

LAIRD BARRON

Old Virginia

ON THE THIRD MORNING I noticed that somebody had disabled the truck. All four tires were flattened and the engine was smashed. Nice work.

I had gone outside the cabin to catch the sunrise and piss on some bushes. It was cold; the air tasted like metal. Deep, dark forest at our backs with a few notches for stars. A rutted track wound across a marshy field into more wilderness. Silent except for the muffled bum of the diesel generator behind the wood shed.

"Well, here we go," I said. I fired up a Lucky Strike and congratulated my pessimistic nature. The Reds had found our happy little retreat in the woods. Or possibly, one of my boys was a mole. That would put a pretty bow on things.

The men were already spooked -- Davis swore he had heard chuckling and whispering behind the steel door after curfew. He also heard one of the doctors gibbering in a foreign tongue. Nonsense, of course. Nonetheless, the troops were edgy, and now this.

"Garland? You there?" Hatcher called from the porch in a low voice. He made a tall, thin silhouette.

"Over here." I waited for him to join me by the truck. Hatcher was my immediate subordinate and the only member of the detail I'd personally worked with. He was tough, competent, and a decade my junior -- which made him twice as old as the other men. If somebody here was a Red I hoped to God it wasn't him.

"Guess we're hoofing it," he commented after a quick survey of the damage.

I passed him a cigarette. We smoked in contemplative silence. Eventually I said, "Who took last watch?"

"Richards. He didn't report any activity."

"Yeah." I stared into the forest and wondered if the enemy was lurking. What would be their next move, and how might I counter? A chill tightened the muscles in the small of my back, reminded me of how things had gone wrong during '53 in the steamy hills of Cuba. It had been six years, and in this business a man didn't necessarily improve with age. I said, "How did they find us, Hatch?"

"Strauss may have a leak. The Reds are conducting similar programs. Information from here would carry a hefty price tag behind the Curtain...."

Suddenly this little field trip didn't seem like a babysitting detail anymore.

Project TALLHAT was a Company job, but black ops. Dr. Herman Strauss had picked the team in secret and briefed us at his own home. Now here we were in the wilds of West Virginia standing watch over two of his personal staff while they conducted unspecified research on a senile crone. Doctors Porter and Riley called the shots. There was to be no communication with the outside world until they had gathered sufficient data. Upon return to Langley, Strauss would handle the debriefing. Absolutely no one else inside the Company was to be involved.

This wasn't my kind of operation, but I had seen the paperwork and recognized Strauss's authority. Why me? I suspected it was because Strauss had known me since the first big War. He also knew I was past it, ready for pasture. Maybe this was his way to make me feel important one last time. Gazing at the ruined truck and all it portended, I started thinking maybe good old Herman had picked me because I was expendable.

I stubbed out my cigarette and made some quick decisions. "When it gets light, we sweep the area. You take Robey and Neil and arc south; I'll go north with Dox and Richards. Davis will guard the cabin. We'll establish a quarter-mile perimeter; search for tracks."

Hatcher nodded. He didn't state the obvious flaw -- what if Davis was playing for the other team? He gestured at the forest. "How about an emergency extraction? We're twenty miles from the nearest traveled road. We could make it in a few hours. I saw some farms; one will have a phone --"

"Hatch, they destroyed the vehicle for a reason. Obviously they want us to walk. Who knows what nasty surprise is waiting down that road? For now we stay here, fortify. If worse comes to worst, we break and scatter. Maybe one of us will make it to HQ."

"How do we handle Porter and Riley?"

