

The Cornerstone

First Chapter

The brass, the bullets, the bravado glittered in the noonday sun. The white perfection of dress uniform, the sanitary gray of the ship, the gently reassuring lapping of the water, all melted into the drone of yet another speech. Rear Admiral Ian McKenzie, USN looked through his sunglasses at the assembly gathered on the deck before him . . . the spit, the polish, the gold cord, the ladies' hats, the impotent spires of the mothballed battleships in the Bremerton Naval Shipyards. How many times had he been through this protocol? He couldn't begin to remember. Too many years, too many wars clogged the memory. One retirement ceremony was just like another. Speech, salute, speech, salute. Razz, remember, commemorate, decorate, kiss, shake, salute that's it golf, write memoirs, die . . . or, as MacArthur preferred, simply fade away.

Whichever.

The air quaked as two jets flew low overhead. A surprise salute? A coincidence perhaps? Or maybe two young smartass pilots from the Whidbey Island Naval Air Station having a looksee at the fleeting pomp as it circumstanced on the decks of the USS Missouri.

As the air stilled and the attention of the crowd came back to rest on the podium, McKenzie returned to the moment and realized it was his turn to speak. As all eyes came to rest upon his glorious gold and white, he rose and approached the podium. Just as surely as the lovely lady Missouri underneath him, Rear Admiral Ian McKenzie, age sixty-three, after forty-six years of service to his country, was being ushered out. No Middle Eastern squabble to save either of them this time. It was 1992, and time for them both to move on. She was out. He was out. At long last. He hadn't prepared a speech. What was there to say? And who out there cared? With Helen and Ian, Jr. dead, what was the point? He took off his sunglasses and looked out over the assembled congregation. Smiling ladies, attentive officers, local luminaries, crackerjacks standing fast around the perimeter of the ship.

He took the easy way out. He smiled and said, "I've been to enough of these to know there's really not much a man can say after forty-six years. Those preceding me here on this dais today have been more than kind. If I had it to do over again, I would. Just as I know ol' Mighty MO would if she could. But things change." He looked at the bunting strung from the once proud cannons, then continued, "But we

both received our last orders and so . . . now . . . all there's left to do is. . . " He smiled as best he could, brought his hand up, and saluted.

The chaplain offered a prayer, the Master of Ceremonies ordered the retirement of the colors, and then he said solemnly, "Rear Admiral, United States Navy, -- departing. . . " The band started softly playing "Anchors Away" at a slow cadence as McKenzie walked down off the stage. He stopped and stood in front of his sideboys eight sailors, four on each side, especially chosen, in bright, perfect crackerjack uniforms. The only movement was their black neckerchiefs, the only sounds the whisper of the band and the flags and bunting snapping in the breeze.

Then, as though to clear the air of such solemnity, Dingding, Dingding, Dingding, Dingding. Eight bells. The sideboys saluted and McKenzie was, once again, a civilian.

Nothing to it.

"Sir? Admiral?" Lt. Lance Harding, McKenzie's adjutant, called in through the office door.

McKenzie, caught smiling down at the last photo taken of his wife and son, snapped his head up and answered, "Come in, Lieutenant." He carefully wrapped the picture in newspaper and added it to the box, nearly full, on his desk. "Just packing up the last few things."

The lieutenant, now in his khakis and looking his thirtyish age, rather than like a shavetail recruit in crackerjacks, appeared in the doorway. "Need help, sir?"

"Almost done, Lance. Thanks. Thanks for everything. Nice ceremony. Went off without a hitch." He took some plaques down from the wall and put them into the box.

McKenzie gave them a cursory look and replied, "Right."

"Oh, and this just came in. It's a confirmation from that Camp Roswell." He handed McKenzie a thin, curled sheet of fax paper.

"Refresh my memory."

"The kids' camp you went to back in forty-four. They're dedicating a new lodge in your name and you said you'd speak at the ceremonies. You agreed last spring, remember, sir?"

"Oh, Christ!" McKenzie moaned as he scanned the letter. "Can you get me out of it?"

"They're expecting you this Thursday, sir, but. . ." the lieutenant said diplomatically, "I could tell them you're not feeling well."

"Yes, all right. Do that." But as the lieutenant started to leave, McKenzie stopped him with, "No, wait, Lance." He paused as he looked at his appointment calendar, clean, white, waiting for adventures to be scribbled in, and said, "Oh sure, why the hell not. It's what, maybe an hour south of here? Nothing better to do. Tell them I'll be there." He turned and looked through his office window at the Missouri and whispered absently, "In the cool, cool, cool of the evening . . . tell them I'll be there. . . "

"Sir?" the lieutenant asked.

"I'll be there," the admiral replied curtly. How well he and Helen had imitated Crosby and Wyman's crooning.

"Christ," he thought, still looking out the window. "It went so fast . . . " He called the lieutenant.

"Sir?"

"You tell them anything about my health and I'll see that you wear nothing but that crackerjack getup for the rest of your living days. In fact, I'll see to it you're buried in it!"

The lieutenant smiled in at the admiral and replied, "Aye aye, sir."

That following Thursday afternoon, instead of being greeted with a gush of warm, Puget Sound memories when

he walked into Camp Roswell, McKenzie was overcome by an immediate sense of regret. The towering firs, the weathered, hand-carved signs offered no welcome, nor did the smell of the salt air nor the sound of faraway campers at play.

He stopped at the check-in cabin, freshly painted and bright, set his grip down, and wondered what the hell he was doing here. If he was the most notable dignitary the board of directors could dig up among the endless rosters of past campers, then Roswell had hardly inspired greatness.

With the exception of some vocal crows above, no one had noticed his arrival. He briefly considered leaving, then remembered that admirals never retreat, although they could, on occasion, change their mind. But he'd already saluted Lt. Harding and the staff car off. What was he going to do, hitchhike back to Bremerton? Besides, he was here now. Might as well check in, orate, get it over with, and find that condo in Arizona where the air was easier and the widows unrelenting. Dressed in his cool khakis, McKenzie didn't feel quite like he fit in with the warm, dark green of the forest. He walked down the path, pulled by the sounds of the waterfront. He stopped at a crossroads of nicely blacktopped pathways. One sign pointed down to 'Registration and Infirmary' and another sign pointed up to 'Ball Field, Rifle Range and Outback.'

A step further down and a ball, tennis it was, zoomed past him. He was barely able to step aside in time to avoid being stepped aside by a large, rampaging dog in pursuit of the missile. The dog, oblivious to rank and uniform, whirled around the admiral, dashed into the bushes, and emerged, grinning, ball in mouth, tail wagging. Just as the admiral instinctively leaned down to extract the ball and propel it and the dog further uphill, there came a shrill whistle from below.

The dog sprang forward in response and dashed off through the bracken. No finely paved roads for he, not when there was a whistle to respond to.

McKenzie smiled and brushed back a slight whisper from his past. He continued his journey toward the waterfront.

A voice, an angry voice, brought him to a halt. "God damn it, Sadler! Get that dog out of here! Last time!"

McKenzie looked down through the trees at a camp counselor, higher echelon no doubt, speaking down to what he could only surmise to be a camper. Barking adamantly at his side was the dog, impatient with such delays. McKenzie stepped closer for a clearer picture of the kid. At first, he was unable to determine its sex, and he had to stifle a chuckle as he inspected the lop-sided haircut . . . closely cut and snowy white above the right ear, shoulder length and blood-red over the left. When he looked past the hair, he finally determined the kid was a boy. Baggy

shorts, sloppy ankletop shoes, oversized plaid shirt. "Screw you, Canaday!" the boy hollered back.

"I mean it, Matt!" the man, Canaday, hollered back down to the kid. "Stop encouraging that dog. We have some top brass coming out this week, and I'll be damned if that mutt is going to be peeing on my new rhodies!"

"He's not my dog!" Matt screeched.

The dog dropped the tennis ball and watched it roll down the path. Then he retrieved it himself, obediently, as though to taunt the humans barking so needlessly on

Canaday unclipped a walkie-talkie off his belt and spoke into it. McKenzie decided to crouch down until the skirmish below began to cool.

Another counselor type came up to Canaday and Sadler. He handed a rope to Canaday and, with crisp, camp-like efficiency, ran back into the woods.

"Here," Canaday said, handing Sadler the rope. "The soonest the Humane Society can get out here is Saturday morning. Now, take that dog, tie him up outside the service entrance, and go back to your cabin to get ready for dinner. That settles that."

"Tie him up for two days?" Matt asked, horrified. "Like hell I will!"

"Well, we'll take down water and food, of course. But don't think for a minute I'm going to have that filthy mutt hanging around here with all our guests arriving." With that, Canaday walked briskly back up the path, leaving the kid, the dog, and the rope behind. McKenzie rose and continued to pick his way down the path.

As he was roping the dog, Matt caught sight of him out of the corner of his eye. "You one of the blow-ups for the dedication crap?"

"Blow-ups?"

"Yeah. You know, mucky-mucks, big-wigs, blow-ups."

"That about sums it up."

"Sweet. Canaday'll wet his pants having a real uniform around here. Wouldn't be surprised if he has you bless his fleet of leaky rowboats."

McKenzie leaned down and pet the dog. "Nice animal."

"Dog's a pest and a fanatic. He's on his way to the pound, dude," Matt said, looking at the admiral through his shock of hair.

The admiral gently lifted the rope off the dog's neck, took the tennis ball out of its slobbery mouth, and tossed it with

all his strength out over the bushes until it vanished and, after it, the dog.

McKenzie looked after the dog, smiled, snapped his fingers, and said, "Darn. Got away again." He handed the rope back to the kid and added, "Here, better get rid of this."

Matt smiled at the conflict between the blow-up's rank and actions. He gave a sloppy salute and the admiral returned it, saying, "Carry on, dude." He picked up his grip and continued down the path, thinking that maybe returning to Camp Roswell wasn't such a bad idea after all. And leaving Matt Sadler thinking, no doubt, that just maybe the last two days of camp weren't going to be such a bust after all.