

Kelso's Island

Chapter One

June 2, 2002

Gilmartin sat erect and nearly motionless at one end of the polished oak conference table. He kept his hands neatly folded in front of him, his callused knuckles brushing against an oversized, black attaché case. He didn't look at the wall clock; he didn't look at his wristwatch. His collar and tie felt tight against his neck, but he refrained from loosening either. Twenty years in the Army had taught him patience—among other things.

His body may have been inert; however, his mind was buzzing, bouncing from one thought to another like a pinball. Mostly, he considered the object in front of him, which would have seemed to anyone outside the room to be a common attaché case, something an aspiring administrator or an engineer might carry, something you could pick up at any luggage or office supply store. And to complete the illusion, the word 'Samsonite' was imprinted in the leather near the handle. The imprint had been Stillwell's idea, suggested when the three-person team had been fresh, still had a sense of excitement about the Lincoln Project.

He glanced at the empty chair to his right and thought about Tyler Stillwell. Only two years out of West Point, the young lieutenant had brought an enthusiasm to the difficult project that Gilmartin, as the older and more seasoned project leader, had long since repressed. But in a tragic twist, Stillwell's youth, inexperience, and unbridled ambition had rendered him careless and needlessly daring. In the early stages of the project, he routinely exposed himself to near-toxic levels of radiation as though his fair skin was made of lead. In just a month or so, he fell sick from radiation poisoning, with the diagnosis coming too late to stop or even slow the corrosive destruction to his body, his tissue rotting from the inside out.

As Stillwell's commanding officer, Gilmartin was tasked with the responsibility of explaining to the lieutenant's parents how and why their twenty-four-year-old son—the pride of their family—died, especially since he hadn't yet been deployed to a war zone such as Afghanistan. “Tyler was assisting in the development of a new weapons system,” Gilmartin had said before the funeral. “There was an accident in the laboratory which caused us to realize the device was unstable and needed a complete overhaul. Your son's death was tragic but may have helped to save hundreds of lives. He died a hero.”

Gilmartin knew the words sounded hollow even as he spoke them. The explanation, such as it was, was a lie, a total fabrication. The Lincoln Project was absolutely covert, and everyone involved was sworn to secrecy. Stillwell's death didn't change that.

So, Gilmartin said the words, shook hands with the father, and handed the grieving mother the American flag, folded in a neat triangle. Then, he walked away from the gravesite. He and Captain Himmel still had work to do, still had a deadline to meet in preparing the device for final testing prior to deployment.

General Burgess expressed a superficial regret over the loss of a team member, but urged the two remaining team members to press on. “There can be absolutely no delay,” he told them less than an hour after Stillwell's body was lowered into the ground.

Gilmartin understood the directive—he'd heard it before. Some high-level military strategists sitting in a paneled room somewhere in Washington had factored the weapon into the long-range plans to ‘help ensure the security of the United States’—a security that had been seriously tested only a few months earlier.

These high-level strategists—whoever they were—didn't share their plans with Gilmartin. Nor did he expect them to. His job was to develop and test the weapon, then turn it

over to someone else for production and deployment. And after his work was done, he might be granted a leave or he might be reassigned, deployed elsewhere, perhaps to develop another weapons system or to serve as an advisor somewhere in the world, most likely Afghanistan.

He might even receive that long-awaited promotion. Most of the officers who had served as long as he had were at least colonels by now. He wasn't counting on a promotion, however. He knew only too well how the Army regarded officers in his position, officers who worked in covert laboratories on projects very few people knew about. And while the end result of the work may have served the mission well, these officers received little or no recognition—that was reserved for the officers who served on the front lines.

Whatever happened, Gilmartin would have shrugged it off. He would have preferred a leave anyway. It was June, and he'd heard that the weather in Virginia so far had been full of sunshine and warmth. And, having spent the last several months in an underground compound, he was more than ready to see trees, flowers, and blue sky, to breathe fresh air or even dip his bare feet in the Atlantic Ocean, which was only fifty or so miles away.

He grew up in Northern Ohio and understood cabin fever. He had deluded himself into believing he was too busy, too involved in the project to succumb to the symptoms. However, now that the prototype was completed and ready for final testing, he allowed himself the luxury of existential despair, knowing that if he didn't get outside soon, he would either go crazy and be carried out in a straightjacket or he would simply roll over and die, to be buried alongside Tyler Stillwell.

Gilmartin blinked and glanced at the wall clock, noting that it was ten minutes after one o'clock. The general was late. But then, in his experience, generals were frequently late. It probably gave them a sense of importance to keep their subordinates waiting. Besides, it was

Sunday, and people with normal jobs don't work on Sundays. Gilmartin acknowledged his job was far from normal. He further acknowledged that time has little meaning when you live underground like a mole, feeding on artificial light, seeing no-one except other moles.

Gilmartin did a quick scan of the room. Himmel sat to his left. He was scribbling something on the yellow pad in front of him—as was his custom when he was nervous. Having lived day and night with Captain Hunter Himmel for more than six months, Gilmartin thought he knew the young officer pretty well—perhaps as well as he had known anyone with whom he had served. Gilmartin knew Himmel's habits, his mannerisms, even the way he reasoned through problems.

Himmel had been a good assistant, an officer who understood the chemistry and physics of nuclear explosives and what it meant to deploy them. He was one who could—and frequently would—make appropriate suggestions and recommendations when the project took the occasional wrong turn. Finally, as a good soldier with solid career aspirations, he knew when to keep his mouth shut, his thoughts to himself.

Gilmartin heard voices and shifted his gaze to the open door. Three men came into view, strolling as casually as if they had been walking through a tree-lined park on a sunny day. Each was wearing the standard army dress uniform, complete with brass and medals. The senior of the three had short, gray hair and three stars on each shoulder. He appeared to be doing nearly all of the talking.

The man next to him was a full colonel with a chest full of ribbons and medals. He nodded at everything the general said. The third man was a major. He carried a leather portfolio and said nothing.

Gilmartin rose to his feet as the three men entered the room. Himmel followed the example.

The general smiled and motioned with his hand. “Please be seated, gentlemen,” he said. His short hair glistened under the glare of the overhead lights.

All five men took seats around the table, with the general at one end and Gilmartin at the other. The major poured a glass of water for the general; he didn’t offer the gesture for anyone else.

The general took a sip of the water and looked around the room. “Well, Major, I understand you’ve completed the prototype.”

Gilmartin took a deep breath and glanced at Himmel, who was sitting rigid in his chair. “Yes, sir,” Gilmartin said. “Captain Himmel and I installed the triggering device last night.”

All eyes shifted to the attaché case. “Good,” the general said. “And you’re certain it meets the specifications?”

Gilmartin resisted the urge to rub his forehead. He was tired but determined not to show it. “Well, sir, the device, as is, meets the specifications according to the initial design; however, because of the uniqueness of the design, we can’t know for certain how viable it is until we subject it to a field test—which we obviously can’t do in this environment.” He quickly looked at the general’s eyes, worried that he might have overstepped by being so blunt

The general smiled again. “Very good, Major,” he said “We’re going to set up the field test. You and Captain Himmel will transport the device to a location where it will then be moved to a target area yet to be designated. Once there, you will instruct Colonel Law on how to trigger the device. Then, he and his Omega Force will deploy it. If all goes well, you and Captain Himmel will turn over all design materials. At that point, you may be asked to oversee the

manufacture of an unspecified number of similar devices, based on the design and the prototype.” He paused and glanced around the table. “Needless to say, because of this device’s potential, we will maintain the strictest secrecy. And, as such, we will exercise a number of precautions in the transportation and deployment. Any questions so far?”

No one had any questions. Gilmartin listened intently, wondering what was going to happen next but making every effort to conceal his curiosity. His instinct—honed by long experience—told him that the target area had already been determined, although he couldn’t imagine where—Afghanistan maybe? He shrugged that off. This was hardly the Manhattan Project.

Still, he knew that if the device worked according to its design, its potential as a gamechanger was virtually unlimited, especially if it fell into the hands of those undeterred by the release of a small nuclear explosion—people such as terrorists and overambitious generals and politicians.

The general looked to his left and nodded. He took another sip of water. “Colonel Law will now describe the procedure you will follow for the transport of the device.”

Gilmartin raised his eyes toward the colonel. There is a true combat officer, he thought, noting the chiseled features and the hard body that filled out the uniform. Although the Omega Force mostly operated in the dark, conducting missions very few outside of the military inner circle knew about, Gilmartin had heard enough to be both impressed and leery.

Colonel Law cleared his throat and sat up straighter in his chair. “Thank you, General Burgess,” he said. “Of course, gentlemen, you understand everything related to this operation is strictly covert. Everyone connected with this project appreciates how catastrophic it would be if the device were to fall into the wrong hands.” He paused and gave a sideways glance at Burgess.

The general nodded once again.

Gilmartin stifled a yawn.

Law took a deep breath. “The plan, as of this moment, is to deploy the device by the end of the week. The procedure for transporting it to the target area is as follows. Major Gilmartin, you and Captain Himmel will disengage the detonator from the weapon so they can be transported separately. That is possible, is it not?”

“Yes, sir,” Gilmartin replied almost automatically. He had anticipated the request during the design phase. He knew perhaps better than anyone how potentially unstable the device could be, especially during transport.

“Very well,” Law said. “Major, on Tuesday morning at 0700, you will be assigned an unmarked vehicle. Then, dressed in civilian clothes, you will drive the detonator, packaged in a plain cardboard box, to Montreal, crossing the Canadian border at Detroit.” He shifted his eyes to Himmel. “Captain, you will have the attaché case and follow the same procedure, only you will cross the border at Buffalo. You will rendezvous at the Four Points by Sheraton Hotel Wednesday night. Reservations have been made in your names. In the lobby of the Four Points, you will be met by Aaron Rumsfeld—he’s a CIA operative. He will approach you and say, ‘How’s the weather in Virginia?’ You will reply, ‘Beautiful, although a bit dry for the farmers.’ Any questions so far?”

Gilmartin had to suppress the urge to laugh. He wondered if this was a scenario written by someone who had read too many James Bond or John le Carre books. He glanced over at Himmel and suppressed another laugh. His young assistant was actually taking notes, his facial expression as serious as if he was being ordered to lead an invasion force. What incredible brainwashing, Gilmartin thought.

Law scanned the men around the table. “Mr. Rumsfeld will provide you with passports and credentials showing you to be Canadian citizens. Then, he will give you airline tickets and boarding passes that will allow you to clear their security. You will proceed on separate commercial flights to a destination that, as of this moment, is unspecified. Once you are at your destination, you will be met by a member of Omega Force and given further instructions. I believe that’s all you need to know for now. We don’t anticipate any problems during the transport. However, in case of something unforeseen, you will not be in a position to breach any confidence. Clear?”

Himmel looked at Gilmartin. Gilmartin accommodated him with a small nod and wink. “Yes, sir,” both said at the same time.

General Burgess leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table. “Thank you, Colonel Law,” he said. “Gentlemen, I cannot overstress the importance of this mission to national security, especially in these very troubling times. Although I can’t, at this time, reveal the intended use of the device, I can tell you that the Joint Chiefs regard it as critical to the ongoing war on terrorism. A successful field trial will be looked upon with great favor.”

This comment got Gilmartin’s attention, as he had never heard it before. “General Burgess, pardon me for asking, sir, but what may Captain Himmel and I anticipate, assuming that the field test is successful?”

Burgess raised his bushy eyebrows and shot a sideways glance at Law. “I can’t answer that question, Major,” he said. “Certainly, any decisions regarding your futures will be made after the field tests and by someone with more authority than I have. I only follow orders, just like you.”

The eternal chain of command, Gilmartin thought, and the perfect cop out. He'd been in the Army for twenty years, ever since graduating from Michigan State. He started out as an ordnance officer, then progressed to research and development once he'd shown a particular aptitude for weapons modification. The longest he had ever lived anywhere was eighteen months. Often, he'd deployed within a day or two of receiving transfer orders. He'd been in Poland working on a new shoulder-mounted missile launcher when the twin towers went down. Now, he was in Virginia. This was how the system worked with the job he had.

He didn't like the system—which he thought was biased against him—and he really didn't know why he stayed for as long as he had—fear of change, perhaps. He had no home, no ties, no family, except for the father and sister he'd left behind on an island in western Lake Erie. And that seemed like a lifetime ago.

Burgess sat back in the chair. “One final thing, gentlemen. If all goes according to the plan, we will meet back here at 0800 a week from Thursday. Major Pitt will brief you tomorrow morning at 0700. If you are able to disengage the detonator this afternoon, you may spend the bulk of tomorrow any way you wish, as long as you're back here Tuesday morning, ready to travel. The timing is obviously crucial to the success of the mission.” He smiled, pushed back his chair, and stood.

The other four officers also stood immediately.

Burgess did a half turn toward the door. “Good luck, gentlemen,” he said. He took a step toward the door. Law was right behind him. Major Pitt crossed their path and opened the door for his superiors.

Once they were alone in the conference room, Himmel took a deep breath and wiped his forehead. “Gil, what do you think?”

Gilmartin leaned over the table and grasped the handle of the attaché case. For a few seconds, he considered the question and the relative naivete of the young man asking it. He wanted to tell Himmel that everything they'd heard today was just so much BS, that the device would end up in a warehouse somewhere, like nearly all the other projects he'd been a part of—an expensive weapon never to be used or even spoken of again.

He wanted to say that. However, a part of him wasn't so sure. The Lincoln Project, as conceived and designed, had a potential for destruction that far exceeded any weapon he had ever helped to produce—a small nuclear device concealed in a common attaché case with lead casing to avoid detection—a true 'dirty' bomb.

But it was the detonator that was the true marvel—a portable nuclear accelerator that could be activated via remote control. Yes, this was a weapon to be proud of and feared, one that could influence the balance of power perhaps as much as the first A-bomb had in 1945.

Still, as he stood at the head of the table and shifted his eyes back and forth between Himmel and the device they had created, suddenly he didn't feel proud. Rather, for the first time in his long career, he felt very uneasy and uncertain. He didn't like the feeling.