

In this intriguing thriller, one man attempts to stop a psychotic serial killer before he extracts his ultimate revenge against the Army, the Nation and perhaps even the world. It is a suspense thriller with a different twist.

THE SADM PROJECT

By Jim Gilliam

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THE
SADM
PROJECT

JIM GILLIAM

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ONE

“Suitcase nukes, or atomic demolition devices (ADMs), are actually small nuclear bombs. Both the Soviets and the US had such devices during the ‘Cold War.’”

—H. Thomas Hayden

THE MAIN BAR of Port Isabel’s El Toro Café was filled with smoke and loud talk from the patrons occupying the bar and tables in the center of the room and interconnecting booths that lined the walls. Coming from the *Wurlitzer* jukebox was a too-loud country ballad about, mamma, love, prison, cowboys and trains—all the ingredients of a proper country song.

Captain Chris Holt leaned on his cue stick. His gaze fixed on his opponent’s low-cut neckline as she lined up a shot on the five ball.

Ignored by the other restaurant patrons, Deputy Sheriff Dave Holt entered the room, stopped behind the Captain and slapped him on the back.

The Captain whirled to face a possible attacker, his cue stick at the ready, “Dammit, Uncle Dave. You ought to know better than to sneak up on someone like that.”

Dave embraced his nephew in a bear hug, “Your mom told me I could find you here.”

The Captain handed his cue to a large Mexican man, “Finish the game for me, will you, Manolo?”

As they seated themselves in a corner booth Dave waved the waitress over, “Maria, can you bring us a couple of cold Lone Stars and a plate of nachos?”

Turning to his nephew, he said, “Okay, boy—fill me in. What’s been going on with you? Seems none of the Holt males—me included—know how to write anymore.”

“I’m going to be involved in something called the SADM project.”

“What’s that all about?”

“The latest Intel has it that the KGB already has a network of sleeper agents here in the U.S. prepared to detonate portable nuclear devices at strategic locations in case the Cold War turns hot. The SADM, or Special Atomic Demolition Munition program, is designed to allow a Special Ops team to insert into Russian territory and take out strategic targets, like a port, a dam, or industrial complex.”

The older man shook his head, “It never ceases to amaze me how efficient we humans have become in killing each other in our wars. That’s the way it’s always been and will always be until we either wise up or wipe out the human race. Right now, I’m starving. So, let’s get Maria to have Miguel grill us a couple of T-bones that hang off the edge of the plate.”

The inside of a C-130 transport in flight is noisy. Like every man on his team, Captain Chris Holt had sworn an oath to defend the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic. The president had approved limited use of tactical nuclear weapons in Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe in the event the Cold War became hot, but from the moment he entered the SADM Program—Holt never considered the possibility of a domestic deployment—yet, here he was.

Holt looked up from the book he’d been reading. Most of his team slept. Holt shook his head. *Soldiers can sleep anywhere*, he thought as he smiled and returned to the page, he had dog eared.

The red jump lights over the side exit doors and both sides of the rear ramp snapped on, signaling that the aircraft was 20 minutes out from the drop zone.

The Captain moved from man to man while his team donned equipment, followed by their parachutes. The men paired off and checked each other’s equipment.

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The Air Force loadmaster tapped Holt on the shoulder.

He turned, and the loadmaster held up both hands with all 10 fingers spread, signifying the plane was now 10 minutes out from the drop zone.

Holt motioned to his team to follow him onto the open ramp. The view from there was almost as sharp and clear as the black-and-white aerial photographs they had memorized in the pre-mission briefing sessions.

The inertial guidance system displayed the coordinates:

N 30°22'35.4" – W 104°35'48.3"

The jump lights changed from red to green and as Holt fell away from the aircraft, he looked up to see a glowing green rectangle of light fading to darkness.

Then there was silence and the pressure of a 120-mile-an-hour wind against his body.

Deep inside the abandoned former Army germ-warfare laboratory high in the Trans-Pecos Mountains, a hermetically sealed, elevator-style door opened into a room that could've doubled as a mini-version of the mission control room at the Air Force's NORAD facility in Colorado.

"Doctor Fleischer, we have a bogey at 27,000 feet on a reciprocal heading with Dyess Air Force Base."

Fleischer looked over the man's shoulder at the blip on the RADAR screen. *You fools—you've come to kill me, but you've been betrayed by the very ones who sent you, and one should die rather than be betrayed. There is no deceit in death—it delivers exactly what it promises, and death is my promise to you.*

The doctor depressed the button on a handheld microphone, "Captain O'Bannon, please prepare a warm welcome for our guests.

They should be dropping in on your position in a few minutes and it would be most helpful if you reached out to them before they land.”

“Roger that, Doctor. We’re ready.”

“On second thought, O’Bannon, spare one or two for interrogation if you can. It would be helpful to know what our friends in Washington know about us.”

The time spent under an open canopy was Holt’s favorite part of the jump—as he looked down—the darkness erupted into multiple flashes of light as tracer rounds from automatic weapons reached up for Holt and his team—killing eight of the twelve—as they swayed under their parachutes.

Holt hit the ground, shed his parachute harness and took cover behind a boulder as bullets ricocheted off it and the other nearby rock formations. A tracer round from an M-60 machine gun grazed his left shoulder, setting the sleeve of his uniform on fire and instantly cauterizing the shallow wound. As he returned fire in the direction of the muzzle flashes—three members of his team crawled to his position.

Sergeant Richards, the team’s engineer sergeant, who jumped with the 150-pound SADM sustained wounds to his lower torso, right hip and left thigh—reached Holt first, “Hi, boss man, so much for the element of surprise, I guess.”

“No one said this stuff was easy. Where are the rest of the guys?”

“Don’t know. Besides yours and mine, I only saw two muzzle flashes coming from our side of this gunfight.”

Lieutenant Braddock, the team XO—was the next to crawl in. He had taken two rounds to his upper left chest and two rounds to his lower abdomen, “You guys need a little help?”

As he spoke, bloody bubbles from his sucking chest wounds made a sound that could be described as somewhere between a gurgle and a hiss.

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Holt cut away the lieutenant's shirt around the chest wounds and using the plastic wrapper of the standard battle dressing as a one-way flutter valve he secured three sides of the plastic by tying the dressing in place, being careful to leave the down side open to the air.

That done, all three returned fire in the direction of the muzzle flashes.

"Hey, you guys. Don't shoot, I'm coming in."

"Come ahead, Ramirez."

Sergeant Ramirez crawled in to join the other three.

"Anyone else alive out there?"

"Don't think so, Captain. Looks like we're the last four at the Alamo."

He grimaced in pain as he chuckled at his dark joke.

"How badly are you hit?"

"I took one to the gut and a couple of other places. I can still fight, though."

"Well, Joe, looks like I got us into some deep shit this time."

"Don't worry about it, Captain. Haven't you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"Barry Sadler's song. You know the one that calls us, 'brave men, who jump and die.'"

Holt smiled, "That wasn't my original plan."

Ramirez shrugged his shoulders.

Both men joined the other two in firing in the direction of the muzzle flashes coming from all around them.

One by one, their guns went silent as the last round was fired and Holt and his men were surrounded.

Sergeant Richards and Lieutenant Braddock resisted and were executed on the spot.

Holt recognized the leader of the ambushers and in a blind rage rushed at him—commando knife in hand, “O’Bannon, I’m going to kill you—you traitorous son of a bitch.”

Two of O’Bannon’s men brought him down with butt strokes from their assault rifles and minutes later, two Huey helicopters landed to pick up O’Bannon, his team and the two prisoners. The bloody ambush had lasted less than five minutes.

The helicopters touched down inside the hangar and the pilots shut down their engines. O’Bannon pointed at two of his men, “Garcia, you and Peters bring the device and follow me. The rest of you grab some chow and stand down.”

O’Bannon motioned for the two prisoners to precede him.

Fleischer looked up from his seat at the head of the conference table when the elevator doors opened, “Ahh, Captain O’Bannon. Who do you have there?”

“Doctor Fleischer, meet Captain Christopher Holt of the Seventh Special Forces Group. Captain Holt and I have a long history together, dating from the Special Forces Q Course at Camp McCall on Fort Bragg.”

“Who sent you to kill me, Captain Holt and what is this you’ve brought with you?”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Doctor. No one sent us to kill you. My men and I were on a routine training mission. We didn’t even know you were here.”

O’Bannon’s kick to the back of Holt’s knees sent him face first onto the cool stone floor, “Answer the doctor’s questions.”

Holt lunged at O’Bannon and the other two mercenaries subdued him.

“Enough of this nonsense. While your actions are brave, Captain Holt, they are also foolish. I ask you again: what is this device?”

“I don’t know.”

“Doctor, instead of wasting time on these two, I can provide you with the information you want.”

“How so, Captain?”

“The device is a small tactical nuclear device, or Special Atomic Demolition Munition, SADM—for short—and the explosive yield is roughly one kiloton of TNT.”

“How interesting, Captain O’Bannon.” Fleischer said, inspecting the device, “Captain O’Bannon, do you think you could arm this?”

O’Bannon moved to stand beside Fleischer and the SADM, “It is armed by means of this mechanical timer.”

“Thank you for providing this interesting device, Captain Holt. We’ll make good use of it, I’m sure. And Captain O’Bannon, since we no longer need Captain Holt or his comrade, why don’t you *drop* them somewhere in the desert?”

“No problem, Doctor. Consider it done.”

He pointed to his two men, “Leave that and bring these two along.”

The helicopter was idling, its rotor blades slowly turning. O’Bannon tapped the pilot on the shoulder and made a circling gesture with his right forefinger.

The massive hangar doors opened, the rotor speed increased and once the skids cleared the hangar floor, the pilot put the aircraft into a slight nose-down attitude, moving it forward and out into the night.

After the Huey cleared the peak, the desert surrounding the Trans-Pecos Mountains could be seen, 8,750 feet below.

O’Bannon tapped the pilot on the shoulder and when he had his attention, he pointed toward the ground.

When the Huey touched down, O’Bannon and the other two mercenaries dragged Holt and Ramirez from the aircraft and walked them into the desert.

O'Bannon cut the bonds securing Holt's hands behind his back with a survival knife, then without a word he turned and walked toward the helicopter. He stopped, turned and threw the knife—it stuck in the dirt beside Holt's right boot and then O'Bannon removed his canteen from his web belt and shook it next to his ear—the canteen landed beside the knife.

Holt picked up the knife and cut Ramirez free, then unscrewed the cap on the end of the survival knife's handle to find fishhooks and nylon fishing line. *These should do*, he thought.

As the Captain stitched the sergeant's belly wound closed, Ramirez said, "Where'd you learn all this medical stuff, Captain?"

"Back in the day, before OCS and the Q course, I was a medic in a *grunt* outfit."

Holt tied off the last stitch and placed Ramirez's right arm in a makeshift sling and fashioned a walking stick from a mesquite limb, "There, that should take care of it and if you're up to it, we ought to start out now."

"Could I have a taste of that water first?"

"Sure, Joe. Only a little, though."

Holt wore a watch with a small compass attached to the nylon strap. Facing the General direction of Alpine, Texas, he took a compass bearing and the two men set out on a 65-mile do-or-die march through some of the roughest terrain in North America.

Ramirez's wounds made for slow going and the scorching sun rose like a colossal funeral pyre for some ancient pagan king. It wouldn't be long before the temperature passed the 110-degree mark.

Ramirez's abdominal wound started oozing again when he stumbled and fell against an outcropping of rock.

Holt caught him and eased him onto the ground in the shade offered by that same outcropping. *Damn—the belly wound has started to bleed again.*

“Okay, Joe, we’ve come far enough. We’ll rest here until nightfall and start again when it’s cooler. Meanwhile, take a couple of sips of water and try and get some sleep.”

“Thanks, Captain. I’m so tired. I feel like I must be dead already. Too dumb to lie down is all. I’m only holding you back. You should leave me and go on.”

“We got into this together and we’re going to get out of it together. Get some rest. We have a long way to go and I promise you all the beer you can drink when we get to Alpine—and I’m buying.”

“Right now, I would settle for a big, cold glass of my *abuela’s* lemonade. Growing up—that was the best lemonade in the world. She used rainwater from the barrel on the shady side of the house and lemons from her own trees. It was so sweet—just like cotton candy from one of the carnivals that used to come to town.” Ramirez closed his eyes, “I can almost taste it and feel the hugs that sweet, gentle old woman used to give me.” A deep sigh and he was asleep.

Holt awakened to Ramirez’s screams, “Don’t leave me, *abuela*. Please don’t leave me.”

Holt gently shook Ramirez’s uninjured shoulder, “Joe. Joe. You okay?”

Ramirez slowly opened his eyes, “Yeah, I’m okay. I was dreaming about my grandmother.” Ramirez coughed and clutched his abdomen, “While I’m still in my right mind, I want you to promise me something.”

“Anything.”

“I don’t think I’m going to make it.”

Holt started to speak.

Ramirez held up his hand, “Let me finish.” He grimaced in pain, “Like I was saying, I don’t think I’m going to make it back this time and if I don’t, I want your solemn promise you’ll cover my body with rocks so the buzzards and coyotes can’t get at me.”

“I promise.”

“I know you’ll make it back, Captain.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because you’re still young enough and dumb enough to pull off the 10-foot-tall and bulletproof thing.” Ramirez grinned at his Captain, “That’s how I know.”

“Okay, you slacker. Get your sorry ass up. We’ve got places to be.” Holt shook his friend’s shoulder and if he didn’t look past the smile on Ramirez’s face, Holt might’ve thought he was sleeping. But Ramirez was not there. He was with his beloved grandmother.

Holt turned for a final look at the mound of rocks—at the top, he had fashioned a crude wooden cross. Then he rendered a slow-motion, military-funeral salute and began to walk in the direction of the town of Alpine, Texas—40 miles away.

The dust-caked front door with the dirty window of Cactus Jack’s Diner and Gas Station banged open and more dead than alive, sunburned and covered in alkali dust mixed with sweat forming a coat of grey mud on his clothing and skin—Holt crashed into a table in the center of the small diner and fell to the floor—exposed and unconscious.

The local looky-loos occupying the diner this morning gawked at him like the geek in a carnival sideshow as they crowded around, all talking at once:

“Who you suppose this fella is?”

“Don’t know.”

“He looks military to me.”

“He’s out cold, whoever he is.”

One of them checked Holt's pulse, "We need to wet him down with ice water and someone needs to get Doc Johnson over here right away."

Doctor Sam Johnson—the town's only doctor—entered the diner and the patrons moved out of his way.

"Some of you boys put two tables together and stretch him out on top. Ruben, go out to my truck and fetch my other bag. I've got to start some fluids going, or we're going to lose this ol' boy. Any ID on him?"

The other patrons crowded around, shaking their heads.

"Well, he looks military to me, judging by the camouflage fatigues and parachute boots. Martha, would you put in a call for me to Brooke Army Hospital at Fort Sam Houston? They're the closest hospital and we need to MEDEVAC him to them as soon as we can—if he's going to have any chance at all."

"Sure thing, Doc. Who do I ask for?"

"Ask to speak to the MEDEVAC coordinator and put me on the line when you get him."

Captain Holt awakened from his coma to the sound of a male voice, "Captain Holt. Captain Holt."

Holt opened his eyes.

"Captain Holt, my name is Colonel Dittmer. I'm the chief of psychiatry here at Brooke Army Medical Center and you've been through an ordeal not many men could've survived."

"If you say so, Doctor. I can't remember any of it."

Colonel Dittmer looked up from Holt's medical chart, "I see. Well, now that you're awake, we can dispense with your IVs and catheter and start you on solid food."

"That's fine with me, sir. I'm in your hands."

"Yes, you are and now I'll leave you to get some rest and eat your meal when it arrives. We'll talk later, when you're up to it."

Holt was dozing when Captain Thompson, the male nurse, arrived two hours later with a wheelchair, “The Colonel’s waiting for you.”

Hello. What happened to “We’ll talk when you’re up to it”?

“Okay. Help me into the wheelchair. I’m still shaky.” *Let them keep thinking I’m too weak to cause any problems while I figure out what is going on here. Like why am I in a locked psych wing of the hospital and not on one of the regular medical or surgical floors with regular doctors and nurses?*

The Captain knocked on an unmarked door.

“Enter,” an authoritative voice on the other side of the door commanded.

“Captain Holt, as you requested, Colonel.”

“Thank you, Captain Thompson. You may leave us alone. I’ll call you when I want you to take Captain Holt back to his room.”

As Thompson closed the door, there was an audible *click* as the electronic lock engaged.

Holt took in the details of the room. The bare walls, a plain, gray metal desk, an empty coat tree and two gray metal filing cabinets and there was also a small bookcase with various books on psychiatry on its dusty shelves and two leather chairs—one empty and the other occupied by a stern-looking man in a charcoal-gray suit.

The man’s presence set off alarm bells in Holt’s brain. He had seen men like this before and nothing good had come from the association.

“Ah, Captain Holt. Did you enjoy your meal?”

“Yes, sir, I did.”

The Colonel did not introduce the man in the suit. Instead, he switched on the recorder on the desk, “Tell me, Captain. What was your mission?”

“I can’t remember.”

“Come now, Captain. You’re a Special Forces A-Team leader with multiple skills, including proficiency in the SADM program and there is no medical reason for your alleged amnesia.”

“I don’t know anything about...what did you call it? The SADM program? I don’t have a clue about that or anything else. You say I’m supposed to be a part of that program and I’ll take your word for it. Since you seem to know more about who I am than I do, why don’t you fill me in from the files you keep referring to?”

“Let’s try this again. What happened to the rest of your team and how did you come to stumble into that diner in Alpine, Texas? Who sanctioned your mission? When and where did you pick up the device? What was your target? Was the mission successful, or did you have to abort?” The Colonel paused, waiting for Holt’s answer. When it did not come, he resumed his questioning, “Answer my questions and you’ll be on a plane back to Fort Bragg and returned to duty after 30 days convalescent leave at the resort of your choice.”

“Like I told you, Colonel: I’ve no idea what you’re talking about or why you’re asking me these questions. I wish I did, but I don’t.”

“Come now, Captain. We can do this all day. What was your mission? Who approved the mission? What was...?”

The questions continued until the Colonel picked up the phone and punched in an extension number, “Captain Thompson, please return Captain Holt to his room now. Yes, I’m afraid we’re going to have to shift to psychopharmacology. Bring a syringe of Haldol with you. It’s just a precaution.”

The electronic lock *clicked*, the door opened and Captain Thompson entered the room.

Holt noted the syringe protruding from the top pocket of the captain’s lab coat and guessed it contained the Haldol the Colonel had ordered.

Thompson positioned himself behind Holt’s wheelchair.

“This finishes our session for today, Captain Holt. Captain Thompson, you may take Captain Holt back to his room.”

When they were gone, the man in the suit spoke, “Take him to the next level with drugs. We need to find the device quickly.”

“Unless the dosage is titrated correctly—we could kill him.”

“That’s not my problem, Doctor—just get the information.”

Captain Thompson inserted his keycard to unlock the door to Holt’s room and wheeled Holt to the bed and set the brakes on the chair.

As Holt stood up, he snatched the syringe full of Haldol from the top pocket of Thompson’s lab coat and, with a swift downward thrust, plunged the needle deep into the man’s neck, emptying the full bolus into Thompson’s external jugular vein.

The Captain collapsed onto the floor and Holt stripped off his shoes and uniform and put them on.

He left the unconscious man restrained and gagged in bed with the covers pulled to his eyes.

Using Thompson’s keycard, Holt made his escape from the hospital and once outside, he hailed a cruising cab.

“Where you headed, buddy?”

“Head off post into the city and I’ll tell you where to stop.”

The cab passed a run-down store with a hand-painted sign:

Prenda de Vestir — Articulos de Segunda

“Stop here, driver.”

Holt paid the driver from the cash in Thompson’s wallet and entered the cluttered shop.

Fifteen minutes later, he exited wearing jeans, well-broken-in hiking boots, chambray shirt, navy blue windbreaker and a black baseball cap—he could pass as just another day laborer.

The office door in the back section of the *Blood on the Risers Bar* was unlocked and Holt entered without knocking.

Sitting behind the teakwood desk and brandishing a loaded .45 caliber automatic sat retired Sergeant-Major Jake Gilmartin, “Dammit, Chris. Didn’t I teach you better than to sneak up on an old soldier? I could’ve killed you.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t—I guess it’s true what I heard—that you’re getting old, fat and slow.”

Gilmartin put the pistol down and got up and gave Holt a bear hug, “Let me look at you, boy. You look like you’ve been stomped by a bull.”

Holt grinned at his old comrade, “Almost.”

“I heard you and your team disappeared off the radar on some ultra-secret mission nobody’s talking about. Speculation is you and your team are dead or prisoners in some backwater shithole of a country. But I knew that was a bald-faced lie when some serious-looking dudes in suits showed up here yesterday asking questions about you.”

Gilmartin put ice in two rocks glasses and poured three fingers of Johnnie Walker Blue Label into each.

He handed one to Holt, “Sit down and take a load off. What are you into and how can I help?”

Holt sat down in an overstuffed chair and raised his glass, “*Absent friends.*”

“*Absent friends,*” Gilmartin echoed, holding his glass high.

“Well, Jake, it looks like I’ve gotten myself in a whole bunch of deep shit this time. I lost my team on some bullshit mission supposedly sanctioned by the President.” He took another sip from his drink, “I don’t think the President knew a damn thing about it and now the SADM my team and I deployed with has disappeared and whoever orchestrated this piece of crap mission has gone into cover-your-ass mode and is trying to tie up loose ends and I’m the remaining loose

end—I'm only alive because I managed to escape before they could make me talk."

"Damn, boy, I'll say this about you: You never do anything half-assed. How can I help?"

"The Army thinks I'm MIA and they're not looking hard for me. The people who know I'm alive want to terminate me with *extreme prejudice*—and that's a problem. You still know that ex-Company forger 'Miguel-something', here in San Antonio?"

"Miguel Chavez. He left the Company about eight years ago and now turns out the best green cards in the world. You can't tell 'em from the real thing."

"Good. I need him to do a complete ID makeover: birth certificate, Social Security card, passport and driver's license. Give me the name 'Ian Stone.' And, Jake—I don't have any cash."

"Did I say any damn thing about cash? We go back a way, you and me. You were one of my best students at Camp McCall. Don't go insulting me by bringing up the subject of cash. I oughta' kick your ass. Anyway, ol' Chavez owes me more than an ID makeover and I'll take care of it. Meanwhile, you can hole up in the safe room in my cellar until I bring the documents back."

Captain Holt's uncle Dave owned a small place in the country between Port Isabel and Los Fresnos. It had been in his family for years. There were no livestock to tend anymore and the small fields adjacent to the ranch house had become overgrown with weeds, assorted cacti and mesquite trees. However, the barn, bunkhouse and main house were all in good repair and whenever Dave wanted to think—he came here.

The house was not visible from the road and as he drove through the gate—Dave could see smoke rising from the direction of the main house.

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He parked his truck out of sight and—with gun in hand—slowly approached the building.

Dave burst into the room, his pistol cocked and ready.

“Hello, Uncle Dave. Had breakfast yet?”

“Chris, what are you doing here?”

“Some real bad people are after me and I need your help.”

“You’ve got it, Chris. Anything. You know that.”

“Thanks, Uncle Dave. And for a while, get used to the name ‘Ian Stone.’”

“Whoever you call yourself, I’m glad you’re here, nephew.”

TWENTY

“My conscience hath a thousand several tongues, every tongue brings in a several tale, and every tale condemns me for a villain.”

—William Shakespeare, *Richard III*

HOLT ENTERED THE OFFICE— “Take a seat, Captain.”

“Thank you, General.”

“I had Baxter fly you here because there’s been a new development.”

“New development?”

“It seems Doctor Fleischer wants to meet with you.”

“With me? Why?”

“Who knows what that diabolical bastard has in mind? But I’ve got to tell you—it’s a strictly volunteer mission on your part. You’ve done more than your share and the President is ready to pay the \$1 billion if we fail to locate Fleischer or the device. We still have 48 hours left on his deadline.”

“I’ll take the meeting.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure. This whole thing is on my head. If I hadn’t deployed with the SADM—on a mission supposedly sanctioned by the President—Fleischer never would have gotten his hands on it. Besides I’m more than a little curious about what he really wants. The last time we met, I thought my number was up.”

“Fleischer could be setting a trap.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why?”

“He’s had plenty of chances to take me out, starting with when O’Bannon captured me after ambushing me and my team when we

jumped into his mountain laboratory. He's got something else in mind, I don't know what and I need to find out."

Holt stood alone, in the middle of the desert, where Baxter left him an hour ago. He cupped his hands around his eyes and made a 360-degree scan of the horizon. The sky was empty and he began pacing.

He stopped pacing and scanned the horizon again. This time, he saw the aircraft silhouetted against the backdrop of the sun.

Finally, it hovered overhead.

The skids raised puffs of dust as they made contact with the arid ground. The dust swirled upward, mixing with a larger cloud of dust and debris stirred up by the wind from the rotor blades and returned to Earth when the blades slowed and finally stopped.

Two armed men dressed in desert camouflage dismounted from the helicopter and approached Holt's position. One carried an orange jump suit—the kind jail inmates wear.

One of the men motioned for Holt to raise his hands and the other man ordered, "Strip off all of your clothes, including your underwear, boots and socks."

Holt hesitated.

"Do it now."

When Holt was standing naked, one of the men took Holt's watch and dog tags and passed a magnetic scanner over every inch of his body. Seemingly satisfied, he nodded to his partner, who handed Holt the jump suit and a worn pair of pull-on desert boots.

"Put these on."

When he was dressed, one of the men handcuffed Holt's wrists behind his back as the other man placed a black bag over his head.

Escorted to the helicopter, Holt stopped when his thighs bumped the edge of the floor of the cargo bay. The two men spun him around, lifted him aboard and strapped him into a canvas seat.

Light emanated from a single naked bulb suspended above the steel table. Holt was sitting in a metal chair, his wrists shackled to a D-Ring bolted to the center of the table. His hood had been removed and he could barely make out the shadows of two men leaning against the wall, on either side of a steel door. The men stepped away when Fleischer entered the room, “Ah, Captain Holt. How kind of you to accept my invitation.”

“I was curious.”

“*Really?* Gentlemen, Captain Holt is our guest, not our prisoner. Remove his manacles.”

One of the guards removed Holt’s handcuffs.

Holt rubbed his wrists, trying to regain the circulation in his hands, “Okay I’m here. What—exactly do you want?”

Fleischer took a seat in the only other chair in the room, “Directness—one of the several qualities I admire in you, Captain. Very well, since you asked, I brought you here to level the playing field.”

“‘Level the playing field’?”

“My dear Captain. Surely you know all of this is just a *game*.”

“Seems serious to me and if it’s a game, the stakes seem pretty high: \$1 billion versus the collapse of the world’s economy for decades.”

“I’m not in the game for the money.”

“What, then? Revenge?”

“Yes, revenge. Or as Shakespeare so eloquently put it in *Othello*: *‘Reputation, reputation, reputation. O, I have lost my reputation. I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial.’*”

“I’m not following you.”

“Of course, my dear Captain. How could you know about my betrayal and subsequent loss of my reputation at the hands of America, the Army and my so-called friends and colleagues?”

“‘Betrayal’?”

“Yes, betrayal. You, yourself—and Captain O’Bannon, formerly in my employ—were—like me—betrayed.”

“Captain O’Bannon and I are nothing like you.”

“Yes, my dear Captain—you are.”

“If you say so.”

“I do say so. Let’s skip my early years, when I was betrayed by the Army, my country and my colleagues and visit the present, where all three of us have been betrayed by a shadowy government with its own Air Force, its own Navy, its own fundraising mechanism and the ability to pursue its own ideas of national interest, free from all checks and balances and free from the law itself.”

“What ‘shadowy government’ would that be?”

“Come now, Captain—you can’t be that naïve. Or perhaps you are. I’m referring to the CIA, of course—AKA the *Company*.”

“Oh, *that* ‘shadow government.’”

“Now you’ve got it. Yes, dear boy, the Company. The Company that offered up Captain O’Bannon as a sacrificial lamb when certain things about their Phoenix Project in Vietnam became public. Like you, he is a man of integrity. When he refused to testify about what was really going on, the Army dishonorably discharged him. He was headed for 20 years’ hard labor at Fort Leavenworth when I, ah, *recruited* him—as it were.”

Holt raised his eyebrows, “‘Recruited’?”

“I’m sure he’s told you all about how my men intercepted the prison bus he was on and convinced him to throw in his lot with me.”

“The way I heard it; he didn’t have much choice.”

“There were the dead guards he would’ve had to answer for of course—had he decided to remain in the ambush area. The Company always intended to terminate O’Bannon ‘with *extreme prejudice*’ and that was supposed to have occurred after his arrival at Leavenworth. I

believe the usual scenario is finding the prisoner hanging in his cell, an obvious suicide brought on by overwhelming guilt about his unsanctioned war crimes in Vietnam. My breaking him out of jail put me on the Company's RADAR and they sent you and your team on a Black Op, with a tactical nuclear device, to take out both me and Captain O'Bannon—two birds with one stone, as it were."

"This is starting to make sense."

"I hoped it would."

"You had O'Bannon ambush me and my team and I was the only survivor. I can never forget or forgive that."

"I can respect that. However, you don't know *all* the facts."

"Why don't you enlighten me?"

"My sources informed me that I was going to be visited by a CIA kill squad, not a Special Forces A-Team. Probably would've been a kill team, but the CIA has no expertise with the SADM Program, so they did what they usually do: they borrowed you and your team for the mission, convincing you the mission had been sanctioned by the only person in the world who could do that—the President of the United States."

Holt shook his head, "I should've known."

"But you had no way of knowing and if it makes you feel any better, O'Bannon would never have started shooting had he known it was a Special Forces team and not the CIA. In all probability, he would've ringed the drop-zone with floodlights and when you and your team landed, he would've given you the opportunity to surrender. He really didn't know."

"I wondered why he let me and Sergeant Ramirez take our chances in the desert. Thank you for clearing that up."

"Not at *all*. You see, I've never allowed anyone to become close enough to me to hurt me ever since my ultimate betrayal after World War Two. But I've come to understand—and even admire—the sort of

brotherhood of war you and Captain O'Bannon share. It gives a real sense of meaning to the quote from Shakespeare's *St. Crispin's Day Speech*: 'We few, we happy few, we band of brothers; for he today that sheds his blood with me, shall be my brother.' But I digress. Let's return to the reason you're here."

"Please."

"The one thread connecting all this together is a rogue CIA agent named Pennington."

At the sound of Pennington's name, Holt bristled. Sweat flowed down his back, pooling in the lumbar area. Fleischer had his undivided attention.

"It started with the head of the Campeche Drug Cartel enlisting my expertise to wage germ warfare against every other cartel in Latin America. As it happened, I had a parallel agenda so I agreed. Then the cartel's head, Don Feliciano and I had a minor business difference. He wanted me to move to his island base off the Yucatan coast and I wanted to remain in the Trans-Pecos, where you found me. Pennington is a key figure in the CIA guns-for-drugs project in Southeast Asia funneling tons of raw opium into Mexico and Latin America for refining and trans-shipment into the U.S. and Canada. Everyone is making billions, especially the Company. Feliciano had a big part of the action and had dealt with Pennington in the past. It was only natural to enlist his help in persuading me to move my base of operations to the Yucatan—something I'd been reluctant to do. When Pennington found out I was involved—and knowing O'Bannon was in my employ—he must have been ecstatic."

Holt sat listening as Fleischer's story unfolded.

"Feliciano informed Pennington of the location of my Trans-Pecos facility and he set the wheels in motion for your raid to wipe me and my laboratory out. He didn't figure on my intelligence resources being as good as they are. No matter—that's history. The point is: I've got

the device and he knows you're alive and that you and I are able to air all of the CIA's dirty laundry to Congress about the guns-for-drugs program and the illegal deployment of a tactical nuclear device within the United States—Congress would love nothing more than to publicly *spank* the Company—stripping the agency of most of its power in the process.”

“I still don't know why you brought me here and why you're telling me all this.”

“I thought it would be obvious by now, but perhaps not. It may surprise you, but I regard you as one of the few people in the world whom I would call a worthy adversary. You see, Captain Holt, Pennington is trying to kill you and me and Captain O'Bannon and I regard his efforts as interference in our splendid game of *'hide and seek.'*”

“If you're viewing this as some sort of game, why is it one of your cartel pals sent his enforcers to ambush me and my team at your compound? Not very sportsmanlike—if you ask me.”

“But yet you survived, as I knew you would. And would I be considering you my worthy opponent if you were easily trapped? I knew O'Bannon knew about the place and I was expecting you. It was the way your team inserted that intrigued me and makes you worthy of my respect—as far as best of enemies goes.”

Holt smiled and shook his head, “Somehow, I've never quite pictured our relationship that way.”

“How do you see it?”

“Well, for starters, you've left a trail of bodies behind you since our first meeting. Your genius, however misguided, could save thousands of lives instead of wiping them out.”

“I know you are perceptive, Captain Holt, so please use those gifts of perception to see the grand scheme of things. Please take note that, along the way, when I attempted to use my genius for the good of

mankind, I was rebuffed and humiliated. As far as my body count to date in the execution of any master plan, there is always collateral damage. You saw it in Vietnam, where you were lied to—just like the rest of the American people were lied to. As the late John F. Kennedy so aptly put it, *‘Now we have a problem in making our power credible, and Vietnam is the place.’* His replacement, Lyndon Johnson, said much the same, *‘This is not just a jungle war, but a struggle for freedom on every front of human activity.’* What do you think those two presidents meant, Captain Holt?”

“Sounds like ‘hearts and minds’ *bullshit* to me.”

“Exactly. At least General Curtis LeMay was honest when he said, *‘Tell the Vietnamese they’ve got to draw in their horns, or we’re going to bomb them back into the Stone Age.’*”

Holt smiled, “What you’re saying then is, ‘When you’ve got ’em by the balls, their hearts and minds will follow.’”

Fleischer almost smiled, “Which brings me back to the CIA’s involvement in Southeast Asia and why you and I constitute a threat to their multi-billion-dollar operation and are now marked for termination. We have to band together and stop Pennington if we’re going to survive the game.”

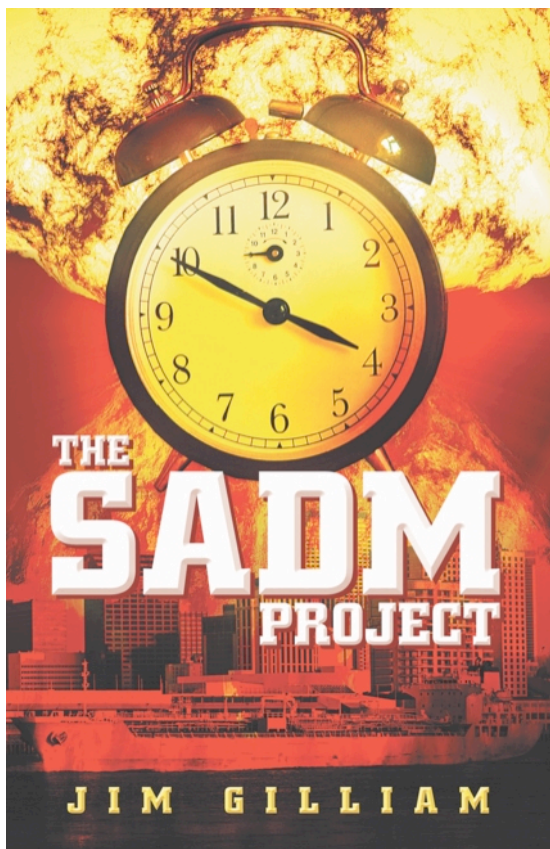
“Of all the things that flashed through my mind when I first learned you wanted to meet with me, this wasn’t even a remote possibility.”

“And now?”

“And now, I’m beginning to see the logic of your proposed alliance. However, this does absolutely nothing to dissuade me from my primary goal of recovering the nuclear device I carelessly allowed to fall into your hands.”

“I would expect nothing less, Captain Holt, I would expect nothing less. Now that we’ve come to a meeting of the minds, as it were, ‘let the games begin.’”

Holt stood on the spot where he'd been picked up, watching the helicopter become smaller against the backdrop of the horizon. His clothes, watch and dog tags were neatly folded atop several cardboard boxes of IBM data-processing cards.



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