

# BLACK OPS:



# THE GATE

In Praise of **THE LINE** also by Bob Mayer

"Bob Mayer has crafted a military thriller in the tradition of John Grisham's **THE FIRM**"

Publishers Weekly



**NY Times Best Selling Author**

# Bob Mayer

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THE GATE: BLACK OPS series, Book One.

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Bob Mayer is the best-selling author of 40 books. He is a West Point graduate, served in the Infantry and Special Forces (Green Berets): leading an Infantry platoon and then Battalion and then Brigade level Reconnaissance platoons; commanding an A-Team and as a Special Forces battalion operations officer; commanded a training company, and was an instructor at the JFK Special Warfare Center & School at Fort Bragg. He also served in Special Operations Western Command on a variety of classified assignments. He has been studying, practicing and teaching change, team building, leadership and communication for over thirty years.

WHO DARES WINS: THE GREEN BERET WAY TO CONQUER FEAR AND SUCCEED was just published by Pocket Books. A draft of WHO DARES WINS: THE GREEN BERET WAY TO BUILD THE WINNING A-TEAM has been completed. In the pipeline are WDW books on Leadership and Communication, Who Dares Wins is also an excellent program for small businesses and sports teams to learn how to become elite like the Green Beret A-Team.

He uses Who Dares Wins to help writers become successful authors with his Warrior Writer Program. The program is designed to help authors overcome the fears that have been holding them back in the world of publishing and succeed where others have failed. He brings a unique blend of practical Special Operations Strategies and Tactics mixed with the vision of an artist.

His books have hit the NY Times, Wall Street Journal, Publishers Weekly, USA Today and other best-seller lists. He has been published in many genres, including thriller, science fiction, suspense, romance and non-fiction. He has appeared on PBS, NPR and the Discovery Military Channel and in USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, Sports Illustrated and Army Times among other publications as an expert consultant. He has sold over 3 million books.

He is an honor graduate of the Special Forces Qualification Course, the Special Warfare Center Instructor Training Course and the Danish Royal Navy Fromandkorpset School. He is Master Parachutist/Jumpmaster Qualified and earned a Black Belt while living in the Orient and also taught martial arts. Bob earned an MA in Education. He also graduated the International Mountain Climbing School and completed 14 marathons including qualifying for the Boston Marathon.

He's spoken before over 500 groups and organizations, ranging from SWAT teams, the University of Georgia; IT teams in Silicon Valley, the CIA, Fortune 500 Company, Romance Writers of America and the Maui Writers Conference. He has written a Staff Walk for the Gettysburg Battle for the Special Warfare Center; a Special Forces Forward Operating Base Standing Operating Procedure; a Special Forces A-team Standing Operating Procedure and contributed the Maritime Operations Standing Operating Procedure.

To learn more about Bob Mayer please visit his website at [www.bobmayer.org](http://www.bobmayer.org).

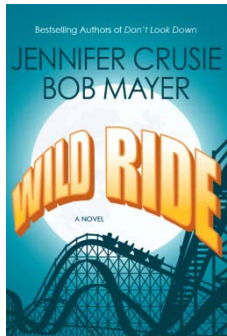
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Books currently available by Bob Mayer (in bookstores, on-line and at his web site)

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THE GATE  
*BLACK OPS series book one*

by

Bob Mayer

## PROLOGUE

HUNGNAM, NORTH KOREA

FRIDAY, 3 AUGUST 1945

5:24 A.M. Local

"Quickly!" The officer barking the orders wore the white uniform of the Japanese Imperial Navy but the tunic was stained with sweat and dirt. The reason was obvious as he added his strength to the work party fastening the large crate in the back of the truck to a crane's hook.

A man standing on the deck of the submarine echoed the naval officer's words.

"Quickly!" This man did not wear a uniform but his demeanor brooked no argument. His eyes blazed darkly at the workers and a long straight scar ran down the right side of his leathery face, disappearing under the collar of the black shirt he wore. Through a tear in the shirt, the officer could see part of a tattoo that covered the man's chest. Large, black ominous waves were etched into the skin with the red orb of a sun looming behind them.

The man was standing next to a midget submarine, which was bolted to the deck, just aft of the conning tower. Behind the midget sub, a special sled rested on a cradle. The sled was designed to fit the rectangular crate. The cradle had been hastily welded to the steel deck, the work finished just moments ago. Cables were lying on the deck, waiting to join the sled and crate to the midget submarine.

The officer cast an anxious glance landward to the northwest, up the long valley floor. In the dim light of early morn, he could see the flash of artillery and he knew that it wasn't Japanese

tubes firing the rounds. They could all hear the rumble of non-stop heavy firing echoing off the tall mountains that framed the broad river valley.

It was the Russian way to use a sledgehammer to open a walnut. The Germans had been experiencing it for years on the eastern front and now it was Japan's turn. There had been no formal declaration of war yet. The Russian bear had not officially joined the American eagle to pick over the remains of Japan's Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, but the officer knew the Russians weren't fools. They wanted what was in this valley, most particularly, what was currently being loaded onto the submarine and a trivial thing such as declaring war wasn't a factor. The Kremlin could always do that later. Just as the Russians had gobbled up as much of Eastern Europe as possible before the end of hostilities in the west, they were beginning to do the same here in the east.

There was little in the valley to stop the Russians. Forces had been stripped down to the bare minimum in Korea. The greatest need for men was in Japan to await the impending American invasion of the homeland and further north in Manchuria. The officer had even heard rumors of desperate negotiating by Japanese officials with the Russians in an attempt to form a last minute alliance. Obviously, from the sound echoing down the valley, the Russian bear wasn't biting the offered bait. In fact, if the crate had been one of the bargaining chips put on the table in those negotiations, that offer might have precipitated this assault. The officer knew much of what was at stake and he could tell none of the enlisted men working for him. They would find out shortly.

The officer had been here for two years and he knew that not only the crate but also the entire area was enticing bait for the Russians. Hungnam was an industrial city with a river running through it opening onto a small harbor facing the Sea of Japan. The river formed a valley

sided on both the north and south by very steep mountains. Further west, where it sounded like the Russians now were, this river and others had been damned to form hydroelectric plants to run the numerous factories dotting the valley floor. The landscape was bleak, almost all the trees cut down, a result of a deliberate program begun by the Japanese when they occupied Korea in 1904 to denude the entire Korean peninsula so guerillas would have no place to hide. It was a dark landscape, made even more so by the filth pouring out of smokestacks and the piles of debris and rubble that the factories discarded. The Japanese occupiers had no use for the land other than what it could produce to support the Empire.

"Carefully!" the officer exclaimed as the crate lifted off the floor of the truck. He put a hand on it, helping to guide it across the dock. The crate went over the edge of the pier and then slowly lowered down. It slipped between the waiting arms of the sled. The man on deck quickly ran chains over the wood, securing the item inside. He then attached two cables from the back of the midget sub to the front of the sled the crate was on. There wasn't a single member of the crew in sight; all were below decks, anxiously waiting to get underway and get out to sea.

Hooking the edge of the chain over a bolt and securing it with a lashing of rope, the man quickly walked forward to the conning tower and climbed up the external ladder. He turned and looked at the officer and briefly raised an arm in salute. The he was gone, the clang of the hatch closing overlaid on the sound of the Russian ordnance coming closer.

The submarine immediately began moving, heading out into the harbor. The officer had no tie to wait. Another truck with similar crate slowly rolled up in a swirl of dust. An open-bay landing craft pulled into the slot the submarine had filled. The officer began barking orders, getting the crane hooked up to the crate. As it was being lowered into the waiting boat, the officer spread a glance toward the mouth of the harbor. The conning tower of the submarine

slipped underwater and disappeared as he watched. Perhaps it would beat the Russian ships that were coming to seal off the exit. He turned his attention back to the task at hand. The landing craft settled a foot deeper in the water as the weight of the crate came to rest on its floorboards.

The officer heard the drone of airplane engines. He turned landward. A Mitsubishi “Betty” bomber, converted into a cargo plane, labored up into the early-morning sky and skidded to the north, barely fifty feet above the dark wave tops. Damn those scientists, he cursed to himself. They were running. But there was no way the men inside that plane could be taken by the Russians. Death was a good option, but the knowledge the men on board that plan held could still be useful so they were being taken away. The plane disappeared around the shoreline to the north.

“The other boxes!” the officer ordered.

The men didn’t need to be told to handle these smaller crates gingerly because they could all read the markings on the outside: high explosive and detonators. They formed a human chain, passing the munitions down into the launch.

As soon as the last box was in place, the officer jumped down and cast off the bowline as a seaman cast off the aft. The officer didn’t spare a second glance at the work crew and soldiers left behind on the shore.

“Go!” he ordered the coxswain.

The launch slowly picked up speed, heading into the harbor. The officer looked up as a pair of planes roared by the overhead. It was now light enough to see the red star painted on their wings. The officer cursed his own pilots and his own leadership. This should have been the number one priority for protection, but they were practically defenseless.

The Russian planes banked and leisurely began strafing the shore, firing into the work party, which was scattering. The officer knew there were Russian ships coming. That was the only reason the pilots were ignoring the launch. When the submarine had come in just after midnight, the captain had told him that Hungnam Harbor would shortly be cut off by sea.

The submarine could only fit the one crate on deck. There was no plane with enough power to take off with second heavy crate even if they could get past the Russian fighters. There were no options left except this last one. The officer pounded a fist onto the side of the crate, ignoring the splinters and the blood that ran forth. If only they'd had more time! But there was still hope, the officer reminded himself. He thought of the last glimpse he'd had of the submarine. There was also the plane that had left earlier and the knowledge that was on board it. There was always hope.

He turned his attention from the fighters to the course ahead. Two thousand meters from the dock, there was a small, rocky islet in the middle of Hungnam Harbor. It had a pebble beach on the landward side, the rest of the island being a pile of rocks with only a few lonely birds as inhabitants. It was toward that beach that the officer directed the nervous and confused coxswain. The crew could see the explosives piled onboard. The officer knew their first guess had been that he was going to use the launch in a kamikaze attack against the Russian ships at sea. This beaching was an unexpected turn of events and they were uncertain as to whether it was a good turn or not.

The officer would have liked to go out among the Russian ships. But he could not take the chance that the project would not work and the crate be captured. He also had to give the submarine a chance to make it clear. Everyone's head snapped up as a very loud and much closer explosion reverberated across the water. On the side of the near mountain on the south side of the

valley, a large cloud of dirt and rock bellowed into the air. The cave from which they had taken the two crates earlier this morning was now sealed. Secondary explosions followed, destroying the road carved into the side of the mountain that had been the only access to the cave, further isolating the site.

The officer nodded and whispered a swift prayer for those who had just died. His military staff was dead and that secret was safe at least. He felt no sympathy toward the men now entombed in the mountainside. They had done their duty, now he was doing his.

The bow of the boat grated on the pebbles and they were beached. One of the Russian fighters flew over to investigate, its pilot leading the way with a barrage of bullets from the machineguns in the wings. The bullets churned up water then onto the beach, only a few hitting the boat. Two sailors fell wounded and miraculously none of the explosives' boxes were hit.

The officer ignored the screams of the wounded men as he ripped off a piece of wood on the side of the crate. He reached in and began working, his fingers following a procedure he had memorized over the past week under supervision of the scientists.

The fighter made another pass, then, confirming that the launch was beached, left to pick more lucrative targets in the valley. They were leaving the launch to the ships that were coming.

The officer had a small electric wire on a reel. He attached one end to the object inside. With that, the officer was done with the crate. He quickly had the surviving crewmen stack boxes of explosives around it, wiring each box for detonation as quickly as it was stacked.

He connected all the firing wires, then unreeled a length of detonating cord up over the edge of the boat, onto the shore, while also unreeling the electric wire. He moved back fifty meters, the other sailors joining him. He wired the detonating cord into a firing box. Only he

knew the explosives were the backup. If the object inside failed, he had to insure the crate would not be found intact.

The officer hooked the electric wire into a small hand cranked generator. He checked to make sure the generator functioned and all was ready. The sun had now cleared the horizon.

The officer turned to the east, the direction of the Emperor, and bowed. Then he cranked the small handle. In the microsecond before he was consumed by the flash, the officer rejoiced. It worked and there was still hope! Then he, and all in a half-mile circle were gone, obliterated by the blast.

In the skies above, the planes were consumed by the fireball. Out at sea the Russian Admiral in charge of the flotilla steaming for Hungnam at flank speed was left to wonder at the mushroom cloud that rose up over the shore.

## CHAPTER ONE

SAN FRANCISCO

SUNDAY, 28 SEPTEMBER

4:12 A.M.

"Just like in the Cav, man. Locked and loaded. Ready to rock and roll and waste some motherfuckers." Preston smiled, the gap between his middle teeth showing clearly. His skin glistened with sweat inside the stuffy interior of the van. He held up the AR-15 that Lake had modified three days earlier. "I hope we run into someone," he continued. The rubber gloves he wore squeaked as he patted the weapon one more time.

"Not before we put the device in place," Starry said. "Keep the operational priorities straight in your head, Preston."

"Sure, Top, sure," Preston said. "That's cool."

Lake was seated in one of the captain's chair in the back of the van, watching Starry work on the "device." This was the first he'd seen of the machinery and he had a very good idea what it was: an industrial, high-pressure, paint sprayer. The problem was, Lake didn't know why they had it in the back of the van. He also didn't know what the operational priorities were that Starry kept talking about. Lake's initial job with the two had been acquiring and modifying their weapons. Now he was providing security.

Lake ran his hand along his AR-15. Actually, technically speaking, it could now be called an M-16 since he had modified the inner workings to allow the commercially sold, single-shot,

assault rifle to be fired on full automatic. He also wore gloves. He'd been handed them before entering the van and that told him that whatever they were going to do was illegal since Starry didn't want any prints left. Actually, Lake reminded himself, the fact that they had the automatic weapons in their hands already put them on the wrong side of the law, not that he had expected anything else. In fact, Lake would have been disappointed if his new partners had stayed inside the confines of the law.

He continued to watch as Starry carefully read instructions, completing the preparation of the sprayer. One thing Lake had learned in the past three weeks working with them was that although neither man would qualify as a rocket scientist, they were very thorough and well trained on security. They had never discussed their plans around Lake. They'd simply given him orders and told him when and where to be.

Lake knew they didn't totally trust him, but they'd needed him for the guns after the ATF had raided a "Patriot" compound in Oregon last month and seized the weapons they had planned on using. And there had been Lake, three days later, attending a Patriot rallies and letting it be known to a few of the people there that he had access to weapons. And five days later, he'd been contacted by Starry at the cabin he'd been hiding out in the shadow of Mount Hood. And now he was in San Francisco. Lake knew that to Starry, his presence and access to weapons was a fortunate coincidence. Lake also knew that in this business, coincidences didn't happen. He wasn't quite sure how aware of that Starry was. Their lack of trust in revealing plans showed some degree of awareness.

They'd driven south from Oregon the previous day and stayed in a seedy motel in Novato, just north of the city. Peeking out the window of his room, Lake had watched Starry and Preston drive off in the van several hours earlier and return just a few minutes ago. He'd jumped

back in bed and pretended to be asleep when Preston had opened his door, telling him to grab his stuff and get ready to move.

Lake knew better than to ask too many questions. Paranoid didn't quite apply to these people. When a person implicitly believed that the UN was going to take over the United States with the blessing of those in power in Washington, that person's reasoning abilities were difficult to rationally analyze. Lake found that particular fear quite humorous. He'd personally seen that the UN couldn't keep its own soldiers safe in Somalia and other places around the globe. How was it going to take over the United States? And why would it want to? But that larger reality was not the issue right now. This sprayer was the current reality that he had to keep his focus on.

Starry was done with the equipment. He was a big man. He didn't say much about his past, but Lake guessed that he was a former noncommissioned officer in the army. The way Starry spoke made it seem like he'd been officer but Lake could tell the difference. A wanna-be. Lake had met many. Pretending to be something they'd never been. Maybe a platoon sergeant, was Lake's best guess as to Starry's past. Preston's calling him "top" indicated he might even have been a first sergeant.

Lake did know that Preston had been a staff sergeant. That is until he'd let his little head do his thinking for him during a tour as a drill instructor at Fort Dix. It didn't matter that the female trainee had been more than willing. Preston had had his career abruptly ended and that was all his simple mind could focus on now. It just wasn't fair! How many times had Lake heard that cry from people who had brought their own misfortune down on themselves? Preston was from the south, one of those who ran away from the farm and found a pair of shoes and a home in the army, except he'd lost the latter and he really wasn't trained or schooled to do anything else. He had reason to be mad at the government, or at least he felt he did.

Preston didn't worry Lake. Starry was the one who was getting instructions from somewhere and had enough smarts to carry those instructions out. Lake knew the two didn't think of this-- whatever this was-- on their own. The question for the past several weeks had been which would come first: finding out who was giving the orders or the arrival of orders precipitating an action that would force Lake's hand. This morning it seemed the latter had come to pass.

Preston giggled as Starry opened a large, hard-plastic case that had not been in the van on the drive down. The sprayer had been, but in pieces, hidden under a tarp that Lake hadn't had the chance to investigate. One thing Lake had noted immediately was the small written label on the side of the machine: MADE IN JAPAN.

Starry removed a large, glass jug from the foam rubber interior of the case. Lake estimated the jug could hold about five gallons. The outside was painted bright red and had Japanese characters stenciled on it. The way he handled it told Lake that whatever was inside the glass scared Starry. That bothered Lake because he sensed Starry didn't scare easy. Starry placed the jug onto a platform on the side of the sprayer, then levered down a steel hose that had a pointy spout until it rested just above the metal lid. He locked the jug in place, then suddenly looked up at Lake.

"You said you're airborne qualified right?"

"Eighty-deuce at Fort Bragg," Lake replied. He mustered a semblance of enthusiasm. "Airborne all the way!"

Starry wasn't impressed. "Uh-huh." He flipped open the lid to another crate that Lake hadn't been able to look into. "Here. Put this on."

Lake stared at the MC-1B parachute that Starry had handed him. Even though he knew better, Lake had to ask. It would be too far out of character not to. "Are we going flying?"

"Just put the chute on. And this," Starry added, handing him an inflatable set of water wings that would fit around the parachute rig.

Lake pulled out the waist strap of the parachute and unbuckled the leg and chest snaps. He checked the sizing on the harness. It was a large, which was fortunate because he knew from experience a medium would be a tight fit.

Lake was a big man, not so much in height-- although he did top out at six feet, one inch-- but in width. His shoulders were broad, his chest well muscled from daily workouts. His body didn't taper in to the waist, but just continued in straight lines down to his thick legs. His stomach was smooth and flat, not rippling with muscles like those male models that spent their life doing crunches in pretty gyms, but solid from time spent working in the outdoors. Lake was thirty-eight and his face indicated many of those years had been spent out in the elements-- and not the gentle elements of California. His face was dark, the skin creased. Rough lines flowed from around his eyes, intersecting with those coming up from his mouth and jaw. His dark hair was cut short except for a small wave of curls in the back and liberally peppered with grey. His green eyes were the best feature in the beaten face.

As Lake shrugged the parachute rig over his shoulders, settling it in place, the bandanna that he normally kept tied around his neck slipped, revealing old scar tissue encircling his throat like knotted red rope. Starry and Preston had seen the scar before and they hadn't asked in the way that men avoided the uncertain obvious when gathered together. Not that Lake would have told them.

Starry walked behind Lake and reached. "Left leg," he said, passing a strap between Lake's legs. "Left leg," Lake instinctively replied, taking the strap and hooking it in place. "Right leg." They repeated the process.

"No reserve?" Lake asked as he squatted and pulled the straps as tight as he could make them.

Preston giggled again. "Won't need one, man, if that main don't open. Ain't no time for a reserve."

Lake ignored Preston, pulling the waistband tight and making sure he had a quick release in it. He put the water wings on and sat back down, watching Preston and Starry rig each other.

The scenario didn't fit and that bothered Lake. These two were still one-step ahead of him. The chute indicated they were going up high. Lake ran through the options. They could go to an airfield and get on a plane, but then why had Starry already rigged the jar on the sprayer in the back of the van? Unless they would get on a plane after leaving the van and use that route to escape. Fly, put the plane on autopilot, jump, and let the plane crash. Not bad, Lake thought, but also not likely. It was too complicated and men like Starry and Preston needed simple plans.

There were places to jump from other than a plane, Lake knew. Maybe the Transamerica Pyramid in downtown San Francisco? But why the water wings then? San Francisco was surrounded on three sides by water, but even if they jumped off the top of the Pyramid, it was less than a thousand feet high. There would barely be time for the chutes to open, as Preston had indicated, never mind float over to the harbor.

And why were they rigging now? They certainly wouldn't be inconspicuous getting to the top of a building wearing the parachutes. And again, Starry had already set up the sprayer in the van. And the Japanese angle, not just the label on the sprayer and jar, but Lake had seen a

bilingual map-- English and Japanese-- of San Francisco in the front of the van. What was that for? Lake took the pieces he had: the van, the sprayer, the parachutes, the water wings and slithered them through the recesses of his brain, trying to think nasty thoughts.

Then Lake had it. The whole plan was laid out in front of him in his mind, except of course for some of the details that would develop, but he knew exactly where they were going and pretty much what they would be doing. He still needed to know who was pulling the strings on this, though, and for that he would have to play it cool. Also the Japanese angle didn't quite fit, but that wasn't important right now. Maybe somebody would let something slip.

"Passenger seat," Starry ordered, pulling aside the curtain. Lake squeezed through and took the seat while Starry took the wheel. Preston remained in the back. Starry started the engine and they rolled out of the parking lot. Lake sat back and relaxed as much as the parachute on his back would allow as they turned onto Route 101 and headed south toward San Francisco.

It was early Sunday morning and they made good time, passing the last exit north of the Golden Gate Bridge at a quarter to five by Lake's watch. There was no toll for southbound traffic and that explained why they'd stayed on the north side of the city last night.

Starry's head was swiveling, checking the rear view mirror constantly, looking out and up through the open side window, as if he expected helicopters to be hovering overhead.

Starry was in the right lane and at exactly the mid-point of the bridge, 260 feet above the water, he stopped the van, and turned on the blinkers. "In the back," he ordered Lake who was not surprised in the least at this course of events.

Lake slid into the rear. He noted that Preston had already hooked his parachute static line into a large eyebolt in the roof of the van, just in front of the two back doors. Preston kicked the

doors open and stepped out, weapon at the ready. "Hook up there and join Preston on security!" Starry yelled.

Lake did as he was ordered, slipping his static line hook over the eye bolt and insuring it slid shut, pushing the safety wire through the small hole in the hook and bending it over to make sure it couldn't open. He carefully stepped out, making sure his static line wasn't tangled, and joined Preston. A few cars drove past, but the drivers didn't seem interested in checking out the van with two armed men standing behind it. Somebody might be making a cellular call to the cops but they would take a while to respond. Too long based on how quickly Starry was working.

Lake knew Preston and he were here on the off chance a police car happened by. But he knew that wasn't going to happen. He glanced behind. Starry was extending the large nozzle of the sprayer up and out, over their heads, tilted toward the center of downtown San Francisco two miles to the southeast.

As Starry reached over and lowered the pointy spout to puncture the metal top of the glass jar, Lake shot him with the M-16, the high velocity bullet entering in a tiny black dot squarely between Starry's eyes, and taking with it most of the back of his skull on the way out along with assorted brain matter and blood.

"What the fuck--" Preston began as he spun about.

Lake used his left hand to simply snatch Preston's AR-15 right out of his hand just like a drill sergeant would take a rifle out of a trainee's hands for inspection, which Lake found ironic as he tossed the weapon into the rear of the van on top of Starry's body. Preston's AR-15 wouldn't have fired anyway, as Starry's wouldn't have, but Lake didn't have time to play around.

He jammed the muzzle of his own weapon into the soft spot under Preston's jaw, twisting about so that the backs of Preston's legs were against the bumper of the van.

"Who's paying for all this? Who's giving you the orders?"

Preston was shaking. The man had sat in on all the meetings in dirty halls and campsites and raised his open right hand in the hard-core Patriot salute. Probably even stomped a Jew or a black in some dark alley in the company of others of his kind, but Lake doubted that he'd ever seen someone's brains blown out or had a gun shoved up against his chin and had to face someone down while all alone.

"Talk or you're dead," Lake said.

"What are you doing man?" Preston's voice quivered. "Why'd you do that to Starry?"

"I'm asking the questions," Lake said, emphasizing that by a sudden shove of the barrel. He could hear Preston's teeth clash together. "Who gave you the orders to do this?"

"I don't know. Starry didn't know either, man. We got it off the web. The money followed. Then we were told where to pick up the gear."

"You did all this just cause someone on the Internet told you to?" Lake asked.

"They were with the cause. There was a notice, man. Four months back. On the Patriot newsletter, looking for volunteers for a special, secret mission. We responded. I don't know why we got picked."

Lake wanted to rub his forehead. He'd hoped that the orders had come from the Patriot organization in California. But he believed what Preston was saying and not simply because he was holding a gun on him. The Patriot movement was very fragmented and paranoid. There was no overall leadership and each group did its own thing. If there was one thing that held it

together, it was the Internet. At least he could try to follow this lead on the Internet Web site where the Patriot filth piled up and fermented.

"What happens below?" Seeing the confusion in Preston's wide eyes, Lake amplified the question. "After we jump. What happens?"

"Boat picks us up. It's supposed to be waiting. That's what Starry said. I don't know nothing else, man." Preston blinked. "Why'd--"

He never finished as Lake squeezed the trigger. He'd fine-tuned the trigger tension. He'd had nothing else to do for the past couple of days and it didn't take much work. The top of Preston's head mingled with the gore inside and the body flopped back. Lake threw the legs up and tossed the AR-15 on top of the two bodies, then wedged the doors almost all the way shut. His static line kept them from latching.

He then pressed a button on the side of his watch, checked to make sure the pager had activated, then he stepped over the railway onto the walk. He reached inside his shirt, insuring the High Standard silenced .22 was secured in the shoulder holster, then crossed the walk. He made sure his static line was clear as he stepped up on the outer railing, balancing himself with one hand on a steel cable. The water below was a sheet of black. There was a stiff breeze in his face, something he knew that Starry's plan had called for to carry the contents of the glass jar toward the city.

Lake paused as tires squealed and two blue vans with dark tinted windows screeched to a halt, one behind, one in front of the parked van. Men in black combat gear flowed out of the vehicles, weapons at the ready, the red dots of their laser sights flickering over the scene, a pair fixing on Lake's head.

Lake kept his grip on the cable and his other hand away from his side. "I'm Lake. Two bodies inside," he called out. "Their get-away boat is below. I'm going down to take it out."

A thin, old man dressed in a long, black raincoat stepped forward. "Lake, hold on--"

Lake pointed with his free hand. "I think they have bio-agents in the glass jar in the sprayer inside, so don't break it, Feliks. I'll meet you at the Coast Guard station on the south shore."

"Lake!" Feliks' voice threatened. "Take backup."

"They'll just get in the way," Lake threw himself out into space, then immediately tucked into a tight body position as he'd been taught on the thirty-four foot towers at Fort Benning what seemed like a lifetime ago.

Lake counted, knowing it would take longer because he didn't have the added speed of an airplane to get to the end of the static line. One thousand, two thousand. At five thousand he felt a tug, then a jerk as the chute blossomed open. Just in time as he hit the water three seconds later, still pulling the quick release he had put into the waist belt.

The shock of the cold water caused Lake to gasp, expelling what little air he had in his lungs. He didn't panic even though he was completely submerged. He'd been in this situation in the past and he calmly felt for the small knobs for the water wings. Locating them, he pulled and they inflated, popping him to the surface. The chute settled down into the water off to the side and Lake struggled with the chest release, then each leg release.

Lake kicked to get away from the chute and was promptly entangled in the web of parachute line. He immediately stopped kicking. Drawing a knife from inside his left boot he carefully began cutting the 550 cord to clear himself before the chute became soaked and sank.

As he was doing that, he heard the mutter of a boat's engine. Small, maybe sixty horsepower, Lake estimated from the sound. It was coming from the southwest. He cut through the last line as the sound of the boat came very close. He kicked as a wave rose him up and looked. The silhouette of a zodiac with a man in it was about forty meters away. Good thing there wasn't much of a swell, Lake thought, or that zodiac would be in trouble. He glanced up. The current had already pushed him well away from the bridge toward the ocean.

"Over here!" Lake yelled.

The zodiac turned head on and slowly pattered forward. Lake grabbed the safety line rigged around the forward pontoon and pulled himself up as a swell helped lift him. He rolled into the bottom of the zodiac.

"Where are the others?" the man running the engine hissed, as if his whispering negated the sound the engine made. The man was holding a large pistol, one Lake knew he hadn't worked on. He couldn't make out the man's features in the dark. It had only been Starry and Preston for the past several weeks so this man was a new factor.

"They're coming," Lake said as he pulled off the water wings.

"You were all supposed to jump together! I only saw one chute." The man looked up, over Lake's head toward the bridge. Lake dropped the water wings into the bottom of the boat. As he did so he saw the man bring the pistol up level, muzzle pointing at Lake's chest.

Lake rolled right along the rubber bulkhead, drawing his High Standard as he moved. He heard the sound of a gun going off and the flat crack of a bullet. Coming to a halt against the right pontoon, Lake fired twice, aiming for the man's gun shoulder.

The man was startled by the impact, not sure what had happened as the slight sound of the receiver working on Lake's gun was easily muffled by the engine. He looked at Lake, who

immediately knew he was in big trouble. Either the small caliber rounds hadn't hit anything important enough to immobilize the arm or the man was wearing a vest. Those thoughts flashed through Lake's brain as the man brought the pistol to bear again.

Lake swiftly fired two more shots, directly into the man's right eye socket. There was no exit wound this time. Lake's homemade .22 shells mushroomed upon passing through the eye socket into the man's brain, making jelly of the grey matter. The gun fell to the floorboards with a clatter and the man slumped over.

"Fuck," Lake quietly cursed. He checked the body and found that the man was indeed wearing a bulletproof vest. The .22 slugs had barely cut through the cloth on top of the armor. He looked at the face, ignoring the bloody eye socket. The man had slightly oriental features. Lake patted him down. No ID. Nothing other than the gun and the clothes.

Lake pushed the body aside and took the engine handle. He opened the throttle and headed for the Coast Guard station on the south shore. The engine fought hard against the strong seaward current, but Lake kept on course, guiding off the massive south pier of the bridge, which he knew was over a thousand feet from the south shore. He passed the tower by, just to his right, then headed in to shore, angling against the current.

On the jetty for the Coast Guard station, Feliks was waiting for him with one of the blue vans and several of his men. The men secured the line Lake tossed them, then grabbed the body, taking it into the van. They hauled the boat up onto the jetty and began deflating it.

As they were doing that, Lake held out a hand to Feliks. The older man reached into a pocket of the raincoat and pulled out a cigarette case. He handed it to Lake. Lake snapped open the battered metal top and pulled out a cigarette. Feliks lit it for him. There was a crest on the case. Lake had seen it the first time Feliks had given him a cigarette several years ago. He'd

checked the crest and found out it was from the OSS, the Office of Strategic Services, the World War II predecessor to the CIA.

Feliks had white hair and appeared to be in his mid-60s but Lake didn't know for sure-- the man could be a dozen years either way. Lake didn't know much about Feliks other than the cigarette case. No one at the Ranch did. Feliks was as tall as Lake and his skin was very white, as if he spent little time out of doors.

The first question Feliks asked was what Lake knew he would. "Do you believe they were on their own?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Those bozos couldn't plan a trip to the bathroom," Lake said. "They also had plenty of money to spread around. You knew that when I picked up the weapons and sold them. Someone was financing them and making the plans. Before he died, Preston told me they were recruited over the Internet. Their specific instructions and money probably went directly to Starry in a dead drop."

Feliks nodded. "The Internet's an avenue we can check. The FBI has been monitoring that and has records. What about the Japanese evidence planted in the van?" Feliks asked.

"I don't know. Probably put there to throw the FBI off track when they found the van, I suppose."

"There's a lot of people who'd like to whip up a little hatred for the Japanese," Feliks noted.

"Yeah." Lake pulled off his soaked clothes and slipped on the one-piece coverall one of Felik's men had brought over. "Take a look at the body I brought in." He smoked his cigarette while Feliks walked over, then came back.

"Doesn't look like good Aryan Patriot material," Feliks noted.

"Nope. And he tried to shoot me as soon as I was on board. I don't think he was down there to rescue us. I think he was down there to close out the loose ends."

Feliks was an unmoving figure as Lake continued.

"Like I said, those idiots were just doing what they were ordered. They might have had their own thoughts as to why they were doing it, but the people giving the orders probably had different ones. That's one of the curses of being a peon," Lake added, giving Feliks a hard stare. "You never know what's really going on."

Feliks returned the look. "And?"

"And what?" Lake was tired. He'd been up all night. The adrenaline rush was gone and the nicotine didn't quite make up the gap.

"Any idea who is the mastermind?"

"No." Lake handed the cigarette case back to Feliks.

"Well, we certainly can't ask anyone you ran into, can we?" Feliks said sarcastically. "You couldn't take him alive?" he asked, pointing at the van where the boat driver's body had been taken. "You couldn't take anyone alive?" Feliks amended the question.

"Starry was getting ready to let whatever was in that glass container loose when I shot him. I don't think the citizens of San Francisco would be too happy if I'd let him live another two seconds."

Feliks nodded. "Randkin's with the van. He thinks it might be Anthrax, but he'll have to take it back to the Ranch and test it to make sure. One of my other operatives has a line on someone who might be working for the Patriots making biological agents. We'll have to see if we can connect the dots, then roll up the puzzle."

"The jar had Japanese markings," Lake repeated.

"Yes. I saw it. But we know that the men were Patriots," Feliks said. "I really doubt the possibility of a link between the Patriots and the Japanese. That would be like the FBI and the CIA sharing information."

"The Patriots could be getting used," Lake noted. "It's happened before. The guy in the boat had to be from somewhere."

"Even the Patriots can tell Japanese marking," Feliks said. "They wouldn't use that stuff unless they had a reason."

Lake continued his report, not wanting to discuss theory with Feliks. "The other man, Preston, didn't know shit and taking him alive would have made a scene on the bridge. I wasn't exactly very mobile in my parachute rig."

"And . . ." Feliks nodded at the van again.

"I don't know who he is. Never saw him before. I tried to take him alive but he was wearing a vest and it came down to him or me." The cigarette burned bright as Lake turned toward Feliks. "And you do prefer that it was me, don't you?" His tone was light, but there was an edge to it.

"Of course, of course," Feliks said. "You did well. But this is very serious. Beyond what they planned to do, we don't have a clue who wanted this done. And the body from the boat complicates matters. This might not be a simple Patriot plot."

No shit, Sherlock, Lake thought, but he kept the words to himself. Feliks seemed worried which was a first in the years they'd worked together. Lake rubbed his forehead. "There is an advantage to them all being dead."

"There is?" Feliks waited.

"My cover is still intact."

"Ah, yes." Feliks smiled without any humor. "And, of course, our three friends have just vanished off the face of the earth, correct? Or perhaps they should be in an accident? The van perhaps?"

"I think disappearing would serve better," Lake suggested. It was the way they worked. Outside the law. Even if he had taken any of the three alive, Lake knew from experience that the man would never have seen the inside of a courtroom. And the people of San Francisco would never know how close they had come to disaster.

"Starry and Preston were supposed to disappear," Lake added. "The guy in the boat not coming back is the one that's going to rattle someone's cage."

Feliks touched Lake's arm and indicated that they should walk over to the van now that everything was loaded. "And? With your cover intact? What then? Can you find out who's cage is getting rattled."

"I'll try."

"You have any leads?"

"I don't know," Lake said. "I've heard rumors."

"You don't know. Rumors." Feliks repeated. "That's it?"

"That's it."

"All right. You have two weeks."