

Act of War

Dale Brown

Published by HarperCollins

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

[Click here to buy this book and read more](#)

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

This paperback edition 2006

1

First published in Great Britain/USA by
HarperCollins*Publishers* 2005

Copyright © Air Battle Force inc 2005

The Author asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

ISBN-13 978 00 0 721479 2

ISBN-10 0 00 721479 0

Set in Meridien by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Polmont, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Limited, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Kingman City, Texas

Present time

Just twenty precious minutes more – and the global war for freedom from death and tyranny would enter the next level. The closer the driver came to his target, the more his blood boiled and his adrenaline level kicked up to even higher levels.

I am a man of peace, the driver told himself for the umpteenth time as he made his journey, but if any man on Earth deserved to die, it was Harold Chester Kingman, president and CEO of TransGlobal Energy Corporation. The man's destructiveness and greed were exceeded only by his immense ego. The highways and roads leading to his target were so audaciously named, the driver noted with disgust, that one could practically make the trip without once referring to a map of any sort: from Interstate 45, take the Harold Chester Kingman Parkway off-ramp, head west on Kingman Parkway to TransGlobal Avenue, then south on Dominion Street to the front gate. Kingman had even changed the name of the town itself: known as Texas City since 1893, the oil, gas, and nuclear energy mogul changed the name when he purchased the entire area just a few years ago. Why, thought the driver, didn't Kingman just put his name on every street sign in the city, perhaps with the title 'King,' 'Lord,' or 'Slave Master' added for good measure?

The driver followed the signs to the truck entrance a

bit farther south, noting the security cameras arrayed along every portion of the road. As he got closer, he noticed more and more roving patrols in sport-utility vehicles, with supervisors in sedans, enforcing the enforcers. Yes, paranoid: Kingman trusted no one. From many previous trips here, the driver knew that those SUVs were heavily armored and could probably withstand a rocket-propelled grenade round, then return fire with their own heavy weapons, including assault rifles, machine guns, and grenade launchers. But as tight as security was, the driver remarked to himself that it got tighter and more sophisticated every time he came here. Was it merely the nature of post-9/11 American industrial society, or was it Harold Chester Kingman's supreme ego and paranoia at work? Whatever it was, TransGlobal Energy was surely expending an even greater percentage of their enormous profits on security these days.

Not that Kingman was paying for it, of course – it simply meant that his workers worked harder for even less pay, and he jacked up prices across the board for his products and services, perhaps double the cost of the added expenses. Kingman obviously wasn't suffering because of all these outlays for an elaborate and even outlandish show of security – in fact, he was profiting handsomely from it, telling the world that it was these security measures responsible for the steep price increases, layoffs, and pay cuts.

The front gate to the immense TransGlobal Energy Transshipment and Refinery Complex, about twenty miles south of Houston, resembled some kind of futuristic sci-fi fortress – or prison, depending on how you looked at it. The incoming gate was an entrapment area, with two gates enclosing an arriving vehicle so that there

was no direct opening to the outside at any time. In addition, the moving gates were massive barriers made with twenty-centimeter-square steel posts, topped with coils of razor wire. Those gates looked strong enough to stop a main battle tank.

The driver approached the outside guard shack and parked just outside the steel gates, despite a large sign that read 'DO NOT APPROACH GATE UNTIL CLEARED.' The guard shack was no longer a 'shack' – this was now a brand-new concrete bunker, with gun ports and thick one-way mirrored bulletproof glass instead of the old simple wooden building, screen door, and smiling, mildly bored guards. He had been here only a couple weeks and this bunker wasn't here the first time he'd arrived. He stepped over to the large glass window, idly flipping through a metal form holder.

'Move your vehicle away from the gate, Officer,' an electronic voice ordered through a hidden speaker.

The man on the outside looked up, squinting through the spotlights shining on him from around the window. 'Is that you, Tom?' the man asked. 'What's with the lights?' He knew what the lights were for, of course – they darkened and obscured his view of the inside of the guard bunker, and also allowed them to take more detailed digital photos of him.

'You need to move your car away from the gate until you're cleared in, Patrolman Kelly,' the voice said again. 'Back behind the yellow line.'

Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) Sergeant Frank Kelly squinted in mild irritation and looked back down at his forms. 'Well, clear me in then, and I'll be on my way, Tom,' he said. He looked at his watch impatiently, hoping they'd get the hint. Usually the sight of

someone in a DPS uniform made folks nervous, from young motorists right up to CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, even if they were totally innocent. The DPS enforced not only highway traffic laws but safety and security laws for important public transportation facilities such as ports, harbors, and truck terminals. They had the authority to shut down any facility that didn't strictly comply with Texas law, so every trooper was usually treated with a high degree of respect.

'Procedures have changed, Frank,' a different voice said. 'You obviously didn't get the memo.'

'You're going to make me back the damned car up twenty lousy feet before you'll let me in, Tom?' the officer asked, the exasperation more evident in his voice. 'All I want are the tanker inspection logs and I'll be out of your hair.'

'Frank, the entry procedures have changed,' the invisible guard inside the bunker said apologetically. 'We notified DPS headquarters and all the area substations last week. I'm sorry, but you know, procedures are . . .'

The officer held up his hands in mock surrender. 'Okay, okay, I know: procedures are procedures,' he said. 'I'll back up behind your big bad yellow line.' He slapped the metal form holder shut with a loud *bang!* and walked back to his marked Crown Victoria cruiser.

So much for the rock-solid intelligence they had so far been receiving, Kelly thought, fighting to act inconvenienced and put off. All this added security was unexpected. And the new guardhouse – where in hell have the lookouts been all this time? It should have been plain enough to even untrained observers to notice that these damned blockhouses were being built at the entrances! He glanced in his rearview mirror, noting that the street

behind him was still clear – no trucks or other security vehicles were boxing him in.

A moment later, the guard he knew as Tom stepped out of a revolving steel security turnstile and approached the cruiser, an M-16 rifle slung on one shoulder. Kelly noted that he also wore an automatic pistol instead of the cheap standard-issue revolvers most security guards here wore. Another serious breakdown in intelligence. At that moment, one of TransGlobal's royal blue armored Suburban security vehicles appeared on the street behind him and stopped about fifty yards away, a gun port on the right rear door open. Now Kelly was starting to sweat.

A knock on his driver's-side window startled him, but he quickly regained his composure and hit the switch to roll the window down. It was Tom. 'You okay, Frank?' he asked.

'You guys expecting a war or something, Tom?' Kelly asked, ignoring the question. 'Now you're toting M-16s? I'm not even issued one anymore.' Tom made a quick glance around inside the cruiser but quickly returned his eyes to Kelly's. 'Is there a fucking problem here, Tom?' He reached over and snatched the cruiser's microphone off its clip with an angry pull. 'Okay, I didn't read the memo, or if I did, I forgot about it. You want to bust my balls over it so you look good in front of all your new security cameras, fine. Should I call my supervisor, or did you already do it?'

'Relax, you big Mick chump, relax,' Tom said with a smile. He held up a piece of paper. 'I just came out to give you a copy of the memo. We haven't implemented most of the procedures on there, but the new guys are pretty gung-ho and they feel pretty tough with their assault rifles and Berettas.'

Kelly took the memo and glanced over it, trying like hell not to look too relieved. 'New guardhouse, new weapons, cameras out the wazoo – what else you got in there?'

'Half the cameras aren't hooked up, and I swear to God these kids haven't a fucking clue – if I got a dime for every time I've told these jerkoffs to keep their damned fingers off the triggers of those M-16s, I'd be as rich as you troopers.'

'Har har.'

'I'm serious, dude – as soon as my application is accepted, I'm out of here and going to the Highway Patrol Academy,' Tom said. 'Working for Kingman is like what it must have been like working for Napoleon, Hitler, or Clinton.'

'Bill or Hillary?'

'I thought they were one and the same – they both liked their power and their women,' Tom said. Kelly was pleased to note that his laugh sounded normal. Tom's face turned serious as he went on: 'Starting next week, we'll be instituting an electronic identity verification program for both individuals and vehicles. We'll be asking everyone to have biometric prints taken, and your cars will have to have coded transponders on them, like on airliners. Give everyone at the station a heads-up.'

'More fun and games, huh?'

'This antiterrorist shit is no fun and games, especially with Mr Kingman,' Tom said. 'We'll soon have security in this place that'll make Fort Knox look like a day at Disneyland.'

'I can't wait.' Kelly noted with relief that the big outer steel gate was starting to open. 'Why don't you just have Kingman's transportation guys transmit the vehicle logs

over to headquarters rather than have us pick them up all the time?’

‘I guess Mr Kingman likes seeing troopers around.’

‘Well, recommend that he make us feel a bit more welcome next time, or we’ll make *him* bring the logs to *us* rather than the other way around, the way it’s supposed to be.’

‘With all the political muscle Kingman has, I’m surprised he doesn’t have the governor build a DPS substation here at the terminal – or better yet, have the President build an entire army base here,’ Tom said. He slapped the door sill. ‘You take care, Frank. Sorry for the inconvenience. I’m afraid it’s only going to get worse, though.’

‘No problem, buddy. Thanks for the heads-up. Later.’ As Tom assumed a port-arms stance to guard the open gate area, Kelly pulled his cruiser inside the entrapment area when the green direction light came on. After he was inside, he waited until the outer gate closed, shut off the engine, popped open the hood and trunk, and then exited his vehicle to allow the security guards to search. They shined flashlights in the engine compartment, opened glove boxes and storage compartments, looked under the seats, flipped down sun visors, inspected under the spare tire, and rolled a mirror underneath the cruiser to inspect under the chassis.

Kelly then handed a guard a logbook marked FIELD KIT SECURITY LOG, and the guard compared the last number on the log to the number stamped onto a steel truck seal that secured a large metal case in the trunk. The trunk contained a shotgun, ammunition, a Taser gun to subdue unruly citizens, road flares, flashlights, strobes, ropes, and other safety and security devices carried by

all DPS sergeants, but they were prohibited in TransGlobal's complex unless they were sealed by TransGlobal security personnel. The numbers matched, and the security guard closed up the trunk, handed the logbook back to Kelly, and nodded at the guardhouse to allow him to pass.

Kelly got into his cruiser and started it up. Just when he was expecting the inner gate to open, he saw Tom enter the entrapment area. He rolled the window down again as he approached. 'What's up now, Tom?'

'Just a glitch.' He noted Tom had his M-16 rifle hanging in front of him this time with his hand on the grip, not over his shoulder like before.

'Need me to step out?'

Tom shook his head. 'Shouldn't take a minute.' Kelly could see Tom touch an earpiece in his left ear as he listened to radioed instructions. 'Pop the trunk again for me, buddy. They want me to check something.'

Kelly hit the trunk release button. 'Sure. Need the logbook?'

'Why don't you let me see it? These new guys are starting to blabber. They're driving me nuts. Let me straighten this out.' Kelly handed Tom the truck seal log, and Tom went around to the trunk, opened it, and started to work inside.

Kelly got out a moment later and casually strolled around to the back of the cruiser. He noticed three more guards outside the bunker, their M-16s also slung in front of their bodies but not upraised, watching him. Tom had his flashlight out and was inspecting the truck seal on the field kit box, the logbook open. 'Problem, dude?'

By way of reply, Tom ran a gloved finger under the truck seal, feeling all around the underside of the steel

strap. After probing the entire seal, he gave a light pull . . . and the seal came apart and clattered to the carpeted floor of the trunk.

‘Why did you do that, Tom?’ Kelly asked.

The security guard stood up and faced the DPS sergeant, a dark, blank expression on his face. ‘It shouldn’t have come off that easily, Frank,’ he said. ‘And it looks like the band itself was cut right at the clasp to make it hard to detect the cut.’

‘Probably just a bad seal,’ Kelly said. ‘No big deal. I’ll pull out, and you can reinspect the field kit, reseal it, and sign the log again.’

‘There’s another problem, Frank,’ Tom said. ‘There’s a radiation alarm going off.’

‘A what?’

‘Radiation alarm. We installed radiation detectors here at the facility.’

‘Yeah? That’s pretty cool. Well, the shotgun and my sidearm have tritium sights – your guns probably do too. That’ll set off a radiation alarm.’

‘This alarm is going off the scale, Frank,’ Tom said. He raised his M-16 and clicked off the safety. ‘Turn around, walk forward to the fence, then place your hands on the fence, lean forward, and spread your legs.’

Kelly did as he was told. ‘Jesus, Tom, put that thing down. It’s me, man, remember?’

‘I’ve known you for a grand total of two weeks, Kelly – stop making like we’re brothers or something. Cover!’ he shouted. Two of the security guards started to enter the entrapment area. Tom took Kelly’s pistol and Mace canister out of his holster and tossed it aside, then held his rifle aimed at Kelly until the other guards could cover him. ‘Okay, asshole, what’s in the case?’

‘It’s my field kit, Tom. What do you think it is?’

‘You can’t get away, so whatever that thing is will kill you along with everyone else if it goes off,’ the security guard said. ‘Give it up. What’s in the fucking box?’ No reply. *‘Answer me!’*

Kelly hesitated for a moment, and then replied in a low voice, ‘If I were you, Tom, I’d get out of here, now, as fast as you can. Head for the train tunnel on the other side of the deep water canal – you’ll be safe there.’

‘What did you fucking say?’

‘I said you’d better get away from here. Leave me with the two Rambos. A kilometer should be far enough as long as you’re underground. Two would be better.’

‘Better for what?’

‘I like you, Tom,’ Kelly said. ‘You’re a good guy. You always have been.’

‘What are you fucking talking about, mister?’

‘You’ve treated me with respect even though you’ve had your doubts about me – I like that. You should have followed your instincts, though. That just makes you a bad security officer, not a bad guy.’ Kelly started to turn around.

‘Don’t you move!’

‘Don’t shoot me. Let me explain.’ He continued to turn until they were looking into each other’s eyes. Kelly’s eyes motioned up to his left hand, and it was only then that Tom noticed he had a small device resembling a remote car door opener attached to a clump of keys in his hand. ‘You should order me to turn around again, Tom,’ Kelly said in a low voice. ‘You tell the Rambos to cover me while you report this to security headquarters in person, and then you should get into that armored Suburban back there and start driving toward the tunnel

on the other side of the canal. Even if you don't make it all the way, inside that Suburban, you should be okay.' Tom started to reach for the device. 'Don't do that, Tom. I've already activated it. It's a dead-man's switch. If it leaves my hand, it'll trigger it.'

'Trigger what?'

'You know what it is, Tom,' Kelly said. 'My mission has failed, and it's time to give it up. But I can save at least one nice guy here. TransGlobal is filled with nasty, sleazy, uncaring persons. You're the only good guy I've known that works for TransGlobal. You deserve a second chance. Get as far away from here as you can. I'll hold them off, don't worry.' Tom raised the M-16 and aimed it at Kelly's head. 'Don't be stupid, Tom. If you shoot, I'll let go of it, and you'll die. That's foolish. Do as I say. Get away from here. You don't owe Kingman a damned thing.'

'He's not here. You won't be doing a thing to him.'

'Maybe not to him, but to his company – *this* facility, this abomination to nature that pollutes Galveston Bay, pollutes the air, pollutes the drinking water, and enslaves workers all over the world.'

Tom lowered the rifle slightly. '*What?*'

'Kingman is a bloodsucker, Tom. He'll do anything for profit. The only way to hurt him is to kill his profits.'

'Are you some kind of environmentalist wacko?'

'I am a soldier of GAMMA – the Environmental Movement Combat Alliance.' Tom's face fell and he looked at Kelly over the sights of the M-16 with shock and surprise. 'I see you've heard of us.'

'You blew up that dam in Paraguay recently . . .'

'Uruguay.'

'You killed hundreds of people . . .'

‘TransGlobal paid almost five million dollars in bribes to government officials to get approval to build that dam,’ Kelly said. ‘The government uprooted thousands of persons who had lived in that river valley for centuries. Hundreds of peasants, who were working for pennies a week, died during the construction – and *then* when they flooded the river valley, they wiped out hundreds of thousands of acres of rain forest, priceless Indian artifacts, and the graves of thousands more.’

‘Where in hell did you get a nuclear weapon?’

‘There are governments all over the world anxious to sell nuclear weapon components,’ Kelly said casually, ‘and there are many socially and environmentally conscious persons willing to pay to obtain them, and even more dedicated, selfless soldiers willing to plant them in the places where they’ll do the most good – not against mindless soldiers or isolated military targets, but against the real killers of planet Earth, men like Harold Chester Kingman.’

‘Is it a real bomb? Full-yield – not a dirty bomb?’

‘So-called “dirty bombs” are the joke of the century – they would do nothing but scare a few people, certainly not someone as devoid of conscience and morality as Kingman,’ Kelly said. ‘No, this is a real weapon. GAMMA has sent a tape with all of the data on it, including its yield and components, in order to validate its authenticity. I notice that since the tape also warned TransGlobal Energy to evacuate the area that either no one listened to it, or Kingman *did* listen to it and ordered his security staff not to do anything about it. I tend to believe the latter.’

‘I thought GAMMA was an environmental protection group. You’ll contaminate this entire region and kill thousands when that thing goes off.’

‘Kingman dumps enough pollution in the air world-

wide every *day* to equal a full megaton nuclear blast,' the terrorist said. 'Besides, I like the irony of that . . . using weapons of mass destruction to punish those like TransGlobal Energy and Kingman, men who build weapons of mass eco-destruction.'

'You're crazy. Do you know how many people you'll kill in this area with that? Thousands . . . no, maybe *hundreds of thousands*. You'd do that just to try to hurt Kingman?'

'He's killing thousands of people every day around the world with his harmful deep-water drilling, leaky unsafe single-hulled tankers, outdated wells and storage facilities, wanton pollution just to make more profits, and miserable working conditions that enslave entire generations of workers,' Kelly said. 'I truly believe that Kingman is capable of killing the entire *planet* if his practices aren't revealed to the world and shut down *now*. If I can shut this one plant down, it'll really hurt him right where he lives – in the wallet. Maybe he'll give up after that, after what I'll do wakes up the world to his lies, corruption, and criminal activities.'

'You . . . you can't do this. It's *insane* . . .'

'Get away from here, Tom,' Kelly repeated. 'It's your last chance. Get far away from here before your cowboys get their hands on me. Tell them to stay away. I'll give you ten minutes. That should be enough time.'

The two guards started to enter the entrapment area, but Tom raised a hand. 'Stay back!' he shouted. Kelly smiled, nodded, and started to turn back toward the fence. But Tom ordered, 'I'm going to take that detonator away from you, Kelly. I can see what button you're pressing. I'll put my finger on it, and you let it go. Don't try to stop me.'

'Don't try it, Tom. I'm giving you a chance. You have a wife and kids. Don't let this chance slip away.'

'My house is less than a mile from here, man. If it goes, they'll go too. They're innocent. You'd be killing them and thousands of other innocent people.'

'I'm sorry to have to do that. You can call them – tell them to get belowground. Or you can go there, be with them – maybe even get them into that Suburban. At that distance, the armoring might protect them . . .'

'You sick bastard!'

'This is a war, Tom, and in war, innocent people are killed,' Kelly said quietly. 'It's what makes war so horrible – it's the reason why we need to end it. This is my blow for freedom. Maybe it'll be the beginning of the end of Harold Kingman.'

'I'm going to take it from you, Kelly,' Tom said, his voice shaking. He had to concentrate to keep from thinking about his family. Where were they? In school? No, it was Sunday . . . they might be safe if they went to the grocery store or . . . but if they went to the park, they'd be out in the open . . . oh shit, oh shit, oh *shit* . . . 'Listen, man, you don't have to kill thousands of people to make your point,' he went on. 'Once the world finds out what you've done here, they'll all want to know about your beef with Kingman and TransGlobal. That's the best way to get your message out. If you kill thousands of people here today, you'll be nothing but a terrorist. No one will ever listen to you.'

'I don't care about that, Tom – I only care about hurting Kingman. He's the target. Now get out of here.'

'I'm reaching up to your hand, and I'm taking that detonator.' His hand touched Kelly's. They looked into each other's eyes. Tom must've seen something akin to

surrender in the other's eyes, and he thought it meant that he would give him the detonator.

'You're a good guy,' Kelly said. 'You didn't run. Maybe you would have made a good trooper. But we'll never know.' And Tom watched Kelly's eyes go blank, and then close . . .

. . . just as his own thumb closed over the button to the detonator. Kelly did not struggle. Tom was able to take it out of Kelly's hand, his finger firmly on the button, keeping it safe. He did it.

Just then, Kelly's eyes snapped open. He grinned at Tom, winked, then yelled, 'Open fire!'

'No!' Tom yelled, but it was too late. The two young security guards drawing down on Kelly opened fire, their M-16s on full automatic. Slugs ripped mercilessly into both men. Tom remembered through the pain and dizziness to keep his thumb on the button, keep his thumb on the button, keep his . . .

. . . and then as a slug entered his brain, and he died, the world disappeared in a blinding flash of white-hot light . . .

**Multipurpose Range Complex, Joint Readiness
Training Center, Fort Polk, Louisiana
That same time**

With a tremendous 'CRAAACK!' as if from the world's largest and meanest bullwhip, the lightweight thirty-millimeter projectile disappeared from view as soon as it was launched. The radar trackers on the instrument range followed its flight path flawlessly. 'Good shot, J,' Dr Ariadna Vega, a civilian research engineer assigned to

Fort Polk, reported, checking the range telemetry data. Ariadna was in her early twenties, dark-haired, slender, and beautiful, and seemingly very much out of place on this muddy tract of land in central Louisiana. 'Launch velocity . . . seventeen hundred meters per second. Awesome. Range two point three-five kilometers . . . two point four . . . two point four-seven kilometers at impact. Not bad.'

'I can do better than that, Ari,' her partner, Major Jason Richter, responded confidently. 'Reset the sensors and throw me another ball.' The two were very much alike and could have been mistaken for brother and sister. Not much older than Vega, tall, lean, and dark-haired, Jason Richter too was an engineer, assigned as the special project office director of the U.S. Army Infantry Transformational BattleLab, a division of the Army Research Laboratory, tasked with developing new ways for infantry to fight on modern battlefields.

'You got it, J,' Ariadna said with a proud smile. She reactivated the radar scanners briefly to scan for any vehicles or unwanted observers in the area, then reset them to track another projectile. 'Range is clear, sensors reset and ready.' She reached into a padded metal case beside her, withdrew an orange object, ran it under a bar code scanner to log its size, mass, and composition, and tossed it to Jason. 'Keep your head down.'

'I got this nailed,' Jason said. He put the orange projectile on a golf tee, leveled his 'Big Dog' composite driver – slightly modified for these experiments and definitely not PGA tour-certified – addressed the projectile, brought the head of the driver back, paused just for a moment on the back side, then swung. They heard another loud whip-crack sound, but this time with a much less solid,

tinny tone. Just a few hundred meters away, an immense cloud of mud and standing water geysered into the air, and the projectile could be seen skipping across the ground, soon lost from sight.

‘Told you, J,’ Ari said, resetting the range telemetry sensors again. ‘You’re bringing your head up and topping the ball. Head *down*.’

‘All right, all right,’ Jason murmured dejectedly. ‘Toss me another one.’

‘This is the last one,’ Ari said, tossing him the last orange projectile from the case. ‘Make it good.’

Jason reached up and snatched the ball from mid-air – but it was not *his* fingers that grasped it. The fingers belonged to a three-meter-tall robotic figure. Its arms and legs were thin, covered in composite nonmetallic skin. Its shape was like a human, with arms, legs, a head, and torso; its bullet-shaped head was an armored sensor ball that swiveled and moved in all directions; its joints were fluid and massive, matching strength with dexterity. But for its size, the machine was incredibly agile – its movements precisely mimicked a human’s movements in amazing detail, even to subtle movements of its shoulders and hips as it precisely, casually placed the orange projectile on another golf tee and stepped back, ready to hit it downrange. The robot parted its feet and centered up on the ball – it was almost comical to watch, like some weird child’s caricature doing a completely human thing.

‘No using fire control sensors now,’ Ariadna reminded Jason. ‘You said you wanted this completely manual.’

‘I’m not using fire control,’ Jason said. The robot was fitted with a variety of sensors – millimeter-wave radar, imaging infrared, and laser – that fed a computer that

could steer weapons with zero-zero precision, or the data could be uplinked to other aircraft or forces in the area via satellite. Jason smoothly brought the club back, paused, relaxed his 'body,' and began his swing . . .

. . . just as a cellular phone rang. The robot's head jerked up just as the club head made contact. The projectile veered sharply right, ricocheted off a steel revetment with a sound like a heavy-caliber gunshot, then blasted through a concrete range officer's building a hundred meters away just in front of the vehicle assembly area. '*Dang!*' Jason shouted. 'No fair! I want a mulligan!'

'The range officer's going to be pissed – again,' Ari said as she reached for her cell phone. 'Hop out and help me get packed up – that was the last projectile.'

The robot tossed the golf club toward Ari, then assumed a stance with one leg extended back, the other knee bent, leaning forward, and arms extended back along its torso. An access hatch on the robot's back popped open, and Jason Richter climbed out from inside the machine. He was a little sweaty and his face was lined with ridges from where the oxygen mask and sensor helmet plates sealed on him, but he was still grinning from ear to ear like a schoolkid who had just hit a home run in a Little League game.

Ari opened the flip on her phone. 'Vega here.'

'Put Major Richter on, Ari.' She recognized the agitated voice of the staff NCO, Army Master Sergeant Ted Gaines.

Ari held out the phone to Jason. 'It's the Top, and he sounds weird,' she said.

Jason barely finished saying hello when Gaines asked breathlessly, 'Are you listening to the news, sir?'

'You just ruined my last test shot, Top. I was . . .'

'Turn on the radio, sir! *Houston has been bombed!*

'*Bombed?* Bombed by whom?' Jason motioned to the Humvee parked a few meters behind them, and Ariadna flipped on the satellite radio receiver and turned it to SATCOM One, the all-satellite news broadcasting station . . . and in moments, they were both stunned into absolute speechlessness. 'I . . . I can't believe this,' he finally stammered. 'Someone set off a *nuke* near Houston . . . ?'

'Major! Are you still there?' No response. Richter's mind was racing. This was unbelievable . . . too horrible for words . . . '*Major . . . ?*'

'Sergeant, get the Chinook ready to fly,' Jason said breathlessly. 'I'm taking the Humvee and CID One to the flight line right now. We're going to Kingman City.'

'*Kingman City?* You can't go there now! It's a radio-active hole in the ground!'

'CID will be the only system that can operate in that environment,' Jason said. 'Just get it moving. I'll call the boss and get clearances. *Move!*'