Scimitar SL-2

Patrick Robinson

CHAPTER ONE

Thursday 8 January 2009

The White House,Washington, DC

The brand new Democratic Administration, fresh from a narrow election victory, was moving into the West Wing. With the exception of the President, who knew he was going anyway at the end of his second term, every hour of every day was a trauma for the outgoing Republicans. For the big-hitters of the military and government handing over the reins to what most of them believed to be a bunch of naive, inexperienced, half-assed limousine liberals, led by an idealistic young President from Rhode Island, who would have been pushed to hold down a proper executive job, well, anywhere, was appalling.

And today was probably the worst day of all. Admiral Arnold Morgan, the retiring President's National Security Adviser, was about to leave the White House for the last time. His big nineteenthcentury naval desk had already been cleared and removed, and now there were only a few goodbyes left. The door to his office was wide open, and the admiral, accompanied by his alarmingly beautiful secretary Kathy O'Brien, was ready to go. In attendance was the Secretary of State Harcourt Travis, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Tim Scannell, the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Alan Dickson, the Director of the National Security Agency, Rear Admiral George Morris, and his personal assistant Lt. Commander James Ramshawe, American by birth, Australian parents.

As the great man took his leave, they all stood in a small 'family' huddle, veterans in the last half dozen years of some of the most brutal secret operations ever conducted by the United States military. Their devotion to Arnold had grown from the series of great triumphs on the international stage, due, almost entirely, to the strengths of the admiral's intellect.

Like Caesar, Admiral Morgan was not lovable - except to Kathy - but his grasp of international politics, string pulling, poker playing, threats and counter-threats, Machiavellian propaganda, and the conduct of restricted, classified military operations, was second to none. At all of the above he was a virtuoso, driven by an unbending sense of patriotism. During his reign in the West Wing he had intimidated, cajoled, outwitted and bullied some of the most powerful men on earth. His creed was to fight and fight, and never to lower his blade short of victory. General Douglas MacArthur and General George Patton were his heroes.And now the admiral was departing, leaving his Washington confidants devastated, convinced that another heaven and another earth must surely pass before such a man could be again.

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Many of the high-ranking civilians would go themselves within a few short weeks of the incoming Democrats, but none so utterly ignominiously as Admiral Morgan himself. Called on the telephone by a Miss Betty-Ann Jones, a Southern liberal who had never been to Washington before, he was told, 'President McBride thinks it would be better if y'all resigned raht now, since he dun't think you and he's gonna get along real well.'

Arnold Morgan had needed no second bidding. Five minutes later he had dictated his short letter of resignation to Kathy, and ten minutes later they were working on their wedding date, the colossal job of National Security Adviser no longer standing between them.

At Arnold's farewell dinner, at a favourite Georgetown restaurant, Secretary Travis, always the voice of irony and sly humour, had arrived at the table humming theatrically loudly, the tune of 'Those Wedding Bells Are Breaking Up That Old Gang Of Mine.' Shortly he would return to Harvard to take up a professorship.

The military members of Arnold's inner circle would remain at their posts, more or less, under a new Commander-in-Chief.

And now Admiral Morgan stood at the great oak door to his office. He hesitated briefly, and nodded curtly to the empty room. Then he strode outside to the corridor, where his former colleagues waited. He smiled with some difficulty. 'I'd be grateful,' he said, 'if each one of you would come and take me by the hand.'

And so they said their farewells, each consumed by the private sense of trust they all shared with the National Security Chief. The last handshake was with the youngest of them, Lt. Commander Ramshawe, with whom Admiral Morgan had a near father-son relationship.

'I'll miss you, Jimmy,' he said.

'And I'll miss you, sir,' replied the young officer. 'I don't suppose you'll ever know how much.'

'Thanks, kid,' said the admiral informally. And then he turned on his heel, immaculately tailored in a dark grey suit, gleaming black leather lace-up shoes, blue shirt and Naval Academy tie.

He walked resolutely, shoulders back, upright, full of dignity, with his bride-to-be, Kathy, at his side. He walked among the portraits of Presidents past, nodding sharply to General Eisenhower, as he always did. He walked like a man not departing, but like a young officer recently summoned to the colours. In his mind a lifetime of thoughts, a lifetime of service to his country. The different people he had been . . . the commanding officer of a surface ship and then of a nuclear submarine out of Norfolk,Virginia . . . the Intelligence tsar, head of the National Security Agency in Maryland . . . and finally the right hand of a faltering Republican President who

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ended up knowing neither loyalty nor patriotism. That never mattered. Arnold had enough for both of them.

Walking along the familiar corridors, the admiral heard once more the swish of the waves on a ship's hull heading out of a threatened harbour into the great rolling swells of the ocean, the metallic scream of the anchor chain, the terse instructions of the COB, and, in the deepest recesses of his mind, the shouts and commands of long-lost US Navy SEALs whom he had never seen, never met. Obeying his orders. Always obeying. As he himself obeyed his. Mostly.

He heard again the bells of the watch, tolling off the hours. And the smooth slide of his submarine's periscope. Once outside, he knew he would inevitably glance upwards in the chill December breeze, and he would see it, snapping so damn proudly, right above him. The flag, always the flag.

He wore no overcoat, though Kathy was cosily engulfed in a light brown full-length shearling number. And just before they turned left towards the main doors and out onto the West Wing veranda, she stretched out her right hand to take his, confirming once more he would not be alone as he left his quarterdeck for the last time and steered their ship into the long years of retirement. Admiral Morgan was sixty-four.

No one who was there would ever forget the departure of Arnold Morgan. Each and every man in the lower corridor felt a sense of control slipping away, as if a giant warship had somehow lost its helm. There had already been reports of civilians replacing the Marine guards at the White House.

Patient young men in their early thirties were shaking their heads and talking sadly about the primitive ways of the US military under a Republican Administration. The new young ideologues came from a different world, the world of the future, where education of the Third World was paramount. Where no one was evil, just ignorant.Where death and destruction were to be replaced by more and more financial aid, where tyrants must be taught the ways of the West, not murdered. And where the poor and the helpless had to be given succour, and trained Americans had to work on their lack of selfesteem. And where absolutely no one could ever be harmed in the interests of revenge, conquest or the destruction of a rogue regime.

Massive naval and military cuts were on the horizon. President Charles McBride was a globalist, certain in his own mind that reason, reason and mercy, would always prevail, however misguided a foe may appear. But like President Clinton, and Carter before him, McBride was a vacillator, a career politician accustomed to compromises, always looking for the middle ground. He was a man of none but political conviction, the way forward for the lifelong lightweight. And he was chronically inexperienced in the harsher reaches of international diplomacy. President-elect McBride would not have recognised a scheming, self-interested statesman at six paces.

The one thing Charles McBride did know, however, was the futility of spending zillions of dollars on defence, if you weren't planning to fight. No one had yet told him the age-old mantra of the wise - you want peace, you better prepare for war.

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And if you don't, you'll end up paying for it in blood, sorrow and tears. Or, as Chairman Mao would say, real power comes from the barrel of a gun.

Most of the men still standing in the corridor had a distant idea of the truth of that creed. And most of them believed it was probably true. And that everything would be fine, so long as the USA held the biggest gun of all. But if ever there was a US President who could have used Arnold Morgan in the next office, it was surely the forty-seven-yearold Charles McBride.

And as Arnold's footsteps disappeared from the building, General Scannell muttered, 'Jesus. I don't know what's gonna happen now.'

And Harcourt Travis added, 'Neither, General, do I.'

A few hours later, Admiral Morris and Lt. Commander Ramshawe sat disconsolately in the rear seat of the Navy staff car driving back to the National Security Agency in Fort Meade, Maryland.

'Hard to believe he's gone, Jimmy,' grunted the Agency's Director.

'I just can't seem to accept it.'

'Nor I.'

'It's not gonna be the same any more, is it?'

'Nothing is. It's gonna be worse. Because right here we got an incoming President who does not understand what kind of threats this country might face. He thinks we're all crazy.'

'I know he does - can you imagine, sir? Getting some secretary to call up and tell Admiral Morgan he's fired. Bloody oath.'

'God knows who he'll replace him with.'

'Oh, he'll probably come up with some nice little social worker, team leader in the Peace Corps or something . . . Jesus, I can't believe this is happening.'

Jimmy Ramshawe shook his head.

'The trouble with Intelligence,' said Admiral Morris, 'is that you need someone in government who starts off believing you are not some kind of a dumb ass and who will listen knowing that we speak from the kind of experience he simply doesn't have. Otherwise there's no point having a vast Intelligence network, which costs billions to run. Not if its top operatives are wasting half their time trying to prove the unprovable, to guys who are supposed to be on our side.'

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'I know, sir.That was the best thing about Admiral Morgan. He never dismissed what we said, always took it into consideration, at least. He was some kind of a bloke, right? The best I ever met.'

'And the best you ever will meet, young James.'

The two men rode in companionable but sombre silence to the northwestern suburbs of Washington and then out into the country to Fort Meade. Once there, the Director headed to his office, while Lt. Commander Ramshawe retreated to the chaos of his own paper-strewn lair for one of his favourite parts of the week.

Thursday afternoons. For thirty-year-old Ramshawe it represented a couple of hours of pleasurable study. It was the day his personal newspapers arrived: the Daily Mail and the Telegraph from London, the Age from Melbourne, the Morning Herald from Sydney and the Toronto Globe.

All of them were full of snippets of news, diplomatic, military, government, society, finance - stuff you would not necessarily find in the Washington Post or even the Wall Street Journal.

Curiously, there was one page Jimmy loved above all others. It was the Court and Society page of the London Daily Telegraph, a somewhat glorious mishmash of esoteric events, starting with the daily routine of the Queen and the various members of her family who were paid by the British Government's Civil List.

Her appointments were listed, as were those of Prince Philip and Prince Charles.There was reported all manner of obscure educational events and appointments, at England's great public schools, and the universities of Oxford, Cambridge and London. There were lists of mourners at important memorial services, lists of medals, awards and appointments for the Navy, Army and Air Force, including Commonwealth Services.

There were records of service reunions, announcements of important engagements, weddings and funerals. An In Memoriam column in which service families annually remembered officers who had fallen in action, often as long as sixty years ago.

Jimmy regularly devoured this page, making notes which he would later transfer to his private computer file. For a new Flag Officer Submarines, Royal Navy, for example, he would fill in the new man's name and career highlights, just in case Fort Meade needed him in the future. Quick cross-reference. Instant knowledge. Lt. Commander Ramshawe was the consummate Intelligence professional.

In the Telegraph of Monday, 5 January, there were a few items which amused him and a few that caused him to scribble hurriedly, but there was one word, in particular which almost caused him to spill his coffee.

'Murdered' it said. Right there in the dreariest of Universities sections. A small down-column paragraph announcing the appointment of a new Senior Lecturer at the Benfield Greig Geohazard Research Centre at University College, London. Dr

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Hillary Betts, a volcanologist, replacing Professor Paul Landon, who was discovered murdered in west London last May.

'Murdered! Streuth,' said James. 'Never saw that bloody word on this page before. Like seeing a stripper illustrating a prayer book.'

Instinctively, he went on line, looked up the London Telegraph and keyed in a search for Professor Paul Landon. To his surprise a sizeable front-page headline in the edition of Monday, 12 May appeared.

PROFESSOR PAUL LANDON MISSING
World's Top Volcano Expert Vanishes after Royal Geographical Lecture

There followed a detailed account of Professor Landon and his achievements, followed by a police report on his failure to return home to Buckinghamshire after addressing the Royal Geographical Society on the evening of 8 May.

There were quotes from the Royal Geographical Society's General Secretary, and from colleagues at University College, and of course from his wife. But no one had the slightest idea what had happened to him.

Lt. Commander Ramshawe soon found out for himself. The front-page headline over all eight columns on Thursday 15 May read:

PROFESSOR PAUL LANDON FOUND MURDERED
Washed Up on Thames Island - Two Bullets to the Brain

In the opinion of the police pathologist, Paul Landon had been shot twice in an 'execution-style' killing, and then dumped in the river.The coxswain of a London rowing club eight had spotted the body washed by the flood tide onto Chiswick Eyot, a small island landmark for racing shells, halfway along the Oxford-Cambridge Boat Race course between Putney and Mortlake.

There were as yet no suspects, but there was no doubt in the minds of the Metropolitan Police.This was a cold-blooded murder, though why anyone should want to kill an apparently harmless academic remained a total mystery.

Lt. Commander Ramshawe liked mysteries, and for the next hour he scrolled to and from various editions of the Telegraph spanning the early summer to the autumn. He found the inquest, the funeral, a feature on Professor Landon's area of expertise. But he never found a single clue as to why the hell anyone should want to kill him.

He switched to the London Daily Mail, a more adventurous downmarket tabloid, which might have come up with a different, more original idea. No such luck. For the week after the professor's disappearance the Mail was totally preoccupied with two murdered London policemen and their dog:

GALLANT ROGER KILLED IN ACTION BESIDE HIS MASTERS
Police Slaying Baffles Scotland Yard

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