

A BAD DAY
ON THE
RIVER

MIKE ADAMS

A Bad Day On The River

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A Bad Day On The River

Book 5 of Fierce Girls at War

Other books by Mike Adams

Fierce Girls at War series

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Fierce Girls At War

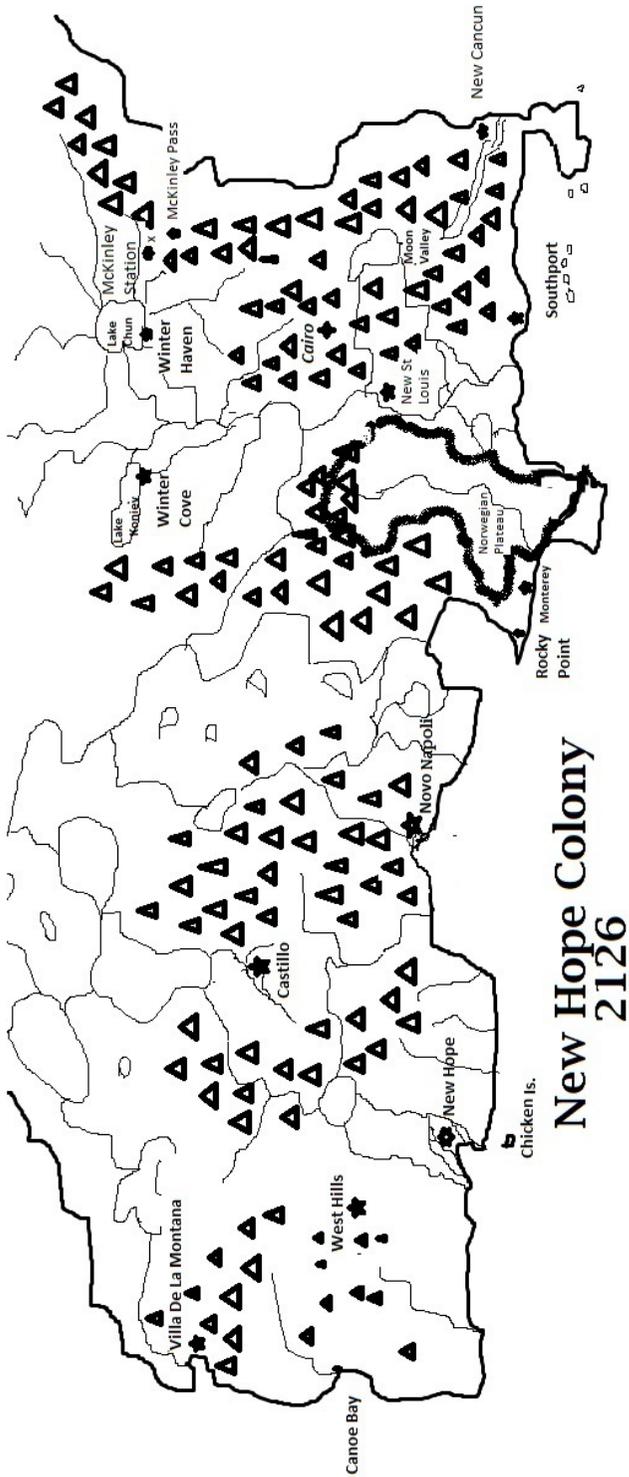
This series is dedicated to the female soldiers, marines, sailors and airmen all over the world who are as capable and competent as their male counterparts but are often discounted, disrespected and demeaned by people who in reality are often not as smart, not as brave and not as competent as they are. It is also aimed at young, intelligent girls who given the chance to do so, or in this case when they have no other choice but to do so, are able to demonstrate their smarts, their courage, their determination and their ability to fight to survive in a difficult situation.

The setting of this series is on a colony planet under threat of an alien invasion. This provided a unique environment to put characters from all over the world together in a situation where they all must work together and fight for each other regardless of the state of relations between their home countries now or in the period in which the series is set.

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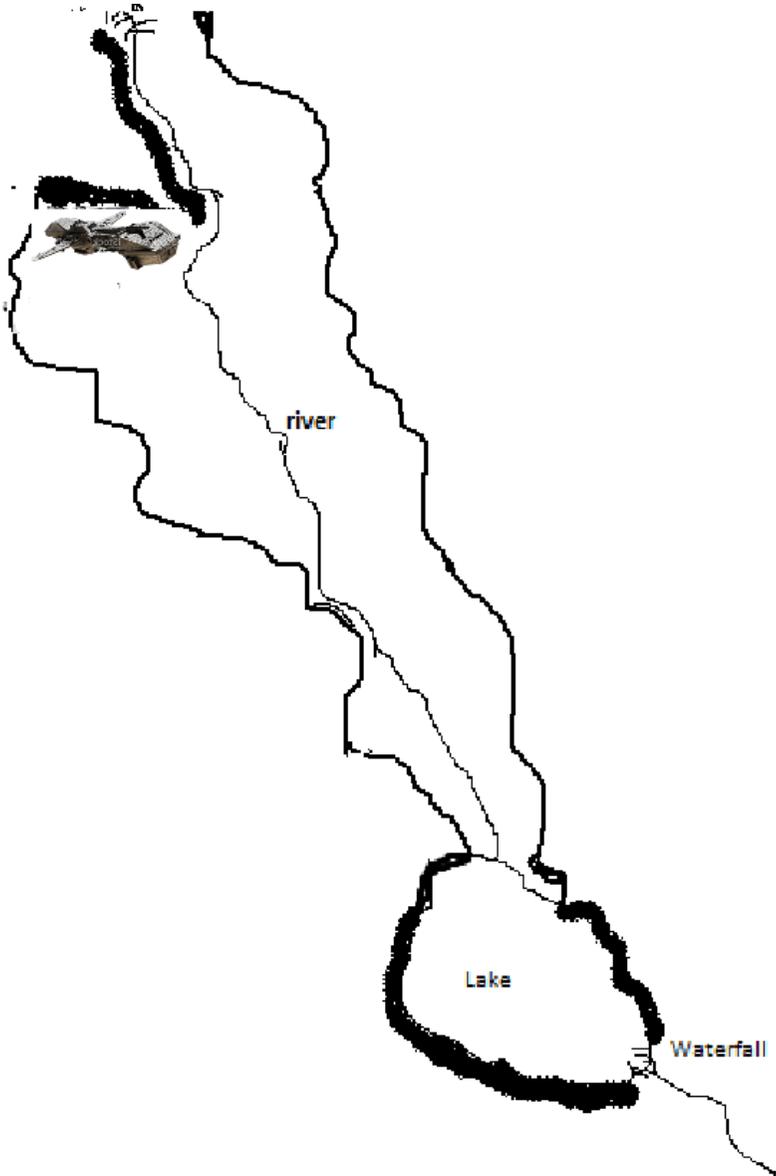
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A BAD DAY ON THE RIVER



A BAD DAY ON THE RIVER

CAIRO'S VALLEY





Chapter 1

Captain Jing Woo

February 2122

Kenya

The platoon of Chinese Night Rangers approached the Kenyan town of Maragua from the northwest, spread out in an arc that would cover a section of the western outskirts of the town of about 32,000. The Night Rangers were part of the Republic of China's elite Special Forces and specialized in dangerous, high risk, night missions. The platoon leader, Lieutenant Jing Woo was about fifty yards ahead with a pair of recon specialists searching for any of the Lipiza Kisasi (Vengeance) militia members guarding that sector.

Lieutenant Woo's mission was to infiltrate the town, find the location of the hostages being held by the militia including the President of Kenya Mr. Kobe, then signal Colonel Chang to begin the general attack on the town, secure the hostages, and if possible capture or kill any of the leaders of the militia who might be in town.

Fortunately, the majority of the town's residents had fled when the militia showed up but reconnaissance drones had spotted at least 500 militia fighters within the town and more in the area around it. To keep from being spotted Colonel Chang's force of 2000 Chinese Marines and Night Rangers and 1,500 Kenyan Army troopers were waiting with 25 armored antigravity troop carriers in a valley five miles to the northeast. Once Woo sent the go-signal the transports, each with 50 heavily armed combat troops aboard, would take off, quickly ascend to 5000 feet then head for preselected drop zones around the towns. After disgorging their passengers they would return to the valley for another load of troops.

Jing Woo and her reconnaissance team had spotted three armed sentries so far but she was sure there were more. "Keep looking," she whispered into the small mic embedded in her combat helmet, "we've got three tagged so far but I don't like it. I think there's another, maybe more than one."

"We've only registered the body heat of the three on the infrared sensors," Sgt. Chow said quietly. "There's no sign of any more, Lieutenant."

Jing didn't respond as she continued visually searching the nearest buildings. "Ah, there he is." She tagged the fourth guard as he exited what appeared to be a public outhouse. All four tagged guards now showed up on the visor displays of every member of her 24-man platoon.

"Got him!" Each of the squad leaders confirmed in turn.

"Right. We'll move in closer. Count on them having infrared too, so be careful," she admonished them again. Even though the Night Rangers wore special body armor that absorbed most of their emitted body heat making them difficult to see they could still be spotted if an ill-timed turn that exposed their backs.

Lieutenant Woo sent four three-man teams forward and in among the nearest buildings taking care not to be spotted. Each team was assigned to take out one of the guards while their platoon leader continued watching. Three minutes later all four guards were dead and she ordered the rest of her people to move in.

As they made their way toward the center of the town a few dozen militia members were seen moving about or standing together talking quietly. It was nearly 4 AM and most of militia members were asleep. The Night Rangers did their best to avoid them as they moved in. Every contact had the potential to cause an alarm to be raised, something that would be potentially disastrous, but when several of the Lipiza Kisasi passed too close by the Chinese soldiers; they quickly and quietly met their end.

Silently Jing Woo's platoon converged on the town's government center where President Kobe's personal emergency locator was emitting a very brief and difficult to intercept burst giving the President's location and general health status. The emergency locator was no bigger than a large ant and had been secretly inserted beneath his scalp by a Chinese doctor shortly after his taking office. Kobe had been concerned that the Lipiza Kisasi militia was targeting him and the Chinese ambassador had offered him the emergency locator in case of trouble and he had accepted gratefully. Not even his closest aides were aware, only his wife and the chief of his security forces had been told about it. That decision had allowed Chinese intelligence to track the movements of the attackers who had intercepted his vehicle convoy, killing most of his security detachment and taking him prisoner along with several of his cabinet members. Now that locator was providing a chance for the hostages to be rescued before any more of them were executed.

When they reached the town center Woo's technical specialist Sergeant Bao said, "This is where the President's locator says he is. He could be upstairs or downstairs though."

"Okay, send it then," she told Bao in a whisper.

The specialist nodded and activated a bee-sized spy drone then launched it towards the town's two-story government center building where the captives were thought to be held. In one hand Bao held a small screen that showed whatever appeared in the drone's camera view; with the other hand he manipulated the drone's controller.

As the spy drone approached the left side of the building Jing Woo opened the command channel to Colonel Chang and said quietly, "Scorpion One, we've made it to the town center undetected. A 'Bee' is on its way to check the windows first. Recommend first transports start on their way."

"Understood, Python. Commencing movement now." Chang's force would be 5,000 feet directly above their landing zones in less than five minutes. They would be on the ground in 30 seconds once the signal from Woo was received.

Bao had the 'Bee' flying silently from one darkened window to the next using its infrared camera to peer inside looking for the captives and for the militia fighters inside. There were six offices on the bottom floor and of the three on the left side in two of them appeared to have three or four militia fighters sleeping in them while several guards sat around talking in the front room.

"Going around to the other side now," said Bao. Woo kept watching the front of the building for any sign of movement. Two armed guards stood at the top of the stairs leaning against the building on either side of the entrance door smoking some of the locally produced cigarettes; Jing could tell what they were by the familiar disgusting aroma the light breeze carried over to her. There were two more guards sitting on the steps below them talking quietly. No one else seemed to be on the street but there were probably more fighters in the surrounding buildings. Bao whispered, "Two more guards awake in the center room, three sleepers in the back room. Looks like nobody in the front room on that side. No sign of any of the hostages."

"Okay, he must be top floor then. Let's have a look."

The 'Bee' floated up to the second floor where there were six more rooms and peeked into the window of the upstairs front room, "Four, civilians I think." The 'Bee' floated to the middle window where a light was on. "Three more guards, awake. Another one in the hall just outside." The rear room was next. "Priority target sighted. It's Mr. Kobe. He's lying down. Two more civilians, also on the floor. There's two guards right outside the door."

Woo had already given her squads their initial assignments and they were stealthily moving into position as they listened to Bao's reports. Two sniper teams had taken firing positions on the roofs of buildings to either side of their target structure. They adjusted their sights as their priority targets were identified. "Moving to the other side now." Each room on the other side of the building had at least two fighters in them but no other civilians were seen.

Woo called Chang, the transports were all in position above now, "Ready to move now, Scorpion One."

"Move in thirty seconds, Python. Mark."

"Mark." She gave the order, "Teams one and two, move now." She watched as pairs of shadows approached the entrance from both sides. The guards suddenly collapsed without a sound; silenced rounds had pierced their brains. Two Chinese soldiers hopped the stairs and caught the bodies of the two by the door before they hit the ground. "Ready to move," she told the two squad leaders waiting behind her.

The four Night Rangers checked around them then signaled for Woo to move forward with the two six-man squads. The sniper teams above watched the street in case they were seen; they weren't. Jing reached the door without incident and listened as Bao gave her an update. He had stayed behind and brought the 'Bee' back down to the first floor to confirm that no one had moved. *"Everyone's in the same spot, Lieutenant,"* came in over her comm.

She nodded to Sergeant Chow who quickly opened the front door and a dozen Night Rangers led by Woo ghosted into the downstairs hall. At the same time one of the snipers fired into the front room to the left while another fired into the rear room on the right where the guards were awake. One fighter dropped in each room as the sound of breaking glass caused the others to turn towards the windows just as two Chinese Rangers entered each room and killed the other guards without raising any alarms.

Jing had been holding her breath half expecting some of the sleeping guards in the other downstairs rooms to come awake and sound a warning but no sound was heard. The 'easy' part done she kept looking up the wide stairway where three guards were out in the upstairs hallway guarding the hostages. She triple-clicked to warn the sniper teams that they were about to move up the stairs. Rangers took up position by each of the other rooms ready to lob grenades inside.

Sergeant Peng, the sniper team leader on the side of the building where the captives were being held told her, *"We've got two of the guards in the hallway in our sights but the third is not in view. Ready to fire on your command."*

Woo triple-clicked again, the signal to go on a three-count. She nodded to her squad leaders and held up three fingers, lowering one at a time then as she brought the last one down she led her Rangers up the stairway. The snipers began taking out any guards they could see including two of the three in the hallway. The third turned to look when the fighter two feet to his right suddenly fell; the distraction gave Woo the second she needed to take him out. After that things moved quickly. The poorly trained fighters in the building began to react as explosions outside were heard coming from all directions; Colonel Chang's first wave was on the ground and taking out militia positions all over town. The fighters in the building reacted but too slowly and they were eliminated quickly by the highly trained Chinese.

###

Jing Mei Woo was born in Wuhan, China in 2098, the oldest child of Ling Hon and Ming Woo. In 2103 the great viral plague hit China and devastated a large part of the country including the area around Jing's hometown. Nearly 15,000,000 Chinese died from the influenza in just six months including both of her maternal grandparents, three aunts and uncles and several cousins. While her parents and her younger sister did not contract the influenza Jing did and the 5-year-old was hospitalized and battled the virus for several weeks before recovering from it. Tests confirmed that the young girl, while otherwise fully recovered, was now sterile and would never have children. Because so many had died in the extended family plus little Jing's infertility her parents were encouraged to have at least two more children which they did over the next four years giving Jing a little brother and another little sister.

It wasn't until Jing reached puberty that she was told about her condition. The parents had feared that the 11-year-old would take the news badly but it was just the opposite. For a day young Jing brooded about it, she did not like being told that she couldn't do something, but then her attitude changed completely. She realized that she was free from any obligation to have children, whether she wanted to or not, and she vowed to herself that she would live a life of adventure.

The youngster was a beautiful child with a bright smile and laughing eyes and for short time was a model for children's clothing. She was even offered a small part in a historical drama playing a daughter of one of China's ancient emperors. Her lines consisted of two words, 'yes, father', after which she told her parents she was not interested in being an actress. The hours of boredom waiting for her very brief part was not appealing at all and she turned her energies to both academic and athletic achievement. A top student in her middle school she was a good enough soccer player to qualify for the province's top team for her age group. She continued to advance as a soccer player throughout high school while adding volleyball, swimming and tennis to her repertoire of sports accomplishments. She was a top player in all of her sports and one of the best swimmers in her district.

At age 16 the coach of the junior national soccer team saw her play and thought that she had the potential to make the team. The coach met with Jing and her parents and encouraged her to concentrate on soccer, telling her that there was a chance that she could, maybe, make the national team in three or four years. While the attention was flattering and the vision of being on the Chinese Olympic team was tempting, there was certainly no guarantee that that would happen, and the thought of giving up her other sports did not appeal to her at all. Becoming a professional athlete had never been one of her goals and Jing realized that she needed to decide how she would make her dream of adventure come true.

In 2116 during her senior year in high school the creation of the Colonial Rangers was announced. Detachments of military personnel from sponsoring nations would be providing security for the explorers and other inhabitants of Earth's first extrasolar colony on the planet Tau Ceti 4. As soon as Jing heard about it she knew what she wanted to do. She just had to figure out how to go about doing it.

An outstanding athlete and superior academic achiever Jing applied to the Chinese Army Military Academy and was quickly accepted. The grueling three-year curriculum was geared to turn out superior officers and Jing Woo finished near the top of her class of over 800. Her high standing meant that she would have her choice of assignments upon graduation and when she was asked what she wanted to do she immediately answered, "I want to represent China in the Colonial Rangers at the New Hope colony." Reminded that all personnel chosen for the Colonial Rangers had to have at least two full years of service before they could apply she was asked for another choice. Jing had already known that but she wanted to get it on record early that it was something that she wanted to do in the future. She looked at the assignment board and told the colonel in charge of student placement that she wanted to join the Night Rangers, the most elite unit in the Chinese military.

Only a handful of females had survived the selection process for the Night Rangers and she was asked to choose a second choice in case she failed to qualify. Jing had no intention of failing but she had already thought it through and knowing that even the best candidate could suffer a disqualifying injury she told the assignments officer that in the event that she failed to make the Night Rangers she would like to go to flight school and become a Special Operations pilot.

The selection process for the Night Rangers was difficult and there were moments when Jing began to doubt that she could make it through but those doubts only made her that much more determined. The young lieutenant made it through the grueling training process and earned her Night Ranger pin. Like the American Navy SEALs, the Night Rangers had to be able to operate in any environment and the training Jing went through over the next twelve months included parachute and ultralight glider training, five different styles of hand-to-hand combat, combat swimming, underwater demolitions and water survival, survival courses in jungle warfare, desert warfare and mountain warfare, sniper training, and celestial navigation.

She earned the respect of her instructors as she excelled in all aspects of her training. Her lead instructor told her privately that when he had first seen her and saw how beautiful she was he had doubted that she had what it would take and he apologized for judging her on her looks. Jing just laughed; this had happened many times throughout her life and it did not bother her at all. In fact she rather enjoyed making those who doubted her because of her looks look foolish. She was very happy that she was beautiful even though she knew that her looks sometimes got in the way when other people had to make decisions about her. She'd realized that as a young teenager and simply decided to use it to her advantage. If anybody doubted that she could do whatever it was that she set her mind to she would just work that much harder to impress them and change their minds.

Now, fourteen months later she was a highly regarded platoon leader in the Night Rangers and had been personally chosen by Colonel Chang to lead this rescue mission.

###

The captives rescued, Woo reported to Colonel Chang who greeted her with a smile and a congratulatory handshake. "Welcome, Lieutenant Woo, Excellent work!"

"Thank you, Colonel."

"I am more than pleased with your performance and that of your platoon. Not only were you able to save all of the remaining hostages and kill or capture over a hundred of the Lipiza Kisasi fighters, you managed to get your platoon through it with only two wounded and none killed!" He had warned her to expect as many as fifty percent casualties; hers was a particularly dangerous mission but vital to the overall success of the operation.

Jing grinned, "They are an outstanding group and know how to keep their heads down."

"Agreed but your leadership was outstanding and I am very glad to have you in my battalion."

"Thank you, Colonel. It's nice of you to say that."

"Come, sit down," he pointed to an empty chair next to his makeshift desk in the town's government center. She took the indicated seat and sat gratefully, it had been a long day and night and she was ready to get off her feet for a while. "When you first reported in I saw in your record that you have requested assignment to one of our detachments going to that colony on Tau Ceti 4. Is that still something you wish to do?"

Jing's eyes lit up in surprise and excitement, "Yes, very much so, Colonel. It is something I've wanted since before the Academy. It is why I applied to go there in the first place although I do love being with the Night Rangers."

He smiled, "Good answer, Lieutenant." He pulled on his lower lip in thought then said, "I believe that an officer with your potential and leadership ability would bring honor to our nation if you represented us in the Colonial Rangers. Whether you return to the Night Rangers, or move on to other assignments within the army or even if you choose to remain with the Colonial Ranger organization after you complete a tour with a detachment of Chinese Rangers I think you will make all of China proud."

Hardly believing that she'd heard correctly what the Colonel had just said Jing tried to contain her excitement and she asked cautiously lest she make a fool of herself, "Colonel, are you saying that I can go? Go to the colony with one of our country's detachments?"

Chang chuckled, "Those who make that decision have had their eye on you for some time, Lieutenant. General Chau wanted me to evaluate your performance and give her a recommendation one way or the other. You've been with the Night Rangers for over a year and your company commander has reported that you are an outstanding officer and that your platoon would follow you into hell if you asked them to. This last mission was your nineteenth, I believe?" Jing nodded in confirmation. "After this mission I think the time has come to forward my recommendation to General Chau that you be assigned to the next available Chinese detachment joining the Colonial Rangers. Congratulations, Lieutenant!" He stood and offered his hand again.

Jing stood and shook his hand gratefully, "Thank you, Colonel. I will not disappoint you!"

Chang nodded, "I'm sure you won't. Keep in mind though that even if you are approved all the way up, and I believe you will be, it could be months before a spot for a detachment platoon commander opens up. In the meantime you'll continue your work with the Night Rangers. Please try not to get killed before you go," he admonished her.

Jing chuckled, "I'll try not to, Sir. And thank you."

Things went very quickly from that point. She was formerly accepted into the Colonial Rangers program just three weeks later and received orders to join a detachment of Chinese Rangers that had begun their three-month Ranger course two weeks earlier. She would replace an officer who had broken his leg four days into the course and under the circumstances she was deemed the best candidate to replace him. With her background her superiors were confident that she could join the detachment without losing a step. The detachment completed its training in May of 2122 and after a two-week leave to visit her family Jing and the rest of the Chinese detachment boarded the cargo supply ship *Antarctica* in June 2122 for the six-month voyage to the New Hope Colony on the planet Tau Ceti 4.

Jing had already become good friends with fellow platoon leader Lieutenant Eva Zhang and during that voyage she would meet several female officers from the other national detachments onboard who would become her close friends. This group would, like Jing, all

decide to remain at the colony when their detachments finished their tours of duty and returned to Earth. This group included Captain Claudia Stairs, commander of the American detachment and one of her platoon commanders, Lieutenant Zoey Bryant, and two other platoon commanders, Japanese Lieutenant Yui Watanabe and French Lieutenant Melissa Rossi.

Her Chinese detachment was assigned to Delta Company along with the Americans under Claudia Stairs who as the senior captain became the company commander while the Chinese detachment commander served as her executive officer. About eight months later Jing and her friends were introduced to the colony's Director of Logistics Lieutenant Commander Rick Cassidy and his senior NCO Gunnery Sergeant Molly Pickford at a barbecue at Cassidy's residence in New Hope Town. This barbecue was attended by almost all of the female officers in the Ranger Regiment; it was organized by First Battalion's Executive officer Major Judith Sorensen. Cassidy and Pickford would both come to be among Jing Woo's closest friends and occasional bed-partners.

Her detachment left the colony in December 2125 and after several months on First Battalion's staff Jing was promoted to captain. That August she was assigned to take over the Chinese detachment in Alpha Company from the newly-promoted Major Chun Liu who was moved to the regiment's staff. The other detachment of Alpha was a group of Australians under Captain Rodger Hamilton. One of Hamilton's platoon leaders was Lieutenant Jason Ramsey who would marry Molly Pickford in early 2126 to the great surprise of most everyone who knew both Cassidy and Pickford.

Chapter 2

A Late-night Meal

New Hope Town

It had been a long exhausting day and Major Naomi MacCaffrey was so tired she couldn't remember when she'd last eaten. It had been dark for several hours before she'd finally left her office and sent her Russian assistant First Sergeant Ivan Kurchenko back to the Ranger barracks to rest. She wanted to find something to put in her empty stomach so her first stop was at the cafeteria in the administrative center onboard the converted exploration ship *Seeker* that now served as the headquarters for the Colonial Ranger Regiment and the colonial administration. It was closed at that late hour however so she decided to return to Commander Rick Cassidy's residence where she was now living. She'd simply have to find something in the fridge there.

The vehicle that was reserved for her use was waiting outside where she'd left it. She started off on the ten minute trip to what, after just a few days, she was beginning to consider home. Rick Cassidy and Molly Pickford had insisted that she move into residence the night before their ill-fated flight on *Cairo* left New Hope Town in the wee hours of the morning. MacCaffrey was effectively in charge of the house that now doubled as a refuge for many of the female officers who were starting to move out of the crowded barracks at the Ranger Base.

When she pulled up outside the residence she noticed there were lights on. Several female officers were staying there including Lieutenants Lizette Vidal, Olga Kasparov and Heidi Kurtz. They'd all found the quiet and friendly haven of Cassidy's residence preferable to the overcrowded barracks which now housed not only most of the Rangers in town, it now housed hundreds of volunteers, many of them evacuees from Southport, who'd come forward to help with the defense of the colony since the emergency began less than two full days ago.

When Naomi entered the house there was no one in the front room but a light was on in the kitchen at the back of the house. She looked down the hallway to her left; all three bedroom doors were closed and probably occupied. When she reached the open door to the large guest room off the main living area she peeked inside. A night light was on and she saw a young Chinese officer lying on her back with her eyes closed. She recognized the sleeping woman still in her Ranger fatigues as Lieutenant Yuan Sun. Naomi had met the Alpha Company platoon commander the morning before at the cargo terminal when she'd come with a working party to pick up material they needed before Alpha left for New St Louis that afternoon. MacCaffrey hadn't known that her unit had returned already.

Naomi passed by the open door to Cassidy's darkened larger bedroom where she was now staying and continued on to the kitchen. She was surprised to see an exhausted looking male lieutenant sitting at the table staring off into space with an open but otherwise untouched bottle of beer on the table in front of him. Males were not allowed in the residence, Cassidy being the exception, but she ignored the man for the moment as she opened the refrigerator. She was grateful to see a bowl of leftover pasta someone had made that evening waiting for her. Naomi

took it out and put it in the microwave to heat it up then turned her attention to the man who was now watching her.

“I’m Major MacCaffrey,” she said, not sure how formal she needed to be with the stranger, an Australian by his shoulder patch. “Who are you, Lieutenant? And why are you here?”

The strain of the last couple of days was showing on his face but MacCaffrey saw that there was something else there as well. He looked up at her and said quietly, “I’m Jason Ramsey, Molly Pickford’s husband.” Cassidy had introduced them ten months earlier and to everyone’s surprise they’d married a few months later.

The exhausted Canadian slumped down in a chair when she heard his name. “Jason Ramsey. I’m sorry. I should have realized who you were right away when I saw your shoulder patch. I’m Naomi. I am very sorry for your loss. I only got to know Molly for a very short time. She was a very impressive young woman.”

“Impressive? You don’t know the half of it,” he said with a wry smile. “One-of-a-kind I’d say.” He pointed to the bowl of pasta inside the microwave, “Go ahead, you need to eat. You look almost as bad as I feel.”

“*That* bad, eh?” MacCaffrey gave a tired sigh. She got up slowly to rescue the pasta from the microwave and put it on the table. “It’s been a long few days. We’ve had thousands of refugees pouring in. We’re trying to take care of them, and we’re trying to find material for the Rangers getting ready to head east, *and* for all the local defense projects. It’s been nonstop, all day, all night. I don’t think I’ve had more than some bread and crackers to eat today. Sorry.” She stirred the hot pasta then lifted a forkful carefully to her mouth and blew on it to make sure it wasn’t too hot to eat. Satisfied, she shoved in a mouthful, swallowing it quickly.

“No worries, Major. I’ve been sitting here trying to get up the nerve to go back to our apartment. I still can’t believe she’s gone. In fact, I don’t believe she is. Molly’s out there somewhere along with Cassidy and the rest of them. I just know it. Those two both have nine lives and they’ve only used up four or five of them each. Those two together, they’re just about indestructible, I tell ya.”

“You really believe that they’re out there somewhere?” Naomi asked him doubtfully. “I hope you’re right. But even if you are, I don’t know how anyone can help them. It looks like they’re surrounded on every side by mountains except maybe to the north if they made it far enough and who knows how far away from help they are.”

The Australian grinned at her, “This ain’t the first time, or even the second time, *or third*, that my girl’s been in a pickle, in a *really* bad situation surrounded by bad guys with little hope of survival. Rick, too. I’m telling you, they’ve each got nine lives like a couple of alley cats.” His grin faded and he looked away for a moment.

MacCaffrey downed a few more bites which were already making her feel better. “I never got to hear any of their war stories.” Naomi said. “I did hear something about Cassidy and demon wolves but that was after they left.”

Sad as he was feeling, Jason Ramsey chuckled at the mention of Cassidy and demon wolves. “That is one crazy brave boyo, that one is. Have you seen the video file?” When MacCaffrey shook her head he said, “It is wild! When you see it you’ll have an idea why I wouldn’t want anyone else to have Molly’s back out there. I know I couldn’t have done what he did. I don’t know anyone else who could have either; except maybe Molly herself now.”

Naomi MacCaffrey raised her eyebrows at that kind of backing of Cassidy from Molly Pickford’s husband. “Are you saying that you’d rather have Rick out there with her than you?”

Jason Ramsey blinked several times as he stared at her and frowned. Then his frown relaxed into a little grin. He chuckled, “Yeah, I guess I am. I hate to admit that but if there’s anyone can help her and them kids get back here safe, no matter how long it takes, it’s Rick Cassidy and I know he feels the same way about her having his back.”

“That’s a pretty big endorsement of them both, especially Cassidy.” Naomi thought about the group of kids who were with them, “You know, maybe you should go over to the school and talk to some of the parents of those kids. You seem to know them better than anyone and I’m sure they could use some words of encouragement. Some reason to hope.”

Ramsey looked at her and slowly nodded, “You think that would help? I guess I can see that. I’ll try to do that soon.”

“Good.” Changing the subject she asked, “That Chinese lieutenant in the other room, you know her? I hadn’t heard that her unit was on the way back.”

“Yuan? Sure, I know her. We’re both in Alpha Company and we just got back to town a couple of hours ago. We came over here together once we sent the troops back to the barracks. We were only in New St Louis for a few hours with our platoons. The rest of Alpha stayed here to help start training the volunteers. We were sent there just to help with the evac. Then they sent us back with 1,100 refugees on the *Athens*. After they relieved us of all our ammo and weapons. I guess they figured they needed that stuff more than we did. We haven’t slept more than a couple of hours over the last three days, not with that midnight wake up two nights ago. Nobody slept on the flight out, we were all too amped up and we didn’t get any rest on the flight back either. There were a lot of injured on that flight and twice as many people as seats. Yuan was so tired that I had to take her boots off for her. She was asleep before I got the second one off.”

“I know Molly left some things here. Do you want to take them with you?” Naomi asked.

Jason shrugged indifferently then he gave Naomi another, more cheerful little smile, “No. Just keep them here for now. Like I said, she’ll be back, no matter how long it takes. That bird’s got nerves of steel when she needs them. They came in handy when she saved some of your fellow Canadians back in Africa.”

Naomi’s head came up and her eyes opened wide in surprise. She asked guardedly, “What Canadians do you mean?”

Jason Ramsey grinned in obvious pride of his wife’s courage and remarkable past. “Oh, it was maybe a year or so before she came here. That was, what, over three years ago. Before she got promoted to gunnery sergeant, she was a squad leader with some Marines in Africa. Nigeria it was. She and one of her squad were hiding on top of this little hill surrounded by over a

hundred of the worst bunch of cutthroats you could imagine when they dragged these Canadian soldiers, I think there were some Norwegians too, out of the jungle. There were going to cut the head off one of them.” Jason paused to down some of his beer and he didn’t notice the frozen expression on Naomi MacCaffrey’s face which had turned almost white.

He continued, “She told me that there was no way she was going to let them execute a hostage right front of her eyes and do nothing. So she and her squadie opened fire even though they had no protection other than a few bushes. Then she jumps down and killed all the guys around the hostages first, and then she fights some of them hand to hand. She got hit twice in the vest, that knocked her down for a sec but she popped right back up. Took one off the helmet too that rang her bell right good but she kept going. Luckily, the rest of her company got there just in time to back them up and they caught the bad guys in a crossfire. She said that when the shooting stopped, she pulled the bodies of some of the bad guys off the gal they were going to chop the head off of and made sure she was okay. She got a couple of medals for that, including one from your guys.” It was only then that Jason noticed the stricken expression she was wearing and the tears running down Naomi’s face. Unsure what was wrong, he asked, “Naomi? What’s the matter?”

Naomi MacCaffrey tried to wipe her tears with her hands and said in a voice filled with sorrow and disbelief, “That was *her*? That was *Molly*? How can that be? How can that be? She was killed. I went to her funeral.”

Jason shifted uneasily in his chair, not quite sure at first what was going on there. Then the fog cleared and it came to him. He locked eyes with MacCaffrey and said in amazement, “That was *you*! That was *you* they were going to kill, wasn’t it?” Naomi wordlessly nodded her head and began to cry in shame, full of regret for not having recognized her savior when she was right in front of her.

“How could I have missed that?” she muttered to herself and covered her face with her hands.

A grinning Jason Ramsey got up from his chair; he walked around the table to the distressed woman and leaned down to put his arms around her. “I am very pleased to meet you, Naomi MacCaffrey. There’s no need to cry now.”

It took a few minutes for Naomi to recover. When she did she saw the now happily smiling Jason Ramsey watching her. She saw the open bottle of beer in front of her and drank deeply from it. “I can’t believe this;” she said in a near whisper. “That means that Molly Pickford is Susan Bennett, doesn’t it? And Rick Cassidy is ...”

Ramsey nodded; he put his finger up to his lips and made a shushing sign, “She’s really very proud of that moment, you know. I’ll bet that she didn’t recognize you either. After all *you* were a bit of a mess back then I hear.”

“I can’t argue with that.”

Chapter 3

Strategic Reserve

New Hope Town

While Jason took a shower in the master bathroom, Naomi sat in the kitchen playing with the remains of her pasta while her mind went around in circles trying to comprehend the fact that the person who had saved her life had stood before her and neither had recognized the other. Now she was missing, perhaps dead. The turn of events was incomprehensible.

It hadn't been until three weeks after she'd returned to Canada and been released from the hospital that she'd been told that the Marine staff sergeant from the incident at the consulate in Douala, Cameroon was the same one who'd saved her weeks earlier. She'd wanted to meet her but soon after that the assassination attempts on Sue Bennett and Paul O'Brien were all over the news. Then it was reported that they'd both been killed. She'd flown to Washington to attend the joint funeral for the two heroes. There Naomi had met O'Brien's young daughter Ciara who'd grieved for them both.

As she tried to recall everything she'd seen or heard since meeting the two Americans she suddenly remembered something that Molly had said when she'd brought her to the house that first time. Molly had said the words, "I got you, Major." For a fleeting second that had provoked a vague recognition. The Marine who'd rescued her had said "I got you" exactly the same way. It was the same voice. *How did that get past me?* Naomi wondered.

Jason Ramsey came back to the kitchen dressed in clothes from the closet in the room where Yuan was sleeping. "You okay, Naomi? Couldn't finish your pasta I see. May I?" Without waiting for a response he helped himself to the plate in front of her, quickly devouring what remained. "Needed that. Thanks."

"I'm still trying to wrap my head around this, Jason. Something you said earlier though, about them sending you back minus your guns and ammo. What was that about?"

He sighed, "They're real short of ammunition out there. That's why they sent us back without our gear. And they are arming anybody who knows how to shoot. But without the bullets that won't do much good unless they send out some more."

Naomi nodded, "That's been a big topic ever since this started. The first thing I had to do when I got dropped in it was to find the ammo containers marked for First Battalion. They were still sitting at the terminal. It's a big cause of worry at Regiment but it's not something they want to talk about in public."

"What about the reserve? It can't be gone already, there's too much of it," Jason asked in confusion.

"What reserve are you talking about?" MacCaffrey asked in equal confusion.

"The *strategic reserve*," Jason told her.

"What *strategic reserve*? I asked General Jamison if we had one; he said no, they were specifically prohibited from stockpiling weapons or ammo. The politicians back on Earth were afraid somebody was going to try to take over the colony or some such dribble."

Jason sat back staring at her in bewilderment for a moment then he shook his head and laughed. “Oh my, my! Those two scoundrels! I should have known! When I get my hands on that little minx I’m going to put her over my knee and give her a good spanking! Of course if I try it’ll probably be me that gets spanked. I might even like that,” he gave her a buoyant smile.

“Can you give me a clue what you’re talking about?” MacCaffrey asked, perplexed by Jason’s spanking diversion.

“No doubt they wanted to shield me if they got caught even though they had me help ‘em on a couple of occasions.”

“Perhaps another clue, please. That was just a might vague for me right now. My batteries are running down fast.”

Jason chuckled, “We used to joke about Cassidy leading a revolution and declaring independence. Those two schemers already had their fingers in so many pies they both smelled like cherries. They told me it was under the table but had the full backing of the Regimental Commander and that it had to stay covert. If one of those dimwit government reps found out they’d scream bloody murder. Could get him relieved, even court-martialed.”

“Are you saying that they were stockpiling weapons and ammunition illegally?” MacCaffrey asked in astonishment and with a mix of distress and hope. “But why?”

“Why? Why did you ask the Colonel if there was a reserve?” Ramsey challenged her.

“I..., but...”

“See?” Jason asked. “You *would* think we’d *have* one, right? What if for some reason a shipment didn’t come in? Didn’t get loaded, maybe someone decided we’d enough already. Or one of the scheduled departures gets pushed back because the ship has some kind of problem. All those have things have happened at least once since I’ve been here. Do you have any idea how much ammo some of these detachments shoot off for practice? First Batt is always sending part of our allotment out there because some of them go through everything they’re allotted *before* they go out in the field for real.”

“But how? Where? How much do they have put away?”

Ramsey shrugged. “I’ve never seen it all but there’s a lot of it, I know that. There’s a section in the yard where they put all the boxes as they come off the supply ships. Then they do their magic. Then the boxes get moved to the standby areas for shipment to their ultimate destinations. They asked me to help once when they had a really big shipment come in about five months ago on the *Antarctica*. There were a few things that needed to be moved from one container to another. They would’ve done it by themselves but it was raining and they needed to get it done like quick. Telling me was a sign of trust, ya know? They’ve been skimmin’ ten percent or so off the top for over two years *and* placing some of their own orders on top of that. Who knows what they’ve saved up over time? They fix the paperwork so that nobody’s the wiser and no one’s ever noticed either.”

“What possessed them to even start this? That was a real risk to take, wasn’t it?”

Jason scratched his neck in thought before answering. “Well, yes and no. Now that you know the truth about them, that makes you just the third person here who knows. Far as I know

it's just you, me, and the General. His predecessor General Black knew who they were too. You may have noticed that they've had a bit more, let's just say, latitude, than one might expect your typical loggy to have."

"So I've noticed," Naomi said, acknowledging the obvious.

"It's not just that the General would protect them if somebody complained. You, even in the short time you've been here, have an idea of what they're capable of. Stuff nobody else would dare try. Life and death stuff. Wait till you see Cassidy's wolf video. Their little stunt at the Consulate. What she did for you. Some of the stuff they went through while they were on the run. Fucking fearless they are. Calm as death when they need to be. So where others wouldn't even consider asking, they'll go right up to the manager in charge and *tell* him, or her, what they want and they get it. But they're also gonna make sure that that manager gets something in return. Everybody wins, unless someone decides to be really uncooperative or thinks that they are more important than everybody else or gets verbally abusive. Well, that could be real bad news for him. Or her. But usually it's a him.

"You have *no idea* what they've accomplished since they got here, even though it increased their risk of being recognized. They call it 'hiding in plain sight'. They've transformed this place in some important ways. Ways that have really made it a better place to live. There isn't a top manager of any company on the planet that doesn't wonder at times who's really in charge of the colony including some of the senior officers among the Rangers, too. Some of the government reps, as well. Not to mention the previous Colony Administrator and the current one, Van Name. And everything, *everything* they've done here has been for the common good, well except this house of course and ain't nobody who matters complaining about that. And they almost never let anyone recognize them publicly for it. They prefer to let others take the credit publicly which just enhances their own position when they want something else done."

"Sounds like they must have been pretty popular, as well as efficient. And influential."

"More than you could know! And just what would the General have done if he'd found out about this? Not a damn thing. Slap them on the wrist in public if word got out. Distribute the booty? Even if he didn't know who they were, what could he do without ending up with a mob bearing torches pounding at his door? Call in the Rangers? Some of these guys and girls worship Rick Cassidy just for the wolf thing alone. The ones who've been here a while all know what they've done for them. And what if word got back to Earth? Okay, then it would be a misunderstanding they'd blame on one of the previous RegComs. Like that ass Katsulis or poor McBain who got himself killed. Oops, sorry, won't do it again."

Naomi shook her head in wonder, "Can you show me where this stash is?"

"Sure, in the morning. It's too late now. Speaking of late, I'm going to stay here tonight, if you don't mind. I'll bunk with Yuan. She'll be okay with it."

"I guess that's alright. I need to get some sleep too," Naomi said with a yawn. She started getting up, "You say they've got a lot of stuff. Are you saying, like three or four containers full of ammo and other stuff? Because that would really help."

Jason had already risen and taken a few steps towards the guest bedroom when she asked her question. He turned around grinning and said, “Three or four containers? I don’t think you quite understood what I was saying. Not three or four. Try twenty or thirty. Not just ammo and guns, of course. That’s maybe half of it.”

Stunned, the tired major hadn’t truly grasped the scope of what Cassidy and Pickford had done until that moment. All she could say was, “Oh, my god!”