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Barker Must Die

by Jeff Garrity

Part I

Big Rock Bay

The sky was the azure of deepest summer.

Barker wondered where he'd heard that before. Some movie? Didn't matter. Not much mattered at the moment. Cecilia was at the helm of her new sailboat and his only responsibility was to lounge in the cockpit and not spill wine on the deck he helped swab that morning.

They had decided to anchor in Big Rock Bay before heading out into Lake Huron so they wouldn't have to worry about the waves upsetting their promising buffet of smoked whitefish, pickled asparagus, fresh peaches, goat cheese and sourdough bread. The blackened round loaf was made by Cecilia's friend at the Hearth of Michigan Café, whose colorful awning covered a deck hanging over the lake's rocky beach near town, and stood out against the lime green of the sun-washed oaks and maples lining the shore.

"How's this?" Cecilia said.

"Perfect," Barker said, trying to remember if he had a role in anchor-weighting.

The mainsail began to wrap around the boom, the jib spun around itself and soon the anchors dug into the lake bottom. With the mainsail down and no longer blocking the sun, Barker slipped his sunglasses in place and buttoned his shirt to shade the tiny scars on his abdomen, the only vestige of three surgeries to repair his bullet-scrambled guts.

"If you get the cooler, I'll set up the table," Cecilia said from behind him.

In a few minutes the repast was spread before them. The fruity Entre Deux Baies red wine made on the other side of the state was as fine as either had tasted. They toasted nothing in particular and smiled into each other's eyes. The cool breeze was a sensuous counterpoint to the bright and warm sun sparkling the vastness of Lake Huron, spreading across the horizon to the east where Canada lay below the earth's curve.

"Don't you ever get the urge to do something?" Cecilia said.

"Sure, but let's eat first," Barker said.

"I'm serious. I don't think thirty or forty years of this ..." Cecilia swept her hand through the air, "... leisurely life, will add up to anything."

Barker sipped his wine and looked up into the infinite azureness. “We’ve only been filthy rich for a few weeks. I haven’t thought that far ahead. Maybe we could start a foundation. Save the Turtles or something.”

“Turtles?”

“Orphans?”

“I can’t tell if you’re ... “

Cecilia was interrupted by the wail of an emergency alert siren coming from Okinisee’s fire station a couple miles away. The boat shuddered, causing wine to slosh onto the table, and the bowl of peaches clanged into the plate of smoked whitefish. Cecilia peered over the gunwales and the water seemed to shimmy, producing wavelets within waves.

“What just happened?” Cecilia said, still staring at the waves. “I’ve never seen the water do that.”

The town’s siren continued to wail and the patio at the Hearth of Michigan, crowded just moments before, was empty.

Cheboygan, Michigan

Barker scanned the sky for some variation, some indication that the sun was still up there. But from horizon to horizon the sky was a formless gray. It was early morning but noon wouldn’t look much different. Barker wondered when he would again feel the warmth of the sun’s rays or see the whiter-than-white cumuli towering into the sky. How long since anyone had seen the sun or the moon? Six weeks? He felt a nudge from behind.

“Move. Please.”

Barker brought his eyes down from the infinite grayness and saw that the line had moved ahead of him. He looked behind and smiled at the elderly man who had poked him in the back with his folded umbrella. Barker moved ahead a few steps to join Cecilia who was talking with a young mother as they looked over the revised food line schedules the Provos had just handed out. The young woman’s four-year-old son held onto his mother’s hand and stared up at Barker. The boy’s father kept his eyes straight ahead where Provos checked IDs and punched allotment cards before handing out plastic ration bags they pulled from US postal bins stacked on pallets. The Provo workers were behind long plastic tables that separated them from the line of weary and hungry people who had risked traveling from throughout northern Michigan to get their sugar beets, moldy cheese, dried fish and scabby potatoes.

Barker noticed two gaunt dairy goats tethered to a wooden fence and wondered why no one had eaten them. There was a small two-wheeled cart near the goats and Barker assumed someone thought they were more useful for hauling. When the food lines opened five weeks before there were several draft animals – horses, mules, even a couple llamas – but he hadn’t seen them the last couple weeks.

The food line was in the parking lot of the Brulé Beach County Park, just north of Cheboygan, a small Lake Huron town whose population tripled during the warm months in previous years but was now a ghost town, like all the others in the North. The town’s marina was empty of boats, the beach deserted and the shops, bars and restaurants all looted weeks before. Since the disaster, Food Line No. 4 was Cheboygan’s only attraction.

Barker recognized some faces in line from the past few weeks, but not most. There were no reliable estimates on how many had refused the federal government’s order to move south to the settlement zones, but there was no shortage of mouths to feed and the six food lines run by the Provos had become the only option for most.

Cecilia wished the young mother good luck and patted her son on his head. The boy's father was still fixated on the food tables, as if he was calculating whether there would be anything left after the dozens of people ahead in line received their rations.

"I wish I still had my winter coat," Cecilia said to Barker. She adjusted the improvised sling supporting her left arm and leaned into him to shield herself from the damp breeze blowing off the lake. Occasionally snowflakes drifted past. Barker followed one to the ground to make sure it melted. If snow stuck in July, he thought, there wasn't much hope.

"I think they're talking about you," Cecilia said. She nodded toward the front of the line where two men, wearing orange jump suits and holding shotguns across their chests, talked with a woman wearing an orange jacket. The woman seemed to be looking at Barker while she spoke. She pointed in his direction, and the men nodded and began walking up the line. The woman followed but stayed back a few paces.

Barker looked around to see if there was any trouble that might have earned the guards' attention but people in Food Line No. 4 didn't seem to be in a fighting mood. Where people were lucky enough to have food lines in the North, reports of fights and full-scale riots were common. It seemed from limited reports that most people around the world were left to scrounge for food however they could.

"You Barker?" said one of the men carrying a shotgun. He wore dark sunglasses despite the dim sun, and had a dark beard just beginning to gray. The other man, with the same broad frame as his bearded comrade, stayed back a couple steps so he could look up and down the line.

"Who are you?" Barker said.

"I need to know if you're Ray Barker," the man said.

"I need to know who's asking," Barker said.

"I'll take that as a yes," the man said. "Wanda wants to see you." The man's belly bulged his jump suit. Barker wondered where he was finding food.

"Wanda?" Barker said.

"Don't play dumb. Everybody knows who Wanda is. She wants to talk to you. We've got a car waiting." The man nodded toward a tiny three-wheeled micro next to the repainted U.S. Postal Service truck that brought food for the few hundred people in line. "Provo Food Distribution Do Not Approach" was slopped in orange on the side of the truck and all insignias indicating the truck's former use were covered with orange paint.

"What's in it for me?" Barker said.

"Not my concern," said the man wearing sunglasses.

"What do you think?" Barker said to Cecilia.

"Just you, newsguy," the other man said. "Not her."

"Either we both go or forget it," Barker said.

People in line behind Barker and Cecilia were getting restless and began to shout to move the line forward. Next to the tables were large signs warning against cutting in line and there were stories of Provos shooting people who caused trouble so no one moved past them, despite the widening gap.

"We were told just you," the man wearing sunglasses said. "I gotta check on her." He looked back at the woman in the orange jacket who had pointed out Barker a moment before. She had been listening and nodded when the man looked at her. "All right," the man said. "Both of you." There was more shouting from the back of the line so the man looked at his comrade standing a couple steps behind him. "Shut 'em up, willya?"

The man pointed his shotgun above the heads of those at the rear of the line and fired.

The shouting stopped.

“Do we get our food first?” Cecilia said, wincing from the shotgun’s boom.

“Wanda will make sure you’re fed,” the woman in the orange jacket said.

Cecilia looked toward the food truck and saw the guards passing a bag of carrots between them. “We can always listen,” she said to Barker. “Maybe we’ll get a decent meal.”

Washington, D.C.

President Villejo rode in the passenger seat of a black jeep with darkened windows speeding down Pennsylvania Avenue and sending sprays of water onto the sidewalk every time its tires hit a low point in the road. Sleet had fallen almost daily on Washington for the past month and slushy ice pellets splatted against the windshield. There were empty decoy limos ahead and behind the jeep, and Secret Service personnel wearing rain gear and goggles rode motorcycles flanking the motorcade. The jeep’s wipers were a blur and metal tire chains grumbled below.

“Why the snow chains?” President Villejo asked the driver, a bulked up former Navy Seal from Alabama.

“In case this shit doesn’t melt,” the driver said. “Pardon the language.”

“I think ‘shit’ is the right word for this,” the president said, watching a few pedestrians on the sidewalk walking with their heads lowered because of the sleet and wind. One of them looked up and thrust his middle finger at the motorcade. The president looked down a side street and saw a food line that stretched two or three blocks. On another street, groups of people huddled around small coal fires lit in large concrete planters under an overhang in front of the Canadian Embassy. The lone guard of the mostly shuttered building stood watching with his automatic rifle slung over his shoulder and his arms crossed.

The president was returning from a deflating meeting with the Secretary of Agriculture. Before the meeting he had seen some optimistic results from trials in Florida and Louisiana using passive greenhouses warmed only by the sun’s weak rays to grow cool weather greens. But Secretary Ammongis made the point again and again that large scale agriculture, once responsible for producing the colossal number of calories to power humanity, was not viable with the severe climatic change that had affected the entire world. Without more intense sunlight, he said, smaller scale, intensive production could feed a portion of the population, but not four hundred million Americans. Ocean fish stocks, which had already seen drastic drops in previous decades, would be depleted in a matter of weeks, and fish in lakes and rivers were suffocating because the sun’s impotent rays weren’t able to reach oxygen-producing aquatic plants. When the president asked how many could be fed with current infrastructure the Secretary said fewer than a million, and that increasing production and distribution would be extremely difficult because many sectors of the economy were no longer functioning. Within three years, perhaps two million could be fed, the secretary said, but he felt that was optimistic, and dependent on tenuous projections of increased sun penetration.

When the president responded that he understood current food stockpiles were expected to last less than a year at current consumption rates, the secretary nodded and looked away.

The meeting had been scheduled for 7:30 in the morning and the president had hoped breakfast would be included. He hadn’t seen bacon and eggs in weeks and his mouth watered at the thought of a full breakfast with some black coffee to wash it down. He knew he would have succumbed to the temptation if offered, despite his protestations that he receive no special rations, reinforced by the vid showing the president happily eating a meal of boiled potatoes and

canned spinach that had been seen by millions as it played over and over on the side panels of relief trucks in the settlement zones (roughly the southern half of the country, and, because of the reconfigured ocean currents, the surprisingly warm Pacific Northwest). But breakfast wasn't even mentioned when he arrived for the meeting, and the small bowl of leathery, dried fruit at the center of the conference table was picked clean by the five participants before the meeting even started.

We're fucked if the President of the United States can't get a good meal, he thought. "We're fucked anyway," he said.

The driver turned toward the president. "Talking to me, sir?"

Cheboygan

Barker and Cecilia followed the two Provo men to the SanWheel Micro and slipped into the tiny back seat. The low, curved roof made Barker lean forward. Their driver, a young woman somehow excused from wearing orange, was already at the wheel. As soon as the doors closed, the driver accelerated through the parking lot and onto M-23, which followed the northwesterly arc of Lake Huron's shore toward the Straits of Mackinac and Mackinaw City.

Occasionally the car swerved past abandoned vehicles resting on their axles. Pairs of human eyes peered back at Barker and Cecilia from several vans loaded on an abandoned car carrier which had become a mini-hostel in the middle of M-23. Several men and women holding baseball bats and metal pipes stood outside the truck's cab and watched the SanWheel pass.

A few minutes later the car lurched to a halt in front of a checkpoint, set up by several Provos all wearing some piece of orange clothing. Cecilia steadied herself by putting her injured arm against the front seat, but even that slight pressure triggered a jolt of pain through her arm, wounded a few days after the sky went dark when her café was raided by a group of armed men and women claiming to be Provos. She had locked herself in the kitchen and when the intruders tried shooting the lock open, a bullet ricocheted through her left arm. The wound made it difficult to close her hand but there was no infection, at least so far. She heard a few days later that the imposters who raided her café had been arrested and executed by the Provos.

To create the checkpoint, the Provos arranged abandoned vehicles sideways in two rows and left just enough room for a car to pass through the center. The driver produced a square plastic disc for the man who came to her window. He scanned it with a handheld and then smiled as he looked through the window into the back seat.

"Got some VIPs, eh?" the man said. "Say hi to Wanda," he said, smiling at Barker and Cecilia in the back seat. He waved the car on and the Provos blocking the opening between cars stepped out of the way. Some offered informal salutes as the car sped past.

"Where are we going?" Barker said to the driver.

"That way," she said, pointing ahead through the windshield. She was small and seemed so physically inconsequential her clothes seemed to float in space. "They don't tell me much. I'm not one of them. They don't let me wear the orange. They only want you to join up if you got a gun." She spoke with a slight lisp and her jaw seemed to catch with every word.

The car came to a stop again to let three emaciated whitetail deer pass in front. A couple of the deer limped badly and all of them had trouble negotiating the steep ditch half-filled with water. One deer stumbled as she tried leaping to the other side and tumbled backward to the bottom of the ditch. She raised her head out the water, but didn't have enough strength to keep it there.

"There's somebody's dinner," the driver said. "If you two weren't in the back seat I'd

grab it myself.”

The Oval Office

The president pulled a painter’s tarp off one of the chairs in front of his desk and tossed it onto the floor so Vice President Mal Vasco could sit down. Vasco adjusted the chair so it faced the president’s desk but waited for the president to sit. In his early sixties, Vasco had a few years on the president, and half his hair, which he combed back over his bald spot and tied in a small bun at the back of his head

“We’re getting leaks,” the president said, looking up at light brown stains on the ceiling. “They tell me the roof membrane is only a year old. Just can’t handle all the sleet building up.” The windows behind his desk were covered with black plastic because wet, swollen wood had cracked several ancient panes. “Have a seat. Any trouble on the roads?”

“None,” Vasco said, bringing his eyes down from the ceiling.

They eyed each other but neither spoke.

“You’ve read the declaration,” Vasco said after a moment.

“Of course,” the president said, and waited for Vasco to continue, but he didn’t. “You only want to know if I read it?”

“Everyone on the Emergency Powers Committee is wondering why you’ve been silent about what’s happening on Mackinac Island,” Vasco said. “The Provos have declared independence. We have a revolt on our hands. Our house is divided. None of this is news to you but we’re extremely concerned about your lack of action, or even acknowledgement that there’s a problem.”

“I assume you’re familiar with their ideas for trying to keep people alive,” the president said.

“Yes, I’ve seen their propaganda.”

“People are surviving up there,” the president said. “Parents who were watching their kids starve to death are finding help. It’s foolish for people to stay in the North, but if a good number of them can survive, that takes pressure off the food stocks in the settlement zones. And just maybe they’ll learn some things that could help all of us.”

“Let me repeat: the Provos have declared independence,” Vasco said. “And everything you just mentioned is window dressing covering up their brutality.”

“When’s the last time scurvy was a problem in this country?” the president said. “People were in horrible pain in the North and now they’re getting help from the Provos.”

“Boiling pine needles to extract vitamin C doesn’t make them saints,” Vasco said. “Your position puts you at odds with nearly all of your cabinet members, the entire EPC, the speaker of the ...”

“All we have to do is refuse to recognize their declaration,” the president said. “The refuseniks who stayed in the North are finally facing reality and coming south in bigger and bigger numbers. I’ve seen reports that in the past week the numbers are up at Toledo, the Quad Cities, Philly. If the Provos can’t figure out how to survive in the North, there won’t be anyone to lead – people will die or leave. If they can figure out how to survive, and have at least some reasonable form of civil rule, let’s allow them to experiment and maybe find ways to get through this.”

“They’ve weaponized food,” Vasco said.

“When people are starving, food is power.”

“Food may be power, but dependency is subjugation,” Vasco said. “What we’re seeing

on Mackinac Island is the first of the regional warlords gaining a foothold. If the Provos succeed we're just encouraging more of the same. The Provos put a gun to your head, take your food and make you dependent on them. If they aren't stopped we can no longer call this a nation of laws."

Mackinac Island Public Library, Mackinac Island, Michigan

In the library's windowless storage room several candles burned at the center of a makeshift table made from an old metal door laid across four short filing cabinets. Two elderly women, each sitting on stacked book boxes and wearing gardening gloves with the fingers cut out, sewed orange banners onto the backs of a pile of coats, jackets and vests. They received a meal ration for every thirty banners sewed. The large block letters on the banners spelled out "Great Lakes States of America," and in smaller but bolder type below, "We Feed the People!"

"I was just talking to Wanda in the john," one woman said to the other. She wore glasses at the end of her nose but never seemed to look through them. "Wanda said she thinks that woman with Barker, you know, the one who did that show with him ..."

"Cecilia?" the other woman said.

"Yeah, Cecilia. Wanda says that Cecilia knows how to sail. Got her own boat. Or had her own boat. Wanda remembered that from the show that made them two famous. You know, the show from Okinisee when they talked to Mars Girl, and those boats got blown up? What was it, terrorists or something?"

"Of course I remember. I was watching."

"Everybody was watching," said the woman wearing glasses.

"Not everybody. My husband, God rest his soul, wasn't watching. He said it was all fake."

"He's dead?"

"Who's dead?"

"Your husband. You said 'God rest his soul.'"

"I don't know, but he ain't here."

"Because he's not here, he's dead?"

"Might as well be. He's not doing me any good."

The women went back to sewing.

"I can't blame anyone for heading south," said the woman without glasses. "I mean I woulda done it, but I had all my birds to think about. Can't just walk away from 80 cockatiels, most of them babies. Lotta good it did. I should've gone south."

"Ever taste one?"

"One what? A cockatiel? Absolutely not!"

"I tell you, if you roasted one and put it in front of me right now I'd eat it right down to bones."

"You're awful. If we all get to be like those barbarians that broke into my house and ate my birds we ain't gonna make it."

"At least they didn't eat you. Now they got all your birds and you got nothin'."

"I got my peace of mind. That's more than I can say for them guys who ate my birds."

"Yeah? We're sewing on patches by candlelight for a few scraps of lousy food and nobody knows how long until that's all gone and we'd be fine if we'd gone south but I'm fully expecting to die before I leave this island and you got peace of mind?"

A thin young man wearing coveralls and sporting bright orange dreadlocks stepped inside the library's storage room and waited a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. The

women knew what he wanted.

“If you’re looking for more books to burn, you can turn right around and go out the way you came in,” said the woman with glasses.

“You already burned our table and chairs,” said the other woman. “I may be pushing eighty but you touch one box and this needle draws blood.”

“You best believe she’d do it,” said her friend, glaring over her glasses at the young man.

“Wanda’s orders,” the young man said, looking under the makeshift table. “She says paperbacks burn a lot better than the hardcovers and you’re sitting on the only boxes of paperbacks we got left.”

Both women stood and pointed their sewing needles at the young man.

“You want us to stand here for hours and hours?” said the woman with glasses, advancing on the young man. “You ain’t taking these boxes!”

The young man grabbed her wrist, reached behind her and picked up the top box by its flap, then ducked out the door, just dodging the needle the other woman jabbed at his back.

The Oval Office

Vice President Vasco leaned back in his chair. “Mr. President, my mission today seems futile, but I need to at least fulfill the task given me by the Emergency Powers Committee and make certain that you are aware that the Provo leadership has gathered at the library on Mackinac Island, and that the EPC is unanimous in its insistence that we strike them now and cut off the snake’s head. Our information indicates they will disperse this evening after dark.”

The president’s gaze drifted past Vasco to the portrait of former president Amanda Zinlanski, whose grin seemed sinister to him for the first time. He took a deep breath and looked at Vasco. “As misguided as you may think they are, every Provo is an American citizen and I am extremely reluctant to murder Americans. I’m trying to make you understand that given the right approach, they could be an asset to us. There are options to consider between the extremes of inaction and slaughter.”

Vasco took a deep breath and sighed. “The House will vote to impeach if you do nothing, and thirty-two senators have already signed a pledge to remove you from office if you refuse to deal appropriately with the Provos. I assume several more have signed the pledge by now.”

The president smiled. “If you put my death warrant in front of all one hundred senators, there are at least thirty-two who would sign it. Probably more. Congress is not my main concern right now. And given the revisions to the Emergency Powers Act a few years ago, counsel tells me that impeachment proceedings have no standing.”

“Sir, as you are well aware, nearly half the population doesn’t even believe that the Great Disaster was caused by the Yellowstone Caldera eruption! We can’t even build consensus on what needs be a fundamental and accepted truth so that the nation can move forward. And now you refuse to take action against a separatist group that has declared independence. This nation will not survive unless you take your responsibilities seriously.”

There was a knock on the door and the president pushed a button on his chair to release the lock. Inez Bouzel, the president’s chief of staff, stepped inside the room and used her cane to steady herself as she turned to shut the door. Her graying dark hair was parted in the middle and fell to her shoulders. Everything she wore was either black or gray. Bouzel looked over her glasses at Vasco, and then the president.

“Sorry to interrupt, sir, but there’ve been some developments,” she said.

“All right, Inez, let’s hear it.”

She glanced at Vasco. “This is extremely sensitive information.”

“It’s fine, the vice president can hear the news too,” the president said. “We’re all friends here.” He smiled at Vasco and turned back toward Bouzel. “Go ahead.”

“Sir, for the record, I’m very reluctant to disclose highly classified information while Vice President Vasco is in the room,” Bouzel said.

“Sounds like you’ve got someone on the inside too,” Vasco said.

“Sir, I respectfully insist that you do not answer that question.”

“Yes, Mal, we do. Standard counter-insurgency work.”

“Sir!” Bouzel said. “Please.”

“Inez, it’s all right,” the president said. “We’re on the same side.”

“I wonder if we’re sharing the same informant,” Vasco said.

“Doubtful,” Bouzel said. “We’re only interested in reliable intelligence.”

Vasco smiled. “I’ll bet you a steak dinner that the EPC knew an hour ago what you just found out.”

“We verify our information,” Bouzel said.

“Children,” the president said. “Let’s get back on topic.”

Bouzel looked at Vasco again, and then back at the president. “Are you ordering me to divulge highly sensitive information while Mr. Vasco is in the room?”

“I am,” the president said.

“Very well,” Bouzel said. She left her cane by the door and limped to the empty chair next to Vasco in front of the president’s desk and sat down. Ignoring Vasco, she spoke to the president. “Provo leadership has gathered at the library on Mackinac Island. They’re having some kind of planning session. Your national security team is unanimous in its insistence that we move now to take them out. Intelligence says the window of opportunity will likely close at dark when they disperse.”

M-23, Northwest of Cheboygan

A man wearing an orange hunting vest stood in the middle of M-23 and waved the SanWheel carrying Barker and Cecilia onto a half acre of beat up asphalt in front of a looted Food-4-Less grocery store. The windows were all broken out and glass covered the pavement near the building. Two choppers, splashed with orange paint to cover up former insignias, rested near the front of the store with their rotors drooping. The low spots in the asphalt were filled with wet sand and ash, and several Provos holding a variety of hunting weapons and some form of orange on their clothes, stood around a bonfire they made from breaking apart wooden crates. Just beyond the fire, one of their comrades stood on a concrete block with a gallon bucket of orange paint in one hand and a paintbrush in the other as he changed the text on the side panel of a former U.S. troop transport truck from “Provos” to “Great Lakes States of America.” He had already scrawled “We Feed the People!” in smaller letters. All the Provos, even the painter, took interest when the SanWheel pulled into the parking lot.

“Why are we stopping here?” Cecilia said.

“Because they told me to,” the driver said.

“Ask them what’s going on,” Barker said.

The driver looked at him in the rearview. “I used to ask questions,” she said. “Then they busted my jaw.”

Several of the Provos approached the SanWheel and one opened Barker's door.

"Let's go, pal," said a man wearing gray insulated pants with orange duct tape wrapped in horizontal stripes around his thighs.

"Go where?" Barker said.

"I said out!" the man said. "Let's go!"

He reached inside the car to grab Barker's arm but Barker pushed his hand away and got out of the car on his own.

"Do that again and you'll feel my fucking wrath, asshole," the man said thrusting his face into Barker's.

"Fuck you and your fucking wrath," Barker said, shoving the man backward and causing him to trip and fall.

The man regained his feet and lunged at Barker, but two of his comrades grabbed his arms and began pulling him away as he tried kicking at Barker. "One more word outta you and you're dinner, asshole!" the man shouted at Barker as they pulled him toward the transport truck.

Barker heard the SanWheel door slam behind him and turned to see Cecilia being led toward the helicopters. She screamed when one of the Provos pulled on her injured arm. Barker ran toward her but he was met by four Provos. One of the men put Barker's arms behind his back and wrenched them upward until pain immobilized him.

"Listen, even if we knew where they're taking your girlfriend, we wouldn't say," said a man with an orange bandana tied around his head. He seemed to be in charge as much as anyone. "I don't think I need to tell you that things are pretty tense around here. For all I know they're going to drop you from a thousand feet, or just as likely give you some kind of medal and a big chicken dinner. None of us know and none of us care. We do what we're told and our kids go to sleep with food in their bellies. As far as seeing your girlfriend again, that's the least of your worries. So do us all a favor and settle down."

Barker watched as Cecilia was led to one of the choppers. She looked back at him as she was pushed into the co-pilot's seat. The paint on the chopper's body had peeled and it was badly rusted. Its landing gear looked like stairway railing welded in place.

The rotors sped up until they were a blur and the chopper lifted off and headed west.

"All right, your turn," said the man with the orange bandana, and pushed Barker toward the remaining chopper.

Barker heard shouts and then two gun shots from the transport truck as they walked past. He looked back a moment later and saw four men carry the man with the orange-striped pants down the truck's ramp. They laid his limp, bleeding body across two tables set up by a man unfolding a large meat saw.

"Face forward!" Barker heard one of the men shout and he felt the palm of someone's hand knock his head from behind.

Soon Barker was in the second chopper, another rusty two-seater whose seams spilled ragged yellow foam out of its cracked upholstery.

The pilot wore a scraggly white beard and long thin hair not quite as white as his beard. He looked at Barker with watery, bloodshot eyes. "Last time this thing saw action was running wounded in Vietnam." The pilot had to shout over the whirring rotors. "One of these saved my dad's life. Believe it." His red cheeks popped out of his beard when he smiled. "This one's been in that war bird museum down in Kalamazoo. Far as I know it still works good. We're gonna find out either way." He gave Barker a wink and showed his red cheeks again before pushing the throttle forward and lifting the chopper into the air.

“Hey, I’ve got a food stash just a couple miles from here,” Barker shouted over the noise. “Just follow that other chopper and I’ll give you everything you can carry. I hear guys are getting laid for a can of pork and beans. You could have a lot of fun.”

The pilot laughed so hard he started coughing. “You think I ain’t heard that before?” he said between coughs. “I don’t think you got anything to worry about. If they were gonna kill you, they’d a done it back there. Seems like every time I been to the Food-4-Less, they got somebody on the butcher block. Good thing I’m a stringy old buzzard, eh?” His laugh turned into a cough again.

The Oval Office

“Frankly, Mr. President, this is the only time I can recall completely agreeing with the Emergency Powers Committee,” Bouzel said, glancing at Vice President Vasco, still sitting next to her. “I doubt there’s any other issue that would bring such unanimity. We have clear direction from the NSC and the EPC so we need to move ASAP.”

The president, seated behind his desk, tented his fingers in front of his face, and then leaned onto his forearms. “Here’s my solution,” he said.

“Sir, the only solution acceptable to the EPC is to take out the Provos,” Vasco said.

“Force without war,” the president said, looking at Vasco and then Bouzel. “We use the threat of imminent military action to get the Provos to renounce the declaration. We allow them some kind of limited authority to maintain civil society and we create some reasonable rules and monitoring systems about their food gathering and distribution operations and anything else that concerns us. If they refuse to play by our rules we’ll have trials of American citizens, not assassinations.”

Vasco looked at Bouzel but she didn’t meet his glance so he turned back to the president. “This is no time for moderation,” he said. “Your approach only emboldens other opportunists, making an already extremely dangerous situation absolutely untenable. We have no real police powers up there so what you just proposed is nonsense. If the Provos feel any threat, their leadership will simply slink off into the wilderness. Either we send a missile right now and end the rebellion, or at some point we’ll have to commit tens of thousands of troops to sweep the northern forests as the rebellion spreads and other warlords make similar declarations.” Vasco looked at Bouzel again for support but she kept her eyes forward so he turned back toward the president. “I have no choice but to report to the EPC that you have refused to deal appropriately with the insurrection. I’m certain you will be notified of impeachment proceedings before the day is over.”

“That’s fine, Mal,” the president said. “But in the meantime we’ll let the Provos keep running their food lines so people don’t starve, and I’m confident we’ll have a new declaration from the Provos that stops well short of independence once we put my plan into place.”

“You’re saying there will be no attack on the Provo leadership at Mackinac Island,” Vasco said.

“We’ll scare the bejeezus out of them but we won’t assassinate them,” the president said.

“That’s not good enough,” Vasco said.

The president leaned back in his chair. “We’ll go through all the motions of preparing a missile launch and make sure everybody on the island knows we’ve got them in the bull’s eye. I’m sure none of them are foolish enough to think they could survive if we really want them dead.” The president leaned forward onto his desk. “And if they try to run, what do they have? A few boats and helicopters? We’ve got an Army, an Air Force, the Navy and the Marines and

each one has a zillion drones to track down anything with a heartbeat.”

Vasco looked at Bouzel and this time she turned toward him.

“I think this is the best we’re going to get right now,” Bouzel said to Vasco. “I suppose it could work.”

“Who’s the commander in Atlanta?” the president said.

Bouzel tapped the screen of her assistant a few times. “That’s General Rhenfree. Penelope Rhenfree.”

“It’s vital that General Rhenfree thinks this is the real thing,” the president said. “And tell her the president will give the final order. No one else.”

“I want to make it very clear that I speak for the EPC when I say that your lack of action confirms serious doubts held by many members that you are either unwilling or unable to effectively ...”

“Understood, Mal,” the president said. “You have your principles and I have mine.”

“This goes beyond principles,” Vasco said. “It’s simple common sense.”

“You look a little hungry,” the president said. “I think we can scrounge up a bagel or something for you.” The president reached for his desk phone. “Peanut butter all right?”

Three thousand feet above Northwest Lower Michigan

Cecilia could see Lake Michigan in the distance, its deep blue almost decadent against the dull brown pastels of the landscape. Straight ahead she could make out Little Traverse Bay, like a blue finger poking into the brown. So far, every attempt at conversation had been met by silence from the pilot, a woman in her sixties with short gray hair and a pleasant face.

“We’re going to the bay?” Cecilia said, pointing through the windscreen.

“You wanna talk about my grandkids, we can talk all day,” the pilot said. “You wanna talk about where we’re going or why, I don’t wanna hear it.”

“How many grandkids?” Cecilia said, smiling at the pilot.

“None,” the pilot said.

A few minutes later, the pilot noticed her assistant was flashing so she took it from its holder on the dashboard and spoke a few words, then held it out for Cecilia.

“Wanda wants to talk to you,” the pilot said.

Cecilia put the assistant to her ear and Wanda was already talking, but not to her.

“Hello?” Cecilia said, and waited for Wanda to finish.

“Cecilia? This is Wanda Demerest. I’m chair of the Great Lakes States Central Committee. I’m sure you already know that we’re the only authority up here and we’re responsible for public safety and we run the food lines. That’s why I want to talk to you. That show you did with Ray Barker before the disaster, I remember you know how to sail and we need someone to go down the Lake Michigan shore to load up sixty boxes of canned veggies we got from a school district’s warehouse and get it up here so we can feed the people. We’ve got some windmills pumping up batteries but only enough for the choppers and security boats, so this sailboat is a real find for us. But no one knows how to work it.”

“Where’s Ray?” Cecilia said.

“Where’s what?”

“Barker. Ray Barker.”

“He’s on his way here. You’ll see him when you get here.”

“Where’s here?”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” Wanda said. “We’ve got a security detail waiting for you

at the boat and they'll direct you," Wanda said. "All we're asking is for you to run an errand. Pickup and delivery. All right?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"We've got starving people showing up at five food lines twice a week," Wanda said. "My people tell me you and your boyfriend have been in line the last few weeks so you know how important they are. We have access to food so it's just a matter of distribution. You do your part and everybody gets veggies for another week. Otherwise, people who depend on us get hungry and desperate and then we've got trouble and every time we have trouble people get killed. We're barely keeping a lid on things as it is. You need to do this."

"What kind of sailboat?"

"It's the kind that floats," Wanda said. "Somebody said it's a 30-footer, someone said a 40-footer. Couple of our guys found it bobbing off Beaver Island. Double suicide, far as anyone could tell. Bodies weren't dead long so we don't think anyone stripped gear off the boat. The guys towed it in and they told me they cleaned up the blood best they could for you. You'll have three armed escorts, and we'll find you a shotgun. Just in case. We aren't in the habit of handing out guns to people so you can take that as a sign of trust."

Cecilia saw that the chopper was heading toward the north part of Little Traverse Bay and Cecilia guessed that meant they were going to the marina at Harbor Springs.

"So I understand the boat's at the marina in Harbor Springs," Cecilia said.

"Let me talk to the pilot, please."

Cecilia handed the pilot her assistant.

"I swear I didn't tell her," the pilot said. "I didn't say anything."

The pilot pulled her assistant from her ear and looked at Cecilia. "Thanks a ton. She thinks I told you where we're going. Tell her I didn't say anything, willya? Me and my grandkid need the rations."

Cecilia thought about it for a moment, and then took the assistant. "She didn't say anything about where we're going. I see Little Traverse Bay up ahead and guessed. I've sailed there before. Beautiful spot. Used to be, anyway."

Mackinaw City, Michigan

The chopper carrying Barker floated over one of the large concrete piers at Mackinaw City and settled just beyond the sign that directed people toward Mackinac Island arrivals and departures. The dock was big enough to host the last six vintage hydrofoil ferries still in operation, all but one commandeered weeks before by the National Guard to take people south after the resettlement proclamation. The remaining ferry was left behind by the ferry company's owner so a local pastor could use it for Sunday services on the lake, a far safer place than on land for groups to gather.

On any nice summer day during the past hundred years the piers at Mackinaw City would have been swarmed with thousands of tourists headed for the island, but the only people on the dock that day were two armed Provos watching the chopper settle onto the pier. Bobbing just beyond the two men in the harbor's gentle chop was a small fishing boat tied to one of the pier's rusty emergency ladders. One of the men wore an orange hunting jacket and the other man wore the jacket's matching orange pants.

"End of the line," the pilot said, smiling and showing his red cheeks again after the chopper settled onto the pier. The two Provos walked slowly toward the chopper, holding their guns across their chests. They lowered their heads as they reached the rotor's sweep.

“Who we got here?” one of the Provos shouted when they reached the pilot’s window. He had a full black beard that nearly kept his mouth covered when he talked. “Another one for the freezer?” The man looked at Barker, and Barker could tell he was smiling because the corners of his eyes crinkled. “Just kiddin’ man. No executions today. At least nothing scheduled.” His eyes crinkled again.

After Barker stepped out of the chopper the pilot gave him a quick two-fingered salute and Barker kept low as he walked out from under the rotors. Barker and the two Provos turned away from the curl of dust and debris as the chopper lifted off, and then watched it head northwest over the four-mile wide Straits of Mackinac. The chopper gained altitude over the twin spires of the Mackinac Bridge and then banked toward the southwest, well above three enormous spinning windmills.

“Think we should bag him?” Blackbeard asked his companion.

“Might tie his hands too,” the other man said, eyeing Barker. “He doesn’t look too happy to be here.”

The men were chosen to guard the ferry terminal because they each had more than ten years experience as baggage handlers on the dock and knew the facility, and because each had a small arsenal of hunting rifles and shotguns they agreed to relinquish to the Provos. Both were allowed to keep a 12-gauge shotgun, which they kept slung over their shoulders most of their waking hours.

“Let’s get him on the boat first,” Blackbeard said.

The three walked to the edge of the dock and Blackbeard climbed down the rusty ladder to the open fishing boat.

“Your turn,” the other man said, giving Barker a shove from behind.

Barker climbed down the ladder and into the boat, and when all three were aboard, Blackbeard held a burlap rice bag over Barker’s head, causing him to draw back.

“C’mon,” Blackbeard said. “Hard or easy?”

Barker allowed him to put the bag over his head, and realized he could see through the bag’s loose weave. One of the men grabbed his arms and the other bound his hands with a bungee cord. Each man pulled down on one of Barker’s shoulders and sat him in a padded seat in the middle of the boat. As the boat pulled away from the dock, Barker could see that its nose was pointed at Mackinac Island.

“Hey!” Barker said. “I can see we’re headed to Mackinac Island. You might as well take the bag off my head.”

Both men turned to look at Barker.

“Smart ass,” Blackbeard said.

The White House

There was an empty PainKillz bottle tipped over on Inez Bouzel’s desk and she was on her knees using her hands to feel the carpet for the capsule that had squirted from her fingertips. Her office was undecorated, other than a few photos of herself with legislators from her days as White House Congressional liaison to the House Democratic Whip. On her desk there were three screens of text displaying talking points for the president, one screen for each possible scenario she foresaw resulting from his response to the Provos’ declaration.

She decided to abandon the search when she heard her assistant buzz.

“Bouzel,” she said, whacking the back of her head on the bottom of the desk as she tried to stand up.

“Colonel Smidt here. We’ve got a problem with the CO in Atlanta.”

“What kind of problem?” Bouzel said, sitting down at her desk.

“She refuses to prepare the missile launch,” Smidt said.

“Why?”

“She cited some Supreme Court decision from 30 years ago about using the military to kill American citizens,” Smidt said. “We’ve got a civil war on our hands and all the sudden she’s a legal scholar.”

“You have presidential authority to do whatever is necessary to prepare the missile launch,” Bouzel said. “So make it happen.”

“What are the parameters?”

“You choose. We want results. I’ll inform the president.”

“Seems certain bullets will fly. I just want to know that the White House isn’t gonna play dumb. We’re gonna have Americans shooting Americans.”

Bouzel stood from her chair. “Colonel, there is a direct order from the President of the United States to ready a missile for launch. You are to do everything necessary to prepare that missile and if people are gonna die then people are gonna die! Time’s wasting!”

Mackinac Island

Blackbeard steered the fishing boat northeast, toward the south end of Mackinac Island, a four-square-mile hump of limestone with a line of steep cliffs carved by glaciers as they receded ten thousand years before. The island was home to the Odawa when French traders and Jesuit missionaries showed up in the 1600s to ship beaver pelts to Europe and send Native American souls to heaven. Built during the Revolutionary War by the British to control the strategic Straits of Mackinac, British and American troops swapped the fort back and forth until the War of 1812 brought an end to England’s New World ambitions. Soon the island became a popular tourist destination and Mackinac Island became the nation’s second National Park, after Yellowstone, but in 1895 the deed passed to the State of Michigan and the island became its first state park. In keeping with the Victorian-themed shops and vacation homes, motorized vehicles were banned in the 1950s and more than five hundred horses were stabled throughout the island to move people and goods. The horses became the Provos main supply of meat after the disaster.

Despite the rice bag over his head, as the boat approached the island Barker could see the Grand Hotel’s white colonnade and the limestone walls of old Fort Mackinac, the island’s main tourist attraction. The three large piers in the harbor at the southern end of the island formerly served nearly non-stop ferry boat traffic during the warm months and the boat was aimed at the one farthest west, the smallest of the three.

Blackbeard cut the engine as they approached. His comrade reached out to grab one of the pier’s safety ladders and tied off the boat. The two men helped Barker to the ladder and unbound his hands, but left the hood in place, then followed him up the ladder to the pier. All three walked down the pier and wordlessly passed under an arch that formerly welcomed visitors, but had been painted over in orange with the message “Provo Secure Area.” “If You Don’t Belong You Die” was scrawled below in smaller letters. The light breeze carried the odor of burnt wood and plastic.

The three reached the base of the pier and walked past a looted gift shop and onto Main Street at the western end of the island’s commercial district. To the east the street was lined on both sides by looted restaurants, bars, fudge shops, bicycle rentals, ice cream parlors and souvenir shops, all designed to echo the ornate charms of the Victorian era.

Barker thought they were going to walk into town so he started to the right, but one of the men grabbed his arm and pulled him in the other direction. Through the rice bag he could see the outlines of the large, steep-roofed homes on the high bluff overlooking the town and harbor. The Michigan Governor's summer getaway was set off by itself just west of the other homes on the bluff.

After walking a couple blocks Blackbeard grabbed Barker's arm and pulled him down a sidewalk leading toward the shore. Barker could see the remnants of a large, burned out building to his left near the shore.

Blackbeard stopped outside the building next to it and Black Beard reached out to grab the back of Barker's jacket to make him stop walking. Through the rice bag the building looked like a large two-story block. On the far side of the building was the beach and Lake Huron, and he could just make out through the rice bag the Lower Peninsula's sloping hills rising above the water five miles away.

"How do we get inside this place?" Blackbeard said.

"You never been here?" his comrade said.

"It's a fucking library."

"Hey!" a man yelled from the other side of the building, toward the beach.

"Is that Barker?" the man said.

"They don't come with nametags," Blackbeard said, giving Barker a shove toward the man. When they were close Barker could see that "Pierre" was embroidered on the man's orange hunting vest.

"What's the bag for?" Pierre said.

"Just in case," Blackbeard said.

"In case of what?" Pierre said.

Blackbeard shrugged. "You name it," he said.

"I can see through it anyway," Barker said. "I know I'm on Mackinac Island and we're at the library."

"Maybe you two should take the bag off, huh?" Pierre said.

Blackbeard pinched the top of the bag and pulled it off Barker's head. "Guess we're done now," he said to his comrade.

"You're definitely done," Pierre said.

"I want to see Wanda," Barker said to Pierre.

"I'm sure the feeling's mutual," Pierre said. "You'll see her soon." Pierre looked at the men, still standing next to Barker. "You guys want something?"

"Last time we got a box of Cap'n Crunch," Blackbeard said.

"Last time you didn't put a bag on the head of the new Minister of Information," Pierre said. "I think you guys should get the hell out of here before I decide Wanda needs to hear about this."

"Hey, show me the rule book we're using and we'll get everything right," Blackbeard said. "Everybody's making up half the shit they do. We don't know this guy from Adam."

Pierre just looked at him.

"I'm starting to think I shoulda gone south if I gotta put up with this kind of crap all the time," Blackbeard's comrade said. "You ain't even got a bagel or something?"

"We've got a new latrine to dig out back. If you guys are still here in ten seconds I'm getting shovels for you."

"We know when we're not wanted," Blackbeard said, and the two men turned and

walked back toward the road.

“Sorry about the bag,” Pierre said to Barker, starting up the concrete steps that led past square columns holding up the roof of a large reading porch with a sweeping view of the Straits of Mackinac and the Mackinac Bridge. There were several flats of emerging lettuce starts resting on the porch railing. “But I guess they’ve got a point,” Pierre said. “We can’t expect them to know who you are if we don’t tell them, and it’s true that we’re making up most things as we go. You know how we chose orange?”

Barker shrugged as Pierre opened the glass door.

“One of our food scouts found six cases of orange paint in a school basement so we just went with it,” Pierre said, following Barker into the library. “I’m late for a meeting. Just hang out here and someone will come get you. Wanda’s expecting you.”

Pierre walked toward a door at the far end of the library’s great room, passing several tables, empty except for the many maps and documents spread across them. A mural depicting the first human stepping onto the Martian surface was painted on the domed ceiling above the tables. A couple dozen rows of mostly empty book shelves filled the left side of the room.

When Pierre reached the meeting room door, Barker heard voices, but silence returned when the door closed. He took off his jacket, bunched it up, and lay down on a bench near the door with his jacket as a pillow. Within minutes he was asleep.

The Oval Office

The president started to reach for his phone to see about lunch when Bouzel knocked and he buzzed her in.

“Sir, we have a problem at the launch site in Atlanta.”

“What problem?” the president said.

“The commanding officer refused to act on your order to prepare the attack.”

“Why?”

“She said she doesn’t believe that the armed forces should be used for police actions against American citizens. She cited a Supreme Court decision from thirty years ago plus her right to ignore illegal, immoral or criminal commands by any superior officer, including the commander in chief.”

The president smirked.

“Sir, this is hardly funny.”

“No, no, of course not,” the president said. “But I can’t say I blame her. I think it’s telling when the military doesn’t want to fight. Who is it again?”

“Penelope Rhenfree,” Bouzel said. “Exemplary career to this point, but she may not survive this.”

“Let’s make sure she does.” The president thought for a moment. “You mean literally?”

“She brought this on herself,” Bouzel said. “Soldiers are to do as they’re ordered. Otherwise we have chaos.”

“Right,” the president said. “Like at the Nazi death camps.”

“Extreme example, sir. We have a revolution on our hands. There’s an RR company on its way to the base in Atlanta.”

“RR?”

“Rapid response. Marines.”

“To do what?”

“Whatever’s necessary.”

“On whose orders?”

“Yours.”

“You mean yours.”

Bouzel blinked a few times. “Perhaps I assumed too much.”

“Yes you did,” the president said. “We need to tell Rhenfree in Atlanta that we’re not really planning to fire the missile or we’ll have our people shooting at each other.”

“Sir, I respectfully disagree and hope you understand the need for the utmost ...”

The president rose from his chair. “Get word to her now, and I mean *right now*, that we’re not intending to launch a missile. She just needs to go through the motions as if we were.”

Bouzel stared back at the president but didn’t move.

“You just lectured me about how soldiers need to follow orders,” the president said. “Pretend you’re a soldier and get it done.”

“Communications to and from the base have been blocked,” Bouzel said. “We didn’t want her to recruit others to join her side and make this an even bigger mess.”

“We’re on the same damn side! It’s just that she doesn’t know it, so tell her!” The president plopped into his chair but kept his eyes on Bouzel. “If we can block them, we can unblock them.”

Bouzel stood from her chair and started to turn toward the door but stopped when she turned half way.

“Something else, Inez?”

“No, sir. I’ll get word to Rhenfree right away.”

Mackinac Island Public Library

A skinny young man with a shaved head and wearing an orange prison uniform carried a half-bushel basket full of apples in various stages of rot to where Barker slept on the wooden bench near the library’s entrance. He nudged Barker’s shoulder with the basket.

“This’ll be the last apple you’ll ever eat,” the young man said, grinning at Barker and stooping to let Barker see inside the basket. The man looked to be about 20 and wore a large circular key chain dangling from his belt.

Barker propped himself up on an elbow and chose an apple with less rot than the others. “Fell off a truck?” Barker said.

“Root cellar in an abandoned house on the U.P. side,” the young man said, using the common abbreviation for Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, a few miles to the west. He smiled, showing a few missing teeth. “Saw some wild dogs pawing at the cellar door so I shot the dogs and broke open the door. I usually find dead people when I’m following dogs but instead I found all these apples. And we’ve got some meat for supper.” He grinned again.

The young man moved on to the library’s main room, his key chain jangling as he walked. Barker noticed that the keys hung from a holster belt, and he wore a pistol opposite the keys. The room had been empty when Barker nodded off an hour before, but now buzzed with twenty people scattered in small groups strategizing on how to survive in the part of the world they had recently claimed as their own. Each in turn picked an apple from the basket as the young man worked his way around the tables. The women all had their hair pulled back or piled under hats and the men hadn’t shaved for weeks. A great smell of humanity filled the room.

Barker pulled a pen knife from his pocket to cut away some of the apple’s rot. The flesh was so mealy the knife slipped through and he nicked the heel of his left hand, spilling drops of blood onto the wooden bench.

“Anybody got a band-aid?” Barker shouted into the din of the library’s main room, then took a bite of his apple.

“Green and white box in the bathroom.”

Barker wasn’t sure who had answered his question. He looked around the room but no one was looking his way. He finished his apple in a few quick bites as he walked to the bathroom just past the main entrance, and found a cardboard box of bandages on the counter between the two sinks. He used a jug of water labeled “for everything but your stomach” to rinse the cut and air dried it by blowing on the still oozing wound. He chose a large square bandage, slapped it in place and walked back into the library’s main room.

Having nothing better to do and feeling the damp cold, he walked to the wood stove, haphazardly installed in the non-fiction section. Barker followed the flue to the ceiling and saw mismatched ducts leading to a make-shift chimney made of flashing held together by duct tape. The chimney was stuck into a hole hand-sawed into the ceiling above empty metal shelving.

Barker opened the stove's small metal door and used the poker lying on the floor to stir the coals into life. He considered adding the log lying next to the stove.

“Hey newsboy!” Barker turned to see who was speaking and saw a tall man wearing a flannel shirt and leather vest with a reddish beard and blond hair. He pulled several books from the cardboard box liberated from the sewing room and threw them one at a time across the room in Barker’s direction. “That log is for tonight so burn these instead.”

The books slid across the tiled floor to Barker’s feet. He gathered them and tossed them into the fire and closed the door. He saw that he had missed one of the books so he picked it up and carried it to the bench. The cover had been ripped off but he flipped a couple pages and saw its title: *Tropic of Cancer* by Henry Miller. He sat on the bench and felt his mood improve when he read, “I have no money, no resources, no hopes. I am the happiest man alive.”

He read a little farther and felt himself nodding off again, so he tucked the book into his jacket pocket and stood up to stretch. He peered out a window by the building’s entrance, and noticed that the light rain had turned to flurries. “November in July,” he thought. Just past the porch, he noticed that the snow had covered the concrete walkway that led to the beach.

“This I cannot abide,” Barker said to no one, and zipped up his jacket. He grabbed a push broom leaning against the wall and started toward the door to relieve the sidewalk of its snowy burden.

“Barker!”

Barker turned to see who it was.

“Wanda needs to see you now.” A woman with frizzy blonde hair who looked to be around thirty pointed down the only corridor leading from the main room. She wore an unzipped raincoat over a heavy wool sweater.

Barker put the broom back and laid his jacket on the bench by the door. The woman hadn’t waited so he turned the hallway corner and saw an open door leading to what used to be the children’s section.

The young man with the apples walked toward him down the hallway carrying the bushel basket on his head, his key ring jangling with every step.

“Any more apples?” Barker said.

The young man grinned and turned the basket upside down to show it was empty. “And these are for the chickens, he said holding up the gnawed cores he carried in a plastic bag. “I’m saving the seeds. When this is all over I’ll be the new Johnny Appleseed.”

Wanda was alone in the office, sitting on a pillow at a low table and reading some

handwritten notes. There were throw pillows scattered around the table in place of chairs, all burned in the wood stove because they were too small for adults and there were no small children on the island, although Wanda was nearly eight months pregnant so that was likely to change.

She didn't see Barker standing in the doorway.

"Knock knock," Barker said.

"Who's there?" Wanda said.

Barker searched his mind for a joke but came up empty. "Barker."

"I was hoping for a little humor," Wanda said. "We could use some." She wore a fleece pullover, zipped in the front, except where her belly bulged.

"I'll work on it," Barker said.

Wanda turned her attention back to the notes she was reading. "We need some responses to what the administration's going to throw at us," Wanda said, glancing up only briefly. "I'm sure they've got all their big guns poring over our declaration and they'll be firing back soon. We don't have much time." She looked up and smiled. "By the way, nice to meet you. I assume you're fine with taking over as Minister of Information. Cal did a fine job. He died a hard death." Her face sank, but she caught herself and managed a smile. "I guess you've heard all about that."

"I had no idea why I was brought here and no one's ever mentioned Cal," Barker said.

Wanda sighed and rubbed her belly. "Sorry," she said with a smile. "He would've been a good dad." She pointed at a blue and white striped pillow on the other side of the table and Barker sat down with his legs folded and leaned back, propping himself with his palms on the tightly woven carpet. He ignored the mild pain from the fresh cut in the heel of his hand.

"We're going to be in the middle of a shit storm pretty soon," Wanda said. "We figure they'll come up with a formal response to the declaration before they send in the Marines so they'll have some kind of justification for whatever they're going to do. We just need to stay one step ahead." She looked up from her papers. "Then maybe we can head off a shooting war."

"Any word from Cecilia?" Barker said.

Wanda thought for a moment. "Who?"

"The woman your people picked up with me," Barker said.

"Right. Cecilia. No. Nothing."

"I'd like to know that she's okay."

"I'm sure she's fine. She went down the Lake Michigan shore to pick up some food. She'll be here soon. Later today or tomorrow. Right now I've got a job for you. I'd like you to work with Carruthers and hammer out ten or so statements we're likely to hear from the administration, and then develop responses for each. We need a draft by tomorrow morning."

"I'm sure you're in communication with whoever she's with," Barker said. "I just want to know if she's okay."

"Know if *who* is okay?" Wanda said. Remembering, she rolled her eyes. "The Feds are jamming every bit of wireless data, and the hard wires up here haven't been used in a decade so there are gaps all over the place. We won't know anything until we see the sailboat." Wanda arched her back to stretch. "Barker, we need you to focus. Maybe we jumped the gun putting you in charge of communications, but if you keep going on about ..." Wanda closed her eyes, unable to remember the name.

"Cecilia."

"Cecilia ... we'll find someone else. We've got a thousand things to deal with but if we

fail to convince the world that we have the moral right, if not the obligation, to help people abandoned by their own government, we're going to see the Marines any day now."

"Just a quick call? I know you have communications. Those two goons who brought me here were talking to someone."

Exasperated, Wanda shook her head. "All right, sure. We do have an old analog two-way on the boat. We'll call the boat so anyone with a scanner will know we've got a boat full of food heading this way and all they have to do is kill a few people and it's all theirs. Would that make you feel better?"

The White House

Bouzel was in her office talking with Colonel Smidt in Atlanta. She held her assistant to her ear with one hand, and massaged the furrows in her forehead with the other.

"What do you mean I can't talk to her?"

"We shot her," Colonel Smidt said. "She's dead."

"Dead?" Bouzel said. "You're sure she's dead?"

"She's three feet from me," the colonel said. "Doc confirmed it and zipped her up."

"This is a problem," Bouzel said.

"I *told* you there would be bullets flying. She pulled a weapon. We were under orders."

"How many fired?"

"Probably four of us," Smidt said. "I don't think Pinleff ever fired. Said his gun jammed. I think his brain jammed."

"How many bullets hit her?"

"I don't know. Maybe ten."

"Are you sure?"

"At least ten."

"Did she fire back?"

"No. I smelled the gun after it was over. Nothing."

"Then you need to fire her weapon at least a couple times."

Bouzel pulled her assistant away from her ear. "Damn it! Next time, warn me when you shoot," she said.

"I'm hit!" the colonel screamed. "God damn it! In the gut."

"Who's shooting? Hello? Hello? Who's firing? Hello! Damn it, somebody talk to me!"

Finally, Bouzel heard a different man's voice. "Identify yourself!" the voice yelled into her ear.

"Who is this?" Bouzel said.

"I told you to identify yourself," the voice said.

"I am Chief of Staff to the President of the United States and we are in crisis mode," Bouzel said. "I demand to know who you are, your rank and the name of your commanding officer."

"Blow it out your ass. You're all a bunch of fuck-ups. We just sent a missile to do what you incompetent assholes should've done already."

"Do you realize ... hello? Hello!?" Bouzel nearly fell off her chair reaching for her cane, but regained her balance and scurried out the door and down the hall with surprising speed, given that most of her body below the waist had been reconstructed.

She noticed the Oval Office door wasn't fully closed so she pushed it open and started

talking before she was inside.

“Sir, shots have been fired in Atlanta and we believe the base commander has been killed and the new base commander has arrived but we’ve got problems.”

The president was sitting in front of the cold fire place and had been watching DisneyNews speculate about troop movements around Atlanta. “The commander’s dead? How?”

“Shot.”

“By our troops?”

“They’re all ours, sir. But that’s the least of our problems. I believe there’s a coup under way and a missile has been fired. The library at Mackinac Island is the target.”

Mackinac Island Public Library

Barker walked into what was once the library director’s office and saw Carruthers in a wooden chair leaned back against a wall with his arms crossed. He wore jeans and a sweatshirt and the bill of his Lake Superior State University baseball cap was pulled down over his eyes. Barker wondered why nothing he wore was orange. The small room’s lights were off but the shades were open.

“You awake?” Barker said.

Carruthers uncrossed his arms and angled his head back far enough to look under the bill of his hat to see who was talking.

“Wanda wants me to work with you on the responses,” Barker said. “She’s giving us until tomorrow morning.”

“Who are you?” Carruthers said.

“Barker.”

Carruthers studied Barker’s face. “Oh, right. I recognize you now,” he said through a yawn. “I remember that show you did a couple years ago on that restaurant. They were serving dog meat or something.”

“None of that was true,” Barker said.

Carruthers pushed his cap up so he didn’t have to lean his head back. “I remember documents or something.”

“Forgeries.”

“Still, it was a great show,” Carruthers said. “That crazy ass dude chasing you with a meat cleaver and all those dogs running into the street, traffic all fucked up and those cops running around with no idea what to do. Crazy story, man.”

“Wanda wants us to get started,” Barker said.

“I’m better later in the day,” Carruthers said. “Why don’t you relax and settle in and we’ll get to work in a couple hours. I need some sleep. We’ve been talking about this for days. Just need to put down on paper what’s already upstairs.” He tapped his forehead with his finger a couple times and pulled his baseball cap down over his eyes. “Just give me a couple hours.”

Barker pulled the door shut behind him and walked back to the library’s main room. He stood facing several small groups of people scattered around the large tables, all in earnest discussion. Barker wondered if he should tell someone he was going for a walk on the beach but decided against it and turned to walk out into the afternoon chill. The flurries had stopped and the snow on the walkway had melted. As he walked west along the gravelly shoreline, crunching mussel shells underfoot, he could see three huge wind turbines through the haze a few miles to the south across the Straits of Mackinac. He assumed he’d be able to see Cecilia’s sailboat from

at least a mile but he saw nothing on the water. The magnificent suspension bridge spanning the Straits seemed to Barker like a relic from a bygone era. His mood sank when he realized it was.

Off to the south he thought he heard the rumble of distant thunder, but that didn't seem likely. In an instant the guttural grumbings grew into a deafening roar and he was thrown face first onto the beach by a massive explosion that froze time.

As his hearing began to return and his body recovered from the shock, he got up to his knees and looked back toward where the missile hit and saw that the library he had walked away from moments before was now little more than smoldering rubble. He looked up into the sky and saw thousands of fluttering book pages falling around him like propaganda leaflets.

The Oval Office

"Lieutenant General Lierti has troops we believe are loyal to him taking defensive positions around the base in Atlanta," Bouzel said, after she burst into the Oval Office. "They've either killed or captured all the members of our RR team. Details are coming but we think Lierti has access to at least one hundred additional missiles at the base. We may be targeted. I suggest we move underground immediately."

The president stood from one of the high-backed chairs facing the cold fireplace. "No, we'll deal with this from here," the president said. "I'm not running from some punk general who thinks he outranks me. NSC?"

"On their way," Bouzel said, thumbing her assistant to change meeting locations.

"Do I know Lierti?"

"General Sheldon Lierti," Bouzel said. "He wasn't our first choice to take charge of the base, but he was in Huntsville and was able to get there fast. He's the youngest three-star we have. Moved up fast running counter-insurgency in the Arabian Peninsula and kept a low profile by necessity. I've got his backgrounder right here." Bouzel read from her assistant. "It says that his 'considerable personal ambition figures heavily in his decisions and alliances.' Given the situation, and your concerns about General Rhenfree, we chose proximity over personality."

"What'd they do, storm the base?"

"Lierti and his troops were expected as support for the RR team so there was no initial resistance." Bouzel looked at her assistant. "Just getting word now that we scrambled some bombers from Shaw AFB in South Carolina. They're going to hit the missiles and take out the launchers." She kept reading on her assistant. "And we have loyal troops arriving at the base in Atlanta in a few minutes, plus we can drop paratroopers if necessary." She looked up from her assistant. "Of immediate concern is whether Lierti fires any of those missiles before we take them out. And, of course, what their targets might be."

"You're absolutely sure you don't want to go underground?" Bouzel said, using her cane to walk across the room toward the president. "I'd like to live another month to see my first grandbaby born."

"We'll be fine," the president said.

Bouzel looked at her assistant. "We're getting indications that most of the troops with Lierti aren't aware they're on the wrong side of a coup," she said. "Desertions have been growing as word spreads." She looked up from her assistant. "We're being asked for guidance. There are six, no seven, of the nine on the NSC who say we should try to limit casualties and encourage a quick surrender."

The president's eyes snapped toward Bouzel. "We will do whatever it takes to secure the base as quickly as possible. Period."

“Are we prepared for the appearance of civil war? Body bags. Distraught families. Funerals for American soldiers killed by American soldiers.”

“The only real danger is letting this fester,” the president said, leaning against the high backed chair. “Imagine the consequences if this revolt appears to have some chance of succeeding.”

“I must say, sir, if you’d shown the same resolve in dealing with the Provos, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“This is opportunism,” the president snapped. “Pure and simple.”

They both turned toward the door when Cordis Cortein stuck his head inside and offered a friendly “Ciao!” Cortein, the president’s chief strategist was the first to arrive for the National Security Council meeting. He wore a linen suit, and a rubber band stretched around his head held a pheasant feather sticking up from the back. He wore no shoes or socks.

“Better than we could’ve hoped for, huh?” Cortein said, after he stepped inside the door. No one said anything so he walked halfway to where the president and Bouzel stood and sat cross-legged on the floor. “The Provos are wiped out and it’s not our fault! They’re out of our hair and someone else did it.” Cortein unbuttoned his suit coat and leaned back, propping himself up with his hands. “Everything is cleaning up nicely in Atlanta and your numbers are wavering a bit but trending up, mainly because of your perceived decisive action over the past half hour.” Cortein paused for comment but none came. “Seems most everyone who wanted the strike is happy the Provos are gone, and those who didn’t are blaming a rogue general.” Cortein waited again but the president and Bouzel just looked at him. “If I didn’t know any better I’d say it was divine intervention.” Cortein pulled his assistant from his suit coat pocket. “And, hey, look at that,” he said after reading the short message on his screen. “Lierti’s dead.” There was still no reaction. He looked at his assistant again. “Yup, he took seven bullets.” He looked at the president, who was staring into the fireplace, and then at Bouzel, who studied her shoes. “You two fighting?”

Near Skillagalee Island, Lake Michigan

Cecilia hunched low to avoid the worst of the wind as she sailed northeast along the Lake Michigan shore toward the Straits of Mackinac. She occasionally looked up to check the mainsail’s attitude, and to gauge her distance from the shoreline to the east. She had just passed Skillagalee Island and was heading toward Waugoshance Point and its small archipelago that jutted due west into Lake Michigan from the tip of the Lower Peninsula. Once she passed Waugoshance, she would bear due east into the Straits.

As the first drops hit, she wondered if there was any rain gear onboard.

She glanced behind her at the three dead men slumped in the sailboat’s cockpit and thought about taking the orange raincoat off one of the men, but decided against it when she saw how blood-soaked it was. Earlier she had opened the scuppers to drain a pool of blood and saw that soon it would be time to do it again. Each of the three men had taken at least two hunting arrows.

Her first instinct had been to try pushing them overboard after the boat was out of range from the attackers’ compound and cross bows, but with the strong winds heaving the sailboat nearly to the point of capsize she knew in order to travel fast she needed the dead weight for ballast. Plus, she thought, someone somewhere might want to bury them. Whoever they were.

The sailboat, a 36-footer out of Charlevoix dubbed the Lee Sure IV, was riding high and light because it had been stripped of everything nonessential to make room for the cargo they

never brought onboard.

There had been at least six attackers hidden behind the dock's pilings as Cecilia brought the boat into the tiny harbor at Cross Village. If the attackers had waited until the boat docked, she knew she'd be dead. But the boat still had momentum when the first arrow hit one of her guards, so she redeployed the mainsail and spun the wheel to head back out into open water while the other two Provos held off the attack. Cecilia kept low in the cockpit as the arrows flew.

A few arrows went through the mainsail, but otherwise she thought the boat was in good shape. On any other day she would have reduced the sails because of the strong winds, but she wanted speed so she left them fully deployed, despite heavy lurches that took the boat's gunwales to the waterline.

The last of the three men to die told her that the plan had been to deliver the food to Mackinac Island, where Wanda and the other Provo leaders were meeting. Cecilia assumed she'd find Ray there too, but before the dying man's lungs filled with blood he told her everyone would leave after dark that day. She was at least a few hours away but when she looked ahead she was pleased to see the string of islands west of Waugoshance Point like little bumps on the horizon.

"Hang on, Ray, I'm on my way," she said.

Mackinac Island

Barker sat against the trunk of a large pine tree in the small park next to the library's rubble. Small fires still smoldered among the ruins despite the rain that began falling just after the attack. Barker looked up through the pine tree's limbs. Needles on one side of the tree had been burned off by the blast. He felt hungry, but the odors mingling in the smoke made him nauseous. And he had no food anyway. He stood and reached up to grab a few pine needle clumps, and then rubbed them between his hands to release their sharp scent.

Above the rooftops of the town, he could see the white limestone walls of old Fort Mackinac, perched on two hundred foot bluffs. From the conversations he overheard in the library, the fort was the main food storage site. He wondered how hard it would be to find the cache.

He turned to look toward the Straits and was glad for the first time that he didn't see Cecilia's boat. There was no reason for them to leave anyone alive, including her. Or him. Whoever they were.

The Oval Office

As Bouzel walked down the hall to the Oval Office, she re-read the cable on her assistant to make sure she knew the details. When she knocked and pushed open the president's door he was sitting at his desk.

"The missile took out an unexpected target," Bouzel said. The hand on her cane shook as she lowered herself into one of the chairs facing the president's desk. "This may be a problem."

"What kind of target?" the president said.

"Ray Barker," Bouzel said, laying her cane across her knees.

"Barker was a target?"

"No, but he was in the library and was killed in the attack," Bouzel said. "Our guy on the island sent a message up the line that Barker was there just before the strike. I only saw it a few minutes ago."

“What the hell was Barker doing on Mackinac Island?” the president said.

“We don’t know yet,” Bouzel said. “We may never. Everyone’s dead.”

The president rubbed his eyes and then leaned back and studied the expanding stains on the ceiling. “Everyone on the entire island?”

“The missile had a micro-head that sends its blast straight down so only people in and very near the library were killed,” Bouzel said. “We’re pretty sure there are a few refuseniks scattered around the island trying to eke out some sort of existence, and probably some armed Provos too. But without direction the remaining Provos are just thugs with guns like everybody else up there.”

“So we really haven’t confirmed anything, including Barker’s death,” the president said.

Bouzel hit a few buttons on her assistant and unsteady vid from the library’s interior appeared on one of the president’s wall screens. The camera slowly panned the library’s main room and showed small groups huddled in various parts of the library. As the camera swept toward the library’s entrance Bouzel stopped the vid.

“There,” she said. “That’s him.”

Toward the right side of the image Barker stood facing the camera. There was a white circle around his head.

“We’re sure that’s him?” the president said.

“Yes, our guy identified everyone in the room, including Barker. This is less than a minute before the missile hit.”

“What about Cecilia? Was she there too?”

“We don’t think so,” Bouzel said. “There’s some indication that she was with Barker recently but no confirmation. We had nothing connecting either Barker or Cecilia to the Provos. Until this.”

“Has anyone asked our inside guy?” the president said.

“He’s dead. Killed by the missile.”

The president paused for a moment. “And we’re sure Barker is dead.”

“Yes.”

The president looked at Bouzel. “We’re certain?”

“We’ll have confirmation soon. We’ve got a couple boots on their way to the site and they’ll scan for Barker’s DNA.”

“If we have no data, how are you so sure? Maybe Barker took the garbage out or something before the missile hit.”

“There’s more vid,” Bouzel said. She hit a couple buttons on her assistant. “You can clearly see Barker in this one. We’re fairly certain that this was just seconds before the attack.”

Bouzel tapped her assistant again and the wall screen showed Barker sitting on the bench near the library’s entrance reading a book.

“We had the vid analyzed,” Bouzel said. “It’s Barker.”

“All right, but let’s wait until we get the DNA evidence before making any statements,” the president said, leaning back in his chair. “And I want to know if we find anything linking Barker and Cecilia to the Provos.” The president rubbed his eyes. “Christ, what a mess.”

Mackinac Island

With his hands in his jacket pockets and turned away from the chilly breeze coming off the water, Barker watched three gulls fighting over the remains of a dead fish forty yards down the shore. Ahead were the smoldering library ruins. He left the beach and walked up the charred

walkway and was nearly overwhelmed by the stench as he stood at the edge of the porch. There were still stubs of two pillars that supported the reading porch's roof. Barker unzipped his jacket and lifted his shirt up and over his mouth and nose. It didn't help much.

Finding a key to the food stores among the destruction before him seemed impossible. He wasn't even sure there would be a key. Perhaps access would require an eye scan. Even if he found a key, perhaps he'd never find the cache.

But after only a few minutes of looking he saw a mangled and charred body on the edge of the ruins with a bundle of keys attached to the remains of a blackened leather holster. Barker was pleased to see that only a few of the keys were bent, and those only slightly. He unhooked the key chain but dropped it because the metal still held heat from the explosion and fires. He found a piece of torn fabric nearby and looped one end through the key chain, then tied its two ends together so he could carry the keys, and started for the white limestone walls of the fort.

The White House Situation Room

The principals of the National Security Council were seated around the Situation Room's large oak table, but Cordis Cortein, still wearing his feather headdress, sat cross-legged on the floor in a corner next to a Christmas cactus in full bloom. As the members waited silently for the president to arrive, everyone but Cortein focused on their assistants, occasionally swiping or thumbing their screens. Cortein picked succulent leaves from the Christmas cactus and piled them neatly on the carpet.

The dish of roasted peanuts at the center of the table was already empty. When they heard the door to the presidential washroom open and close, some hurried to finish messages and others laid their assistants on the table.

"Let's skip past the coup for now since that seems to be settled," the president said as he strode across the room and sat at the head of the table. "What's on my mind now is Barker. His death is just hitting people's screens and we need to be on top of this." The president looked over his shoulder at Cortein, still stacking leaves. "Cordis? Thoughts?"

Without looking up, Cortein launched into his analysis. "Barker's been out of sight for a while, since well before the disaster, but his numbers are still excellent and he carries a lot of goodwill and some of that could transfer to us if we get on the right side of the story."

"What's the story?" the president said.

"We would've taken out the Provo leadership earlier but we had to get Barker out of there first. Because of Lierti's haste, Barker's dead. We were prudent and careful, Lierti was rash and careless and he killed an American hero without the authority to do so. That should put a dent in the residual admiration we saw in Lierti's recent numbers, and maybe reduce some of the disgust people feel for you, Mr. President."

The president looked around the table but no one spoke. "Admiral Moriarity?"

Admiral Moriarity cleared his throat. "I suppose I can live with that," he said. "I think calling Barker an American hero is beyond farcical, but I also see a desperate need to rebuild trust among the American people."

"By lying to them?" said Secretary of Energy Riane Begole. "I never met my grandfather but I have a picture of him carrying his favorite anti-war sign at a march during the Vietnam War. It said 'fighting for peace is like fucking for virginity.'" She looked at the president. "Lying to build trust makes no sense."

"And let's give Barker an Arlington burial," Cortein said, standing up. "A little diversion from the misery. We'll remember a fallen hero and boost people's spirits. Bring the country

together.”

“Arlington? Really?” The president scanned the room to check reaction.

“Sir, I have to object to any suggestion that Barker receive military honors,” Admiral Moriarity said. “That would make a mockery of a long and honorable tradition and demean the men and women who have distinguished themselves” – he looked at Secretary Begole – “by fighting for peace.”

“Cordis?” the president said.

Cortein faced the door and stood with one hand in his suit coat pocket, and one foot ahead of the other as if someone had pushed his pause button.

“Cordis? Anybody home?”

“There are many ways to serve one’s county,” Cortein said, finally hitting play. “We can certainly make a case that Barker and Cecilia served our great nation by risking their lives to uncover President Flanagan’s barbaric, murderous behavior.”

“Despite the fact that President Flanagan was actually trying to save us from the asteroid that caused the Great Disaster,” Attorney General Andrea Malthus said.

“Andi!” Bouzel said, with obvious disgust. “There was no asteroid! It was the Yellowstone Supervolcano!”

“You can repeat that story all you want,” Malthus said. She turned to glare at the president. “But you haven’t convinced me, or a whole lot of Americans like me.”

“Barker’s favorables just jumped another three points,” Cortein said, looking at his assistant, and sitting cross-legged on the floor again. “He’s at seventy-seven percent, just twelve percent unfavorable. And that’s only people in the settlement zones. I assume they’d be even higher in the north, but we have no way to poll up there.”

“His numbers are improving because he’s dead,” National Security Advisor Daniella Forsher said, looking at the president. “And we don’t know why he was on the island. What do we do if we bury him at Arlington and then it becomes known, or even widely believed, that he was one of the Provos? Dig him up?”

“The mere suggestion that we bury a traitor at Arlington offends me, Mr. President,” Malthus said. “And it will offend all right thinking Americans.”

“We don’t know how or why he was on the island,” Cortein said. “But we control the story because there’s no one left to contradict us. There will be partisan noise but that won’t move the numbers much. Here’s the approach I favor: just like what he and Cecilia did to stop the murder of Mars Girl and avenge the deaths of sixteen American heroes, Barker went to Mackinac Island to stop the separatists from pulling this country apart, although this time without camera or microphone. He sought no glory or recompense, but only to serve his nation in a time of peril.”

“Do we have anything to bury anyway?” Forsher said.

“Closed casket,” Cortein said, with strain in his voice because he was doing some sort of yoga pose. Both knees and one hand were on the floor, and the other hand reached for the ceiling. “We’ll say we’re burying his remains. The vast majority won’t want to see what that means.”

“I’m sure we can find something on the island,” Bouzel said.

“Just need somebody’s finger or toe,” Cortein said, switching hands and facing the wall. “Like relics in European cathedrals. Any corporal representation, real or not, provides a sense of legitimacy.”

“I’d like to make it clear again that I vehemently object to an Arlington burial,” Malthus

said.

“Ditto,” Forsher said.

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing,” Secretary Begole said. “Maybe we do something crazy like wait until we find out why Barker was there and then tell the American people the truth. I mean, think about it. We face mass starvation in less than a year and we’re totally consumed with where to bury a dead guy who made a fortune making up lies to get eyeballs!”

“I see this decision as directly related to our ability to gain the public support we need to deal effectively with the disaster,” Cortein said, walking to the table and using his empty chair for balance while he stretched his Achilles tendons. “Ensuring the highest possible survival rate will necessarily require great sacrifices from millions of people, and almost all of them have already suffered greatly. Our efforts will undoubtedly fail unless the president can convince people that they must endure, even embrace, more deprivation. Right now the president’s numbers are so low that he’s operating from a position of great weakness, and that means disaster for the nation. So, in order to make sure the president has the strong numbers he needs to save as many lives as possible, I see only two real options. Either we accept the minimal risk of giving Barker an Arlington Burial with a twelve-gun salute and white horses and all the rest, or we invade Mexico.”

Mackinac Island

Barker walked through the narrow band of nearly leafless trees and bushes bordering the seventh fairway of the Greenstone Golf Course, lying just inland from the commercial district that hugged the southern shore of the island. Through the branches Barker could see the white limestone walls of Fort Mackinac extending from the high bluff.

Halfway to the fort Barker left the cover of the trees and veered away from the shore and toward the fort, passing through a park named for Father Jacques Marquette, a Jesuit missionary and explorer who used the Straits as his base in the late Seventeenth Century. Marquette’s bronze statue was the centerpiece of the park, and was surrounded by huge but sickly sugar maples and clumps of leafless lilacs. After crossing Fort Street, Barker started up the long, sloping gravel path carved into the bluff and leading to the fort’s entrance. As Barker walked up the slope he stopped to look behind him and he could see the Mackinac Bridge to the west, its twin spires supporting enormous cables that held the span connecting Michigan’s Upper and Lower Peninsulas. Two hundred feet below its four-lane deck, Lake Michigan’s water became Lake Huron’s, pushed through the Straits of Mackinac by a three-knot westerly current.

“Where are you Cecilia?” he said to himself as he scanned the water.

The hunger knot in his stomach spurred him on so he continued up the sloping path that rose above the town below, its Victorian charms lost in the dying trees, wilted and rotting flowers, and dark squares of vegetable gardens never planted or whose seeds never germinated.

When he reached the arched doorway built into the fort’s limestone wall, he noticed that the heavy wooden door, seeming too small for the six-acre fort, had been propped open by a large rock. Just outside the entrance, the braided rope and standards that once kept tourists in an orderly line were still in place.

Barker pulled on the door’s wooden handle and slipped inside the fort. A couple dozen wooden benches were still arranged in two rows on the brown grass covering the parade ground, which in past summers would have been filled with tourists watching hourly reenactments of an 18th century muster. Across the parade ground he saw the two-story, reconstructed wooden barracks, some of its wooden shutters swinging in the mild breeze. Barker walked to the benches

on the parade ground and saw that they were made of aluminum and painted to look like wood, which explained why they hadn't been burned.

He stood at the center of the fort and surveyed its roughly triangular interior with the ring of keys in his hand, looking for something that indicated there might be a lower level. From what he remembered, the Provos talked about pulling food from a basement at the fort. The function for each of the fort's buildings was identified for tourists by signs attached to wooden posts. He saw the sign for Food Stores and thought that would be too obvious, but decided he might as well start there.

Just Offshore, Mackinac Island

Cecilia had dropped her sails and hugged the western end of Mackinac Island to stay out of sight. She knew of a dock at Sweetwater Wharf, her favorite restaurant on the island, and used the sailboat's cell to power the inboard motor, hoping she'd make it to the dock even though the meter said the cell was nearly dead. She planned to tie up the boat and walk the mile or so to town, staying out of view as much as possible, but when she was near enough she saw that the restaurant's dock had toppled into the water. She looked for another place to dock but there were none in sight. She considered beaching the boat but knew she wouldn't be able to sail it again. So she raised the mainsail, killed the motor and turned back toward the southern end of the island and the large ferry piers in the harbor.

As she neared the harbor she could smell something burning, and saw the still smoldering remains of the library.

"Ray, Ray, Ray," she said. "I hope you weren't in there."

She tried the cell so she could drop the sails and motor into the harbor but the meter flashed red indicating no more power. She luffed the mainsail to slow her speed as she approached the pier, and heard the thrumming of a chopper behind her to the south, coming in just above the water.

She lowered the mainsail but the jib kept the boat moving into the harbor. There was no chance to reach cover so she turned to wave at the chopper, now only a few hundred yards out.

The Straits of Mackinac

The chopper was getting close enough to Mackinac Island that Captain Maddy Deefer thought she better start scanning so she powered her hand-held screen and adjusted the settings to human parameters.

Major Rob Minor, the mission's CO, was seated across from Deefer behind the pilot, and noticed that her screen was on. "Got anything?" Minor said. Minor was nicknamed "Groundhog" by his high school football teammates because of his long, thick torso and short legs, and his habit of burrowing under offensive linemen to get at the legs of running backs.

"Nothing," Deefer said. "But I don't think we're in range yet." The only nickname Deefer ever had was Raz, given by her senior drill instructor at Parris Island. It was a reference to her red hair and her SDI's love of raspberry jam. But she made sure she lost the nickname when he tried to rape her and was given a six year sentence.

"The ops doc says we probably won't find anyone alive," Minor said, looking past the pilot and through the windshield. "But one Windstorm missile on an island this size isn't going to do anything but kill the people it fell on. We best keep our eyes peeled."

Deefer looked up from her scanner and gazed out the small window next to her seat. "I bet it's awfully pretty up here in the summer," she said.

"It is summer," Minor said.

"I mean real summer," Deefer said, looking at her scanner screen again.

"They had me convinced we were going to some tiny spit of land," Minor said, eying the island's four square miles. "They should've sent a platoon, not just us two. I already don't like this."

"Low profile," Deefer said, still staring at the scanner screen on her lap. "All we need is some of Barker's DNA to prove he's dead. We're not sweeping the whole island."

"You think nobody's gonna notice this bird dropping?" Minor said. "Even if no one's scanning, we're gonna be hard to miss. But orders say anybody we see gets a bullet. Keep that up front in your mind." Minor looked out through the windshield again and shook his head.

"Far as I'm concerned any poor slob trying to live up here deserve what they get. We'll just be doing them a favor."

"I don't see the big deal," Deefer said, glancing up from her screen. "Pickup and delivery. That's the extent of it."

"You mean pick up and wait," Minor said. "We'll be on the ground for at least two hours. Right, Smitty?" The question was directed toward Emanuel Smith, the chopper pilot, a combat veteran with five deployments in three theaters.

"Two hours if all goes well," Smith said. "I'm picking up a full bird colonel downstate. Last time I gave this guy a ride we left a half hour late cuz he was in the latrine. And we were an hour late arriving cuz he wanted me to take him over his favorite goose hunting spot on Saginaw Bay."

Minor looked at Deefer. "See?" he said. "We're gonna be sitting ducks."

"That's what those are for," Deefer said, glancing up from her scanner and pointing at their rifles, strapped to the chopper's wall.

"Shoulda sent a platoon," Minor said. He could just make out the white walls of Fort Mackinac and wondered why they built the fort there when it looked like there was higher ground just beyond it.

"Got something!" Deefer said. "On the water."

"Yeah?" Minor said. "You said that at Cheboygan but it was just a deer, and then a flock of birds."

"Too cool to be a deer," Deefer said. "I've got it set for human heat range. Temp comes in at 99.2. Human, probably doing mild exertion."

"Where?"

"Ten-o'clock."

"We've got a sailboat!" the pilot said. "Nearing the harbor. Five hundred yards. I've got it locked. Gimme an order and it's toast!"

"Not yet," Minor said. "We need to know what we're dealing with."

"Then cut that scanner!" Smith said.

"Negative," Minor said. "Keep scanning, Deefer."

"Major, the Chinese shipped surface-to-air to the Provos and that sailboat might send one up our butts if we keep scanning. Three hundred yards! Either we take it out or we stop scanning!"

"I heard those rumors too and I'm not buying it," Minor said.

"I'm scanning four objects with human mass in the sailboat," Deefer said. "But only one is in the human heat range. The others are ambient."

"Looks like someone went hunting," Minor said. "God these people are barbarians."

“You just said we have orders to take out anyone we find!” Smith said, slowing the chopper’s speed. He turned toward Minor. “Sir! We have orders! Let’s take it out!” Smith turned forward again. “Two hundred yards!”

“You’re doing a drop and run,” Minor said to the Smith. “We’re staying behind. We need to know what we’re dealing with down there.”

“Then I’m changing course,” the pilot said.

“Negative!” Minor said.

“Major, I’m not scanning any weapons,” Deeper said, looking up from her scanner.

“If there are dead people, there’s weapons!” the pilot said.

“People die for all kinds of reasons up here,” Deeper said.

“Orders!” the pilot said, as the chopper neared the sailboat. “We’re disobeying a direct order!”

“Deeper?” Minor said. “You’re certain there’s someone alive on that boat?”

“It’s a goddamn sailboat and it’s under sail!” Smith said. “There’s gotta be someone alive! Gimme an order! Fifty yards!”

“Definitely a live human onboard,” Deeper said.

“Visual! I’ve got visual confirmation!” Smitty said. “I see someone on the boat!”

“Smitty’s right,” Minor said. “We’ve got orders. All right. Take it out.”

The boat exploded into pieces, sending fragments high into the air.

“One less thing to worry about,” Minor said, as the pilot veered to avoid the plume rising above the sailboat.

Fort Mackinac, Mackinac Island

After searching the buildings labeled “Food Stores,” “Barracks” and “Mess,” Barker headed toward the “Munitions” sign hanging over the entrance to a small courtyard surrounded by a low stone wall just outside a one-storey wooden building. The only other buildings around the courtyard sported signs saying “Restrooms” and “Gift Shop.” Neither seemed promising. But Barker was pleased to see that the gravel path leading toward the former munitions dump had seen a lot of recent foot traffic, and the hunger knot in his stomach tightened when he noticed that there were several double grooves in the path indicating the use of some kind of cart.

Barker crunched the gravel underfoot as he approached the courtyard’s whitewashed half-walls, and pushed open the Eighteenth Century iron gate. He walked past empty gunpowder barrels, cases of dummy ammunition and a display tracing the evolution of firearms used by British and American forces at the fort. On the other side of the courtyard he saw that the latch was broken on the building’s thick wooden door, marred by a couple hundred years of scrapes and gouges. When he pulled it open he saw a couple more weaponry displays in the windowless room. The light spilling in from the door illuminated a simple wooden table across the room and his eyes froze on a trap door under the table, its clasp held shut by an old fashioned padlock. His optimism grew when he saw fresh scrapes in the wooden floor planks around the trap door.

Barker shoved the table aside and began working through the few dozen keys on the ring. Because it was a padlock, he tried the smaller keys first and after a few attempts found the one that popped the lock. Swinging the trap door up and over, he let it drop with a tremendous bang and wished he hadn’t made so much noise. It seemed unlikely that he was the only person left alive on the island.

He felt the basement’s cool, damp air as he carefully stepped down wooden steps into the dark. Enough of the dim light from the building’s doorway made it through the open trap door

that he could just see a box of candles and several LED devices on a small metal shelf at the bottom of the steps. Barker lit one of the candles using a wooden match he found in a plastic bin containing matches and lighters on the next shelf down.

Walking toward the interior of the room, he saw a maze of mismatched shelving units holding several hundred cases of canned food of all types, boxes of military ready-to-eats and foil pouches of tuna and chicken. Walking further he saw mesh bags of potatoes, onions and squash hanging from the ceiling or piled in crates. The potatoes in one of the crates were all rotten, as was most of the squash.

He held the candle above his head to read the words stenciled on the metallic sheets that had been attached to the entirety of the basement's ceiling. The ScanStop logo was repeated in rows from end to end of each sheet. The walls were made of stone and, Barker assumed, weren't in need of scan-blockers. He continued on toward the opposite wall and saw two coolers stacked on top of one another. He opened the top one and held his candle above dozens of frozen steaks that were nearly thawed. "Hallelujah!" Barker said.

He started looking for something he could use to cook them but stopped when he heard what sounded like a distant explosion. He grabbed a can of chili off a shelf and went back up the steps. Across the nearest corner of the fort's triangle, the square sentry room of the fort's West Blockhouse rose above the wall and seemed to offer a good view of the town and harbor and would keep him hidden. He did a quick look around the fort, and jogged across the parade ground to the steps leading up to the blockhouse. The thick limestone walls of the small sentry room at the top of the steps had several loopholes, narrow on the inside wall and widening out to allow soldiers to aim their muskets at attackers while remaining hidden. Through the loophole he could see smoke rising from near the main pier in the harbor and, through the smoke, he saw a black helicopter settling onto the beach in front of the library ruins. When the chopper landed, Barker saw two people exit, and soon the chopper lifted back into the sky, banked to the south and zoomed across the Straits, leaving the two behind.

"Welcome to paradise," Barker said, popping the top off the can of chili and tipping it back like he was chugging a beer.

The Oval Office

"And we have no idea how Cecilia got to the island?" the president said into his desk phone. He listened for a moment, and then looked at Bouzel, sitting in one of the chairs facing his desk. She stared at her assistant, waiting for the president to finish.

"How do we even know Cecilia was there?" The president looked up toward the ceiling and leaned back in his chair. "So we don't know for sure that she was there. Then what the hell are you telling me? All I'm hearing is that you don't know anything other than her name was mentioned in a report that said she might be coming to the island, and then we've got this destroyed sailboat that may or may not have something to do with her."

The president rubbed his eyes and ran his hand through his graying hair.

"We know when the Chinese Premier takes a crap but we don't know what's going on in our own country?" The president stared into his desk. "Just let me know when you actually know something."

The president hung up the phone and looked up at Bouzel.

"While you were talking I got a message about all this," Bouzel said. "We've got a couple boots on the island now and they took out a sailboat that had three dead people and one still alive. It's possible that was the sailboat referenced by our guy on the island before the

attack. The one Cecilia was supposed to bring to the island.”
“Meaning it’s possible we killed Cecilia Westraek.”
Bouzel hesitated. “I would say ‘probable.’”
The president rubbed his eyes again. “How many boots do we have there?”
“Two. A major and a captain, both from a recon unit.”
“Only two?”
“We’ve got almost a thousand marines on standby in two locations a little ways south, in the Lower Peninsula, and half that number on the UP side.”
“What orders are the two boots under?”
“Kill anyone they find on the island.”
The president lifted his eyes. “Why?”
“To wipe out any Provo resistance and finish what Lierti started. I mean, since he started it, we might as well finish.”
“How were the orders conveyed?”
“By me,” Bouzel said. “You were talking with the Canadian premier and the boots needed parameters.”
The president continued staring at Bouzel.
“I apologize if you feel I overstepped my authority,” Bouzel said.
“You certainly did overstep your authority, Inez. By a mile.”
Bouzel met the president’s glare. “Would you like my resignation?” Bouzel said.
“I would,” the president said. “Under normal circumstances. Do something like that again and I won’t wait for you to resign.”

Mackinac Island

Deefer and Minor stood on the beach in front of the library watching the chopper fly off to the south across the Straits, and then fade into the haze over the Lower Peninsula.

“Something tells me we should be on that bird,” Minor said.

“Let’s get this over with,” Deefer said. “Poking around dead bodies ain’t my idea of a good time.”

They silently slipped their respirators in place, slung their rifles over their shoulders and stood staring at the smoldering ruins of the Mackinac Public Library.

When they neared the library they pulled on their heat reflecting boot covers and tuned their sensors to Barker’s DNA. The blast zone wasn’t much larger than the library itself, but they expanded their search twenty yards beyond the library’s foundation to make sure they didn’t miss something. Deefer started at the east end and scanned a two-foot swath as she walked north and south through the scattered rubble, twisted metal, splintered wood and body fragments. Minor did the same, starting at the west end of the building.

“I’ve got a hit,” Deefer yelled after a few minutes. She pulled a metal tool from her belt and began to work through the debris. Minor continued working at the other end of the building.

“Looks like an apple core,” Deefer shouted through her respirator. She held up a plastic bag, bulged by a charred lump. “Got anything?”

“Nothing,” Minor said, sweeping the sensor’s flexible wand back and forth and stepping through what was left of the doorway into the children’s section.

Ten minutes later, while working near the library’s entrance, Minor got a hit.

“Blood!” he said, using tongs to pick up pieces of splintered and charred wood with a few dark splotches. “We’ve got Barker’s blood!”

Deefer walked to where Minor stood and they exchanged plastic bags so they could each see what the other found.

“We’ve got what we need,” Minor said, looking through the plastic at the charred apple core. “That core would’ve rotted already if he hadn’t just ate it. And the blood proves he was here when the missile hit. Probably fell right on his head. That’s why we can’t find any body parts. We’ll put that in the report.”

“Works for me,” Deefer said.

Minor reached for the pocket on the outside of his sleeve, pulled out his assistant and thumbed some numbers. “We’re just proving what everybody already knows anyway. I’ll get word up the line that Barker was blown to pieces like all the others. Shoot me your data for the report. And let’s send everything to Toledo too. Give those jokers something to do.”

Fort Mackinac

Barker stood in the fort’s West Blockhouse and peered toward town through the narrow loophole in the thick limestone wall. He had finished the can of chili and thought about getting another, but decided he should keep an eye on the two people he had just watched wander through the library ruins. And he thought it would be good to save his appetite for his steak dinner. Just thinking about it made his mouth water.

He thought one of the distant figures pointed in his direction, but they were too far away to be sure. Then he heard a whoosh overhead so he scooted to the south facing loophole and saw two cigar shaped drones with American flag insignias hovering near the fort’s entrance.

Barker skipped down the blockhouse steps, sprinted to the munitions dump and jumped its short courtyard wall. He pulled the heavy, wooden door shut behind him and nearly fell down the steps into the dark basement but caught himself on the railing, and pulled the trap door shut.

Mackinac Island

Minor and Deefer stood looking over the town’s rooftops at the drones hovering in the distance above Fort Mackinac.

“A4 or A5?” Minor said.

Deefer held her scanner upside down and peered through it. “Neither. N6. Never seen one of those before.”

“What the hell’s the Navy getting involved for?”

“I assume you noticed that we’re on an island,” Deefer said, stowing her scanner. “The Navy and water kinda go together.”

“Doesn’t count unless it’s saltwater.” Minor said. “When’s the last time the Navy fought a battle on a lake?”

“When’s the last time there was a civil war?”

After the drones completed their circuit around the fort, they rotated and shot across the Straits and out of view.

“Just checking up on us?” Deefer said.

“Doubt that,” Minor said.

Minor’s assistant buzzed and he answered. “Minor here.” He turned to look toward the fort. “Any idea where?” He looked at Deefer. “I know *in* the fort, I mean *where* in the fort?” He looked in the distance at the high limestone wall that was built as an extension of the bluff and formed the fort’s western perimeter. “From here all I see is some white walls and a couple blockhouses on top of it. We gotta be at least half a click away.” Minor listened for another

moment, staring at the ground and shaking his head. “You know there are only two of us, right? What happened, the government’s outta money or something?” Minor looked at Deefer again and frowned. “Listen, as far as I know there’s hunters crawling all over up here so if you ... Asshole.” Minor put his assistant back in his sleeve pocket.

“They found something?” Deefer said.

“They don’t know,” Minor said. “The drones read a human and then the human wasn’t there. Not enough data for an ID. Fuck the Navy anyway.”

“Maybe it was a bad reading,” Deefer said. “Or a deer. Like at Cheboygan.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Minor said. “Worst case, we get up there and a hundred people with guns are hiding under some kind of scan blocker and we walk into a trap. At least it’ll be quick. Better than starving to death like everybody else is gonna do.”

“I’m heartened by your optimism,” Deefer said.

“They’re sending two people to take an entire fort,” Minor said. “Fucking Navy anyway. C’mon. Let’s go.”

Fort Mackinac

Barker busied himself in the munitions building basement gathering what he’d need to cook dinner. Underneath the steps he found some loose bricks and a metal grate, and nearby a bag of charcoal briquettes and a small bag of hickory chips. There were several lighters on the shelf with the LEDs and flashlights near the bottom of the steps.

He carried everything he had gathered up the steps and made a small pile inside the building’s door. He leaned outside and looked up to make sure the drones were gone. He didn’t see anything and couldn’t hear the whoosh of the engines so he moved farther out into the courtyard and spun in a slow circle searching the sky. Still no sign of drones.

He put the bricks in two small stacks on the ground by the courtyard’s iron gate and dumped charcoal between them. There was a row of leafless shrubs along one of the courtyard walls so he snapped off a handful of dead twigs, placed them under several briquettes and lit them.

Satisfied that the briquettes were catching, he went back down into the basement for a steak and found some aluminum foil and a couple spongy but acceptable potatoes, plus a can of fruit cocktail. He grabbed a bottle of wine from a wooden box on the floor and returned to the fire and piled briquettes over the corner where he had lit the twigs. The coals would take some time so he walked across the corner of the parade ground to the blockhouse and climbed its worn wooden steps to check on the two people left behind by the chopper.

Looking out the blockhouse loophole he saw they had left the library and were walking toward the fort.

“Looks like it’ll be steaks for three,” Barker said.

The Oval Office / Langley, Virginia

President Villejo was at his desk in the Oval Office with his desk phone to his ear. “You’re sure?” he said. “You can guarantee me that Barker is dead.”

“Sure, if you put it all together,” Dr. Zennal said from his office in Langley. “When you combine the time data on the vids, the DNA on the apple core, plus Barker’s blood, we don’t need anything else to be certain.”

“But no body parts, no internal organs? No flesh of any kind?”

“Mr. President, I’ve pronounced people dead on far less evidence and in the twenty-seven

years I've been doing this no one's ever come back to life. At some point you have to say the weight of evidence is conclusive."

"Okay, you're the expert, but we're talking about an Arlington burial so we need to be sure we're burying a dead man."

"Understood. I give you my word. Barker is dead."

Mackinac Island

Deefer and Minor walked behind the row of businesses along Main Street, feeling somewhat protected by the buildings, but they still needed to cross the much more open Father Marquette Park to get to the fort.

Deefer nodded toward the statue of Father Marquette. "I'll go first."

Minor stepped behind a tree and raised his rifle to provide cover while Deefer ran to the statue, staying low and then lying prone on the near side of the statue with her rifle pointed toward the fort's limestone walls. She looked back at Minor and motioned for him to join her. He trotted across the brown grass and settled onto his knees at the statue.

"I think I'm going crazy," Deefer said, raising her chin and sniffing the air. "I could swear I smell steaks grilling." Deefer shook her head and laughed. "I think I'm losing it, man."

Deefer had enlisted after she decided not to go back to the University of Texas following her freshman year when she got pregnant and put her boyfriend in the hospital when he dumped her. She wasn't a large woman, and looked weighed down by all her gear, but she seemed to have endless energy and could outmarch anyone in her unit.

"I'd love a good steak, but you know what I really miss?" Minor said, as they both started toward the fort again at a slow jog. "I'd go for some melon. Any kind of melon. Musk melon. Watermelon. Cantaloupe." Minor had planned to learn a trade in the army and leave after one stint, but he took to army life, even though his wife didn't. After she left him for the base dentist, he decided to make soldiering a career. "I'd give my left nut for one of those French melons my wife used to get at the farmers market. Shant-ray. Something like that."

"I don't know why but you know what else I miss?" Deefer said, motioning to the left and a more direct angle toward the base of the sloped path that led to the fort's entrance. "Fruit cocktail. With all that thick syrup. I can taste it right now."

"Let's keep our focus," Minor said.

They stopped at a maple tree to plan their assault on the fort.

"You don't smell that?" Deefer said. "That's meat cooking. There's gotta be other people here."

"You wanna know what I think?" Minor said, using his rifle scope to get a good look at the path carved into the bluff. "You're smelling those people that got blown up at the library. We need to get to those bushes at the base of the bluff. Go when you're ready."

Deefer jumped to her feet but after a couple steps Minor shouted "Bandit! Bandit! Twelve o'clock!"

Deefer dove to the ground and trained her rifle on the man standing on top of the fort wall. Minor stayed behind the tree.

"Take him!?" Deefer said, her scope's crosshairs on Barker's chest. "Take him now!? C'mon! We've got orders!"

"Hold on, hold on," Minor said keeping his voice down. "There's two of us and they might have a hundred. See any weapons?"

"None visible," Deefer said.

Barker waved at Minor and Deefer. "Welcome to paradise!" he shouted from his perch far above them.

"We're soldiers in the United States Army," Minor shouted. "Who the hell are you?"

"Ray Barker."

"Incorrect," Minor said. "Try again."

"Barker comma Ray?"

Barker's dead."

"Someone's exaggerating. Or I've been resurrected."

"Barker's going six feet under at Arlington tomorrow. So you can't be him."

"Buried alive?" Barker said. "I don't think that's legal, even under emergency powers."

"I need your name and the names of anyone with you," Minor said. "We have authority to shoot on sight. We've got a bead on your brain, and there's a whole platoon at the docks."

"My name is Ray Barker, I'm alone and I don't have a rank or serial number," Barker said. "And I'm skeptical about the platoon."

"Ray Barker died in the missile strike," Minor said. "This would go a lot better if we all agree that Barker's dead."

"Suit yourself, but I've got three steaks on the grill," Barker said. "I saw you coming and I'm happy to share. How do you want your steaks? Bloody? Medium? By the way, what was that explosion on the water by the pier?"

"Scare him," Minor said so only Deefer could hear. "Make him dance and get a scan. I'll cover you."

Deefer fired and a piece of Eighteenth Century mortar near Barker's right foot broke off and sailed into the fort. Baker flinched but stayed on the wall. Deefer rotated her scope two stops and zeroed the dial on Barker's face.

"What was that for?" Barker said. "If you don't believe I'm Ray Barker, come on up and I'll prove it to you. Scan me up and down. My mother's maiden name is Stinsel. The last four of my SS number is 3860."

"Scan done?" Minor said to Deefer.

"Got it," Deefer said, rotating her scope back to its former position and putting the crosshairs on Barker again. "I just sent it to Toledo."

"How'd you get up there?" Minor shouted to Barker.

"I flew." Barker flapped his arms. "I'm sure you two are hungry like everybody else. Come on up and we'll have a feast."

"You flew?"

"Sure," Barker said. "If I can be resurrected I guess I can fly too. I was just putting a steak on the grill when I heard your bird," Barker said, still flapping his wings. "I put some hickory wood chips on the charcoal. Imparts a nice, smoky flavor. Got some potatoes and fruit cocktail. I've got anything you want. Even some tasty wine."

"You need to tell us who you are," Minor said.

"I need to get back to the steaks," Barker said. "No sense in burning them. Join me if you want. The gate's over there." Barker pointed toward the main entrance.

Deefer, still prone, watched through her scope as Barker stepped down behind the fort wall and disappeared from view. Through her scope she noticed wisps of smoke rising above the wall.

"Tell me you don't smell that," she said to Minor. "That's definitely meat cooking. Barker's really got some fucking meat up there!"

In a few quick strides Minor was standing over Deefer, grabbed her jacket collar and pulled her to her feet. “Barker’s dead!” Minor said with gritted teeth and narrow eyes.

“We’re on the same side, remember?” Deefer said, pushing Minor away and adjusting her jacket.

“I don’t like this,” Minor said. “Why would someone want us to believe he’s Barker?”

Barker climbed back up onto the wall and held up two bottles of wine. Deefer dove to the ground but Minor just stood there, looking at Barker.

“Aperitifs will be served shortly,” Barker shouted.

Okinisee, Michigan

Fred and Amber had turned Fred’s Fixit into a mini fortress with alarms and booby traps surrounding their home and office, plus the attached repair garage and the pole barn out back. With no electricity anywhere in the North, they powered the sensors with the largest of their remaining three cells. Fred dug a one-holer behind the house and built the walls with scrap lumber, and then pulled the front door off an abandoned house down the road. He didn’t think about the glass windows in the door until the outhouse was done, but solved the problem with black plastic and a staple gun. They had to expand the outhouse to a two-holer when he and Amber took in a few others who had stayed in the north, mostly Amber’s cousins. At the peak there were seven people living in the compound, and they all took turns on the garage’s roof, armed with a rifle, and made sure there was always at least one person on sentry duty. Fred used leftover orange floor paint to write “Armed and Dangerous Keep Out” on a large piece of plywood and screwed it into the sign on top of the garage, but had to take it down two days later when three armed Provos stood by the road and used a bull horn to announce that they would burn down the house at sundown the next day if the color of the sign didn’t change.

Fred had spent most of his life as an avid mushroom hunter and even now he found occasional chanterelles, hen of the woods and certain varieties of oyster mushrooms that could tolerate the wet and cool weather. There were ample nutrients for fungi in the dead and dying trees, and foraging kept at least some protein on the table. But Fred’s foraging trips were taking him farther and farther into the state forest behind their home, and less familiar environs meant more danger and fewer mushrooms. Over the past couple weeks, food stocks at the compound had dwindled to almost nothing and those who had found sanctuary at Fred’s Fixit began to head south, despite the dangers. Eventually, everyone but Fred and Amber had left, but even they knew that holding on in the North was going to be nearly impossible. There were no reliable predictions for what kind of weather the coming winter would bring, but they knew it wouldn’t be good.

For the past week Fred had spent hours poring over his map of Lake Huron to determine how they might get to Toledo in his father’s old aluminum fishing boat. He also made a list of every scrap of food they had left and put it in front of Amber. The list wasn’t very long.

“Once the food’s gone, we either head south or try to get to the food line up in Cheboygan,” Fred said. “I don’t like relying on handouts, and getting there and back twice a week would be dangerous.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Amber said from her desk, looking up from her game of solitaire, with the meager food list in front of her. “It’s just so sad. But maybe it’s time.”

“If we can get to Toledo,” Fred said, sitting down opposite Amber. “There’s help to get us to the resettlement zones. If we’re careful and pick our days, we can get there in less than a week and maybe I can find mushrooms along the way for us to eat. We’ve still got a few days of

canned food too. It won't be easy. We'll have to travel at night."

"It's just such a shame," Amber said. "We made a nice home for ourselves up here. We had a nice business and we were comfortable. That's all I ever wanted, you know?"

"I know, I know," Fred said. "But we have to face reality. We don't want to starve."

Amber wiped away a tear. "No," she said. "We don't."

Fred stood and walked around the desk and put his hand on her shoulder. "I'll get the boat ready and we can leave tonight."

Amber stood and they embraced.

"God will guide us," Amber said into Fred's shoulder. "We'll be all right. But what are we gonna do down South? We don't have any friends there. No work. No place to stay."

"Same's true for millions of others. They're making it okay and so will we."

"I guess," Amber said, with a tear on her cheek. "It's just such a shame."

Fort Mackinac

"You're sure about this?" Minor said, trying to keep his voice down.

They had climbed the long sloping path carved into the bluff and stood against the limestone wall next to the fort's arched entrance.

"I'm not making this up!" Deefer said, holding her assistant for Minor to see.

"You know all that shit's Greek to me," Minor said, not even bothering to look at the rows of data on Deefer's screen.

"I had Toledo run each scan three times and it's always the same," Deefer said. "That guy on the wall is Barker. No doubt about it."

"Barker can't be alive!" Minor said. "I mean, we've got DNA. And blood! What'd he do, cut himself shaving? And then what? Took a stroll on the beach just before everything blew up?" Minor looked back to the west at the twin spires of the Mackinac Bridge. The sky behind it was just beginning to show some hazy evening color. "I mean, they got vid showing him there just before the strike!" Minor seemed deflated and confused. "There's no way he wasn't in that library when it got flattened, and if he was in that library when it got flattened, he's dead."

"So who's cooking those steaks?" Deefer said. She inhaled deeply through her nose. "Damn that smells good. I want one more steak dinner before I die and this may be my only chance. So let's not worry about who's throwing the party until after it's over. Deal?" She put out her hand for Minor to shake.

"He just came back to life, like Jesus himself?" Minor said, ignoring Deefer's hand. "This just ain't computing."

"Right now I don't care if it's Jesus or the devil or Mahatma Gandhi cooking those steaks. I only know that I want one, so let's go."

"We've been ordered to kill anyone we see," Minor said. "What are we gonna say to the guy? 'Thanks for the steaks, but now we gotta blow your head off?'"

"I know what I'm gonna say when I finish my steak," Deefer said. "I'm gonna say, 'Thank you sir, can I have another?' Maybe *you* need direction, but I'm following my nose to a steak dinner." Deefer turned to walk into the fort.

"No, you're not," Minor said. He pulled his revolver and pointed it at Deefer's head. "Stop right there."

Deefer turned back to face Minor and rolled her eyes. "Jesus Christ, Minor. What the hell is wrong with you?"

"You're going to wait here until I call this in," Minor said. "We've already got problems

cuz we didn't put holes in that guy on the wall."

"To make up for it you're gonna put some holes in me?" Deeper said. "Let's go find out what's really going on and we'll report facts, not guesses."

"I'm beginning to think we got some weighty shit going on around us," Minor said. "We need to think this through."

"Maybe our chef has some kind of logical explanation," Deeper said. "Maybe ... I don't know, maybe he's got some of Barker's blood on him and my scanner read that."

"Does that even make sense?"

"No, it doesn't, but neither does pointing a gun at my head."

"There's more than we know going on here," Minor said, his eyes distant as he searched for an answer. "Barker's dead, then he's not dead. And he's got food like no one's seen for weeks. It's like that Bible story. You know, loaves and fishes. We got loaves and fishes. And a resurrection."

Deeper was losing patience. "Okay, we've got the flippin' Rapture going on all around us. Fine. So let's go, before Jesus burns our steaks."

"You're walking into a trap," Minor said. "You've been blinded by grilled meat. I'm starting to feel the devil's at work here. I'm ordering you to stand down until I call this in."

"Suit yourself," Deeper said. "I've got a date with a steak dinner."

She spun around, pulled the door open and marched through the gate. Minor ran to the open door and aimed his pistol at the back of Deeper's head.

"The safety's off!" Minor shouted.

Deeper continued toward the smoky wisps rising from behind the short courtyard wall.

"Damn it!" Minor said. He lowered his gun, pulled his assistant from his sleeve pocket and thumbed some numbers. "Yeah, this is Minor," he said after a moment. "We've got a situation here."

Alexandria, Virginia

"Left at the next street, then down the alley on the right," Vice President Vasco told the driver from the back seat of the black micro-limo. Vasco pulled a flask of whiskey from the door panel next to him and carefully poured his second shot into the cap. "Remember what we talked about?" he said to the driver.

"I was never here, and neither were you," the driver repeated as if he was already bored with the conversation.

Vasco knocked back the shot in one gulp. "Right. I appreciate your cooperation. He pulled a tiny morsel of beef jerky wrapped in clear plastic from his suit coat pocket and tossed it onto the front passenger seat. "A little something to show my appreciation."

The driver glanced at the morsel. "Last time I got a peanut butter sandwich."

"Times are tough," Vasco said. "Two more driveways and pull over."

"Am I waiting this time?"

"No," Vasco said. "I'm feeling lucky. I'll buzz you when I'm ready to go. I'm assuming mid-morning tomorrow. After breakfast. Jeez. I used to look forward to making breakfast. I'd donate a toe for some bacon and eggs."

Vasco tugged a rain hat down to his ears, put on sunglasses and stepped out of the limo. He knocked on the driver's window so he would lower it.

"Remember?"

"Yeah. Never here. But I think that's worth more than a taste of beef jerky."

“There’s a bottle in the back. Help yourself. Just leave me some.”

Fort Mackinac

Deefer sat on the edge of her folding chair in the small courtyard outside the fort’s munitions dump savoring the aromas rising from the wooden cutting board on her lap. She took a sip of wine from her paper cup and picked up her fork and steak knife.

“Sweet Jesus, I might have an orgasm just from the smells,” she said, staring at the food before her.

“Sorry about the cutting board,” Barker said, pouring himself a cup of wine. “Didn’t find any plates.”

Minor stood just outside the low courtyard wall with his rifle ready and his head on a swivel. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He glanced behind him and watched Deefer ease her knife into the tender steak, spilling amber liquid from the gash. Deefer lifted the tender morsel to her mouth and moaned with delight as she chewed.

“You ready?” Barker said to Minor. “You got the biggest one.”

Minor spun around to face the fort’s interior again. “When Deefer’s done she can take my place and I’ll eat.”

Barker forked Minor’s steak and laid it on a metal serving tray. Then he peeled the foil off Minor’s potato and, tossing the steaming tuber between his hands, dropped it onto the tray.

“Fruit cocktail?” Barker said to Minor.

“Yeah, yeah, of course,” Minor said without turning to face Barker. “Don’t have any melon do you?”

“There’s cantaloupe in the fruit cocktail,” Deefer said between chews.

Minor took one last look around and slung his rifle over his shoulder. “Damn it,” he said. “I don’t like this, but a man’s gotta eat.” He walked through the open gate in the courtyard’s short wall and sat in one of the folding chairs Barker had brought outside.

“My God, I’ve never tasted anything so good,” Deefer said. She swallowed and took another bite. “I gotta get a picture.”

She stood and held her assistant at arm’s length and snapped a selfie with Barker and Minor in the background.

She looked at the picture. “One more,” Deefer said. “Everybody smile this time!” Deefer used her fork to hold up the remainder of her steak for the picture and sunk her teeth deep into the meat, spilling juices onto her cheek. Barker toasted the lens and Minor, expressionless, stared into the camera.

Deefer looked at the picture, thumbed a few buttons and turned her attention back to her food. She looked at Minor. “I turned off the locator when I posted the pic, in case you’re worried,” she said as she chewed. “I think you’ll like the caption I put on it. I wrote ‘Loaves and fishes,’ then struck out ‘fishes’ and wrote in ‘bloody steak,’” she said with a smile.

“That wasn’t smart,” Minor said. “With the hording laws we could be in some deep shit.”

“This isn’t ours,” Deefer said, pointing at her plate. “No law against accepting a prepared meal is there? Right now, I don’t care anyway.”

“People see that and they’re gonna go crazy,” Minor said. “That really wasn’t smart.”

Minor stared at his plate for a moment and then dug in, finishing before Deefer or Barker.

Okinisee

Fred walked to the pole barn behind the repair garage and rolled up the overhead door after he thumbed the lock. He noticed the glass in the back window was broken and his eyes immediately went to his treasured sixteen-foot aluminum fishing boat, a relic he inherited from his dad who bought it after coming home from the Vietnam War and decided his mind needed time alone on the water to get past the haunting horrors of war. Although, if anyone asked, he said he bought it because he liked fishing. When his grandmother had the boat and trailer towed to his house from Dearborn a decade before, Fred made a hobby of figuring out how to rebuild the two-stroke outboard. Amber called it an obsession. But within a month Fred had it running and for several years the boat's guttural purring was always a curiosity on the rare occasions he and Amber took the boat for a spin on Big Rock Bay.

Fred lifted an edge of the boat's tarp and peered underneath. Everything seemed to be fine, but the broken window still worried him.

"Fred! Fred!" He looked through the open overhead door and saw Amber scurrying toward the pole barn, crunching driveway gravel under her slippered feet. "Look honey! Look! It's that guy! That caster with the car that broke down a few months ago. You almost knocked him out with the swinging door. You know. Barker. Ray Barker."

"What about him?" Fred said, checking the gas tank on the outboard.

"It's loaves and fishes all over again," Amber said, still holding up her assistant.

"What's loaves and fishes?"

"He's up on Mackinac Island and he's making everybody dinner," Amber said. "He's grilling steaks. Look! Look!"

Fred put the cap back on the gas tank and finally looked at Amber's assistant. On the screen was Deeper's bloody steak selfie, with Barker toasting and Minor staring at the camera.

"When's the last time you seen a steak like that?" Amber said.

"Quite a while," Fred said, picking up a small gas can and feeling its weight, and then carefully slipping the nozzle into the boat's tank. "But I've seen lots of pictures of steaks. Can't eat a picture."

Fred emptied the gas can and walked to the boat's bow to get another one. "I did some calculations and we should be okay on gas. If we get some weather we'll have to beach the boat so we don't use too much. If it rains hard we can get under the tarp and build a fire to stay warm. If it's really bad we can tip the boat over and get under it."

"Mackinac Island's a lot closer than Toledo," Amber said, looking at Deeper's selfie again. "Won't take more than a few hours to get there."

"Why don't you find out if Barker delivers," Fred said, pouring gas again. "Tell him we're leaving tonight so he better hurry. Medium rare for me."

Fort Mackinac

Baker had gone to retrieve another can of fruit cocktail and Minor and Deeper spoke quietly so he couldn't hear.

"You saw the codes," Deeper said. "It's from the White House! We've got no choice!"

"I need to come to some kind of understanding before I authorize anything," Minor said.

"Understanding? We have a direct order from the fucking Commander in Chief to kill whoever is claiming to be Barker," she said, pointing toward the open door with one hand and holding up her assistant for Minor to see with the other.

"He was dead, and now he's alive," Minor said, ignoring Deeper's assistant. "You saw the library they blew up. He was in there! And now he's got steaks, potatoes, canned fruit, wine

and God knows what else. He says he's even got fresh greens! The fucker is turning water into wine right in front of our eyes and you can't see it! Maybe he really did fly up onto that wall like he said." Minor looked at the doorway leading to the munitions dump. "Things are starting to come together for me. I'm starting to see it. All of it."

"You're losing it," Deefer said, pulling her pistol from its holster. "That steak made you stupid."

"Just think about it for a minute," Minor said. "If God was going to send a savior, now's the time." He held up the gnawed bone from his tray and looked at Deefer. "If this isn't divine intervention, what the hell is it?"

"You're a fool," Deefer said. She stood up and checked the action on her pistol. "We have clear orders and I intend to carry them out."

"I'm taking my orders from upstairs," Minor said, standing up and pointing a finger toward the sky. "That's the ultimate authority."

"Then I'm replacing you as CO," Deefer said. "Effective immediately."

Barker walked through the munitions door with another can of fruit cocktail and a can opener.

"Got some more fruit cocktail," Barker said, turning to push the door closed behind him.

Deefer threw back the rest of her wine, tossed the cup aside, and aimed her pistol at Barker's head. When Barker turned around he froze and Deefer fired.

Minor wasn't fast enough to stop Deefer's first shot but he put a bullet into the back of her head before she could fire a second. Deefer's knees buckled and she fell face first to the ground.

Barker dropped the fruit cocktail and can opener and put his hands in the air.

"You got nothing to worry about," Minor said, standing up and holstering his pistol. "Deefer just don't recognize holiness when she sees it. Seeing that bullet go through you was the final proof I need to know that you're repping for God here on earth." He walked to Deefer's body and checked her pulse. "I was born and raised Pentecostal. Guess I never really believed I'd see you. Until now."

"What the hell just happened?" Barker said, still holding his hands up.

Minor pointed behind Barker at the splinters in the heavy wooden door. Barker glanced behind him, and then looked down to see if there were any holes in his body.

"Deefer was one of the best in our outfit," Minor said. He crossed himself and then stood up. "It's a shame but if I gotta choose between the Son of God getting whacked and taking out a fellow officer ..."

Barker stared at Deefer, sprawled face down on the cobblestone in front of him, one leg twitching. Blood trickled from her nose.

"What the hell do I call you anyway?" Minor said to Barker. "Father? That doesn't sound right. Your lordship? Damn, I wish my wife was here to see this." Minor crossed himself again and bowed his head.

Barker lowered his hands half way. "Why did she try to kill me?" Barker said, looking at Deefer's body.

"Orders," Minor said. "The fact that you're still alive means that I'm ignoring an order direct from the top. The very top. I'm gonna be in deep shit for that. Not to mention killing the second in command. But there's no way in hell I'm letting the Son of God take a bullet."

Barker put his arms down and thought about running. Or maybe locking himself in the basement.

“By the way, I’d suggest you lay low for a while,” Minor said. “I’m only one soldier and I’m not getting all the intel but it seems pretty clear the U.S. government wants you dead and they usually get what they want. Far be it from me to tell our Lord and Savior what to do, but I figure if I can keep you from getting crucified, maybe the world can get through this.” Minor plopped into his folding chair. “I’m feeling a huge weight on my shoulders right now. Civilization’s future. I guess I’m like your first disciple. That’s some weighty shit. But I guess you’re used to that, huh?”

Okinisee

Fred and Amber were playing two-handed euchre at Amber’s desk when there was a sharp knock at the front door that set off three alarms and fired two bullets at the front porch from guns Fred had fixed to the eaves. Fred picked up a hatchet and a pistol from a small table on his way to the front door and Amber pulled a pistol from the desk’s top drawer and got down behind her desk. There was another sharp knock and two more automated gun shots. Fred peeked out the window next to the front door. Amber, watching from behind her desk, could see the tension drain from Fred’s body.

“It’s London,” Fred said. “He’s out by the road throwing rocks at the door.”

“You’re sure it’s London?” Amber said. “Haven’t seen him since ...”

A rock crashed through the window just above Fred’s head, showering him with broken glass, and firing a shotgun fastened to two posts behind some bushes outside the house. The gun was aimed at a point just outside the window where an intruder might lurk.

“Yeah, that’s London,” Amber said, as Fred carefully picked shards of glass from his hair.

“Sorry!” they both heard London yell from the road. “Can I come in? Please? I got canned sardines!”

Amber stood up from behind her desk, straightened her dress and sat in her chair. “I thought he went south,” she said.

“I thought he was dead,” Fred said, still picking glass from his hair. “Wishful thinking,” he said to himself.

“We gotta let him in,” Amber said. “He’s sorta family, you know?”

Fred sighed. “We gotta?” He looked out the window at London and then at Amber. “You’re sure we gotta?”

“Maybe one more person heading south with us will be good,” Amber said. “Another pair of eyes and ears.”

Fred looked at her and grimaced. “London?”

“Okay, maybe not. But we gotta let him in. We can’t leave him out there all alone.”

“C’mon sis!” London yelled from the road. “Open up!”

Fred pushed the largest of the glass shards on the floor into a pile with his shoe and then looked at Amber. “You know as well as I do that having London around is going to make it harder for us to survive. If we gotta do anything, we gotta take care of ourselves.”

Amber’s face sank and she wiped away a tear. “It’s London,” she said. “We can’t just ... it’s like we’d be giving him a death sentence, you know?”

“And he’ll give us a death sentence if we let him in,” Fred said, looking out the window.

“We can’t just leave him there,” Amber said. “All alone. Starving. We just can’t.”

Fred sighed again, and then reached behind him to disable the sensors between the house and the road. He looked at Amber and her quivering lips tried to form a smile. Fred opened the

front door and waved London in with the hatchet.

Mackinac Island / Camp Lejeune, North Carolina

“Colonel Wingslet’s office, Sergeant Roegeroski speaking.”

“Roegeroski? Dan Roegeroski?”

“Hell yeah, who’s this?”

“Hey, Rocket Man, this is Minor.”

“Hey, Minor Leaguer, how things hangin’?”

“Can’t complain. You still pitching for the base team?”

“Nah, that’s why I’m here,” Roegeroski said. “I threw a wild one last week with Papsmear on third and he stuck me with his spikes when I was covering home. So Wingnut put me on desk duty until I can throw again. I thought you were off doing some secret hush-hush shit.”

“Yeah, that’s why I’m calling. I got a situation I need to run up the line.”

“You already talked to Hulming?”

“Far too big for him, and he’s by the book all the way. I need to talk to Wingslet.”

“What’s the situation?”

“I really need Wingslet on this. He around?”

“He’s in DC for the week. Hanjer’s here.”

“I can’t see Handjob doing me any good. You gotta get me through to Wingslet”

“He told me ten times that if I interrupt him it better be something big.”

“Oh, this is big all right. Nothin’ bigger.”

“No shit? Some kind of terrorist thing?”

“I got a resurrection.”

“You got an erection?”

“No, dumb ass. A res-ur-rec-tion. You know, when people come back to life.”

“No shit? That’s a new one. You’re saying you were dead?”

“Not me! This Barker guy. The caster from all that Mars Girl shit a few months ago. Someone up the line needs to know about this. Been more than two thousand years since the last resurrection.”

“I don’t know, Wingnut told me it’s gotta be life or death.”

“This is both,” Minor said. “He was dead and now he’s alive. I got orders to kill the guy but I’m not messing with the Son of God. He got blown up and came back to life and I just saw a bullet go right through his head when Deefer shot him.”

“Maybe she missed.”

“She was ten feet away,” Minor said. “You ever see Deefer miss from ten feet?”

“Let me talk to Deefer,” Roegeroski said. “I need some kind of verification before I go bugging Wingslet.”

“When Deefer fired on Our Lord and Savior I put a bullet in her head.”

“You ... say again?”

“Deefer tried to crucify the son of a bitch so I shot her. Nobody kills the Son of God on my watch. Especially not in these End Times we got going on all around us. I’ve been hearing about this since I was a kid and never really believed it. But here we are. Plain as day.”

“You’re telling me you put a bullet in Deefer’s head because she was following orders?”

“Because she was trying to kill the Son of God. We got a change in command going on and I’m making sure I’m on the right side.”

“You’re saying Deefer’s dead.”

“Affirmative,” Minor said.

“All right, I’m on the horn to Colonel Wingslet right now.”

“Just make sure you tell him about the resurrection,” Minor said. “Tell him to get his ass up here and he can see for himself. We’ll put some steaks on the grill for him. I got water turning into wine all around me. Swimming in the stuff. Even got some hickory chips for the grill. And fruit cocktail. If this ain’t divine intervention, I don’t know what is.”

Alexandria

Daniella Forsher, the president’s national security advisor, carried two dinner plates from her kitchen to her small dining room where Vice President Vasco, a friend since Columbia graduate school, thumbed through messages on his assistant. Behind him a large window in the living room looked out over the roiling Potomac River, racing toward the ocean seventeen stories below. Each plate had half a potato, steaming from the cut ends and drizzled with creamed corn. When she put one of the plates in front of Vasco, she was just finishing up a conversation in her head with a colleague at the NSA.

“You’re sure about this?” she said. “Okay, I’ll make sure he knows. Good work. Over-Now.”

“What’s he know?” Vasco said, eyeing his dinner.

“It’s Barker,” Forsher said. “Just pretend the creamed corn is gravy.”

“What’s Barker?” Vasco said, looking up.

“On the inside,” Forsher said, working a corkscrew into what she thought would be the last bottle of pinot she’d ever drink. “Bouzel admitted their inside guy was killed on the island, right? She only said that so you wouldn’t know Barker was there. They wouldn’t kill their inside guy.”

“I’m not sure I share that assumption,” Vasco said. “If you believe the nut jobs, he was killed and then resurrected.”

“We traced that back to a low level clerk on Colonel Wingslet’s staff.”

“The clerk made it up?”

“No, it started with one of the boots,” Forsher said. “A major on the ground. I think his name is Minor. He shot his second in command.”

“Shot him?”

“Her. She’s the one who took the bloody steak selfie.”

“For what reason?”

“Minor wanted to stop her from killing the messiah,” Forsher said. “She was following an urgent order right from the White House. He called the clerk right after he gunned her down.” Forsher popped the cork, closed her eyes and inhaled the aromas floating out the top of the bottle. “Minor told the clerk that Barker was blown to bits when the missile hit the library.”

“But then he was resurrected,” Vasco said.

“Right,” Forsher said. “Minor also claims he saw a bullet go right through Barker’s head, and watched him fly up a couple hundred feet. And the bloody steak selfie has turned into a loaves and fishes story.”

“And the logical conclusion?”

“Barker is the Son of God.”

Fort Mackinac

"Can you slop me some more of that fruit cocktail?" Minor said, holding out his bowl for Barker to fill.

"I don't know what to call you," Minor said. "Your worship? Your holiness? Something like that?"

"Ray's fine," Barker said after Minor's bowl was half full.

"Don't be stingy, your holiness," Minor said, and Barker tipped the can again. "I haven't had anything even resembling fruit in weeks. Hey, I was just thinking that you must be Jesus' son, or maybe his brother. I mean, Jesus was the son of God, and now you're here so ... is that right? I mean is God your dad and Mary your mom? Or maybe Jesus is your dad. No, Jesus wouldn't be your dad or that would be sorta like incest. Or maybe Mary Magdalene is your mom, not the Holy Mother."

Barker shook the last of the fruit chunks into his own bowl. "Do you have any transport?" Barker said. "A boat? Chopper?"

Minor shook his head after he slurped from his bowl. "We were just supposed to get data to prove you're dead, get back on our bird and head south. But they needed the chopper to run some brass somewhere and left us here." Minor looked up into the sky as if he might see the chopper. "That bird should be back."

"When?" Barker said.

"Soon," Minor said, still scanning the sky. "Ish."

"What happens then? You said I'm supposed to be dead."

"I'm working on that," Minor said. "Everybody figured you'd stay dead. Nobody factored in a resurrection. "All I know for sure is that there's no way I'm gonna play lord high crucifixioner and put a bullet in the messiah. I already told them we got a resurrection going on up here." Minor checked his assistant then put it back into his pocket. "You'd think they'd get back to me about that."

Okinisee

London sang "Onward Christian Soldiers," as he sauntered down the walkway leading to the front door. Fred waited on the porch with the hatchet in his hand.

"How's it hangin' Fredster?" London said, holding up a hand for a high five, which Fred ignored, so London slapped him hard on the shoulder.

After London walked past, Fred held the hatchet high as if he was going to bury it in London's skull.

"Amber!" London said, stepping through the door. "Sweet sis!"

"You're welcome in our home but if you call me sister again I'll strangle you in your sleep," Amber said from her desk.

"You'd have to get past these," London said, jabbing the air with his fists. A piece of rope held up London's baggy pants and the ends of the rope danced each time he punched the air. "Only good thing about the disaster is it got me back to my fighting weight."

Fred closed the front door, secured its three deadbolts and re-armed the booby traps.

"I gotta confession," London said, dropping his fists. "All I got is a half a donut. I've been picking at it, you know, around the green for a couple days. After that, I got nothin'. You guys are probably sittin' pretty though, huh?"

Fred started to raise the hatchet again.

Fort Mackinac

“I think the devil's at work here,” Minor said, scooping up the last cherry from his fruit cocktail. “I don't imagine he's too happy that you got resurrected. Even if it just happens every couple thousand years, it's still gotta stick in Satan's craw when God's rep is roaming the earth and doing good for people.”

“You really gotta get over this resurrection thing,” Barker said.

“Yeah, you're right,” Minor said. “I gotta get over trying to explain it. God's will is in full force right now. I just gotta go with it.” Minor tilted his head back and tipped his bowl to drain the last bit of syrup. “But I don't need to understand it when I can feel it. Why don't you go ahead and give me some more wine. For all I know this is my last supper. I mean here I am breaking bread with ...”

Minor's eyes darted to the side, and he dove from his seat and rolled twice on the ground. A crossbow bolt smacked the cobblestones next to him and ricocheted over the courtyard wall. Minor pulled his pistol and fired two rounds at a man dressed in camouflage and wearing a ski mask, but the man had already ducked around a corner of the munitions building.

“Throw down your weapon!” Minor screamed as he got to his feet and stayed low, moving to his right and forward, keeping his pistol trained on the corner of the building. “You have no chance! There's an entire company on the island! You're surrounded!” Minor crumpled to the cobblestones when a crossbow bolt struck him from behind and lodged in his chest. He held onto his gun and with great effort and screaming in pain, he rolled over onto his side and raised his gun toward the man behind him holding a crossbow and about to dive behind the courtyard wall. Minor fired and the man fell to the ground. Minor summoned enough strength to roll back onto his stomach and when the man who fired the first bolt peeked around the corner of munitions dump, Minor put a bullet into his forehead. Minor tried to look behind him again but began coughing up blood and his body convulsed several times, and then he lay still.

Barker backed toward the heavy wooden door and quietly closed it behind him.

Alexandria

Vasco had just finished his potato smothered in creamed corn and swallowed the last of his wine when his assistant buzzed. He pulled it from his pocket to read the message.

Forsher was swirling the last of her pinot when she got an alert in her head to check DisneyNews. She ordered it on and the wall screen lit up across the room with vid of hundreds of boats all heading in the same direction on a large river.

“Holy shit! Where's that?” Vasco had just swallowed the last of his wine and had pushed his empty plate off to the side.

“The Detroit River,” Forsher said. “That's Detroit on the left and Windsor, Ontario on the right. They're working their way upstream toward salvation.”

“Salvation?”

“Mackinac Island,” Forsher said.

“Where Barker's hanging out.”

“Couple hundred miles north of Detroit.” Forsher closed her eyes for a moment to listen to her head. “People are trying to travel overland too but it's dangerous, plus the roads are clogged with thousands of abandoned cars and trucks and whatever else. And the Air Force is serious about the no fly rules north of the fortieth parallel. Boats are the only way to go.”

“It's all because of that bloody steak picture?”

“Apparently they believe Barker represents salvation,” Forsher said. “Funny what fear does to people.”

“I have to admit that my mouth waters just thinking about that picture,” Vasco said.

The floater switched views for a look south and there were boats throughout the mile-wide river in that direction too.

Forsher closed her eyes again. “Rumors are raging that those who pass the test of faith not only get eternal life but also access to Barker’s endless supply of food.”

“Test of faith?”

Forsher opened her eyes. “Just getting there.”

“So you get a reservation in heaven, and an endless all-you-can-eat buffet if you make the pilgrimage to the island,” Vasco said. “Barker said that?”

“I don’t know that he said anything, but I’m not sure that matters.”

The floater swooped down to get a closer look at the boats heading north.

“After they get through the Detroit River, they’ll have to get past Lake St. Clair and the St. Mary’s River, and then travel the whole length of Lake Huron to the Straits of Mackinac,” Forsher said. “Those fools in canoes and rowboats will never make it.”

Vasco looked at Forsher to see if she was looking at a map.

“You don’t remember my master’s thesis, do you?” she said. “Nineteenth Century western migration saved the Republic.”

“It did?”

“No, but that was my advisor’s heartfelt belief and playing along got me into the PhD program.” She closed her eyes again. “There were thousands of boats abandoned by people who moved south after the disaster, and all those boats were just sitting there in marinas, waiting for this to happen.”

“All part of God’s intricate plan, I’m sure,” Vasco said.

“To send thousands and thousands of people into the North where there’s no food, no law and order? And they burn up their cells just to get there, and then they’re stuck. Imagine the security situation.”

The floater zoomed in on a family in a cabin cruiser. There were three small children in the cockpit wearing life jackets and sitting quietly near their mother as their father steered the boat.

“I bet half the people in those boats don’t make it back alive,” Vasco said.

“That Barker is real trouble,” Forsher said. She reached with her fork to stab the last piece of potato on her plate.

“We have to assume Barker’s got a DisneyNews contract and he’s doing all this for the eyeballs,” Vasco said.

“I guess this explains why Barker’s been out of sight for so long,” Forsher said. “I bet he’s been cooking this up for weeks. This Barker guy is real trouble.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Vasco said, raising his empty glass for a toast. “Seems to have no moral compass.”

Forsher picked up her empty wine glass and clinked Vasco’s glass.

“When’s your husband coming back?” Vasco said.

“He’s in New York until tomorrow night.”

Vasco rose from his seat, gave Forsher a slight bow, took her hand and led her to the bedroom.

Fort Mackinac

Barker sat at the bottom of the basement steps and ran through all the options he could conjure. None were good. He'd never considered suicide before, but even that seemed foolish, practically redundant.

The four dead people upstairs would eventually be missed by somebody. Especially the soldiers. For the first time he thought of the racks and racks of food as a threat to his life. Food giveth and food taketh away.

With the pleasing thought that Cecilia might still be alive, he opened a jar of spicy pickled asparagus and ate one after another, relishing the vinegar's bite and the jalapeno's heat.

Anaheim, California / Detroit River

"Holy Hoax or Super Savior? That's the question."

Zinc, standing behind his anchor desk, pivoted to a different camera and the screen behind him showed several large pleasure boats in a Chicago marina. One boat was nearly past the short breakwall but the others were battlegrounds with people onboard using golf clubs, umbrellas, bottles and whatever else they could find to smash the fingers or bash the heads of people trying to climb aboard from smaller boats, or swimmers trying to hoist themselves up at the stern. Two small groups on the dock fought over the only boat still tied up.

"No one can say for sure whether we're in the midst of that most miraculous and rare of events, a Second Coming, or we're the victims of a masterful deceit by former MASSnews caster Ray Barker. But there's one thing we know for sure: Tens of thousands of people are desperate to get to Mackinac Island, a tiny dollop of land in the Straits of Mackinac between Michigan's Upper and Lower Peninsulas. They've all seen the bloody steak selfie and heard Barker's claim that he'll feed all believers who make it to Mackinac Island, or what some are now calling Miracle Island. But is this loaves and fishes, as Barker claims, or no loaves, just wishes?"

Zinc disappeared and the fistfight on the dock in Chicago took over the screen. One group had gained the upper hand and all but two from the opposing group had been tossed off the dock into the cold water, but another group of seven men and women were sprinting down the dock and joined the fray.

"As you can see," Zinc said, filling the screen again, "pilgrims will need all the passion and fervor of their convictions to survive in the lawless North, where brute force rules and local law enforcement no longer exists."

Zinc turned to face the first camera. "Reports of violence are flooding in, but we're also hearing about more civilized transactions in places like Toledo, Cleveland, Buffalo, Milwaukee, Indiana's Michigan City and other northern cities where it appears government estimates regarding the number of refuseniks are low, and true believers are outbidding each other for boats that will get them to the Promised Land. For a ride north people are giving up their life savings, property, jewels, anything that might still have value. We've even heard of a few hastily arranged marriages in exchange for a ride. And there are several reports from places like West Virginia, Maryland and Kentucky of steady streams of people trying to make their way through or around government checkpoints to travel to the North in hopes of meeting their Lord and Savior."

Flying above the Detroit River, the floater followed a speedboat as it zoomed past slower boats and cut a deep vee in the water. Its wake capsized an overloaded canoe, leaving five men clinging to their upside boat. The men waved and shouted at passing boats but none stopped to help.

“We have numerous unconfirmed reports that Barker has already performed several miracles on the island, despite the fact that less than an hour ago the White House reported they had proof he was killed in the attack on the Mackinac Island Library. And remember that the administration was planning a hero’s burial at Arlington, so the fact that Barker is alive seems to have caught the administration completely off guard. While we can’t yet confirm that a resurrection has occurred, the two soldiers pictured with Barker in the bloody steak selfie did discover evidence convincing enough for the White House to declare Barker dead.”

The bloody steak selfie filled the screen behind Zinc.

“Of course, the implications of a resurrection are enormous,” Zinc said, “and it remains unclear if Barker is claiming that he’ll feed only those who travel to his new kingdom in the devastated and dangerous North, or perhaps he’ll somehow miraculously share his divine bounty with everyone who simply recognizes his divinity and professes fealty to the Christian faith. More on that as the story develops.”

Zinc turned to face another camera.

“I’m told we have DisneyNews caster Treenie Bigby live from a park alongside what some have dubbed the ‘Salvation Superhighway,’ also known as the Detroit River.”

A young woman stood on a small dock just inches above the swollen river. She faced away from the camera and her dark ponytail spilled over the hood of her bright yellow raincoat. Beyond her, the river was thick with boats of all sizes plying its gray chop. Treenie turned to face the camera.

“Yes, Zinc,” Treenie said. “You’ve got me.”

“What do you know, Treenie?”

“I know that everyone I’ve talked to is willing to do just about anything to get to Mackinac Island, or Miracle Island, as everyone here is calling it. It’s a strange mix of desperation and joy, with not a little fear mixed in.”

The floater’s camera rose in the air and zoomed in downstream on a small group of women on the river bank waving and gesturing to passing boats. One jumped up and down holding a large sign that read, “Blowjob for a ride to Salvation!”

“Treenie, we’re hearing lots of reports of violence,” Zinc said.

The camera left the group of women and returned to Treenie.

“Yes, fear of violence has a grip on just about everybody here,” Treenie said. “I’ve been hearing occasional gunfire since I arrived a half hour ago, and I’ve already seen a couple fist fights, and watched two guys beat on each other with two-by-fours. Nobody won that fight. People are desperate to get on the water but most people heading north don’t have any idea what they’re up against. I don’t think they realize that the Detroit River is the easy part. Fifty miles north of here, after Lake St. Clair and the St. Clair River, is the enormous Lake Huron. It will be like crossing an ocean and I don’t think many of these people are prepared for that. Of course, lots of them are relying on their faith to pull them through.”

“Any idea on how many have died so far?” Zinc said.

“No way to know for sure, but we’ve seen at least five or six people knocked out with clubs and left face down in the water,” Treenie said. “Several times I’ve seen people in small boats climb onto bigger boats and throw people overboard. Every now and then you see a body or two floating by. This is no place for the meek, despite assurances.”

“Assurances?”

“That they’ll inherit the earth.”

“Of course,” Spender said. “Have you been personally threatened?”

“If DisneyNews hadn’t sent three armed guards with me, plus the armored vehicle dropped in by chopper, we would have certainly lost our spare power cells, and probably our lives. We’ve been offered as much as two hundred thousand dollars for one fully charged cell. Some people set up stands to sell power cells but, from what I’m hearing, most are overrun by mobs.”

The floater rose again and zoomed in on the remains of a metal shed downstream that had been pulled apart and lay in pieces on the ground. Three bodies lay among the debris.

“Yes,” Zinc said. “We’re seeing an example now. Seems like a war zone.”

“Yes, more like Armageddon than the Second Coming. But there are also people who have the look of pure joy in their eyes and they’re absolutely convinced Barker is the SOG.”

“We have an interview you did a few minutes ago,” Zinc said. “Hang tight there, Treenie, we’ll run the interview and be right back to you.”

Zinc gave way to a scene along the Detroit River. Treenie approached a man loading a small, five-seat fishing boat. He had a pistol tucked in his belt and his two young children wore life jackets and sat on the rear bulkhead watching the man hand bags and boxes to his wife so she could stow them under the seats.

“If you make it to Mackinac Island, what do you expect to find there?” Treenie said, holding her right hand a foot from his face so the mic imbedded in her ring could pick up his voice.

The man paused and looked up at Treenie.

“*When* we make it to Mackinac Island,” the man said with a grin. “I can feel it in my bones. This is real. I knew God would come through for us, and he’s doing it. The Lord gave his first son for our salvation, and now he’s sacrificing his second.”

“Sacrifice?” the caster said. “You think Barker will be crucified, just like Jesus before him?”

The man picked up a cardboard box but stopped short of handing it his wife and considered the question. “Hadn’t thought about that,” he said. “I guess it’s all in God’s very capable hands. I can’t tell you what he has planned. All I know is that I have to get my family there so we can bask in the glow of the Heavenly Father.”

“And get a good meal.”

“That won’t hurt either,” the man said with a smile, and handed the box to his wife.

“No worries that this is a hoax?”

The man stopped loading the boat again and looked up at the floater. “Deep, deep in my bones I know that God takes care of his people and he’s going to take care of us.”

The screen went back to a live view of Treenie.

“I did that interview about fifteen minutes ago,” Treenie said. “They never launched the boat. After I finished talking to the dad, several men came out of the trees and he was only able to take out one of them with his gun. The thugs knocked him out with some kind of club, took his gun and shot him. The mom grabbed the kids and ran. I’ve covered two wars and lots of natural disasters,” Treenie said. “This is far different than anything I’ve ever seen. Sort of a mix of Carnival and World War III.”

“Well, we really appreciate the risk you’re taking to bring us this historic event.”

“Just doing my ...” Treenie was nearly knocked off balance and turned toward the sound behind her of a boat ramming into the end of the small dock she stood on.

A man in an overcoat and a knit hat pulled down to his eyes jumped out of the boat and onto the dock. “We want your cell! The two men in the boat pointed pistols at Treenie. They

were the first to be gunned down by the DisneyNews guards, firing from behind the armored vehicle parked on the riverside park's drive, up a small hill from the river. Even though he seemed to be unarmed, the man in the overcoat took several bullets too and fell into the water.

"Sorry, Zinc. We need to get out of here," Treenie said, already running down the dock toward the low-slung, black vehicle where her guards waited, weapons still drawn.

Okinisee

Fred sat next to London on the vinyl love seat studying his dad's old map of the Lake Huron shore while Amber swapped out the dead cell in the wall screen with their only remaining cell with any juice so they could watch the exclusive coverage of the Second Coming on DisneyNews. The bloody steak selfie filled the screen, with Barker toasting the camera between Deefer and Minor.

"I knew there was something special about that guy," Amber said when she sat down behind her desk. "Fred, you remember how you just about knocked him out when you busted his head open with the door. And what'd he do? He turned the other cheek, just like Jesus would've done."

"My Jesus would've kicked your ass," London said. "Seems like God always had to do the dirty work. Yeah, Jesus did some hard time on the cross, but otherwise he had it pretty easy, hanging out with Mary Margarita and turning water into wine with his apostle buddies. Probably had a killer man cave up there on the mount. But God had to be the enforcer and I think that made Jesus soft. If this Barker's for real, I hope he's planning on kicking some ass along the way and pulling his own weight."

Amber glared at London. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I'm just saying these times call for a different kind of Jesus," London said. "We got some bad shit going on and he needs to come out swingin' and not just turning cheeks. He's gotta adopt a aggressive attitude. I want my Jesus to be a goddamn pissed off mofo looking evil straight in the eye and kickin' its sorry ass all the way back down past the gates of Hell."

"We shoulda left you out there on the road just like Fred wanted," Amber said.

London's eyes shot at Fred. "You were gonna leave me out there?" London said. "All alone?"

Fred shrugged and kept studying the Lake Huron shoreline.

"You got nothin' to say?" London said. "Just, 'oh, what the hell, let's leave London to die and rot on the road right outside the door?'"

On the wall screen, the selfie was replaced by a scene along the Detroit River.

"Look at that, willya?" Amber said, pointing at the screen. "Hallelujah! All them people in all them boats can't all be wrong. I say we forget going south to Toledo. When we leave tonight I say we go north to Mackinac Island and let our Lord and Savior shower his love upon us."

London still glared at Fred. "In my time of need?" he said. "In my darkest hour? Me, who has never asked anything of you?"

Fred stood and walked to Amber's desk where he laid out his map of Lake Huron and sat down opposite her. "I'm going to mark some good stopping points," he said, choosing a pencil from a pewter mug on the desk. "We'll have to keep track of where we are all the time because it's not going to be easy finding anything at night."

Amber was more interested in the wall screen. The number of boats in the Detroit River seemed to have doubled.

“Just look at what we’d be missing if we go to Toledo,” Amber said. “All those people! Just look! And the island is so much closer.”

“I’m in,” London said to Amber. “I’m gonna overlook what Fred tried to do to me and help you two get up to Mackinac Island. We could be there in five or six hours. Sounds a helluva lot better than spending all those days out there on the way to Toledo. I’ve been out there and it ain’t pretty. It scares me to think that I might still be out there. All alone. Right, Fred?”

Fred turned to look at the screen and the floater zoomed in on several bodies that had washed up against a concrete embankment on the Canadian side of the Detroit River.

“That could happen whether we go north or south,” London said, as the floater left the dead bodies and flew higher for a view of the entire, packed river. “So we might as well go north. Plus, I got like twenty grand in unpaid speeding tickets in Ohio.”

Anaheim / Washington, D.C.

“The next stop for our intrepid caster Treenie Bigby will be Miracle Island for an interview with Barker himself,” Zinc said into the camera. “And as she fights her way through the dangers of the North to find him, let’s take a look at what we know about Ray Barker, this mysterious miracle worker. Barker is the subject of a fascinating report we just received from a trusted source claiming that the two soldiers in the bloody steak selfie were actually sent to kill him. If treating your would-be assassins to a steak dinner isn’t forgiveness in the extreme, I don’t know what is. Also, according to an unidentified eye witness, Barker was seen levitating as high as two hundred feet, but more miraculously, he also survived a bullet passing through his head with no visible marks. And we’ve already heard the claims that he either survived the bombing of Provo headquarters on the island that left no one else alive, or he was killed and then resurrected. All this makes the old chestnut of turning water into wine seem like child’s play, although that’s another miracle Barker is said to have performed. And maybe some of you wouldn’t consider a steak dinner a miracle these days, but I’d put it in that category.”

Zinc grinned and changed cameras.

“We’re trying to get White House reaction to all this but so far there’s no word from the president or any administration officials. However, I understand that we have a statement from Texas Senator Deen Jahne, a former Baptist minister.

The screen filled with a crowded hallway outside the Senate Chamber. Senator Jahne was at the screen’s center and he was surrounded by casters for an impromptu press conference. The senator’s face, reconstructed following a helmetless motorcycle accident, gave the impression that his features had a natural downhill slope from left to right.

“I’m all for a Second Coming of Our Lord and Savior,” Jahne said, raising his left eyebrow, steepening the slope. “And I gotta say we’re about due, given the kind of world we live in now, but if this Barker jackass is trying to pull a fast one on us, I’ve got some two-by-sixes and a nail gun that’ll solve his problems.”

One of the casters in the crowd shouted out a question: “You’re saying that falsely claiming to be the Son of God is punishable by death? Wouldn’t a crucifixion be considered cruel and unusual?”

“I’m saying we’ve got enough problems without some caster taking advantage of desperate people just so he can get some eyeballs,” Senator Jahne said. “If Barker is who he says he is, doesn’t matter what we do to him, right? I mean, he’s saying he’s got divine powers. Maybe we oughta test those powers. Make him prove it. He says a bullet went right through his

brain. I wonder if he can do that twice.”

Zinc filled the screen again. “Some strong words from Senator Jahne,” he said, and Mirellen Garasovic filled the right half of the screen.

“Joining us now all the way from Mars for the first time in weeks, we have an extremely special guest who might be able to shed some light on Barker’s divinity claims.”

Mirellen wore a NASA jacket a few sizes too large because the laundry equipment at the Gemini Cricket Family Restaurants Mars Station hadn’t been functioning properly and she was working her way through the unworn clothes belonging to the sixteen colonists she had buried in the Martian dust weeks before.

“Mars Girl! It’s been a while,” Spender said with a broad smile. “How are things on Mars?”

“I’d really rather be called Mirellen,” she said without emotion. “That’s my name.”

“Well, sure,” Zinc said with a forced giggle. “But I don’t think the lawyers would like that.” He appeared to listen to someone off camera. “Yes, I’m being told that we’re obligated to call you Mars Girl. Contracts are contracts, you know,” he said with a chuckle.

“I don’t think it’s a lot to ask,” Mirellen said. “I’d just like to be called by my real name. And I don’t care how many dolls or whatever other garbage you’ve made with Mars Girl on it.”

“Have you heard about Ray Barker?” Zinc said. “We’re getting reports that he’s performing miracles down here on earth. We have reports that he survived a bullet going through his head, and now we’re told that he can turn water into wine.”

Mirellen smirked. “I guess nothing would surprise me,” she said. “What he and Cecilia did for me was pretty miraculous.”

“So would you say that Ray Barker has the ability to save us here on planet earth like he saved you on Mars?”

“I’ve never even met Mr. Barker in person, but why not?”

“Mars Girl, would you say publicly that you believe Ray Barker is indeed the Son of God?”

“I asked you nicely to call me Mirellen. If you can’t even do that, I’m shutting down the camera again.”

“So do you think we can say that Mars Girl believes Barker’s claim?”

“What’s my name?”

Spender glanced off camera again. “Well ... everybody on earth calls you Mars Girl.”

Mirellen reached toward the camera and her half of the screen went black.

Spender looked into the camera and his face filled the screen. “Looks like we’re having technical problems again. But we’ll be right back to talk with Gordie Nottingham, the man you all remember for picking the last three Kentucky Derbies *and* the last four Super Bowls. We’ll talk with Gordie about the odds Ray Barker’s divinity claims are for real.”

The White House

Bouzel was in her office with her assistant to her ear.

“Listen colonel, I definitely have presidential authority for this,” Bouzel said. “It was his idea. If I was giving the orders I’d let DisneyNews cover everything they want. I think seeing all the violence up there will discourage people from heading north, but the president disagrees and thinks that live news coming out of Michigan will encourage more and more pilgrims.”

Bouzel turned toward her wall screen and saw a stream of boats leaving the St. Clair River at Port Huron and heading into Lake Huron.

“I’m not disagreeing and I’m well aware of the constitutional issues,” Bouzel said. “I’ll make sure the president hears your concerns. In the meantime, we need your drones to knock out all floaters sending data from anywhere north of the fortieth parallel.”

Bouzel closed her eyes and shook her head while she listened.

“Here’s why: because the president assumes that the casters will hype Barker’s divinity claims as much as possible so they can grab every last eyeball, and that means more people heading north. We know your drones have been tailing the floaters so this is the quickest and simplest method to achieve our goal.”

Bouzel nodded as the colonel spoke.

“I’m hearing you loud and clear, colonel, and I can assure you that we don’t like pitting the military against the media either, but these are not normal times. When can we expect the floaters to be destroyed?”

Bouzel turned in her chair to face her wall screen, still showing boats entering Lake Huron. After a few seconds, the screen went black.

“Good work colonel,” Bouzel said.

Anaheim

“Well, we’ve been fearing this,” Zinc said, standing at his anchor desk in front of a black screen. “Yes, we are under the Emergency Powers Act and the free flow of some information has been understandably suspended, but to simply do away with our First Amendment rights as we try to report on the hundreds of thousands of people emptying their bank accounts and risking their lives to meet the man they believe to be the savior of the human race is completely unwarranted, un-Democratic, un-American and really, really pisses me off!”

The screen behind Zinc changed to live vid of hundreds of boats entering Lake Ontario from the St. Lawrence Seaway, most hugging the north shore of the lake as they continued west on their way to the Upper Great Lakes, despite the fact that the locks at Niagara weren’t functioning, which would leave them three hundred miles short of Mackinac Island.

Once again, the image behind Zinc went black and large yellow words appeared: “Shut Down By Illegal Government Censors.”

“I’ve just been told that Air Force drones are preventing us from bringing you the truth about what’s happening in the North,” Zinc said. He paused to listen for a moment. “And if the government spots another one of our floaters north of the fortieth parallel our license to broadcast will be suspended,” Zinc said, turning to face a different camera. “Apparently, they aren’t messing around.”

Deefer’s bloody steak selfie replaced the government censorship message behind Zinc.

“We estimate that there will be thousands of people arriving at the Straits of Mackinac by mid-day tomorrow and we’ll do our damndest to show you live vid of the Second Coming even if I have to fly up there myself!” Zinc said, pounding his fist on his anchor desk.

Okinisee

“You know this is crazy,” Fred said to Amber.

She sat at her desk with her eyes closed and her hands clasped between her breasts. She had been praying nearly nonstop since DisneyNews confirmed her hopes that Ray Barker was the Son of God.

London was asleep in a chair by the door, snoring occasionally, with his head leaned back against the wall and his mouth wide open.

“If we’re going to take the boat anywhere, it should be south to Toledo,” Fred said, sitting opposite Amber and slicing oyster mushrooms into serving sizes for the trip to the mouth of the Maumee River, where weekly trips south were organized by former Ohio Highway Patrol officers who volunteered their time to take people safely to the Settlement Zones in a program funded by the Friends Society. “It’s only a few days boat trip to Toledo,” Fred said. “If we make it, we’re safe. And there are food lines all over the place down South.”

Amber remained in prayer position, her lips forming silent words.

“You heard what the Pope said,” Fred said.

“If I was Catholic I’d care,” Amber said, popping one eye open. “And what does some wrinkly old Roman fart in a chef’s hat know about what’s going on here in the U.S.A.?” Amber opened her other eye, but kept her hands clasped. “Any idea when was the last time anyone was resurrected? More than two thousand years ago. We can watch history happen right in front of us. Maybe we can help write the Newest Testament like they’re saying on the news.” Amber smiled at Fred. “You’d be good at that, you know. The Book of Fred. Can’t do it unless we get up to Mackinac.”

Fred put the last mushroom pieces in a small paper sack, folded the top and looked at Amber. “This is a life or death decision,” he said. “We have to do what gives us the best chance, and that’s Toledo.”

Fred put another fold in the paper sack and looked up at his dad’s old map of Lake Huron he had taped to the wall. Fred had marked it with red Xs for what he thought would be good stopping points, and blue Xs for secondary choices. From where he sat, it looked like a long way between the red Xs.

“I knew there was something special about Barker when he came into the shop,” Amber said, her eyes open again. “He had that special thing about him, you know? You saw it too, didn’t you Fred? You know, that thing?”

“No,” Fred said. He walked to where he had taped the map to the wall, took it down and laid it across Amber’s desk.

Amber’s eyes were closed again. “I can feel God’s grace upon us,” she said, holding up a palm. “We’ve been blessed to be alive at such a time, and to be so close to where God decided the Messiah should land.” Her eyes popped open. “Do you think Jesus is Barker’s brother? Or maybe just a half brother. You know, different mother.”

“I wonder where he’ll go for Thanksgiving,” Fred said. He sat down across from Amber and pulled a pencil from the pewter mug.

“And I always wondered about what it means to have God as a dad and a mortal as a mom. Does that make him sorta mixed? Like Spock?”

Fred was staring at the map and didn’t respond. He erased one of the calculations he’d done earlier in pencil on the map in the empty area representing Lake Huron.

“They’ve got the same dad, but I bet they have the same mother too,” Amber said.

“Yeah, the tooth fairy,” Fred said, redoing the long division he used to calculate how far they could go on the gasoline they had.

Amber closed her eyes. “I’m gonna have to do some extra praying to keep you outta hell for that.”

Fred finished the calculation, checked it, and with a dramatic flair that even surprised himself, he slammed his pencil down and sat back in the wooden chair with his arms crossed. “Damn it!” he said.

London, still sleeping in a chair against the wall, let his chin fall to his chest.

“Good news?” Amber said, opening one eye again.

“Worst thing that can happen is that we almost make it and run out of gas and get stuck somewhere,” Fred said.

“So ... good news?” Amber said.

Fred leaned forward to check his new calculation, then leaned back and looked at Amber. “I made a mistake on the math the first time,” he said. “We don’t have enough gas to make it to Toledo. If we can’t make it all the way, we shouldn’t try it. I don’t think we can count on finding gasoline along the way. It wasn’t easy before the disaster. I don’t have any idea where we’d find some now.”

“This is such blessed, good news!” Amber said, raising her arms. “Hallelujah!”

London stirred, leaned his head back and then began snoring again.

“I knew we were going to see our Lord and Savior, the Messiah, the Second Coming of Lord Jesus! The Son of God!” Amber said. “Let’s leave right now!”

Fred pulled a ruler from the pewter mug and measured the distance on the map to Mackinac Island.

“We might even make it before dark if we go now!” Amber said. “Maybe we should take some of grandma’s old gold jewelry, you know, like the Wiseguys.”

Fred looked toward the door where London was still asleep.

“I’ll make you a deal,” he whispered to Amber, and then glanced at London again.

Amber kept her fingers laced together, but let her hands drop to the table.

“You know the last thing I want to do is go anywhere with London,” he said. “Whether we go north or south, if London’s with us I don’t think we’d last an hour without some kind of massive fuck up. So, if you really think Mackinac is our best bet, we can leave tonight after London goes to sleep.” Fred glanced at London again. “But we leave without London. We’ll tell him we’re going to wait until tomorrow morning because Mackinac’s a lot shorter trip and it will be better to travel when it’s light outside. But we’ll sneak out around two a.m. and that should get us to the Straits right about the time it starts getting light.”

Amber closed her eyes, returned her clasped hands to praying position and rocked in her desk chair. After a moment she stopped rocking and dabbed her eyes with a tissue. “If that’s the only way for us to save ourselves and be in the presence of our Lord and Savior, then God has given us permission to ditch London,” she said. “But only if you help me pray for his soul.” Amber reached her upturned hand across the table.

Fred glanced at London again, and put his hand in Amber’s.

One thousand feet above Michigan’s Lower Peninsula

“What do you mean ‘blackout’?” Treenie said. “That’s not legal!”

Treenie sat in the helicopter’s copilot seat and wore a white mustache from the double whip cappuccino she held away from her body as the chopper bounced through some turbulence. After waiting a half hour for the chopper in the riverfront park while her nervous guards kept the armored vehicle moving around the park’s circular drive, Anaheim let Treenie know that the DisneyNews pilot scheduled to fly Treenie and her security detail to Mackinac Island had disappeared. Treenie convinced Anaheim to break with protocol and send them to Mackinac Island without a pilot in order to get there before dark. Treenie’s travel bag sat on the pilot’s seat and she had Anaheim in her head as she peered out the window into the fading light.

“And you all just bent over and took it?” Treenie said, facing forward again. “You think maybe a few of the five hundred lawyers on the sixth floor have heard of the First Amendment?”

She looked behind her through the open bulkhead at her three guards and used the back of her free hand to wipe away her cappuccino mustache. The three sat on bench seats in the passenger compartment and two of them were asleep.

“Ohio?!” she said. “O-fucking-hio? I assume you realize I’m already north of the Ohio line. There’s nothing happening in Ohio. Nothing ever happens in Ohio. It’s all happening north of Ohio in *Michigan*.”

Treenie put her cup in the holder attached to the armrest and slammed her open palm against the dash, waking one of her guards who instinctively reached for his handgun.

“That’s not good enough!” Treenie said, holding her cup away from her body again. “I’m putting my life on the line to cover the biggest show in more than two thousand years and you’re all hiding under your desks because big bro’s being a bully! I can’t believe what I’m hearing!”

Treenie noticed that the chopper was losing altitude. With the sun nearly down the only feature she could pick out clearly was a large parking lot ahead with a yellow X painted at its center, illuminated by two hovering floodlights. The building next to the parking lot looked like a school.

“Hey, we’re landing. Where am I?”

Treenie’s security detail began to stir in the back seat, and craned their necks to get a glimpse out their small windows.

“I don’t want a *safe place*!” Treenie said. “I want to do my job. Where the hell am I?” She looked behind her and all three of her guards had pulled their rifles from the wall mounts. “West Branch High School?”

The chopper settled to the pavement and a driverless cart with three bench seats hurried from the school’s front entrance.

The cart circled the chopper once and waited near the cargo door. Treenie could hear her guards checking their rifle magazines behind her.

Treenie sighed. “All right, all right. Just get this figured out fast.” She took a drink of her cappuccino. “Yes, yes, I’ll tell them.”

Treenie wiped the foam from her upper lip again and turned to face her security guards.

“Gotta leave your weapons here,” she said. “The Marines are running this place. No guns allowed.” She could see they were skeptical. “The White House shut us down. We’ll be back in the air when somebody remembers we have a Constitution. For now, we wait here.”

Fort Mackinac

Barker sat in complete darkness on the bottom step in the munitions basement and wondered if he should risk climbing up into the blockhouse to look for Cecilia’s boat. He tried to convince himself that there was a good chance she was still alive, and hoped she thought the same about him. Tomorrow he would get up before dawn and walk to the shore to look for the sailboat.

Maybe the canoe he had seen hidden near the shore was still there and he’d use it to get off the island. Maybe he could head south somehow. Maybe his fairy godmother would grab him by the collar and fly him to Miami. No, not Miami. Last he heard Miami was so crowded there were people living in cardboard shelters and half the town was underwater. Maybe Asheville, North Carolina. He’d heard that was a good town.

But, for now, sleep was what he needed. He stood and lit a candle he found by feeling his way to the metal shelf by the steps. He walked among the shelves of canned and dried food

until he found a folded up cot behind a large wooden cabinet. When he unfolded the cot a sawed off double-barrel shotgun wedged between the cot's folded halves clattered onto the concrete floor. He figured out how to open the breach and saw that it had two unfired shells. He looked around for more shells but didn't see any. He put the gun on the shelf behind him so he could set up the cot.

The Oval Office

The president sat behind his desk looking at nothing in particular as Bouzel talked. Cortein sat next to Bouzel in front of the president's desk with his hands clasped in his lap. His orange suede wingtips had no laces.

"This false Son of God's cynical and opportunistic populism is the most serious national security threat this country has ever faced," Bouzel said.

"The Civil War?" the president said, still not making eye contact. "Hitler? Trump?"

"Barker is consolidating power and clearly has the capacity to energize his base," Bouzel said. "If we allow this to continue, very soon we will see direct challenges to your authority."

"The numbers are clear," Cortein said. "The SOG has already overtaken you in perceived ability to manage the disaster and put food on the tables of American families. A truly remarkable feat for someone we didn't know was still alive until this morning."

"Things are moving fast, Mr. President," Bouzel said, inching further forward in her chair. "The blackout is helping Barker solidify his position as the SOG by allowing rumors to rule, and most rumors support his claims of divinity. This has the extremely dangerous effect of turning any criticism or even skepticism directed toward Barker into a direct attack on God."

"And God has always been seen as infallible by a strong and consistent majority of those who affiliate with a particular religion," Cortein said. "That's a constant and I see no viable strategy for eroding God's infallibility numbers."

"And Barker would be able to ignore Congress, the courts, bureaucrats, the media ... essentially he'll be a dictator," Bouzel said. "We're one more bloody steak selfie from political chaos."

The president seemed to wake from his reverie and leaned forward in his chair with his forearms on his desk and his hands clasped. "But Barker is not the SOG," he said. "Reality has to count for something."

Cortein snickered. "Your reality-based fantasy won't get us anywhere. Reality only counts if it isn't polluted by lies, biases or blind-faith ignorance. So it simply defies reality to think of reality as having much to do with anything."

"On the other hand, Mr. President, I think you've hit the nail on the head!" Bouzel said. "If we play our cards right, the truth is our ace in the hole. The key is, as Cordis implied, getting the public to accept the truth about Barker despite the noise and interference. Not to mention more than two millennia of Christian superstition."

"Thirty-five percent are either Barker true believers or leaning toward true belief, and that number is trending up," Cortein said. "Astonishingly, that holds with Muslims, Buddhists, atheists, even vegans. We initially believed non-Christians, plus most Methodists and certainly the Unitarians, would be with us, but that's not the case. The only identifiable groups with strong skepticism are women with graduate degrees aged twenty-nine to fifty-four, the transgendered community and lawyers. But there's hope. The undecideds are a plurality right now so we've got a good shot at pulling this off if we can move the numbers our way. Modeling shows most undecideds are going to go one way or the other within the next twenty-four hours,

so if Barker isn't discredited soon, we should start planning for a Christian theocracy."

"I don't think any of us would fare well if we have another Spanish Inquisition," Bouzel said.

"Oh, c'mon," the president said, making a face at Bouzel. "No one expects the Spanish Inquisition." The president leaned back in his chair and sighed. "Barker has barely escaped being killed a few times. Why do we assume he'll survive this?"

"It is the Wild West up there so anything's possible, but we've got a few dozen boots keeping an eye on him for now," Bouzel said.

"Why are we protecting him?" the president said. "If he's dead, everyone goes home."

"Chances are small he'll survive no matter how this goes but a martyr may be an even stronger, less predictable and more menacing force than a live perceived SOG," Cortein said. "He needs to be discredited *before* he dies. Once we move the numbers in our favor, whether he's alive or dead becomes far less consequential."

"And let's say Barker is killed right now," Bouzel said. "No matter who is really responsible, who do you think would be blamed?"

"He's the SOG," the president said. "Blame it on God's will."

"Doesn't work that way," Cortein said. "A couple millennia of experience clearly shows that God gets credit for good, but never blame for bad. It's the damndest thing. It's political nirvana."

"Modeling says if Barker is killed we will instantly see true believer numbers spike another twenty-five percent," Bouzel said. That gives the true believers majority status, and most of them will believe that the President of the United States pulled the Messianic rug out from under us all, ending our best shot at surviving the disaster."

"We considered a narrative that brings him back into the human realm," Cortein said. "We could claim that we wrongly declared Barker dead due to bad data, and all the food Barker is handing out is simply the Provos' food stash left behind when they were all killed, not an endless supply of rations for the world."

"But who would believe that?" Bouzel said.

"Majority opinion will say we're just trying to discredit the Messiah for political purposes," Cortein said. "No matter how we frame it, the message won't work if it comes from us. Inez and I agree that the only real solution is for Barker to discredit himself by clearly showing the American people that he is not the SOG. Once that happens, Barker will not only be discredited and vilified, but will almost certainly be killed by the disillusioned pilgrims who will see him as a false messiah. We've seen this before."

"We've devised a simple and practical method to get us there," Bouzel said. "We cancel the blackout and allow for pool reporting from Mackinac Island. Give Barker enough rope while he's onscreen and his halo will become a noose. He can't possibly keep up this ruse so we make sure people are watching as he fails again and again. The more screen time the better."

"You're saying that, unless he walks on water or does some leper tricks, people will turn on him?" the president said. His eyes studied his desk as he thought through the logic. "I'm not sure I agree."

"You do have a point, Mr. President," Cortein said. "Barker's brand of populism can be particularly intractable. Of course we know that he can't possibly have enough food for the entire planet, let alone thousands of pilgrims, but the SOG's promise of eternal life is impossible to discredit because we can't prove what happens after we die. It's the ultimate in populist politics because it's a campaign promise that will never require delivery. However, modeling

shows that if people believe that Barker is not able to feed everyone, we instantly cut in half the number of people likely to agree that accepting Barker into their hearts is a guaranteed free pass to heaven. So our path to attacking the eternal life plank of Barker's platform is to let people see that he can't feed people or do any of the other iconic tricks you referenced that are attributed to the original SOG."

"Once people begin to question his divinity, Barker's claims will turn to dust very quickly," Bouzel said. "And our hands will be clean."

"For guidance, we can use the politically rational Roman response to Jesus," Cortein said.

The president squinted at Cortein. "They nailed him to a cross and left him to bleed and starve in the hot sun."

"Only after the populace turned on him!" Cortein said. "We simply need to encourage and expedite that inevitable and natural next step once Barker is seen as a fraud."

"And then we leave him to bleed and starve in the hot sun?" the president said.

"That's up to the angry mob," Cortein said, kicking off his shoes and standing up. Two toes stuck through a hole in one of his socks.

"The tide will turn when the thousands who risked their lives for salvation and a good meal find that their only reward is cold and hunger," Bouzel said. "With your approval, we worked out a plan with DisneyNews to get one of their casters to Mackinac Island to shine the cold, naked light of truth on Barker and begin his descent back down into mortality. We can use the Emergency Powers Act to limit access to a pool of casters, but the Act provides no definition regarding the size of the pool so we're setting that number at one. We recommend going with DisneyNews, not just because they're by far the top live news network, but they also have the resources to deal with the hostile environment in the North. Once again, this will keep us at arm's length from whatever transpires."

The president picked up his trout-shaped letter opener and examined the fine silver filigree. "Who's the caster?" he said without looking up.

"Bigby," Bouzel said. "Treenie Bigby. She filed from the Detroit River a couple hours ago."

"Yes, I saw it," the president said. "Where's Barker now?"

"At the fort," Bouzel said.

"Fort?"

"On the island," Bouzel said. "We're keeping an eye on him."

"Is there any way he can communicate with the outside?" the president said. "You know, proselytize? Stir up the zealots?"

"That's the best monitored four-square-miles on the planet and we're not picking up anything," Bouzel said.

"All right, then here's the deal," the president said. "By noon tomorrow if Barker's not on the road to perdition I'm going onscreen live to tell people to stop going north and I'll double the National Guard troops so we can choke off the pilgrimage. One way or another it's our responsibility to stop the lemmings from running off the cliff."

Bouzel looked up at Cortein, still standing in front of his chair. He sat down, thought for a moment and then nodded.

"Okay, that works," Bouzel said. "And we'll make sure DisneyNews approaches this story as true believers, not skeptics."

"Otherwise it's just another case of government trying to manipulate the media," Cortein said, slipping off his socks.

Fort Mackinac

Barker, asleep in his cot, was woken by pounding on the trapdoor at the top of the steps. The thuds were non-stop for several seconds and then he heard two gun shots and the pounding stopped.

Barker felt below the cot for the shotgun, flipped off the safety and laid it across his chest. He wondered how he would do in a gun fight. He hadn't found any side rooms in the basement for hiding so it wouldn't be hard to find him. He heard faint voices above and then silence. If they were coming he hoped they would come now. He thought about Cecilia and hoped if she was dead it had been quick.

West Branch High School

A pleasant young Marine escorted Treenie to a classroom down a locker-lined hallway. The soldier, in fatigues, pushed a folded cot on rollers, even though Treenie assured the young man that she wouldn't need it because she'd be leaving soon. The young man told her that he didn't mind making the effort, even if she wasn't going to use it.

"Here's our best room," the Marine said with a smile as he opened the door to a classroom once occupied by a math teacher named Mr. Gromack, according to the placard on the door. "After you," the Marine said.

Treenie walked into the classroom and saw through a bank of windows on the opposite wall an unmarked chopper landing on the big yellow X in the school's parking lot.

The soldier unfolded the cot next to the teacher's desk and smoothed the wrinkled blanket.

"Who's that?" Treenie asked, pointing toward the man stepping out of the chopper. He wore a black jumpsuit and had a small black backpack slung over one shoulder and a briefcase in the opposite hand. The same cart that picked up Treenie and her guards wheeled out to gather him.

The young Marine glanced out the window. "Your bed's all set. Your friends don't get the luxury accommos that you're getting. They're bunking with all the rest of us in the gym. I wish we had some food for you, but after dinner the food is locked up for the night with no exceptions. The girls shower room is all yours, except for the other women up here. Only a hundred or so." The Marine smiled but Treenie was still focused on the man walking toward the school from the black helicopter. "It's down the hall, to your right."

"I'll try again," Treenie said. "Who's that?" She pointed out the bank of windows.

"Couldn't tell you even if I knew. We'll get you a bagel or something in the morning. If you need anything, someone will be in the principal's office all night. That's the other way down the hall and to your left." The young man walked to the door. "Anything else I can do for you?"

"You can tell me what's going on here," Treenie said.

The soldier grinned. "Nothing. This base doesn't even exist."

"Then how about getting me to Mackinac Island," Treenie said.

"Yeah, up there I guess you get steaks instead of rock hard bagels," he said. "Have a good evening."

When the sergeant left, Treenie's head hummed and she was connected to Bern McNeese, a floater flyer she'd worked with several times before. He was generally thought of as the top flyer at DisneyNews.

“Bern! You flying for me?”

“Sure am,” Bern said in her head. “This should be something!”

“So the blackout is lifted?”

“Just got word.”

“The Supreme Court sided with us?”

“Hardly. They wouldn’t even take it up. No, the administration flipped. We’ve got clearance to cover the story with only one stipulation: you’ve gotta be a believer when you’re onscreen.”

“What does that mean? I have to kiss Barker’s feet or something?”

“No exact parameters,” Bern said. “Things are still in the works so we’ll have some better direction for you early tomorrow when you fly up to Mackinac Island.”

“Tomorrow? Let’s go now!”

“The blackout doesn’t lift until dawn tomorrow,” Bern said. “We didn’t fight that because the East Coast is already in bed, so we’re shooting for a live show starting mid-morning your time tomorrow. Should be thousands of pilgrims swarming the place by then, and everybody out here on the West Coast will be waking up too.”

“What about Barker?” Treenie said.

“Safe and sound in his basement, and the Marines have the area around the fort secured so he’ll be fine,” Bern said. “The pilgrims will go get him if he doesn’t come out on his own. Either way, when the pilgrims and Barker meet there’s gonna be fireworks.”

“Fireworks? No love fest?”

“You should see the docs floating around here,” Bern said. “Marketing has worked up ten possible scenarios and all but one end badly for Barker. We’re hoping he lives long enough to give the show some legs but only one scenario has him surviving until prime time. We’re basing ad and placement rates on five hours of coverage but that’s probably hopeful.”

“Even if he takes a stroll across the Straits?”

“None of the scenarios assumes he’s actually the SOG, but we have to play along because of the contract language for the exclusive.”

Out in the parking lot two Marines escorted a man wearing handcuffs and leg shackles to the chopper still waiting on the large yellow X. One of the Marines stepped onto the chopper with the prisoner, and the other walked back to the school’s entrance.

“So I just sit around here until morning?” Treenie said.

“Here’s your chance for a good night’s sleep,” Bern said. “We’ve been assured you’re in a safe spot. The White House has all the cards on this and they don’t want anything going live before the pilgrims start arriving. We’ll have the chopper back to you by six a.m.”

“How do I meet up with Barker?” Treenie said.

“Worst case, he stays in the basement and someone has to break down the door and haul him out,” Bern said. “Hard to get the floater in position for something like that. We want him out in the open. Too bad Cecilia’s dead or we could’ve used her to decoy him out of there.”

“Cecilia’s dead? How?”

“The recon team saw her sailing into the harbor and blew up the boat,” Bern said.

“She pointed a gun at them or something?”

“No details. We’re not going to cover it. Mary Magdalene outlived Jesus, so we don’t want people focusing on discrepancies in the two narratives.”

“You mean between Jesus and Barker?”

“Precisely. More similarities will mean more believers, and more believers will mean

more eyeballs, at least until things start going badly for Barker. We'll go with public sentiment, wherever that takes us, but it's pretty likely people will eventually turn on Barker and so will we. This is going to be huge!"

Okinisee

Amber held extra blankets under one arm and extra coats under the other as she stood by the front door waiting for Fred to turn off the security system so they could walk out to the pole barn and haul the fishing boat down the driveway and across M-23 to Lake Huron.

Fred reached for the master switch but stopped short.

"Did you turn it off?" Fred said, turning toward Amber and keeping his voice down so he wouldn't wake London, asleep on an air mattress in the small storage room off the office.

Amber shook her head.

"Must've forgot to rearm it after London got here yesterday," Fred said. He reached to the top of a small stack of components that managed the alarms and booby traps and set the timer for twenty minutes. He eased open the front door and held it for Amber, but she nodded toward the timer Fred had just set.

"Why'd you do that?" Amber whispered.

"It'll come back on in twenty minutes," Fred whispered.

"I know, but what about London?" Amber said, looking toward the door to the small storage room where London slept. "He'll get himself killed when he walks outside."

"He can turn it off," Fred said. "Let's go."

"I can see why we're leaving him behind, but I don't see why we should kill him," Amber said, no longer whispering.

Fred looked at his shoes for a moment. Still holding the door, he reached up high for the timer and flipped it off. His other hand slipped from the door and it slammed shut.

They both looked at the door to London's room but they didn't hear him stir.

Fred opened the door again and Amber gave Fred a peck on the cheek. "Thank you," she whispered and walked out the door. Fred reached back and flipped the timer back on before following her.

"I just feel awful about this," Amber whispered when Fred caught up halfway to the pole barn. "But I guess you're right. Nothing good happens when London's around. His own damn fault, I guess. But I still feel pretty awful. I wonder what Jesus II would do. I'm gonna have to confess our sin to him when we get there."

Fred clipped an LED to the bill of his baseball cap as they walked and when they got to the pole barn he unlocked the overhead door and eased it up along its tracks. He removed the blocks in front of each of the trailer's wheels, and began pulling the tarp off his dad's old fishing boat from the stern end, and just about jumped out of his clothes when London sat up in the boat.

"Mornin'," London said, stretching his arms above his head. He pushed himself up and off the boat's floor and landed in one of the middle seats. Flattened seat cushions lined the floor where he had been lying, curled around one of the seat posts. "We headin' out?"

Fred looked at Amber and she managed a weak smile.

"Didn't want to miss the boat," London said. "I wasn't really sleeping when you were talking about leaving last night. You two need me and my five years of combat experience featuring these two battering rams," he said, punching the air with his fists. "You put me in harm's way and you better believe it'll be me doing the harm. These boys've been weaponized!" London kissed each set of knuckles and punched the air again.

Fred took the boat's cover off the rest of the way and stuffed it under the front bulkhead. "So," London said, bobbing and weaving in his seat as if he was really in the ring. "We goin'?" He let his battering rams drop, looked at Fred and raised his eyebrows.

Fred loaded three small gas cans into the back of the boat by the outboard. "You gotta get out of the boat," Fred said to London. "We need to wheel it down to the water. I'll pull from the tongue and steer. You and Amber push from the back."

"Ay ay, Cap'n!" London said. In one lumbering move he hurled his large frame over the edge of the boat and cried out when his feet hit the concrete floor. "Shit!" He eased himself down onto his hands and knees, then crumpled the rest of the way to the floor and rolled onto his back. "I think I busted my goddamn ankle!"

Fred looked at Amber. "Let's go back to the first plan," he said in Amber's ear as London moaned. "Let's go right now. If it's broken, he can't crawl fast enough. Let's go!"

"Fred, we can't," Amber said, her eyes tearing up. "We can't."

London pulled himself up to his knees using the boat trailer's frame, then grabbed the boat's gunwales, pulled himself up to his feet and tried putting weight on his injured ankle.

"Damn that hurts," he said. He tried again and took a few short, tentative steps. "Good news though," he said, looking up at Fred and then Amber. "I think it's only a bad sprain. You two go ahead down to the beach. I'm gonna limp over to the two-holer and take a crap. It's gonna be a long trip. I got the boat's drain plug in my pocket so wait until I get there to put her in the water."

Part II

Fort Mackinac

Barker woke in complete darkness. It took him a moment to remember who he was and where he was. When he remembered, his heart sank. As his eyes searched without success for something to focus on he was taken by an overwhelming urge to leave the island. He could find the canoe he saw the day before and paddle it to the U.P. in an hour. Maybe two. Three tops. He really had no idea if he could even make it. The gun shots from the night before were still a mystery. Maybe there were several thugs waiting for him to unlatch the bolt and open the trapdoor. Maybe whoever did the shooting was unaware that there was a trapdoor leading to food for a thousand. Speculation disgusted him because that's all he had.

Feeling resolve welling inside, he threw off the blanket, felt for the flashlight on the floor and began gathering food in a cardboard box. When that box was full, he filled another and then another.

When he had four boxes loaded and stacked at the base of the steps, he picked up the shotgun and walked upstairs toward the trapdoor. At the top, he unlatched the bolt holding it in place, but couldn't raise the door. He paused for a moment and listened for any signs of life on the other side. He heard nothing so he ducked his head and put his shoulders against the door and pushed hard. After a few shoves he had dislodged whatever it was and he was able to swing the door up and over. He flipped on his light and saw that it was Blackbeard, one of the two men who brought him to the island the day before. Barker climbed out of the basement and grabbed Black Beard by his ankles and slid him across the floor to the other side of the room and out of the way, leaving a smear of blood on the wide pine planks.

Barker pushed open the door that led onto the small courtyard. He heard nothing and in the trickle of moonlight that managed to seep through the haze he could only see the dark shapes of small buildings on the far side of the parade ground.

He flicked on his light and surveyed the fort's interior, then looked for the wooden wheelbarrow. When he saw the empty wheelbarrow, he wondered briefly why Deefer's body wasn't in it, but then hurried to fill it with the four boxes of food he left at the bottom of the stairs. With the wheelbarrow loaded, he laid the shotgun between the boxes and lifted the wheelbarrow's handles. It felt light in his hands and he considered filling another box but impatience took over and he started toward the fort's gate. The walkway gravel crunched as he made his way down the path so he moved onto the grass. He felt he was being watched but kept his eyes ahead. He imagined how it would feel if he was hit by a shotgun blast or an arrow. Or a baseball bat. Anything seemed better than a baseball bat.

The boxes jostled in the wheelbarrow as Barker trotted down the sloping path carved into the bluff. The wheelbarrow's wooden wheel hit a fist-sized rock and the handles twisted out of Barker's hands, spilling the boxes and some of their contents onto the path. With everything back in place, Barker continued down the slope and when he reached the bottom he decided to go through town hoping to make better time on the island's only paved road.

On the other side of town he walked a hundred yards past the library ruins and took the wheelbarrow down a path between two small B&Bs. He didn't see it at first, but soon saw the overturned canoe under a pile of brush where he had seen it the day before. He found the paddles buried in the sandy gravel under the boat. After he placed the four boxes around the front seat to balance the boat, he pushed off from shore, heading west to get around the island. Once clear of the island, his plan was to paddle northwest toward the closest point of the U.P. To navigate he used the faint outline of the shoreline trees and the twin spires of the Mackinac Bridge, just visible as the sun began to turn the eastern horizon from black to gray.

The White House

The president stared at himself in the bathroom mirror as he brushed his teeth and leaned in to get a closer look at his bloodshot eyes. The network of veins reminded him of the mycelium he studied in Mycology 427 at Stanford. He wondered if there were red filaments throughout his brain building up reserves in order to pop mushrooms out his ears, and he wondered why no one was talking about the varieties of oyster mushrooms that fruit below fifty degrees. He stopped brushing as he considered huge plantations of protein- and vitamin-packed mushrooms.

He was wearing only a towel wrapped around his waist and, brushing again, his eyes wandered to his ribs, visible again after disappearing for thirty years. He remembered when he asked the Secretary of Agriculture if he had any good news, the secretary paused and said the only thing he could think of was that juvenile diabetes was in decline.

The president's assistant buzzed so he picked it up from the counter behind him and kept brushing.

"Sir, Barker's on the move," he heard Bouzel say.

"Move?" the president said, rinsing his toothbrush. "Where?"

"He's leaving the island. He just loaded a canoe with boxes of food and he's paddling toward the U.P."

"Paddling a canoe?" The "P" sent a spray of toothpaste onto the mirror. "Where's the U.P.?" More spray on the mirror.

“Yes, a canoe. U.P is short for Upper Peninsula. It’s a lot closer to the island than the Lower Peninsula. So far the Marines are just watching. No one’s sure what to do.”

“Just make sure he doesn’t drown,” the president said. “I hope people realize Jesus would’ve walked across the water.”

“Since he can’t do that, we think he’ll try to walk across the Mackinac Bridge and head south,” Bouzel said. “Modeling agrees that the bridge is his likely destination, but it’s also extremely unlikely he’ll make it that far. We’ve alerted DisneyNews and they have a caster on the way. When the sun’s up we’ll turn on all the comm links up there so pilgrims with working screens can watch Barker’s fall from grace.”

“You ever eat oyster mushrooms?”

“Oysters?”

“Oyster mushrooms,” the president said. “They’re delicious. I bet we could grow tons and tons if we try the right varieties, even in the cold. Good nutrients and protein.”

“Does this have something to do with what’s going on in Michigan?”

“No, no. Just thinking.”

Straits of Mackinac

There was enough early morning light that Barker could just see in the distance the vertical suspenders that connected the deck of the Mackinac Bridge to the massive cables that swung down from its twin towers and held the bridge’s deck two hundred feet above the Straits. The water was calm at the moment and the Straits’ constant three knot current was deflected by a cape that dipped south from the Upper Peninsula, forming the Straits and bringing the two peninsulas close enough for a bridge.

Despite the geography, the current still worked against Barker, plus a growing westerly breeze began kicking up occasional white caps, making him pull hard on the paddle. His hands were sore so he stopped to check them and saw blisters mounding on both palms. He remembered seeing packs of gardening gloves in the basement and wished he’d brought some.

As details of the shore began to emerge from the darkness, he scouted for a landing site with trees or a house close to the water so he could quickly hide the boat and boxes, and perhaps remain unnoticed. By whom he had no idea.

Ahead he saw a stand of cedar trees within thirty yards of the shore so he pointed the nose of the boat in that direction and pulled hard on the paddles, grimacing with each stroke because of the knifing pain in his palms.

Near St. Ignace, Michigan’s Upper Peninsula

“Shit, we’re turning into animals,” said one of Captain Wolne’s soldiers, ordered to stay behind at the beach along with a dozen others in anticipation of Barker’s landing. The rest of the company strapped on night vision and formed a long line to sweep west from the shore through the empty streets, abandoned houses and small woodlots south of St. Ignace. Their goal was to eliminate any threats to Barker. When they reached I-75, they turned around and swept back toward the shore.

The soldier was reading a message he just received from one of his friends on the sweep. “My buddy says he just shot some old dude and he’s having a hard time cuz the dude looks like his grandpa. The old guy was trying to find a couple kids who took his dog,” the soldier said, still reading. “Fell and broke his leg. My buddy put a bullet in his head cuz those are the orders.” The soldier looked toward the other corner of the bungalow he and his comrade were

using for cover. “Why should we be shooting an old man with a broken leg? We’re all a buncha fucking animals.”

“We’re humans, not animals,” the soldier’s comrade said from the other back corner of the house.

“You breathe, you shit, you piss, you have sex. You’re an animal.”

“Humans have souls. Spirits that live on in heaven. If you believe.”

“Yeah, we all get our own cloud, right?” With the sky just beginning to brighten the soldier pulled off his night vision and lifted binoculars to his eyes. “Look at that poor motherfucker. He keeps looking at his hands. Probably got big ass blood blisters. I can’t for the life of me figure out why the hell we don’t just pick him up and give him a blanket. I mean what the hell’d he do anyway?”

“Barker don’t need us for anything,” the other soldier said. “Put a bullet in his brain and all he’s gonna feel is disappointed that you shot him. He’s the Son of God. He’s got no fears.”

“Are you fucking serious? You can spout that Second Coming nonsense with a straight face? Barker’s just some slob trying to keep himself alive like everybody else. Look at him, paddling with everything he’s got. Scared half to death. Freezing cold. Even worse, he’s got no idea the kind of shit storm he’s walking into.”

“You’re doing the devil’s work, man. Jesus knows we need him and there he is.”

“I bet Santy Claus still lands his flying reindeer on your roof every year.” The soldier stowed his binoculars in a case on his belt. “And I bet you got a couple talking snakes for pets, huh? Shit. Water into wine my ass. Maybe he should just step outta the canoe and walk the rest of the way.”

“You’re gonna pay for that kind of talk, man. Barker’s got powers you can’t even imagine.”

“Yeah, the power to make ignorant fucks like you believe whatever sounds good.”

Lake Huron Shore, Near St. Ignace

As Barker neared the U.P. shore, the pain in his hands spiked each time he pulled on the paddle. He switched sides often but that didn’t help. He stopped paddling to look at the damage and noticed that all the blood blisters across his palms had broken, leaving smeared blood and flaps of raw flesh. Without forward momentum the rising breeze turned the boat sideways to the swelling rollers and nearly capsized the canoe. Barker had no choice but to keep paddling. He didn’t have much farther to go and just needed to forget the pain. Mind over matter.

As he approached the shoreline Barker decided to try ramming the gravelly beach hard and send the canoe as far as he could up onto the shore. He didn’t want to wade in the cold water because he planned to walk south as many miles as his legs would take him. Wet shoes meant blisters.

The canoe didn’t slide far onto the beach but he was able to step around the food boxes and onto the beach, past the reach of the gentle waves that left tiny, overlapping sand ridges as they receded. He pulled the canoe farther onto the beach, trying to ignore the pain in his damaged hands, and carried the food boxes two at a time into the trees and put them behind a fallen cedar tree that still had its brown, leathery leaves. He tried lifting the canoe so that it wouldn’t scrape against the gravel, but he couldn’t manage to carry it far because of his tired arms and the pain in his hands. He decided it was better to make noise dragging it into the woods than to be quiet and leave it visible on the shore.

With the canoe stowed in a shallow swale filled with clear water, he decided to eat until

he was stuffed before attempting to cross the bridge. He brought a few empty mesh onion bags and would use those to carry as much as he could, and leave the rest behind. He thought he could carry enough to last a week before he became hungry again. If the way south over the bridge was blocked, he would come back for the remaining boxes of food and devise another plan.

Hidden in the trees between houses a hundred yards apart, he sat down on a log and pulled a tin of sardines in mustard sauce out of one of the boxes, but his eyes caught movement through the trees. He stood to get a better view and saw two teenage boys and a dog ambling along the shore. The boys wore dark rain coats and one of them had a plastic bag that bulged with the dead fish they'd found. The brown and white mottled dog looked like a terrier of some kind. Barker decided to stay still and let them pass, but the dog looked toward him through the trees and its ears pricked up. Barker could feel the wind at his back and noticed the dog holding his nose high. The dog yipped a couple times and began trotting his way. The shotgun was lying across one of the boxes so he picked it up and, thinking offense was better than defense, walked toward the beach. When he passed the tree line, the dog, only twenty feet from him, crouched and began barking.

Barker ignored the dog, and with the shotgun in one hand he walked toward the boys, holding his other hand in the air in what he thought was a friendly gesture.

"He's got a gun," one of the boys yelled and pointed. The other boy reached into his raincoat pocket and pulled out a pistol, but fumbled it onto the wet sand. He quickly reached down and raised it toward Barker.

Shots rang out from the woods and the two boys crumbled to the sand. The dog, frightened by the noise, ran down the beach and more shots rang out. The dog tumbled and lay still.

With the shotgun in his hand Barker turned and ran as fast as he could into the woods and kept running toward the Bridge, ducking under low branches, jumping fallen trees and staying out of view as best he could when he came to clumps of houses with open yards or had to cross streets. In a low and wet cedar grove he tried to jump over a stump but caught his toe and flew head first into a clump of aspen saplings, instinctively dropping the gun and raising his hands to brace his fall. The saplings ripped into the exposed flesh of his palms and started new bleeding in both hands. Barker untangled himself from the saplings, found the gun a few feet away and kept running.

Aboard Fred's Fishing Boat, Lake Huron

During the night Fred, Amber and London had traveled in Fred's fishing boat north and west along the Lake Huron shoreline toward the Straits of Mackinac. Fred, steering from the rear of the boat with his hand on the outboard's stem, checked his compass often and thought they should see Bois Blanc Island to their right, but he couldn't make it out in the haze and weak early morning light. Wearing two coats and wrapped in three blankets, Amber sat on the padded cover of the live well near Fred. Now and then she shone her spotlight toward the shore to make sure they were still following the coast, but not too closely. London had mostly slept through the night, chin in chest, in the padded swivel seat at the bow where he was supposed to watch for deadheads and sandbars. Fred didn't expect London to see anything but putting him there kept him as far away as possible in the small boat.

The murky light finally brought into focus the faint tree line on Bois Blanc Island to the east, and the twin spires of the Mackinac Bridge popped out of the haze to the northwest.

“There it is!” Amber said. “Just like when I was a kid, seeing it when you come round that bend on I-75. Me and my sis used to wait for that part of the trip the whole way. Just gives me goose bumps every time.”

With better visibility Fred started looking for Mackinac Island. After a few minutes he could make out its turtle shape to the north, so he threw the outboard’s stem to the left, dipping the right side of the boat nearly to the waterline. London almost fell out of his seat while the boat swung through a tight turn. His head popped up and he swiveled his chair to face the rear of the boat.

“What’s the plan?” London said. “To the island?”

Amber closed her eyes. “God will provide the answers. God brought us this far, he’ll get us the rest of the way and find us a nice meal.”

At first Fred saw a few scattered boats but the more he looked the more he saw. He let up on the gas and scanned the water.

“Hey, look at all them boats, willya?” London said. “Must be a hundreds out there.”

Fred gunned the outboard again and Amber raised her arms and looked up into the amorphous, early morning haze. “Salvation is at hand. Thank you O Lord for the gift of life everlasting. We give all the glory to you!”

London looked up into the sky and raised his arms like Amber. “Keep the life everlasting and just gimme a goddamn steak and a six-pack. How ‘bout making it a case, since you’re pouring?” London brought his eyes down from the heavens. “I hope this Barker dude doesn’t get all biblical and give us a buncha wine. A few cold ones would make this world look a whole lot better.”

Amber opened her eyes and lowered her hands. “London, for God’s sakes, don’t ruin it for the rest of us.”

As they moved farther from shore and closer to Mackinac Island more and more boats came into view, all heading toward the island. Some were sailboats but most were power boats.

“Jumpin’ Jesus!” London said. “It’s a goddamn flotilla.”

“Just look at them all!” Amber said. “The world has come to worship at the feet of Jesus!”

“You mean Barker,” Fred said.

“You get a new name when you get to the top,” Amber said. “Like the Pope. I’m calling him Jesus.”

“Jesus was always called Jesus,” Fred said. “He didn’t change his name.”

“I’m gonna call him ‘chef,’” London said. “And ‘bartender’.”

Amber ignored London. “I guess New Jesus will do for now,” she said to Fred. “Calling him Barker kinda ruins it for me.”

The more they looked, the more boats they saw.

“Lookout New Jesus, we’re all coming to get what’s ours!” London said, standing at the front of the boat with his hands above his head as if he was signaling a touchdown. “Halle-fucking-luja!”

Mackinaw City, Michigan

After the chopper carrying Treenie and her guards left West Branch High School, the pilot in Anaheim followed I-75 all the way north to Mackinaw City, a small tourist town at the very tip of the Lower Peninsula’s mitten. The town, split in half by I-75, was also the southern terminus of the Mackinac Bridge and, like everywhere in the north, mostly a looted ghost town.

But Treenie had no interest in the town or the five-mile span over the Straits. Her eyes were locked on Mackinac Island's brown hump to the northeast, and she expected the chopper to turn in that direction at any time. The first of the hundreds of boats carrying pilgrims were nearing the island and she needed to get there first.

But instead of banking toward Mackinac Island, the chopper turned sharply to the east and slowed until it hovered over a large parking lot connected to a long concrete pier formerly used by the Turtle-in-a-Hurry Ferry Service, one of four that once served Mackinac Island. There were a few stripped and burned-out cars scattered around the large lot but it was otherwise empty, except for a crowd of eighty or so people at the base of the pier where a small ferry boat was moored, the only boat docked at the pier. Two armed men stood at the ferry's gangplank and stepped aside to let three people walk onto the boat. At the head of the crowd in the parking lot was a large table with three men behind it. Next to the table was a man sitting on a horse and wearing a long purple robe. He was flanked by two more guards holding shotguns.

"I can see Mackinac Island, and this isn't it!" Treenie said. She turned around and saw all three of her guards looking out their small windows with their rifles on their laps. She pulled out her assistant but there was no connection. She would have to wait for the floater to catch up. Treenie tried her head and, as she expected, there was nothing.

The chopper began its slow decent to the pavement and a few people in the crowd by the pier turned to watch. A group of nervous gulls skittered across the asphalt, and then flew off when the helicopter touched down. The guards threw open the choppers side doors and all three men trotted to their positions, forming a triangle around the helicopter. They kept a close watch on the crowd at the end of the pier.

Treenie stood in front of the chopper and checked her head again. This time it worked, and she saw the floater flying in from the south.

"Bern! Why did we stop here! This isn't Mackinac Island!"

"Barker's not on the island anymore," Bern said. "He paddled a canoe during the night to the U.P. and now he's running through the woods on the other side of the Straits. No one knows for sure where he's going but the smart money says he'll try crossing the bridge."

The guards became nervous when small groups broke away from the crowd by the pier and began walking across the parking lot toward the town, which brought them near the chopper. So far no one had walked directly toward the chopper so the guards kept their rifles pointed at the pavement.

"He's in the woods?" Treenie said. "What woods? Where?"

"Along the U.P. shore, on the other side of the Straits," Bern said. "Marines are keeping an eye on him and we're getting updates. He's had a rough couple days and he thinks people are trying to kill him so flying the chopper right at him will drive him farther into the woods and we'll lose a lot of eyeballs if we can't find him right away. Plus, we just got a major sponsor so production needs to finish up the graphics and script before we start the show. We've got a little time so just hold tight and we'll save some of the chopper's cell while we figure out where to rendezvous with Barker. This is gonna be tricky no matter what he does."

Treenie watched a young woman stride across the parking lot toward the chopper holding her young daughter's hand. The little girl skipped along to keep pace. Treenie's guards moved to form a line in front of the chopper and clicked off their safeties. More and more people in the crowd had turned toward the chopper and some were pointing.

"Are you seeing this?" Treenie said. "Might be some trouble."

"Better get back on your bird and we'll get you out of there if we need to," Bern said.

“I’m going to find out what’s going on first,” Treenie said. “Keep the floater here for a couple minutes. Might be something useful. Can we go live?”

“Checking,” Bern said. After a moment, he had an answer. “We’re going to put it on a ten second delay and if you get something good, we’ll jump right to you. We can call it a preview for the main show. Hey, just got word that the comm links are working again up there so everybody around you with some juice left will be able to see the show on their screens. Just keep that in mind. Everybody’s gonna know what you’re doing and where you are, for better or worse.”

“Got it,” Treenie said, starting toward the mom and daughter. “I’ll get back on the chopper after I talk to these two.”

“All right,” Bern said. “Once we wrap this up, I’ll take the floater across the Straits and locate Barker. You won’t need it for comm links anymore.”

The woman had to pick up her daughter because the young girl wouldn’t go any closer to the stone-faced guards and the imposing chopper, its rotors still whooshing overhead.

Treenie trotted past her guards toward the woman and her daughter. “Hey, what’s going on over there?” Treenie said, pointing at the crowd by the pier and holding her ring mic near the woman’s face.

“He’s taking people for everything they got, and then some,” the woman said. “The sonofabitch ain’t no man of God like he says. He’s a thief. Who the hell are you?”

“Who’s a thief?”

The woman put her daughter down and the little girl hugged her mom’s thighs but didn’t look up.

“Reverend Cedoni’s a thief. Wants diamond rings, gold. Any kinda jewels, or one helluva lotta cash. People are over at Pleasant Ridge digging up graves trying to find diamond rings, gold teeth, anything Cedoni’ll take. All this for a ride to the goddamn island. Used to be you couldn’t pay me to go there. Spent too many years selling fudge to the trolls for shit pay and now I can’t even get there to save me and my baby girl.”

“Trolls?”

“Yeah. Downstaters. People below the bridge. You know. Trolls.”

“You don’t have enough to get on the boat?”

“I traded grandma’s silver for a case of mac and cheese a couple weeks ago and I got nothing left. Now the Provos are gone so what the hell are we gonna do? We got no more food and I pawned my diamond before the disaster cuz her dad split.” She looked down at her daughter. “I got nothing left.”

Treenie could see the woman’s eyes welling with tears.

“Barker’s not on the island anymore,” Treenie said. “He’s on the U.P. side and he’s probably going to try crossing the bridge on foot.”

A smile spread across the woman’s face and she wiped her eyes. “Ha!” She looked behind her at the crowd. “Then I hope Cedoni gets what he’s got coming. Hope they knock him off that goddamn dinosaur and it shits on him. I can barely hum ‘Away in a Manger’ but I got more religion than that asshole.”

Treenie looked toward the crowd again and saw that what she thought was a horse was actually a dinosaur. “Where’d he get the dino?”

“It’s from that Yabba Dabba Bible Ranch over in Cheboygan,” the woman said. “Cedoni said God sent it to him so when he goes to meet Barker he can ride like the Wise Men. And he says all the stuff he’s making people give up is like the gold and frankinshit and that other crap.”

But he's lining his pockets! The ferry boat owner gave him that boat so he could do Sunday services docked out in the harbor. You know, someplace safe. Now he's using it to get rich off us poor folks when all we want is to make it another day." The woman looked at the chopper. "You giving rides?"

"No, no. I'm with DisneyNews."

"Make sure you tell everybody that Cedoni's just stealing from people, since Barker ain't on the island no more." She turned to look at the crowd by the pier. "They're gonna be pissed. My neighbor's over there with a box full of gold teeth and caps he spent all night digging up. He figured he had plenty so he gave me a handful but Cedoni says that ain't enough. Sonofabitch." The woman picked up her daughter. "You make sure they know what's really goin' on, all right?"

"Doing my best," Treenie said.

The woman and her daughter headed toward town and the bridge. The little girl covered her face with her hands but peered over her mom's shoulder and through her fingers at Treenie.

By the pier, the crowd rushed forward and the two armed men at the ferry boat ran toward the commotion.

"You there Bern?" Treenie said. Treenie could see that the dinosaur, a plant-eating snorkasaurus, had become unsettled, and was turning in circles with Reverend Cedoni struggling to hang on. "I think they just found out that Barker's not on the island," she said.

There was a gunshot and then another. Cedoni was pulled off the dinosaur and the crowd surged farther forward. There were a couple more gun shots and some people tried running from the crowd with boxes of loot but most were run down by others and fights erupted. Gold, silver, jewels and cash spilled onto the pavement and people scurried to scoop it up. Others in the crowd moved toward the chopper.

"We better go," Treenie said, turning to walk back to the chopper. "Did we go live?"

"We're showing the riot now, still ten seconds behind," Bern said. "After a break we'll do the new show intro and you'll be on live with no delay. You better get outta there."

Treenie looked back toward the pier. Some of the people who had been walking toward the chopper were now running.

Treenie ran past her guards and felt a blast of air from the speeding rotors as she climbed onboard. Treenie's guards stayed in a line in front of chopper and held their rifles waist high, pointing them at the first wave of people approaching from the pier. As the chopper began to lift into the air Treenie heard a shot and saw one of her guards fall backward, clutching his chest. The other two guards took out some of the onrushing crowd but they were soon overwhelmed and their weapons taken. Most in the crowd ran to the chopper but they could only grab onto its landing gear as it lifted off. Treenie slunk down to her knees in the passenger compartment and could hear bullets pinging off the armored plating below. Most of the people hanging onto the landing gear let go and fell back to the asphalt before the chopper gained much altitude, but two men held on as the chopper lifted into the sky and headed north across the Straits. They couldn't keep their grips for long and fell hundreds of feet to the water below.

Near St. Ignace

Captain Wolne watched from behind a detached garage near the shore as his medic scanned the bodies of the two boys his men shot, lying still on the beach just beyond the reach of the waves. The captain kept a few soldiers with him but sent the rest of the company to form a line a couple hundred yards in from the shore. He told them to push Barker toward the beach

and the bridge by firing warning shots if he wandered too far inland. The medic finished her scans and looked back toward the captain. She picked up the gun that one of the boys had brandished and pointed at her head. Wolne could see a stream of water bouncing off the medic's helmet.

"What a goddamn waste," the captain said. "All this for some bullshit Messiah. Fuck Barker. And after we protect him at all costs, we're supposed to just wash our hands of him once the place is swarming with nut jobs. Tell me how that makes any sense. Fuck Barker."

"Anyone but the Messiah wouldn't have survived all he's been through," said Lieutenant Amlis, the chopper pilot who brought Captain Wolne to the island, and served as second in command. He was tall and thin and had hollowed out cheeks.

Captain Wolne snapped his head toward Amlis. "What?"

"If Barker was mortal, he'd be dead," Lieutenant Amlis said. "I'm feeling the presence of something real big. It's like I got this fire burning inside me. For the first time I can see us getting through all this. The Rapture's here, captain. All around us I see the signs of a Second Coming. Wouldn't surprise me if the clouds part and we see the sun."

Captain Wolne glared at the lieutenant and squared his broad shoulders toward him. "You better douse that fire immediately, soldier. Barker's got no divine nothin'. He'd be dead five times over if it wasn't for us so dump that fairy tale shit right outta your head and do it now. You are a soldier in the United States Marine Corps and I'm giving you a direct order. Are we clear?!"

"Captain, I can salute and say yes sir all day but you can't change what's in my heart," Lieutenant Amlis said. "Only good comes from faith. So I'm a believer. I truly believe something miraculous is about to happen and I want to be part of it. How can that make us worse off?"

Captain Wolne jabbed his finger into Lieutenant Amlis' sternum. "You will follow orders, even if that means putting a bullet in Barker's head. And you will do it with no hesitation."

"I will refuse any order intended to do harm to our Lord and Savior," Lieutenant Amlis said. "Nobody outranks God."

Captain Wolne stiffened and held out his hand. "Hand over your pistol. I'm placing you under arrest and ordering you to return to the chopper and wait there for further orders. Give me your weapon. Now!"

Lieutenant Amlis smiled at Captain Wolne and pulled his pistol from its holster, studying it for a moment.

"Now!" Captain Wolne said, holding out one hand and pulling his assistant from his jacket pocket with the other. He thumbed a couple numbers and put his assistant to his ear. "Captain Kim, I need you here right now. I'm putting Amlis under ..."

In one quick move Amlis clicked off the safety and put two bullets in Captain Wolne's heart, then fired two more shots into the ground next to where the captain fell. The captain, on his back and gasping, still clutched his assistant. Lieutenant Amlis pulled it from Wolne's weak grip, put it in his pocket and sprinted toward the beach.

Anaheim

Zinc hurried down the hall from another studio where marketing had just put him through green screen maneuvers for the new show's opening. Ignoring two people in the hall who wished him good luck with the show, he tossed open the door to his studio. As he marched

toward his anchor desk he asked a tech he'd never seen before if his hair was all right but didn't wait for a response and took his position behind the desk. The show's opening was already playing on the monitor embedded in his desk, featuring a giant-sized Zinc striding toward the camera across the glistening water of the Straits of Mackinac. Giant Zinc ducked under the Mackinac Bridge and then continued across the water nodding his head and snapping his fingers in rhythm with the show's theme song, a hummable tune combining the conviction of a hymn with the swing of a bossa nova.

As the theme song came to its first climax, Giant Zinc turned to face the banner unfurling between the bridge's twin spires and smiled with admiration at the banner's message, "One More Time!", which was both the show's title and the name of its main sponsor. In smaller letters, "When Once Isn't Enough!" blinked in neon below the banner's main title.

An announcer's joyous voice intoned, "Live, from the Situation Desk at DisneyNews HQ, it's 'One More Time!' brought to you by the new sexual experience enhancer from our good friends at Feenix Pharmaceuticals. Doubling your fun is easy with six flavors of tablets and inhalers, and now, try our new lotion!"

When Giant Zinc traveled far enough across the water to fill the screen, he folded his arms and grinned into the camera.

"When we come back," Giant Zinc said, "we'll talk to the man of the hour, the man with the power, the Son of God!" Zinc held his arms up to the sky. "The Messiah has come back to earth 'One more Time!' and, coming up next, you get to meet him!"

As the theme song built to its second climax, Zinc dissolved, leaving a view of the Straits of Mackinac, crisscrossed by hundreds of boats, with the majestic bridge and its banner the centerpiece.

North shore of the Straits of Mackinac

Fred slogged through thigh-deep water with his fishing boat's bow line in hand, occasionally shoving empty, drifting boats out of his way as he looked for a place to beach the boat two hundred yards from the bridge on the U.P. side. It seemed less crowded than the southern shoreline but it was still packed with boats. Along the shore people walked in small groups toward the bridge, where thousands of people already lined the four-mile span's railing.

"Salvation!" Amber shouted to the sky. "The closer we get the more I can feel the power of the Lord swelling inside me!"

"Probably just gas," London said. "I feel it in my ass. Damn seat is bustin' my butt."

Fred finally found an opening and pulled the boat as far onto the beach as he could. Amber walked carefully to the bow and Fred held her arm as she stepped onto the shore.

"You coming?" Amber said, turning back toward London, still sitting in the boat.

"Let me know when they start tapping kegs and I'll be there," London said. "He waved a hand toward the bridge. "You're gonna be about number three thousand in line so even if they've already set up the buffet tables it's gonna be a half day wait. Seems like a long walk with a bum foot for nothin'."

"I thought it was your ankle," Fred said.

"Same diff," London said.

"Then take care of the boat," Fred said. "We'll need a way home. If there's any food, we'll bring what we can for you."

"I like my steak rare," London said. "Tell Jehovah Jack to just wave it over the fire."

Still wearing three coats and carrying a bundle of blankets, Amber stood on the shore and

marveled at the huge crowd lining the bridge's rails. "I don't know if I've ever been so excited," she said, and reached her hand toward Fred. "Ready, Freddie?"

Fred took her hand and they began walking toward the bridge.

London decided to take a nap but realized Amber had taken all the blankets and all he found was the wadded up tarp. "Hey, leave me a blanket willya?" London yelled from the boat, but Fred and Amber were out of range. London tossed the seat cushions into a line on the bottom of the boat as he had the night before and pulled the tarp over him. Before long he was asleep.

Anaheim / Straits of Mackinac

"What you're about to witness is no less than the biggest show in human history," Zinc said gravely from the screen's lower left pip.

Bern zoomed in on the jumble of boats near the northern end of the bridge. People were jumping from their boats and swimming to shore through all the other drifters. Abandoned boats were stacked twenty-deep at both ends of the bridge and more were coming. Even four or five hundred yards from the bridge empty boats were stacked three or four deep and many drifted out into the Straits, creating obstacles for boats just arriving.

Bern pulled back to show the entire Straits again. The banner at its center was filled like a sail by the westerly wind, rippling the words "One More Time!"

"We're seeing a live view of Michigan's Straits of Mackinac, the new Holy Land, where Ray Barker's divinity was first made known, and where he survived the library bombing on Miracle Island, where he was seen to levitate two hundred feet into the air, survive a bullet to the head and feed steak dinners to all comers, even the people sent to kill him, as Jesus himself would have done during what we can now call the First Coming. At this moment Barker is on his way to meet thousands of pilgrims on the Mackinac Bridge, built in the middle of the last century to connect Michigan's two peninsulas, but now the bridge will connect billions of hungry and scared people from throughout the world to God's words of comfort and joy, and his promise of hope and salvation. So stay close because we'll have it all for you live here on DisneyNews."

Treenie's chopper flew over the Straits from the south and Bern widened the view to include her as she entered the scene from the left.

"Barker came out of his underground lair in the middle of the night," Zinc said. "And in what we might call an exodus of one, Barker paddled a tiny canoe through treacherous seas to reach the mainland. But don't worry, our intrepid caster Treenie Bigby is tracking his every move. She's dodged a few bullets of her own to bring you our exclusive face to face with the Son of God. Isn't that right, Treenie?"

"That's right, Zinc," Treenie said, looking into the floater from the chopper's co-pilot seat. She gave a quick wave as Bern pulled in for a tighter shot. "After what we've been through in the last few days only God knows what's next, but I should be able to find a lot of answers when I talk with the SOG in a minute or two. He's on the other side of the Straits of Mackinac, trying to get to the bridge, so that's where I'm headed now. I can't tell you how excited I am to meet the Son of God!"

"We're on pins and needles here too!" Zinc said.

"There's no place I'd rather be than right here!" Treenie said. "You can feel the excitement! The anticipation!"

Bern pulled back and widened the floater's view putting Treenie's chopper in the middle

distance with the bridge and its banner in the background. Zinc grew from the lower left pip to fill the center of the screen.

“While Treenie hooks up with the SOG, let’s catch our breaths with a quick break,” Zinc said. “When we come back we expect to see the miracles coming fast and furious. No one alive has seen what’s going to happen next, and it all starts after this message. And remember. When once isn’t enough, put your trust in Feenix Farmaceuticals and you’ll be saying ‘One More Time!’”

Zinc disappeared and the show’s theme song swelled as the camera zoomed in on the banner, alternating its message between “One More Time!”, “When once isn’t enough!” and “New Lotion!”

North Shore of the Straits of Mackinac

Barker dodged between trees and jumped over fallen branches and pools of standing water as he ran through a small forest in the tiny state park that bordered the looping ramps leading onto I-75 and across the bridge.

With tiring legs and burning lungs, Barker kept moving, staying out of sight from the shore, and skirting openings by heading deeper into the woods. All he could see of the bridge was the tip of its northern spire above the trees. He started up the slope to his right, hoping to get a look at the bridge’s deck to see if it was passable, but as he headed inland he heard two gun shots from the top of the slope. He jumped behind a tree, and then ran back down the slope toward the circular gravel drives of the state park’s campground. He thought about taking the shorter route across the opening but stayed in the trees and started around it by going deeper into the woods. Another gunshot from directly ahead startled him and he tried to jump behind a tree but tripped on a fallen branch and used his hands to stop his momentum, ripping into the open wounds on his palms.

“Fuck it,” he said to himself, picking bark from the open sores. Without another thought he dashed across the clearing, keeping his head low and dodging the campground’s picnic tables and electricity posts. Halfway across, he glanced toward the beach and saw that his world had changed utterly. His legs slowed and his run became a walk and then he stood gawking at the thousands of boats in the Straits and along the shore.

He blinked several times but nothing changed.

His eyes searched the scene for something that would explain it all as he walked toward the beach. He stood behind a hedge of leafless sand cherries at the high water mark and he could see thousands of people on the bridge, and a small groups walking toward it from both directions along the shore. From what he could see, the southern shore looked the same.

Barker trotted toward a fishing boat and tried pushing it into the water but it was halfway onto the beach and pushing it made his hands ache. The next boat was just onto on the beach and was much easier to push off the sand and gravel.

“Hey, we’re meeting him on the bridge!” a young woman said to Barker. She and a young man were walking toward the bridge.

Barker had nearly floated the boat and didn’t respond.

“First it was the island, but now it’s the bridge,” the young man said. “Nobody’s on the island anymore. You can walk with us if you want.”

The boat was floating and Barker was in ankle deep water.

“No sense coming all this way and not seeing him,” the young woman said, walking toward Barker.

"I'm meeting friends," Barker said, trying to get a leg over the gunwale but it was too high. "Thanks, but go ahead."

"We were supposed to meet some friends too, but they never showed up," the young woman said. "Can't wait forever. God will watch over them."

Barker groaned in agony as he used his hands to hoist himself up high enough to swing a leg into the boat and flop inside. Barker ignored the couple on the beach and got up to his knees and then his feet, and then had to step over a large tarp to get to the seat next to the outboard.

"Isn't that him?" the young woman said, getting a look at Barker's face now that he was in the boat and facing them.

Barker looked at the outboard but it seemed unfamiliar. There was no power button.

"I think you're right!" the young man said. "Hey, everybody!" the young man yelled to a small group of people walking toward the bridge. "He's right here! He's right here!" The young woman yelled to a group in the other direction: "The Messiah! He's right here!"

Barker saw a pull knob on the engine that was labeled "Choke" and then saw that the motor had a gas cap. He was extremely disappointed when he realized it was gas-powered and he had no idea how it worked.

North Shore of the Straits of Mackinac / Washington, D.C.

Lieutenant Amlis ran along the beach in the hard packed sand at the water line. His eyes were locked on Barker. He had watched Barker climb into the boat and was concerned about the two people talking to him from the shore. He considered reaching for his pistol, but he felt Captain Wolne's phone buzzing against his leg so he slowed to a jog, reached into his pocket and raised the device to his ear.

"What's the latest, captain?" Bouzel said.

"This is Lieutenant Amlis. Captain Wolne is dead."

"Dead?" Bouzel said. "No! How?"

"Shot dead," Lieutenant Amlis said.

"Damn it! Who's in charge then?"

"I'm the ranking officer."

"How about Barker?"

"Still alive." As Amlis continued down the shore he could hear the young couple yelling that they had found the Messiah.

"Any trouble?" Bouzel said.

"Of course, but we took care of it," Amlis said.

"What kind of trouble?" Bouzel said.

"Had to shoot a couple kids, and a guy trying to break into the food stores last night."

More and more people were walking or running toward Barker as word spread. Some were getting into abandoned boats while others began wading toward where Barker sat in the aluminum fishing boat.

"Where's Barker now?" Bouzel said.

Lieutenant Amlis threw Wolne's assistant into the lake and splashed into the water toward a drifting red and white speedboat. He climbed in from the low-slung stern and a teenage couple kissing under a blanket uncovered their faces to see who it was. Amlis pulled his pistol and pointed it at them.

"Out of the boat now!" Amlis grabbed the young woman by her jacket and threw her into the water. The young man lunged at Amlis but collapsed when Amlis put a bullet into his

chest. Amlis sat at the boat's wheel, flicked on the motor and pattered through the maze of drifting boats as he looked for Barker.

Straits of Mackinac

Barker had never run a gas-powered outboard so he reached out and grabbed another fishing boat drifting nearby and pulled it alongside. Up and down the beach he saw people heading his way and the young woman who discovered him pleaded for him to come back to shore.

Barker put a foot on the tarp so he could step his other foot into the other boat. Before he launched, London pulled the tarp down from his head.

"Who the hell are you?" London said.

"Is this your boat?" Barker said. "How do you make the motor work?"

London got up to his knees and slid into one of the padded seats. He looked at Barker for a moment. "You're New Jesus. I seen you onscreen."

"How do you make it go? Those people are after me. How do you work it?"

London looked toward shore and saw people commandeering boats and lots of people running toward them on the beach. He stepped toward the outboard, opened the choke a little, grabbed the pull cord and yanked the motor into life.

"Now turn the stem the way the arrow shows," London said.

The boat lurched forward and slammed into an empty kayak drifting ahead, but Barker kept powering the engine until the fishing boat freed itself from the kayak, and then gave it full throttle. The fishing boat glanced off a few other drifting boats but soon was in relatively open water.

"Tell me what's going on," Barker said to London.

London nodded ahead at the thousands along the bridge's railing. "That's all for you," he said.

Barker let off the throttle, and the boat slowed to a crawl, almost knocking London from his chair.

"They think you're gonna feed everybody," London said. "They think all our troubles are over now that Jesus is back. You're the Second Coming, man. The freakin' SOG." London shrugged. "That's what they're all saying anyway."

Barker looked behind him at the approaching boats and gunned the motor. "That makes no sense," he said. "I've got nothing."

"You might be careful how you tell them you got nothing," London said, looking toward the bridge. "They think you can make steak dinners outta thin air."

"What are you talking about?" Barker said.

"They all saw that selfie of you feasting with a couple Marines," London said. "Steak and baked taters and fruit cocktail. The works. And they think you got resurrected cuz you got blown up, and bullets go right through you, and they think you're turning water into wine and you can fly up in the air." London looked around again. "All these people believe every last bit of that voodoo crap."

Barker glanced behind him again and saw that a few of the faster boats were gaining. When he faced forward again the boat thumped against a wave, sending spray into Barker's face. He used the back of his jacket sleeve to wipe water from his eyes and London saw the open wound on his palm.

"But I'd take a beer if you got one," London said.

Straits of Mackinac

The floater flew just ahead of the chopper and zoomed in on Barker and London as the fishing boat neared the bridge, heading west toward Lake Michigan with hundreds of boats following and others closing in from north and south. There were fewer boats on the west side of the bridge, so, for lack of a better idea, Barker aimed the boat in that direction. London stood unsteadily in the front of the boat leaning into the wind with his arms spread wide as if he were flying.

“Who’s with him in the boat?” Zinc said. The chopper had almost caught up with Barker.

“Of course we don’t like to speculate, Zinc, but I would say he’s one of Barker’s alleged apostles,” Treenie said. “No one can mistake the Christian symbolism of the cross he’s making with his arms. We’re getting close to the SOG so we’ll have answers soon! We’re almost there!”

The floater widened its view to show boats nearly encircling Barker, with the only open water to the west.

“This has to be a pretty exciting moment for you, Treenie,” Zinc said, with a touch of whimsy amidst the chaos. “You probably never guessed when you were a little girl sitting in church staring up at the crucifixion that you’d get a chance to talk with someone who has a direct connection to God.”

“I was kneeling in a mosque when I was a little girl,” Treenie said. “My family is Muslim.”

Zinc let the news sink in.

“But I’m a professional, Zinc,” Treenie said. “My job is to keep an open mind. Looks like we might not be the first to talk with Barker.”

As Treenie’s chopper entered the bridge’s faint shadow and descended toward the fishing boat, Lieutenant Amlis in the red and white speedboat bore down on Barker and London. Amlis cut the speedboat’s engine, sending a heavy wave from its bow that rocked the fishing boat and knocked London off balance. London stumbled backward and tripped over one of the seats and fell headlong into Barker, knocking his hand off the outboard’s stem and slowing the boat.

Amlis was forced to lunge immediately into the fishing boat and landed hard on one of the fishing boat’s seats. He screamed in pain and clutched his ribs but the sound was drowned out by Treenie’s chopper hovering almost directly above.

The floater zoomed in on Lieutenant Amlis, holding his ribs and struggling to his feet, and then filled the screen with the body of the young man Amlis shot, lying face down in a pool of blood in the back of the speedboat.

“There’s a dead body in the back of that boat!” Treenie said. “The boat’s driver is a soldier! Looks like a Marine. Maybe that’s a good sign. We just don’t know.”

Treenie climbed through the chopper’s bulkhead and slid open the cargo door, then pulled out her miniboom and extended it as far down as she could.

“I just need to get the mic in front of him and we’ll be talking to the SOG, Zinc!” Treenie said.

London had regained his feet and stepped toward Amlis. He reared back for a roundhouse swing at Amlis’ face but stopped, and reached out to shake his hand.

“Another alleged disciple?” Zinc said.

“We’ll know soon!” Treenie said. She reached out of the chopper as far as she could and

held her miniboom within a few feet of Barker. Barker looked in every direction for an escape route but he was surrounded by boats.

Under the Mackinac Bridge, Straits of Mackinac

London was all smiles. “Didn’t know they were sending the Marines!” he said, extending his hand to Lieutenant Amlis, who tried standing straight but his broken ribs made it impossible. “It’s about time you guys showed up,” London said, grabbing Amlis by the shoulder and straightening him so he could look around. “It’s crazy up here! Look! They got us surrounded!”

Amlis clutched his ribs with one hand and shoved London into a seat with the other. In two strides he was at the back of the boat. Barker started to stand up but Amlis pushed Barker back into his seat.

“It’s okay!” Amlis shouted to Barker over the chopper noise and sat next to him on the live well. “I’m going to get you up to the bridge!” Amlis unzipped his jacket and pulled out a coil of wire so thin it was barely visible. “The Devil’s at work and you’re not safe here!”

“Who the hell are you?” Barker shouted.

Boats bumped into each other as they drifted ever closer to Barker’s fishing boat. Shouts of devotion were rampant and one group was singing “Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory of the Coming of the Lord.”

“I’m Apostle Jordan, formerly Lieutenant Jordan Amlis of the United States Marine Corps.” Amlis had to shout because of the chopper noise and the extra effort sent knives of pain into his ribs. “At least I hope you’ll consider me for an apostle position! Don’t let the uniform fool you. I answer to God!”

“Last I knew you guys were trying to kill me!” Barker said, as Amlis pulled an inflatable harness from another pouch inside his jacket and unrolled it.

“That’s the Devil’s work I’m telling you about!” Amlis said. “I’m on God’s side.” He grimaced as he reached out to slip the deflated harness under Barker’s coat and around his torso. “This will get you up to the bridge. I’ve got some God-fearing Marines up there with a rapellator winch. They’ll pull you up and make sure you stay safe.”

London reached out and pushed away a small ski boat drifting in hard, and he threw a punch into a guy’s face as he tried stepping onto the fishing boat from a cruiser.

Trying to ignore the pain, Amlis focused on loading one end of the rapellator wire into his collapsible launching tube. Once the wire was secure, he pulled a tab on the harness under Barker’s coat and Barker could feel the harness inflate and tighten around his chest.

Amlis launched the wire at the bridge and a few seconds later there was a sharp tug.

“It hit the magnet!” Amlis said to Barker. “They’ll start hauling you up when they secure it. So get ready! Any second now!”

Two more boats bumped into the fishing boat and people, screaming their love and devotion, tried jumping from each one. London knocked the first few into the water, but two men managed to pull London overboard, although he took them both with him. Amlis pulled his pistol and shot a woman in the shoulder as she was about to jump from a ski boat. Others on her boat backed off while she screamed in pain.

Barker felt the harness tighten under his armpits and he was pulled upward out of the boat. As he ascended he heard shots from below and when he looked down, he saw two men throw Amlis into the water. He looked up and saw thousands of hands waving along the bridge’s rail.

“We have an ascension!” Treenie cried from the open cargo door of the chopper as Barker was hoisted by the wire, too thin for the floater to see. “Barker’s on his way to heaven! We have an ascension!”

The tiny mic at the end of Treenie’s miniboom was a good five feet short of Barker and needed to be closer because of the chopper noise. But she tried shouting questions anyway: “Have you been crucified? What about feeding the world?”

Barker saw that the whirring helicopter rotors were dangerously close to the wire holding him aloft so he signaled Treenie to keep away by using his hands in a pushing motion. The floater zoomed in to fill the screen with Barker’s bloody palms.

“Proof of a crucifixion!” Treenie shouted. “There’s blood on both palms where the nails went in! We’ve had a crucifixion, a resurrection and now an ascension!”

To get the boom mic closer, Treenie leaned out as far as she could with one foot on the landing gear and one hand on the cargo door handle, but the mic was still too far from Barker.

“Are you going to heaven?” Treenie shouted.

Barker, still concerned about the wire above him, pointed to where the chopper’s rotors were threatening to cut the wire.

“He’s pointing to heaven!” Treenie shouted. “He’s telling us that he’s on his way to heaven! This truly is a miracle! I just need a couple more feet and we’ll be able to talk to the Son of God as he ascends to Heaven!”

“We’re trying, Treenie,” she heard Bern say in her head. “The fliers are dealing with winds and you’re almost up to the bridge so we need to be careful.”

“Are you the Second Coming?!” Treenie shouted, but Barker kept pointing up at the wire.

The chopper inched ever closer to Barker and a wind gust nudged it too close. The rotors cut the wire holding Barker aloft and he fell away, tumbling toward the water nearly two hundred feet below.

“Treenie, what just happened?” Zinc said. “Did the SOG fall back to earth?”

The floater zoomed in on the impact point’s spreading foam ring but it soon dissipated among the many surrounding boats. Dozens of people dove into the water to rescue their Savior.

“Get me down there!” Treenie said. “The ascension has been aborted! Get me down there! We have no ascension!”

The chopper dropped and hovered just above the mass of boats. Some of the swimmers were already succumbing to the cold water, which caused more to dive in to rescue friends and loved ones. Many on the bridge had seen Barker fall and word was spreading to those who hadn’t seen it. People began jumping from the bridge and many landed with sickening thuds on boats below.

“He seemed certain that he was on his way to heaven,” Treenie said as she searched the water below for signs of Barker. “He survived a bombing and a bullet through his head so I’ve gotta believe he’ll survive this.”

New boats continued to crowd into the growing chaos below the bridge, and no one was sure any longer where Barker had hit the water.

“I don’t see any signs of Barker,” Treenie said. “I’m going down there to see what’s happening.”

Treenie collapsed her miniboom and stuck it in her teeth. She waited for a cruiser to drift out from underneath the chopper and then jumped into the water. In a few strokes she was at the fishing boat and pulled herself up and hooked one arm over the gunwale. She extended her miniboom so that the mic was in front of London’s face as he stood, naked and soaking wet,

looking up at the bridge and turning in circles.

“Are you an apostle?” She said. “Where’s the SOG?”

London brought his eyes down from the bridge and he looked at Treenie. The chopper flew off to hover a hundred yards away, leaving only the screams and shouts from people foundering in the water. A bridge jumper thwacked the water not far away. The floater hovered a few feet from London and his face filled the screen.

“Is that thing on?” he said to Treenie, looking at the floater.

“Why didn’t the SOG make it to heaven?” Treenie said. “What stopped him?” She used her free hand to wipe water from her eyes. “Did you crucify him?” London looked at the mic, four inches from his face. He began to shiver in the cold wind so he reached down for the tarp and wrapped it around himself like a blanket.

“What just happened?!” Treenie said. “C’mon. You were with the SOG! What happened?”

London looked up at the bridge, still lined from end to end with true believers, and then lowered his eyes and surveyed the boats crowded around him. Most people looked at their screens, waiting for London to speak.

“I gotta say,” London said, choosing his words as carefully as he could. “I gotta say that Barker died for our sins.”