. The DoD contracted Reece Aleutian Airlines to make two flights a week, from Anchorage to Adak and then on to Qiviut and back. They haul mail, transport any passengers unable to get a timely military flight, and they deliver miscellaneous cargo not slated for the much less frequent military C-141 cargo deliveries.”

By the time I was seated behind the counter and given a heavy ceramic cup of acrid black coffee, the aircraft had been loaded and was taxiing toward the end of the runway, wings bending and tipping to the erratic gusts of wind. Or perhaps the buckling heavy plate glass windows of the terminal building, rippled by the strong gusty wind, only caused the plane’s wings to appear to flex.

“Mr. Bradley, I will drive you to the officers’ barracks, where we have a private room for your stay. I am assigning Staff Sergeant Phillips to be your guide and assistant while you are here. He will meet you in the lobby of the barracks at any time you need to go about the island. If the weather is exceptionally foul, as it is now, it is a violation of safety rules to venture out of doors alone. Phillips, or another capable airman, as he may delegate should he be unavailable or indisposed, will be assigned to you for any time of any day or night, not that there is much distinction between day and night here, most of the year and especially during these ten months of winter. Just dial zero from the phone in your room or from the phone in the lobby. You are required to have a companion when you go outside of the compound at any time or when you venture outside of any building during blizzard conditions. Is that clear, Mr. Bradley?”

“Yes, Captain. That is understandable.”

“During these blizzard conditions, with zero visibility and deafening wind, a person can quickly become disoriented and lost, even while simply walking a hundred yards between buildings. There are many other hazards on this island as well, and those will be covered in a brief orientation that the personnel officer, Captain Danforth, will address to you.”

If only I had taken that briefing more seriously. I would not be in such a fix now, freezing to death at the gates of hell. My failure of judgment was surely because of Walter Wego’s urging and his expressed enormous confidence in my ability, coincident with his gross downplaying of the storm’s ferocity and its exacerbating effects on the inherent dangers of the island.

“It’s all your daring and overconfident fault, Walter. Now we could both die! If we die here, my revenge on you will be to claim that all major sins of this dual personality were committed by your part, the fault of my evil twin. Finally, you will then be removed from my presence, and I will be rid of you forever.”

I’ve got to stop daydreaming. I must keep exercising my muscles and moving my joints. It seems to be getting colder in this dark pit. I must have opened a sizeable air vent when I fell through that thick covering of tundra. I feel a gusty and cold air draft. And the once wet walls of this hole are now frozen to ice by that freezing...current of air!

“Ha! Damn your bluff, Walter! I raise the pot a hundred dollars, just on a whim, because I feel either blessed or lucky, and if either gets me out of this mousetrap, I’ll become both, more superstitious and more reverent, for the rest of my life.”

Hallelujah! A steady draft of air! That meant I was not in a simple hole. That meant I was in an underground tunnel with an opening in the direction of the blowing wind. Captain Danforth’s

safety orientation warned me of the maze of World War II tunnels scattered throughout this island. I was warned to stay out of them because they were unstable and were apt to cave in. So that made three, no, four safety violations for me already. I did not log myself as going out into a blizzard. I ventured out alone. I departed from the designated trail, onto the tundra, and I went—or rather, I fell—into an off-limits tunnel. But those last two violations might have saved my life. Now I had only to crawl on a heading against the air draft, and with luck, or the grace of God, I would emerge at the opening where the air was blowing in. It was all so logical, crawl out where the air was gushing in.

Progress was painfully slow, crawling through that soggy cave. The pitch darkness seemed to make time eternal in mockery of my anxiousness to reach the perceived entrance. I had to feel my way, one hand-length at a time, making certain there was not another pitfall. Absolute darkness and perfect quiet lured my mind back into disorientation and doubts of sanity. When I stopped to listen for encouraging sounds, holding my breath, my heavy heartbeats seemed deafening. When I exerted myself to crawl, my rhythmic breathing seemed to reverberate and resonate against the tunnel walls, causing them to pulse, leading my mind to imagine that I was in control, as a parasitic worm maneuvering through the intestines of my unwitting host.

After immeasurable time, as if suddenly transformed out of an unexplained otherworld dimension, the cave opened into space. I could see flickers of lights. In the faint ambient light, my eyes eventually discerned that the cave opened on the side of an inclined embankment. When I attempted to stand, I stumbled and rolled down the embankment onto an ice-packed roadway. Regaining my feet, I squinted to focus on the individual lamplights. I was elated to identify the enlisted men's barracks, less than seventy-five yards away. I merrily began that last trek, and with each step, my sanity gained. Then my consciousness ceased.