



The Day Before Midnight

Stephen Hunter

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THE DAY BEFORE MIDNIGHT

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THE DAY BEFORE MIDNIGHT

Stephen Hunter



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THE DAY BEFORE MIDNIGHT

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If you were at Waterloo,

If you were at Waterloo,

Makes no difference what you do,

If you were at Waterloo.

*–British schoolboys' rhyme,
nineteenth century*

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About the Author

Author's Note

Close observers of Maryland geography will immediately recognize that the author has allowed himself to manipulate the landforms of the state to suit his dramatic purposes. To note two such obvious alterations in reality, South Mountain, though it exists exactly where we have placed it, is not nearly so high and formidable a peak as I have pretended. And the relationship of Burkittsville to South Mountain has likewise been adjusted a few miles to fit the story together more conveniently.

I've allowed myself a similar latitude in depicting the performance of certain military units. Though in fact the Army's Special Operation Group/Delta, the Rangers, and the 1st Battalion (Reinf), Third Infantry, as well as light infantry and tactical air support units of the Maryland National Guard and the Maryland Air Guard do exist, the author hopes that readers understand this is a work of fiction, and although it aspires to accuracy in its portrayal of procedure, its depiction of the performance of these units during a national security crisis is wholly a fabrication.

Finally, the author would like to thank all who gave so generously of time and energy to his researches. These include colleagues Michael Hill, Randi Henderson, Matt Seiden, Peter McGuire, Weyman Swagger, and Fred Rasmussen; friends Lenne P. Miller, Jr.; Joe Fanzon, Jr.; Gerard F. "Buzz" Busnuk; T. Craig Taylor, Jr.; David Petzal; Ernest Volkman; my father-in-law, Richard C. Hageman; my brother-in-law and medical adviser, John D. Bullock, M.D.; my brother, Tim Hunter; and my two children, Jake and Amy, who cooperated (more or less) on a long Sunday drive out to South Mountain. And lastly let me issue special thanks to my faithful believers without whose support I could not have endured: my indefatigable agent, Victor Gould Pryor; my editors, Peter Guzzardi and Ann Harris of Bantam Books; and most especially, my hardworking, ever cheerful, and forgiving wife, Lucy Hageman Hunter.

It snowed that night, and sometime after three, Beth Hummel awoke, as she always did, to the sound of small bare feet padding urgently across the hard wood of the floor.

“Mommy?”

It was the voice of her older daughter. Bean—derived somehow from Elizabeth—was seven, a careful, grave second-grader who wrote her numbers and her name with exaggerated precision and had filled out her Christmas list from the Sears catalogue as if it were a college application.

Beth rolled gently, hoping not to awaken Jack next to her, and turned to face the child in the darkness. Her daughter was very close, and Beth could smell her, warm and fresh like a loaf hot from the oven.

“Yes, honey?”

“Mommy, it’s snowing.”

“I know. They said it would on the TV.”

“The world is all white. Jesus loves the world, he made it all white.”

“I’m sure he does, honey,” said Beth.

Jack snorted in his sleep, came from unconsciousness with a loggy lurch, half rose, then whispered gruffly, “Shhhhhh, girls.”

He fell back, inert in seconds.

“Mommy, can I get in?”

“Of course, honey,” said Beth, scooting over and lifting the covers so that there was room for Bean, who climbed in and snuggled against her mother. The child was still in a second. Beth could feel her daughter’s heart pumping and the rise and fall of her fragile chest. Her little nose was full; she breathed with a vaguely ragged sound, and Beth worried that it would bother Jack, but behind her he continued to sleep heavily.

Beth drifted off herself then. She was dreaming of tropical beaches. But only an hour or two later another soft tread, slightly swifter, slightly lighter, nudged her from her shallow sleep. Poo—from Phyllis—had discovered the snow.

“Mommy!” Poo whispered in a gleeful rush of excitement, touching her mother with tiny fingers. “Mommy, it’s white outside.”

“Shhh, I know,” whispered Beth. Poo was five, a kindergartner, whose blond hair had not yet begun to darken, like Bean’s. She was impossibly beautiful, and as lively as Bean was grave. She was a bossy, feisty child who tormented her older sister, and occasionally her mother. You couldn’t tell her a thing, like Jack.

“Mommy, Jesus loves us.”

“Yes, he does,” said Beth again. The connection between Jesus’s love and the snow dated from an obscure remark made by a Sunday-school teacher a few weeks back to Poo, in November, on the occasion of the season’s first snowfall. Beth had never been too sure what to make of it.

“Mommy, I’m cold. I had a bad dream. Can I come in too?”

Jack sometimes joked that all his life he’d wanted to sleep with two women at the same

time and now he sometimes woke up with *three* of 'em in the same bed.

“Yes, but be careful,” Beth whispered. “Don’t wake Bean or Daddy.”

But Poo hadn’t waited for the answer. That wasn’t her style. She climbed aboard and scuttled like a little commando up the gully between her mother and her father, and slid between them.

Beth felt the brush of her younger daughter’s toes, cold from the long race across the bare floor. Then Poo seemed to merge with her mother, to simply become one with her, the breaths and rhythms joined. Beth pulled the covers up to her neck, felt the embrace of the warmth, its sluggish, numbing power.

But she could not get back to sleep. She lay in the silence, feeling the ease and sighs of her daughters. Now and then something ticked in the house, or a draft of uncommonly cold air came through the door. She lay, waiting for unconsciousness, which did not come. Finally she looked over at the clock. It was almost six. The alarm would go off at six-thirty, and Jack had to be out of the house and in his pickup by seven for a drive to a new job in Boonsboro. The girls had to be fed and dressed for the bus by eight. So finally, Beth decided to get out of bed.

Crossing the floor, she pulled her slippers on and then her robe, a red polyester thing from Monkey Ward that had seen better days. She hoped Jack would get her a new one for Christmas in a few weeks, but since he usually did his shopping at the drugstore on Christmas Eve, she knew it to be unlikely. She looked back at the three heads sunk into and embraced by the pillows. Her husband, an athletic and muscular man three years older than her twenty-nine, slept heavily. He looked like an animal in a den, lost in dreamless mammal sleep as the seasons changed. And her two daughters, facing the other direction, out toward the shaded windows, were delicate and lyrical in the dim light beginning to stream in at the margins of the shades. They were tiny and perfect, their nostrils fragile as lace, their lips like candied slices, the whisper of their breaths soft and persistent. But she was aware that it was sometimes far easier to love them when they were in repose, as now, than when they were each other like wildcats in the backseat of the station wagon. She smiled at them—her three charges in the world—and felt something profoundly satisfactory move through her. Her family. Hers. Then she crept into the bathroom, quickly squirted some Crest on her toothbrush, and cleaned her teeth. She headed downstairs to start breakfast.

Beth walked around the house, pulling up the shades. The morning light was just beginning to show over the trees. Yes, it had snowed; a light powder, unmarked as yet by human traces, lay across everything. Maybe Jesus did love them. The world looked freshly minted. It was radiant as far as she could see. The clouds had cleared overnight. From the kitchen window over the sink, she could see the white roofs of Burkittsville, a collection of sloping rectangles against the white netting of the snow on the trees. Beyond them was the mountain.

It wasn’t much of a mountain, almost more of a large hill in the feckless Blue Ridge chain which had itself seen better days. But to Beth, who was born and raised in Florida, it was a real mountain, a huge hump, crusted with pines, that rose two thousand or so feet above the town. She knew it had been mined for coal back in the thirties, and some of the old people in the town talked about the great Burkittsville cave-in of thirty-four, which had ended the mining operations, and almost ended Burkittsville until Borg-Warner opened its big plant in Williamsport twenty miles away, where most of the men worked. Up top she could see the

red and white towers of the phone company's microwave processing station, or whatever was.

The mountain was something she liked, and in the spring she and the girls would drive to the park and go for long walks along the trails at its base. You got about one thousand feet up it, and there was even an overlook, where you could sit on a little bench and look across the valley, see Burkittsville spread out like a collection of dollhouses, and beyond that the undulating farmland of Maryland. To the left, a dark blur, was Middletown, and farther off was Frederick, the big city. It was a lovely view. The girls adored it. Even Jack liked it, though he wasn't much on views.

Beth shook her eyes from the mountain, and returned to reality. She took out the Honey Nut Cheerios, shook the box, and got the bad news. There was enough for only two bowls—this meant that the third person down the stairs would have to make do with corn flakes. Beth tried to work out the political permutations. If Bean came down last, it wouldn't matter. Bean liked Honey Nuts, but if she couldn't have them, she'd smile and get on with things. Jack and Poo, however, loved Honey Nut Cheerios with the frenzy of zealots. If Poo or Jack came down to see the other finishing the cereal, there'd be trouble. The Jack-Poo relationship was the volatile one in the family because Poo was such a replica of her father—stubborn, selfish, vain, charming. The whole morning could come apart.

Upstairs, Beth heard the shower come on. He was up, that meant, which was a good start to the day, because she didn't want to have to rouse him, a task you wouldn't want to wish on a Russian soldier.

But her heart fell.

Bean walked in.

"Honey, what are you doing up? You don't have to get up yet."

"Mommy," said Bean, one small finger rubbing one sleepy eye, her hair a mess, her little body swaddled in its purple pajamas, "I heard something. It scared me."

"Oh, honey," said Beth, bending to her daughter, "there's nothing to be scared of." At that moment a man in black with a large black pistol stepped into the kitchen. She looked up at him, stunned. She heard the steps of other men moving speedily through the house.

"Mommy, I'm scared," said Bean.

Two more black-clad men with huge black guns rushed into the kitchen. They seemed so huge and she felt powerless. It seemed the world was full of men with guns.

"Please, Mrs. Hummel," said the first man, a blunt, suntanned fellow with shiny white teeth and blank eyes. "Don't make any noise. Don't make any problems."

Beth panicked, started to scream, but a hand came over her mouth roughly, locking it against her throat.

Gregor Arbatov spoke the name "Tata," shook a terrible dream of caves and mountains from his head, and came awake. He found himself where he should be, in the bedroom of Molly Shroyer in a high-rise apartment in Alexandria, Virginia. The time on the clock radio was approximately seven A.M., and already Gregor was late. He was always late.

Gregor still shivered from the dream—he'd been having it more and more lately, the same damn thing. In it, he'd wrestled someone; it was cold and dark, a memory of iron fingers around his throat and hot breath in his face. He had a sense of his strength ebbing. He took

deep breath, trying to clear his head, and touched his temples, contemplating the white ceiling above him. He tried to lose himself in its blankness.

Next to him, Molly Shroyer made a wet noise. He turned to study her torpid form. She was somewhat less than beautiful. With a great deal of effort, Molly was able to transform herself into a reasonably attractive woman by encasing herself in some kind of elastic device that supplied to her body the kind of discipline that her own mind lacked. A muumuu also worked. Molly breathed heavily under the covers, and when she breathed, the image of mountain ranges trembling under a mantle of snow came to Gregor, which is perhaps why he'd been having his cave dream so frequently; the girl, so big on the outside, was tiny on the inside. He knew her to be a delicate, vulnerable, tragically neurotic creature, wretchedly unhappy with her loneliness underneath the excess flesh.

This was Gregor's specialty. In his own small way he was a legend. Gregor, nominal second assistant commercial attaché in the Soviet Embassy in Washington, an old D.C. fixture who drank with Western newsmen, followed the Redskins, filled in at bridge, knew the difference between a Big Mac and a Whopper, was in actuality an illegal operative of the GRU, as Red Army Intelligence is called to distinguish it from the swankier, civilian-run and deeply loathed KGB. His undercover job consisted of agent running, and as he had worked it out, this primarily entailed wooing, then seducing, then turning lonely American women who worked in secretarial or clerical positions in the security or military establishment. Molly, for example, was a secretary to a staff assistant of the Senate Select Intelligence Committee. But Gregor had a few others, all equally enslaved to him, all equally imperfect, all equally rich in self-loathing and impoverished in self-esteem. Yet Gregor's talent and perhaps his most impressive grace was that he loved them all: he really did.

He was not, despite embassy gossip which he did not discourage, a particularly gifted sexual athlete. As a technician, he was irredeemably proletarian: He just got on and plowed until he couldn't plow anymore. Nor was he unusually endowed in the physical sense. But he had the gift of conviction, and the patience to listen, and a slightly romantic tendency. He was kind, considerate, gentle, flirtatious, indefatigable. He remembered birthdays and anniversaries and special restaurants. He always brought little gifts. He gave flowers. He nursed his girls slowly toward friendship and then intimacy and then compromise. It was a good system, carefully wrought, the result of much experimentation.

But on this morning Gregor awoke with a nightmare and a headache, late. Molly preferred him to get up before the sun and slip out, a sensible precaution. He concurred. There were so many foolish ways you could be tripped up by the FBI, turned out and ejected, and the only place on earth this GRU agent did not care to see again was Russia.

He headed into the bathroom and caught a quick shower. A thickish man with exceedingly strong, broad hands, forty-three years old, his body was extravagantly hairy and he left a trail of fur wherever he went; Molly said he could turn a bathtub into a national emergency faster than any man she'd ever known.

You're a whale, he told himself, and it was true. He was easily twenty-five pounds overweight. You need to exercise, be careful what you eat and drink. You'll drop dead in bed one night, and then what?

Gregor dried off, squirted on some cologne (he always tried to smell good), brushed his teeth, pushed the hair he had left on his head into some semblance of wet order, and quickly

climbed into his baggy blue suit. It would need pressing again before the end of the century or the end of the world, whichever came first. He tied his black shoes, thinking how nice it would be to shine them someday. He had owned them for seven years. A little cracked and worn, perhaps, but extremely comfortable.

Molly snorted like a large African game animal wallowing in the mud. Without makeup she was quite appalling to look at. In the dark, when he was riding her like a buffalo, yelping and plunging, it was quite another thing. Now, in the harsh morning, she was the perfect symbol of his imperfect life.

Melancholy seeped through him.

He faced an unpleasant day. To begin with, the boy genius Klimov, Deputy *Rezident*, had called a meeting for the morning, and Klimov had lately been somewhat unpleasant. The morning Gregor had to service his most important source, the mysterious Pork Chop, at a shopping mall out in Maryland, a tiresome, dreadful prospect, very tense, very exhausting. Then, for the worse, he had communications duty that night, which meant sleeping on a cot in a basement cell that embassy tradition called the Wine Cellar, attending encryptment equipment in case the hot eyes-only zapped over from Moscow. In truth, the Americans at the National Security Agency out at Fort Meade, in Maryland, would have it unbuttoned before he could; perhaps he could simply call them and request the message. But the duty, which came about once a month, was the worst thing in his life: It would upset his entire system, which depended on a solid ten hours' sleep, plus a little nap in the afternoon.

And then the other thing gnawing at him, not yet put into words by anyone, but clearly expressed nevertheless. For the truth was, he was now in trouble in the embassy. Of late, the gleanings had gotten thinner and thinner. Where once he'd had nine girls and his life had been a phenomenon of scheduling, an athletic extravaganza, the action was now slow. He was losing his touch. Younger men had been brought in, and they treated him with contempt. Only Pork Chop seemed to please them, and Gregor was only a cutout to Pork Chop, who worked for bigger fish.

Klimov, the awful Klimov, was twenty-eight. Twenty-eight! With shrewd, furious eyes and the energy to work like a beaver, tirelessly. A true believer. A lover of the system, and no wonder. He had a vastly important uncle who could see that things always came to him. Arbatov hated Klimov almost as much as he feared him. And he felt exposed, vulnerable, a target, since he was the only man in the section who was over forty. And because he'd lasted so much longer than the others.

My time, he thought, is almost over.

Molly's left lid crept open, then her right.

"Are you still here, Gregor? God, you're so late."

"I'm sorry, darling," Gregor said.

She laughed, but then turned petulant.

"Who's Tata?" she demanded. "I heard you say her name. Is she a new girlfriend, Gregor?"

"No, no, my love," said Gregor. "Tata's a prince. Prince Tatashkin. A hero from an old story in my childhood. A great knight who saves the world. He came to me in a dream, that's all."

"It's so hard to be mad at you," she said babyishly, scrunching up her features into the mask of an infant. "You're so cute. Mowwy wubs her Gweggy-weggy."

She offered a mouth to kiss. He did, gently.

“I love you, too, my love,” he said, and left.

Jack Hummel had seen the movie *Psycho* at an impressionable age, and for that reason Beth never could fully understand it—he had ordered her never to come in while he was showering.

“Honey,” he’d say to her, “if you saw that movie, you’d know. This guy comes in when the girl is showering. All you can see is his *shape* through the curtain, and then—”

“I don’t want to hear,” she’d say, covering her ears.

So when the door of the bathroom opened and he saw a black shape through the torrent of water and through the steam and through the translucent plastic of the curtain, he jumped, of course, feeling the lingering imprint of the movie. A second later his anger burst out, on the presumption that Beth had, once again, forgotten.

“Beth, honey, how many *times* have I got to—”

But the shower curtain suddenly exploded in a clatter of ripping plastic and popping rings. Jack’s mouth fell open dumbly. In the steam he saw that it wasn’t Beth at all, but some figure out of a terrible dream.

The man stood there in black boots, black combat fatigues, and a black face mask. He had a gun, too, and it was black. Jack, who knew a little about such things, recognized it as an Uzi with about half-a-yard of silencer hooding its short snout.

Jack felt himself pissing in the stall. The water continued to spray down on him. The man gestured with the gun.

“My children,” Jack begged, raising a feeble hand against the surrealism of the moment.

“Oh, God,” he begged again, “please don’t hurt my children. Please, please, don’t hurt my children.”

Another gunman, this one unmasked, popped into the door. He was deeply tanned with the white teeth of a toothpaste commercial and the air of command. He held a black automatic also silenced.

“Come on, now, Mr. Hummel. You can’t stand there all day.” He leaned into the stall and with his free hand turned the water off.

“I hate waste,” he said almost conversationally. “Now, come on. Dry off and get dressed. We’ve got a job for you. Herman, if he’s slow, you might prod him a little.”

He looked at his watch, a fancy black scuba number which he wore inverted on his wrist.

“We have a schedule to keep.”

Jack dressed quickly with shaking knees and trembling fingers, while the man with the Uzi watched him. He couldn’t get the buttons on the fly to work, and it bothered him that the leader hadn’t bothered to wear a mask. Jack wondered if that meant they’d have to kill them all because they’d seen his face.

And it was the kind of face you wouldn’t forget. He had a pro linebacker’s battered mug with a nose that had been broken dramatically into a crooked hawk’s bill. He had almost expressionless eyes, and his hair had been cropped close, almost into blond stubble. His cheekbones were wide and the skin had been tanned until it was almost leathery. He looked like Jack’s old football coach, who’d been one tough son of a bitch.

“Hurry,” said the man with the Uzi.

“Okay, okay,” Jack complained, pulling on his work boots.

Downstairs he found his two girls sitting stiffly in their chairs, eating Honey Nut Cheerios. For once they were quiet at breakfast. His wife stood at the stove. There was a total of five men in black, four of them with an assortment of exotic weapons vaguely familiar from the movies, and the leader with his pistol.

Jack’s problem now was shock. The image didn’t make any sense at all to him. It was as if the guys out of the TV news had crawled out of the box and taken over. He stood there trying to put it together.

“You see, Mr. Hummel. No harm done. Breakfast as usual. No problems.”

“What do you want?” stammered Beth. The color had drained from her face, and her gestures were mechanical. He could see her shaking; she had wrapped her arms tight around herself, as if the fear had made her cold. Her eyes were unfocused. Jack longed to touch her and to make the men go away.

“We don’t have a lot of money,” he said through a clog of phlegm in his throat, though he was certain it wasn’t money the men wanted. But he couldn’t begin to guess what they were after. What could *he*—?

“Come this way, please,” said the leader.

They went into the living room.

“Now, it’s very simple, Mr. Hummel. We have a job to be done. That is, we *may* have a job to be done. We can’t do it. You can. Therefore, you’ll have to come along.”

There was something remote in his voice—not an accent so much as the effort to pronounce each word perfectly. It had an odd, disconnected sound to it.

“And if—I’m just asking—if I don’t?”

“Best to come, Mr. Hummel. We’ll be leaving some people here. Best to come, Mr. Hummel, and avoid unpleasantness.”

“Oh, Jesus,” said Jack. “Please don’t hurt them. Please, I’ll do anything. Just don’t—”

“Mr. Hummel, if you do what you’re told, no harm at all will come to your wife and children. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“You may say good-bye. If all goes well, you’ll be back by noon. If not, it may be a day or so. Your children, however, and your wife, will be perfectly all right.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Jack, wishing he sounded a little less terrified, “I’ll do it. No problem. I’ll do it.”

“Fine. Then we are off.”

“I suppose I’m an idiot for asking. But where are we going?”

“To meet the general, Mr. Hummel.”

Hapgood had tendencies toward comedy which he could not suppress. In his third grade class picture, for example, amid all the still, grave faces, his is the only blur; he is laughing something private, his face gone in the smear of movement.

“Donny,” his mother had said, “Donny, I declare, what *are* we going to do with you?”

As it turned out, very little could be done with Donny. He laughed his way through high school and college and got extremely high grades. He laughed his way into a marriage and nearly out of it. In his profession, his humorous impulses continued subversively, for he made his living amid men who laughed at very little because there was very little to laugh at. But he could not resist: In his infantile scrawl he had crayoned a large sign on a piece of shipping cardboard and taped it above the heavy steel blast door to the launch control center, where its orange childishness fluttered against the rows and rows of switches, the bright red NO LOADING ZONE imperatives from SAC stamped everywhere in sans serif—forbidding solitude in the proximity to nuclear weapons systems—the constellations of red and green status lights, the big twenty-four-hour clock, and the dizzying mesh of wires, cables, and solid-state units that comprised a communications bank comparable to that of a small midwestern top-forty radio station.

WELCOME, the cardboard sign said, TO THE MIRV GRIFFIN SHOW.

Then, just today, on the console panel itself, above the launch enabling keyhole, the famous little metal slot which would, if penetrated, set in motion the probable end of the world in fire, he had added, in ball-point, on an index card, AND HEEERE'S MIRV....

The star of the show, MIRV, was the Multiple Independently Targeted Reentry Vehicle perched in a cluster atop the bird nested at the center of Hapgood's command. The ten MIRVs and their second bananas, the W87/Mk-21 thirty-five-kiloton fissionable warhead, sat atop a tube of black titanium dubbed, with a sense of humor that the great Hapgood could only afford for, Peacekeeper.

This was more famous in the lexicon as MX, Missile Experimental. No longer an experiment, it stood now in its super-hard silo not one hundred feet from Hapgood, long and silent, and enigmatic. A large-payload solid-fuel cold-launch four-stage intercontinental ballistic missile, it was seventy-one feet long and ninety-two inches wide and at launch weight 193,000 pounds. It was fired by three solid-propellant booster motors, with storable liquid hypergolic propellant in the fourth-stage post-boost vehicle. It was guided by an advanced inertial reference sphere and delivered a payload of 7,200 pounds. Its target list included all Soviet “super-hard” control centers, fourth generation ICBM silos, and “very hard” leadership bunkers.” It was, in short, a head hunter, a Kremlin buster, a leader killer, an assassin.

“If anybody from Squadron sees that,” his partner Romano informed him, pointing at the new bit of comedy taped to the launch board, “your ass is history. This is a no-laugh zone.”

“Squadron,” replied Hapgood with a snicker, “is two thousand miles away. Out in Wyoming, fucking-oming, if memory serves, where the deer and the antelope roam. We are all by our

lonesomes in Burkittsville, Maryland, the ultimate lone zone of the entire universe. Moreover," he continued in his grand voice, aching to get a smile out of the dour but focused Romano, "if I am going to unload thirty-five megatons of nuclear doom on top of the Soviet Union and face my maker as one-half of the greatest mass-murder team in history, I'd prefer to do it with a smile on my face and a song in my heart. You're too fucking *Air Force*, man. Lighten up."

Romano, a captain to Hapgood's first lieutenant, two years older and maybe ten years wiser, simply made the unhappy face of a man sucking a ReaLemon bottle. Still, Romano would go easy on the kid: whatever his excesses, Hapgood was the best, the sharpest, the smartest missile officer Romano had ever seen. He knew the procedures and he knew the boards as if he'd invented them.

Besides, Hapgood was largely correct. He and his friend and superior officer occupied the only strategic missile silo east of the Mississippi. Originally a Titan prototype silo, from the late fifties when the liquid-fuel Titan seemed to be The Answer, it had never been completely developed and was left fallow after Air Force enthusiasm had shifted in favor of the western states-based solid-fuel Minuteman in 1962. Now the installation, on a bit of government real estate in central Maryland, had been hastened into operational condition because it was available and obscure, being located halfway between the Pentagon in Washington and the National Alternate Military Command Center at Fort Richie, and also because the Titan configuration called for basing bird and LCC in the same hole rather than remote from each other, as was Minuteman doctrine.

"Rick, I just had a flash from God," Hapgood suddenly blurted out. "He wants us to redecorate! Think about it, Rick! A launch control center done over in—*knotty pine!*"

In spite of himself, Romano smiled.

"God, Donny, what the fuck are we going to do with you?"

"Pray I turn my key, if turn it I must," said Hapgood, touching the red titanium key he wore around his neck on a chain and tucked into his white jump suit's breast pocket.

"But who knows," Hapgood continued, "I might, like, not be in the right mood, you dig?"

Romano laughed at the kid again. If the word came, Donny would turn, on cue, and send the bird on its flight.

It was another day in the hole. They would pass it as they had passed so many others, one day in three, one hundred feet underground in the hardened command capsule of a missile launch site, aware that if World War III were fought, they were the ones who would fight it at exactly the same time they were convinced that their very presence guaranteed that it would never be fought.

The chamber of their drama was a one-piece capsule sunk deep into the earth so that its interior curved at the ceiling line, increasing the sense of claustrophobia; at forty-one by twenty-six feet, it looked like some kind of meditation chamber. The steel floor actually floated above the surface of the capsule, suspended from the roof of the vault by four hydraulic jacks, to better absorb the impact of a nuclear near-miss. The men sat at right angles to each other, twelve feet apart, in cushy swivel chairs complete with seat belts, quite comfortable, quite adjustable, very jet-age. Before each was the console, that is, a panel of switches, ten rows of labeled lights, red or green, each a checkoff to a certain missile function. All these lights were green, meaning the status was go. It looked like a fuse box in

large apartment building or the control room of a television station. There was a computer keyboard by which one entered the daily twelve-digit Permissive Action Link code, or PAL, freeing the machinery for terminal countdown and launch. There was a radio telephone mounted at the base of the console, and it also had a few rows of switches, which could zap the caller all around the installation on various lines. A huge clock hung between the two units. And, of course, the keyholes, marked LAUNCH ENABLER at each console, hinged red metal flaps encasing them. Assuming doomsday has been decreed, the launch siren is wailing, the proper Emergency Action Message has arrived to the encrypted uplink ("Let's hope our EA is true," Hapgood once joked, squinting like a musical-comedy marksman) from any one of several command sources, and the proper PAL twelve-digit code has been entered in the security system, one has to yank the flap up, insert the key, then turn smoothly a quarter turn to the right, this within the same two-second time envelope as one's pal down the console. One man may not start World War III; it takes brotherhood, the true meaning of SAC's mandatory NO LONE ZONE signs. One minute after that—during which Peacekeeper gets its last go-over from its computer baby-sitters—the launch enabling circuits get a short blip of energy, the silo doors are blown, and off the bird flies, its ten warheads, like ten kings of hell, primed for deployment.

Against another section of wall there sat quite a bit of communications equipment, including several teletypes, a satellite communications terminal, and both high and low frequency radios; and at another, racks of metal-covered notebooks which contained hundreds of standing orders and regulations for silo procedure, and at still another, a cot where either guy could grab a nap if necessary. There was one peculiarity to this capsule distinguishing it from the hundreds like it in the missile fields of the West: a small black glass window mounted to the left of Hapgood's console, mounted in the very wall of the chamber itself. It was about a foot square and looked almost like a computer screen. Two words were stenciled across it in red paint: KEY VAULT.

The command capsule was reached by elevator, but not directly. Due to the configuration of the mountain, there was a long corridor between it and the elevator. Beyond the capsule the corridor continued, arriving eventually at a huge safety door, electrically controlled, behind which technicians could access the missile itself. The whole thing was constructed of concrete doubly reinforced with steel rods and coated with a special polymer to discourage penetration by the electromagnetic pulse generated by an airborne nuclear explosion, or by the effects of a blast itself, that is, anything less than a direct hit by a Soviet SS-18, earning its throwload in the twenty-five-megaton range. And sealing the capsule off from the rest of the installation was a huge blast door like a door on a bank vault, usually kept closed tight.

"Junie says we ought to have you guys over," said Romano.

"Uh, not a good idea," said Hapgood. "I think we're in terminal countdown. She spends a lot of time on the phone to her mother. And she's not exactly nuts about the trailer. And look at *this*."

He made a fishy face, and held up the object of his contempt. It was a paper lunch sack with grease spots on it.

"Jeez, I remember when she made bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwiches, or Reubens, or hot turkey, that you could zap up in the microwave. Now look. The sad reality of my marriage."

He pulled out a Baggie with a wilted sandwich in it.

“Peanut butter,” he announced.

There was a buzz on the installation phone.

“Oh, hell, now what?” Romano said. Their twenty-four-hour shift had another ten hours to run. Relief wasn’t due until 1800.

He picked up the phone.

“Security Alpha, this is Oscar-one-niner,” he said.

“Oscar-one-niner, just a security warning, SOP. Be advised I have some kind of disabled vehicle just beyond the gate. It looks to be a van of some sort, off the highway. Looks like some kids in it. Advise SAC or National Command?”

Romano looked swiftly to the console for his indicators for Outer Zone Security and saw no blinking lights, then glanced at Inner Zone Security and confirmed the status freeze. The lights were keyed to the installation’s low-level Doppler Ground Radar networks, which picked up intruders beyond the perimeter. Occasionally they’d go off if a small animal rushed through the zone, and a security team would be dispatched to investigate. But now he saw nothing.

“Security Alpha, what’s your security status? I have no OZ or IZ indicators showing.”

“Affirmative, Oscar-one-niner, I don’t either.”

“Have you notified Primary and Reserve Security Alert Teams?”

“Primary is suiting up, sir, and we woke Reserve, affirmative, sir. Still, I’d like to put a message through to Command—”

“Uh, let’s hold off, Security Alpha. It’s only a van, for crissakes. Keep it under observation and let your PSAT do the walking. Report back in five.”

“Yessir,” said the security NCO topside.

“I’m surprised he didn’t shoot,” said Hapgood.

The Air Force Combat Security Policemen who maintained the defensive perimeters of the installation were traditionally not much loved by the missile officers. The missile guys viewed them as cops, the technologically uninitiated. Besides, the security people were known to have sent complaints to Missile Command if Capsule personnel showed up with unshined shoes or uncreased uniforms.

“Jesus,” Hapgood, a notorious security baiter, said, “those guys must think they’re in the *military* or something. I mean, what is this, the *Air Force*, for Christ’s sake?”

He went back to his homework, part of his program to get an MBA. It was a case study on the difficulties encountered by a fictitious bicycle manufacturer in Dayton, Ohio. Now, with assets of \$5 million, operating costs of \$4.5 million, a decline in sales projected at 1.9 percent over the next five years, what should CEO Smith do? Buy a motorcycle, thought Hapgood.

“I wish he’d call back,” said Romano ten minutes later.

Dad was struggling with the spare tire. He crouched next to the vehicle just off the snow-covered roadway beyond the gate of the installation. The voices of impatient children lashed out from within the interior of the van.

“Dammit, settle *down* in there,” he bellowed. “This isn’t *easy*.”

Master Sergeant O’Malley of the Air Force Combat Security Police watched him from the guardhouse. Even from where he stood he could hear the children inside the van.

“This guy is making me nervous,” he said to the two policemen with him. All were dressed in the uniforms of a private security service, in keeping with the sign that stood above the gate house: SOUTH MOUNTAIN MICROWAVE PROCESSING STATION/ AT&T/ PRIVATE PROPERTY/ NO ADMITTANCE.

“You want us to frisk him?”

O'Malley vacillated. He looked again at his Alert Status board, and saw no change in the OZ and IZ lights. He gave a quick visual sweep of the mountain slope below him, and saw nothing but white snow and black stubble. He blinked, swallowed. He looked around. Where was his three-man Primary Security Alert Team? Jesus, those guys were slow!

Finally, he said, “No. We're supposed to keep a low profile. I'll just go help him along. I don't want him spending the morning here.”

O'Malley drew his parka on and stepped out into the roadway, wincing at the brightness even through his aviator sunglasses. He walked across the hard, cold road.

“Sir, I have to ask you to move on,” he said. “This is private property. You aren't even supposed to be back on this road.”

The dad looked up. He was a suntanned man with very white teeth. He looked, to the sergeant at any rate, like some kind of athlete, a boxer maybe. He had a broken nose.

It was a vivid morning, just a little after eight. The sun spread through the valley. The sky was flawless, dense blue. The chill in the air rubbed on O'Malley's skin; he could feel the mucus in his nose freezing.

“I'm sorry,” the dad said. “I thought there was a McDonald's up this way. I must have taken a wrong turn, and now I've got a flat. Just let me get this tire fixed and I'm gone.”

“Sir,” said O'Malley, “if you like, I can call a garage and they can send a tow truck up here.”

“I think I can get it,” said the man. “If I can just find the lug wrench in the toolbox.” He reached into the box, which was old and battered. In the background the kids began to cry.

The young sergeant was by nature suspicious—his profession demanded it—but when the dad brought out a silenced Heckler & Koch P9 in 9mm, his first impulse was not to reach for the Smith & Wesson .38 he carried on his belt, or to cry out. Rather, he was stunned at the incongruity of it, the sheer, appalling absurdity of such a weapon, here and now, in the man's hand. But he had no time to react.

The major dropped to one knee, and, aiming from a two-handed isosceles position, shot O'Malley twice through the center chest from a range of seven feet, firing 115-grain Silvertips, which blossomed like spring tulips as they tumbled crazily through the young man's chest, knocking him to the earth inside a second.

The major stepped back from the van and its rear double doors sprang open. Inside, two men fired a long burst from a bipod-mounted M-60 into the guardhouse, which shivered, its glass splintering with the impact of the 7.62-mm rounds. Inside, the two air policemen died almost instantly amid a spray of glass chips and wood bits.

The major jumped onto the running board of the van, whacked it with his gun butt, and the driver gunned it. It slithered, kicking up the dust, and whipped through a ninety-degree turn and smashed through the gate. Before him, the major could see three nondescript corrugated tin buildings inside the complex, one of which boasted a red and white radio tower of perhaps fifty feet.

According to plan, they had thirty seconds from the first shot until they took out the above

Romano called back Security Alpha. There was no answer.

“I wonder what that guy is doing?” he said.

“Those cops. You never know.”

“Donny, take your key off your neck.”

“Huh?”

“Do what I say, Donny.” He dialed Communications. There was no answer. He went to the teletype. No messages had come through on their watch.

“Shit,” he said. “I wonder if—”

“Hey, Rick, ease off, man. So the guys haven’t answered the phone. What does that mean, nuclear war? You know as well as I do nobody’s getting down here unless we say so. We control the elevator.”

The post’s entire defensive response to the attack consisted of an air security man from the Primary Security Alert Team with a Winchester twelve-gauge pump. The man with the shotgun fired one shot from behind the Commo building at the major, who clung to the van as it rushed through the compound, but he hurried, missed him, spattering his burst against the van door. Then the van disappeared in a swirl of dust as it reached and slammed into the communications building.

The air security man rethrew his pump and waited for a target to emerge from the confusion. He had a queer sense, however, of being watched, and turned to peer at the Cyclone fence to the left of the gate. He had an impression of someone scurrying away, but as he brought his weapon to bear—it would have been a long shot, anyway, for a shotgun-five charges went off under the fence. It lifted and twisted in the concussions. The explosive was plastique, French-manufactured, detonated by a U.S. Army M-1 Delay Firing Device with a fifteen-second delay.

The young man was blown backward and down by the blasts. When he regained his senses he could see troopers in snow smocks with automatic weapons moving very fast up the hill and through the gaps in the fence. He was amazed at how many there were, and with what precision they moved. He wondered where the hell they’d come from, how they’d gotten so fucking close. He understood, too, that he was probably doomed, that the post was overwhelmed, that unless the guys in Commo got an emergency message out to SAC that he was all over. His own inclination was to run, but he realized he couldn’t. A piece of shrapnel from the fence burst had torn into his knee. Then he realized he’d been hit in the chest too. There was blood all over the snow, flooding down around his combat boot. The shotgun slipped from his grip. He wished he’d killed one of the bastards.

There were three strong points in the compound. The first was the barracks, where the installation’s complement of air policemen was headquartered. One unit of the assault team broke off from the general rush and dashed toward it. Fifty yards out, the four men dropped prone as they deployed their chief weapon, a Heckler & Koch HK-21. The gunner pumped

three-hundred-round tracer belt into the building. The tracers flicked out and kicked through the corrugated tin walls. As the gunner was changing belts and his loader and one other man were supplying suppressing fire, the fourth member of the team dashed forward with a three-pound plastique package with a four-second time-delay mechanism. He primed it and hurled it through the window. The detonation was tremendous, blowing out three of the four walls and collapsing the roof. The barracks team moved through the wreckage of the building shooting everything whether it moved or not.

The second strong point was the launch-control facility itself, with its elevator to the capsule beneath. Generally staffed by three men, it was this day staffed by only two: The other died in the first seconds after the fence burst, when one superbly trained raider kicked the door open and fired a long burst from his Uzi.

The third strong point was Comino, the communications center, which the van team hit, led by the major, carrying an Uzi. There was smoke everywhere, and as the major kicked his way through the haze, he fired a burst into the shapes he encountered. Each went down.

He pushed his way back to the teletype machines and the computer encrypters and the hardened cables that fed into them.

“There,” he commanded.

A man came forward with a huge pair of industrial wire cutters.

“The red ones,” the major said. The man with the clippers was well trained. He knelt, and adroitly began to cut the post’s contact to the outside world, leaving only a single cable.

The major pushed his way through the rubble to the security officer’s office, off the main room. The man himself had already been killed with a machine pistol burst. He lay across the threshold of his office, having been the first of the major’s victims. A satiny pool of blood lapped across the linoleum.

The major stepped over him and went swiftly to the wall safe, where his demolitions man had already crouched.

“Any problem?”

“It’s not titanium. You’d expect better stuff.”

“You can blow it?”

“No problem. I’ve almost got it rigged,” the demo man said. Swiftly, he pinched a lattice-work of plastique into the crannies of the safe. He worked like a sculptor, trying to build a cross current of pressure that would, upon detonation, spring the box. Then he pressed a small device called a time-pencil into one corner of the glop.

“Are we clear?” he asked.

The major, in the doorway, gestured his men out.

“Do it,” he said.

The demolitions man squeezed the bulb at the end of the pencil, which released a drop of acid. As he raced from the building, his gear and weapons slapping against his body in his sprint, the acid began to eat through a restraining piece inside the time-pencil. It took several seconds. When the wire yielded, a coiled spring snapped a striker down to a primer cap, which in turn detonated the explosive. The metal tore in the burst, and the safe was ripped from its moorings in the wall.

The major was the first in, rushing through the smoke. He rifled through the papers until he found what he wanted. Outside came the intermittent sounds of gunshots from the mo-

up.

He beckoned to his radioman, took the microphone off the man's backpack of gear.

"Alex to Landlord," he said, "Alex to Landlord, are you there?"

"This is Landlord, affirmative."

"Get the general."

"He's here."

"Yes, I'm here, Alex," came a new voice on the net.

"Sir, we've got it. We're going down below."

"Good." The voice was cheerful. "I'll meet you at the LCF elevator."

Even the major was impressed. In the middle of the smoking battlefield the general stood looking magnificent and unruffled. But then that was the general's gift. Beyond the force of his intelligence and the depth of his vision, he radiated confidence, beauty, and supreme knowledge. He had a way of drawing you to him and making you his absolutely.

"Report, Major?" the general asked.

"Seizure procedure complete, General. We control the compound."

The general nodded, then smiled. His features lit up; his eyes warmed. His sleek hair was gray, almost white, and had been expensively trimmed. He wore a Burberry trench coat over a well-cut jump suit. He seemed, somehow, more like an executive vice-president than a military officer.

"Casualties?"

"None, sir. The surprise was complete."

"Good. No boys hurt. You planned well. Communications out?"

"Yessir."

"Enemy casualties?"

"Sixteen, sir. Their entire complement."

"The specs called for twenty-four. You'd think in an independent-launch-capable facility they'd be at full strength."

"Yes, sir."

"They had no idea anybody even knew they were here. Still, it wouldn't have mattered if it would it, Alex? Superb."

"We try, sir," said Alex. "I guess we were lucky. We got through the radar all right, and caught them asleep."

"The elevator code?"

"Yessir."

The major went to a computer terminal installed in the wall next to the double titanium blastproof doors that led to the launch command capsule; it was configured like a television screen over a typewriter keyboard and looked a little like a bank machine. He bent to it and typed in the twelve integers of that day's Permissive Action Link, which he had just gained from the safe in the security officer's room.

ACCESS OK, the machine responded.

The elevator doors opened.

"Final assault team forward," said the major.

"Time to talk to the boys downstairs," the general said with a smile.

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