

As they turned onto the campus and raced past the small power station, which had been the source of so much hope and inspiration just a few weeks earlier, representing the best of what he believed his country would again be, he saw the roof of Gaither Chapel ablaze.

He cried out in rage as Maury raced them up the hill, swerving into the drive in front of the building. A score of his old students were up on the roof, armed with axes, crowbars tearing back the shingling, buckets of water laboriously passed up along several ladders. Others stood guard, scanning the sky, weapons of every sort raised. Several observers with binoculars watched the horizon or focused in on the observation helicopter circling high overhead, and John just had an instinctive feeling that Fredericks was high up there, watching, and well out of range of ground fire.

Grace, carbine over her shoulder, ran up to him and saluted, face blackened from obviously having helped to fight the fire.

“Report. First off, any casualties?”

“Three dead, sir.” She started to choke up.

He put his hand on her shoulder. “Focus, Lieutenant. Work with me. Who are they?”

She rattled off a few names, one of them an elderly professor who collapsed inside the chapel when it was hit and started to burn.

“Focus on now, Grace. That’s your job, remember? Focus and go back to it.”

“Sir, the command post down in the basement is still running. They asked for you to report in.”

His admonishment to his young lieutenant of the college troops now reflected back on him. Again that nagging doubt. Was it the concussion of a couple of weeks back, or was he indeed losing his edge? Of course, after being out of touch for at least forty-five minutes, he

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Comment [SAS151]: Doctor: Please consider this—were the students also trained in advanced fire suppression tactics? It seems almost implausible to have received so much expertise in so little time, especially given that the community was struggling just to produce enough food to feed itself and that many had also trained in military operations.

In addition, there is no mention of protective bunker gear, self-contained breathing apparatuses, high-tech rappelling gear, or other such equipment necessary to safely and effectively navigate in a serious high-rise firefight, and there is no mention of a battalion commander overseeing the firefight. How are the students coordinating their efforts? As currently presented, this scene detracts from the plausibility of the story. You may wish to consider revising this.

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should get a situation report and plot his next move. This first strike was a softening up by this time, a ground assault could have rolled over his outpost on the interstate and be heading straight into town.

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“Keep at it, Grace. You guys are doing great.” He patted her on the shoulder and then returned her salute before running down to the basement entry, the window shattered.

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His communications team was inside, and they looked up at him with relief as he came in. They had adroitly run their wires from a basement window through the trees and anchored them to the roof of the adjoining classroom building. Unless on the ground and staring straight

up, no one could spot them, though if they transmitted out for more than a few seconds, an equipped unit could zero in on their location. Without Hellfire missiles, fuel-air explosives, or a large, high explosive, digging them out would be difficult, but it would certainly mean the ultimate destruction of his beloved chapel. Once he had time enough, he would pull this command center out of here and move it to a less precious building, such as the boys' dorm, a hardy structure of concrete and cinderblocks from the 1960s with zero sentimental attachment for nearly everyone, even those who lived there.

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“Any reports from our forward observers?” John asked.

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One of his operators—it was Mabel from the post office—looked up after removing one of the two decidedly old-fashioned headphones. “John, forward outpost reports the two Apaches are back down and obviously rearming. No report of any kind of movement along the interstate, Highway 70, or anywhere else. We are getting an incessant signal in the last ten minutes from someone claiming to be Fredericks. He is on our primary frequency and is now at times overriding and jamming it.”

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John motioned for the headphones and slipped them on. They felt strange, for after all, a few years ~~earlier, he'd used~~ earbuds, and these were definitely retro from the 1960s or before.

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~~There was static, and~~ then a few seconds later, ~~he heard~~ the voice again, and it was indeed

Fredericks.

“Come on, John, that was just the first move. Talk to me before I send them back in again.”

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~~Damn it. What to do?~~ Transmit back for even more than a few seconds, and chances were that Fredericks was indeed overhead, his helicopter equipped with tracking gear, and they ~~would~~ get a rocket down their throats, ~~killing every kid on the roof of the chapel.~~

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And yet he so wanted to reply to see if there was some way to call this madness off ~~and~~ if not, to tell the bastard to go to hell.

He was being baited, played.

He looked at Mabel, removing the headphones and handing them back to her. “Code word scramble,” he said. ~~It~~ was the signal for the teams on the net to switch to the first backup

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frequency, using ~~old-fashioned~~ ham radios and ~~handheld~~ units that the Franklin family had

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protected and stashed away before ~~the Day~~ and, in a surprise gesture, had offered to John just ~~the~~

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~~day before.~~ Mabel announced the one-word signal ~~and~~ then immediately shut down ~~transmission~~

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and powered off, as did the others, and they would now be in the dark for the next thirty minutes before powering up again.

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If the Apaches were back down to refuel and rearm, they could be back in as little as twenty minutes.

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John could now guess what Fredericks was up to. There would be no ground attack for hours, perhaps not even for days. He would not risk his limited assets. He had tasted good blood

with his deadly surprise raid on the reivers. He was now taking it up a notch. As long as fuel and ammunition held out, he would just keep sending the Apaches in, believing that it would wear John and those with him down.

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If he needed to report back to Bluemont, there would be no casualties on his side, just a nice request for more fuel and ammunition, couched such that it would look like he was doing the most effective of jobs suppressing rebellions with minimum cost to his side—an efficient job that always looked good on paper.

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Cursing under his breath, John dashed out of the communications room and onto the front lawn of the chapel. Each breath was painful and his jaw ached, but he needed to focus and ignore the pain.

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The students had managed to contain the fires, but they were still tearing back shingles to get at the last of the smoldering blaze. The aged, dried chestnut within burned easily.

The sight of them up on the roof, while others stood watchful guard reminded him of the heroic efforts of Londoners during the blitz, the faded black and white images of crews struggling to save their beloved Saint Paul's Cathedral. Watching them at work, spotters ready to shout a warning to get off the roof, filled him with pride. He looked across the valley to the Assembly Inn, where the hospital was concealed in the basement. To his horror, he saw a couple of Bartlett's old VW buses racing up to the front of the building, the aging hippie now playing ambulance driver for the casualties in town. Surely the Black Hawk circling above was watching every move.

Comment [SAS152]: Doctor: Here, too, similar to a previous comment: with virtually no professional-grade gear and with relatively untrained group of firefighters, it seems implausible that a fire set with incendiary devices launched from a military helicopter would be contained so quickly, if at all. You may wish to consider revising this.

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“Maury, we gotta move now!” John cried.

As he ran to the jeep parked in front of the building, he looked up. The Black Hawk was still circling. He watched the chopper as he climbed aboard the jeep, and Maury raced down the road around one of the dorms.

“Pull up to the old gym!” John shouted. “I’m getting out here. You take off the other way, find a place under good concealment to park, and make your way on foot to the Assembly Inn.”

Maury grinned and nodded, and John jumped out of the vehicle. Maury continued on, and John stood for half a minute in plain view, looking straight up at the circling Black Hawk before going into the gym. If the chopper overhead did have advanced tracking capability, he now wanted to be seen going into the abandoned building. The cavernous basketball court was dark, empty, the air within dank and musty. It was a building the college wanted to replace even before

the Day, and it had seen no use since. John loitered for five minutes or so and suddenly fought with the terrible urge for a smoke. He wished he had Ernie and his pocketful of cigars with him. He could sure use one now.

He finally slipped out one of the back doors and looked up. The helicopter had shifted a bit back toward Black Mountain. He took a deep, painful breath and ran behind the small dance hall barn. Rather than use the road bridge, he ducked down low and splashed through the tree-covered stream that fed into Lake Susan. He crouched for a minute between several abandoned cars parked on the far side and then sprinted the last few feet into a side entrance of the Assembly Inn.

If Fredericks had a means of tracking him, he had done his best to throw him off.

Once through the door, he was met by chaos. The basement had been converted into a temporary hospital. The Assembly Inn had once been a rather upscale hotel for conferences, and

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shortly before the Day, it had gone through an extensive remodeling. It had a long history, including housing enemy diplomats in the opening months of the Second World War. There had been little use for it since the Day. Of course, there were no more tourists and conferences, and with such a radical population decline in the year afterward, those who needed housing simply moved into abandoned homes while students remaining on the campus on the far side of Lake

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Susan had found that old familiar haunts were of the most comfort and stayed there. Those who married moved in together and lived not just with their spouse but beloved friends and even some of the staff who remained, as well. The college had become something of an old-style commune of sorts, led by the moral guidance of President King and Reverend Black while the beautiful Assembly Inn on the far side of the Lake Susan had slipped into disrepair. It had been

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designated a year earlier as the fallback position of a hospital and refugee center if ever Black Mountain were overrun or destroyed, but little had been done other than board up some windows damaged in an ice storm the previous winter.

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But within the last twenty-four hours, it again had a use as Makala organized the transfer of the thirty-eight surviving wounded refugees and several dozen family members of the wounded who had trekked over the mountains in search of help. The town's precious reserve of gas had been nearly depleted as a result, but no one questioned that. She had even managed to get all their emergency medical supplies out of the hospital and fire station,

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Several dozen wounded from the morning's first attack had been brought in, and again Makala had assumed her role as the "angel of choosing," marking each incoming case on the forehead with red lipstick, sending some into immediate surgery, the center rigged up in a former classroom illuminated by the morning light streaming in through east-facing windows. Those marked as ones were sent to wait in the rear of the foyer, and the tragic threes were sent into

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another back office with the minimal comfort of mattresses and slightly moldy sheets dragged down from long-vacant rooms on the upper floor. No Red Cross flag had been set up out front or atop the building. That would only draw Fredericks's attention.

As John walked down the packed corridor, Makala looked up from her work with a young woman in her late teens, obviously very pregnant but with no sign of injury.

"Sweetheart, you've gone into labor," Makala announced, smiling at her, clutching the frightened woman's hand. "You're most likely hours out, and once things settle down, we'll get you a comfy bed, and I know a granny who was a midwife to help you. Okay?"

The girl tried to smile, her face soaked with sweat. An elderly couple, perhaps her parents, braced her on either side while a young nurse, dressed in camo but wearing a medic's armband, said she'd lead them to a safe place.

Makala looked up at John, smiled, and then dashed the few feet between them to embrace him tightly. "I've been worried sick about you all night." She sighed. "Thank God you're safe."

"How are things here?" John asked.

"Not bad, but not good." She drew closer. "Actually, when compared to the before times, it's practically medieval," she whispered. There was pain in her voice. "The ones I mark as threes? Nearly all could have been saved before this, and John, everyone in this town knows what a three means. They look up at me wide eyed, saying, 'I'm not a three, am I?' I lie to nearly all of them. Damn all this."

She held him tightly, and then he tensed, looking toward the open window. The helicopters were coming back to Montreat.

"Everyone!" John shouted, breaking the hushed whispering—which, even now, everyone felt was the way one should talk in a hospital—his loud, booming voice even startling Makala.

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Comment [SAS153]: Doctor: You may wish to reconsider this; if the patient is only in her late teens, her parents might not be elderly. Might you perhaps mean *grandparents*? Please note that they are described as *elderly* elsewhere, as well.

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“It might get a bit rough in the next few minutes. I need all of you to work with me as a team. Any wounded in the rooms facing Lake Susan, we have to get them out now and into the back rooms away from any windows. Those of you with vehicles, get them the hell out of here. You only got a minute or so to do it. Now move!”

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John looked passed Makala and saw the elderly couple helping the young pregnant woman, who was bent double from a contraction and crying out. John ran up, shouldered her family aside, and picked her up. Ignoring the sharp pain in his chest and dashing for the back room, he set her down none too gently.

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Makala had taken charge, as well, shouting for people to move, as she ran into the surgery center that needed as much lighting as possible and thus had been set up in an east-facing room.

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John looked out the window and saw one of the Apaches swinging up over Lookout Gap, lining up for a strafing run across the valley, the second one turning behind it.

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Surely the son of a bitch had not ordered this!

“Move them now!” Makala shouted, “Move them now!”

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Three surgeons were working on wounded set side by side, one of them Doc Wagner, a young assistant by his side, handing him instruments as Wagner bent over to pull something out of a boy’s chest, which he had split wide open.

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“Doc, go now!” John screamed,

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“Not now, I can’t!” Wagner shouted back, still intent on the forceps buried in the boy’s

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John looked from him to Makala, who had shoved aside two nurses, struggling to stop the bleeding from an old man’s shattered arm and was trying to maneuver his makeshift gurney out of the room. John looked back out the window. The Apaches were skimming down the slope of

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Lookout Gap, guns blazing, shots ripping across the campus and now slashing the waters of Lake

Susan, coming straight toward them.

He tackled Makala, knocking her to the floor and rolling with her up against the outer wall, the window a foot over their heads shattering into a thousand shards. A split second later, Wagner was dead, nearly torn in half from a bursting twenty-millimeter shell that also killed his assistant and the boy they were both trying to save. For a second, the room was a cacophony of exploding twenty-millimeter shells, shattering glass, blood splatters, screams, and hysteria.

John's memory flashed to the videos posted on the Internet showing the work of gunships killing terrorists in the years after 9/11, the comments on the web pages nearly orgasmic with delight, laughter, and jokes. Yeah, they had been enemies who deserved to die, but had all those commentators ever seen people up close as twenty-millimeter shells exploded in their bodies?

Makala was screaming not with fear but horror at the sight, and John buried her head against his chest, holding her tightly, forcing her up against the wall and shielding her with his body. Where were Elizabeth and Ben in all this madness? Elizabeth's post was on campus. He had caught a glimpse of her as he'd left the communications center, but he had not had time to speak to her. Ben, thank God, was in a shelter in the basement of the girls' dorm.

He spared a quick glance up over the edge of the window sill and then instantly ducked back down. The second helicopter was nearly on the tail of the first, which had roared overhead in a sharp banking turn to avoid slamming into the mountains that bordered the northwest slope of the valley. Another volley of fire ripped into the room, but there was nothing left to kill or destroy; all three surgical stations were a shambles. The chopper roared overhead, and John stood up, pulling Malaka to her feet.

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“Run!” he screamed. “Get into the back rooms. If they had put a rocket in here, we’d all be dead. Now run, and keep down until they’re gone!”

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She looked about wide eyed, and for the first time since they had met long ago, he could see that she had become completely overwhelmed with the horror of it all.

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He started to pull her from the room, and then she struggled to break free, screaming as she tried to reach down to Doc Wagner, who was convulsing spasmodically on the floor, even though it was obvious to John he was beyond any help and would be mercifully dead in a few more seconds.

Comment [SAS154]: Doctor: On the previous page is the following:

“A split second later, Wagner was dead.”

Please revise for consistency; either remove this section here, or revise the earlier mention that he had already been killed.

“They might hit again. Now get your people in the back rooms until they’re gone!”

John pushed her into the hallway, which was a sea of chaos. People were screaming. Some of the twenty-millimeter shells had blown through doorways, and a fire was smoking near a doorway where a shell or incendiary round had ignited a shattered kerosene lamp. Someone was screaming in anguish over a prone body, that he recognized as one of his students who had fought with valor against the Posse, but had wanted nothing more than to help teach others how to gather food and preserve it, and now she was as dead as her comrades and friends who had been killed at the pass long ago. But this time, she was a victim of the very people who were supposed to be on her side.

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He heard the helicopters coming back, the sound of their approach greeted with wild screaming. This time, they were coming down the mountain slope from the east, and a few seconds later came that surreal sound almost like yards of cloth being torn, but it was not hitting the Assembly Inn this time. He cracked open an emergency exit to look out and saw the old gym getting torn apart, and this time, two rockets were unleashed into it, blowing off part of the roof, igniting fires within.

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He smiled grimly.

So you did see me go in there, he thought with bitterness. He wondered if their supply of rockets was running low, perhaps the last two reserved for a personal strike against him. If so, it had spared those in this building.

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The helicopters continued on down the valley after the two strikes, and he slipped out the door, crouching low. A minute later, heard distant explosions. They were back to ripping Black Mountain apart.

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He went back down the corridor and spotted Makala in one of the storage rooms, struggling with a set of forceps to dig into an elderly woman's arm to close off an artery and clamp it shut. Though the woman was obviously in agony, she was talking calmly to Makala, reassuring Makala that she was doing a wonderful job. Makala clamped the forceps shut, telling the woman to hold on to them with her good hand and that someone would be along shortly to tie the artery off.

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In a gesture John thought nothing less than surreal, the elderly woman first reached out with her good hand and gently stroked Makala's cheek, telling her that she was a beautiful woman whom she would pray for. Makala actually leaned against her for a moment, beginning to sob again. The woman saw John, and he recognized her as an old friend who had worked in the bank and then disappeared into retirement some years earlier.

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"John, I hope you are well," the woman said in a soothing voice. "I think your wife needs a good hug before you go running off again."

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Her tone so startled John that it actually did take him aback. He smiled, thanked her, and put his hands on Makala's shoulders, turning her around.

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"Sweetheart, I have to go now. And you have to do your job. I love you."