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Pure Fusion

Bill Buchanan

PART 1

OUT OF BALANCE

Day 3, February 5, 2010

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Angel Of Death, 02/05/2010, Fri, 09:21 A.M.
Hama, Syria

For *Times* correspondent Wyley Ramsi, it all started in Hama. Once Syria's most scenic city, today the Orontes River meandered lifelessly through town under a dreary, overcast sky. As for its western bank—well, he'd been instructed to follow the west bank to the barricades. So far, except for dead fish and scavenging dogs, it'd been practically deserted. It was a cold, drizzly-gray winter morning, the kind where damp wind and rain leave you chilled to the bone. Exhausted and shivering, Ramsi wished he'd never left home.

Rumors on the road to Damascus were running rampant—chemical weapons, water poisoning, tribal genocide, drug-related mass murder—but at this early stage of his investigation, only one thing was certain. Something horrific happened here three days ago, in the middle of the night, and Syrian President Bashar Assad had banned the press—until today.

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Wyley drove the 120 miles from Damascus to Hama early Friday morning and even then, after talking with dozens of refugees along the way, he didn't know exactly what to expect. He knew it was bad, but no one really knew what had happened. He'd brought enough clothes, food and water for a week—didn't want to risk contamination—a notepad, laptop computer, three camera bags crammed with photographic equipment, a case of batteries, two tripods, a lead-lined bag filled with a hundred rolls of film, a parabolic dish, portable satellite uplink and a phone. His mid-sized car was packed full. Still, nothing could have prepared him for this day.

Being there, experiencing Hama first hand would change Wyley forever and yet, this was only the beginning.

Slowing to a stop alongside the river, he studied a hand-drawn road map sketched for him by a refugee. *This is about as close as I'll get*, he judged, squinting in the dim light. Dry contacts bothered him and he reached for eye drops. Feeling his shirt pocket empty, Wyley sighed. *Figures*. He'd left them back home in his Beirut office. Blinking, he formed tears, then studied the street signs. Marked intersections were few and far between in this part of town.

He parked the rental car in a dank honeycomb of narrow alleyways, just short of the military barricades surrounding the old Barudi neighborhood. *One thing about deserted city streets*, Ramsi observed tiredly, *the dogs are quick to move in and take over*. Sliding his pistol into his trench coat pocket, he grabbed his 35 mm camera bag off the front floorboard and started walking down the west bank.

Rounding the first bend, Ramsi stopped cold in his tracks. Squinting to focus, the scene looked like an old black and white picture from the German concentration camps of World War II—bodies heaped on top of bodies, hundreds of them dumped willy-nilly along the west bank. He'd been told the

Hama clean-up was complete, yet these corpses hadn't been taken out of the city. *Like father, like son*, he thought. *Assad wants me to see this; He wants the world to see.*

Instinctively, Ramsi mounted a wide angle lens, moved closer to the shore line, and framed the shot. Looking down stream, dead fish and human bodies extended off frame, seemingly into infinity. He had to get close-ups; their faces, who were these people?

His pace quickened, his energy renewed. Moving nearer this horrific scene, he swapped lenses on the fly, mounting his favorite face lens, the Nikor 50-135 zoom. His breathing was rapid now, when suddenly the wind took his breath away. A nauseating stench washed over him unlike anything he'd ever experienced—rotting fish and flesh.

And it only got worse.

The nearer he drew to the dead, the closer he looked, the more vividly real their deaths became. These people could have been Wyley's family, friends, or relatives. At second glance, these weren't like Nazi concentration camp deaths at all. Closer inspection revealed these people had been treated with dignity. There was no blood, very little anyway, and no look of death agony on their faces. Most looked asleep, a few expressions revealed shock. Women remained adorned with clothes and bits of jewelry, their faces covered in the Muslim fundamentalist tradition, men still had their gold teeth.

Unbelievably, Wyley heard a groan. One corpse near the surface of the heap shifted, raising an arm and opening its eyes. Wyley froze. It was a middle-aged man. Any reporter—or CIA field personnel—worth their salt would have seized the moment, but Wyley couldn't move.

Lying on his back, near the top of the pile, the heavy-boned, dark haired Syrian began vomiting uncontrollably, gasping for air. Gazing in total disbelief, Wyley looked on paralyzed,

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unable to muster the courage to climb the body heap and help a fellow human being in need.

The Syrian man turned his head, their eyes met, and for a few moments, time stood still. His gaze revealed a profound hopelessness. Wyley, feeling the man's death agony and overwhelmed by the situation, wept openly, tears streaming down his face in the mist.

Seconds later, the Syrian lost focus, gagged on his own vomit, suffocated, then quietly stilled.

Finally, Wyley could stand it no longer. Instinctively, he lifted his camera knowing it'd shield him. Focusing on the dead man's eyes, deliberately blurring the surrounding background, his heart stepped out of the picture and his hands took over. One shot, the motor drive sang, another, then another, bracketing each exposure without conscious thought. Running on photographer's automatic, in the distance, maybe a half mile down stream, Ramsi saw something moving through the eyepiece. It looked like black diesel smoke rising from twin exhaust stacks; might be a front loader working bodies, but through the mists, he couldn't be sure.

Struggling to hear the engine noise, Ramsi held his breath, his attention suddenly shifting toward the old neighborhood across the river road. The cold stillness was punctuated by the sound of wooden wheels creaking. The sound lasted ten seconds or so, then except for the distant howling of dogs and wind racing down the alleyways, Hama fell silent once again.

As best he could judge, the sound came from an alley. He couldn't be sure which one.

Cautiously approaching one narrow street, a cold chill shot down his back. *The Syrian army*. Soldiers carried corpses, one after another, out of neighborhood apartment buildings, loaded them onto wooden push carts, then dumped alongside the river. The Syrian army was in charge of the clean-up,

clearing the dead from the west side, but from the looks of them, they were only boys, kids really; couldn't've been over sixteen. Kids or not, they were integral cogs in Assad's mechanized body disposal apparatus.

But where's the regular army? And the officers?

Ramsi wanted to know exactly what happened in Hama, how it happened, and why. It had been twenty-eight years since Assad's father—often called the “Lion of Damascus”—first purged Hama of the Muslim Brotherhood, an underground coalition of guerrilla groups. Even today, no one knew how many fundamentalists his regime killed during the 1982 massacre, but Amnesty International estimated ten to twenty-five thousand civilians dead, thousands more homeless. To make sure the job was done right, Hafez Assad crushed the troublesome neighborhoods with bulldozers, plowed up their rubble, then flattened them like a parking lot.

Like his father, Bashar Assad didn't destroy one of his own major cities every day—murdering countless thousands of his own people was reserved for special occasions—and Wyley believed if this could happen in Hama, no one was safe anywhere in the Middle East, perhaps anywhere in the world.

Wyley metered off the building shadows and grimaced. There wasn't enough light for a good, body-cart shot in the alley. He needed a faster lens and his big flash, so he set up as he approached the boy soldier clearing the block.

On seeing Ramsi, the boy put on his sternest, most commanding expression and raised his weapon. “Halt!”

Dropping his camera and big flash, Wyley raised both hands, palms open toward the soldier. The bulky camera assembly fell like a full gallon of milk swinging by a tether and knocked the wind out of him. Its long lens rotated downward, bouncing off his lower abdomen. Pressure from the neck strap caused his head to throb.

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The young soldier approached cautiously, looking for bullets or grenades on Ramsi's bandoleer. Across his chest, outside his trench coat, Wyley's bandoleer was festooned with rolls of film, extra batteries, and magnetic disks.

Wyley watched the boy's face, all the while keeping a close eye on his gun barrel. Normally, he never stuck his neck out for anyone and wasn't about to get gunned down by some frightened, trigger-happy kid. Even in the dim light, he could see stubble on the boy's lip and chin. *This kid's barely shaving.*

The boy soldier pointed his rifle barrel toward the bandoleer. "Empty it."

Wyley did so, laying out a dozen film canisters on the street.

Immediately, the tension in the boy's face relaxed, and Ramsi felt the immediate crisis had passed. Behind the boy's thinly veiled facade, Ramsi sensed sadness and age beyond his years. His eyes conveyed anguish, having already witnessed more death than most would see in a hundred lifetimes.

"Papers," the boy demanded.

Wyley handed over his *New York Times* press pass stamped Beirut Bureau Chief. Not surprisingly, there was no mention of the CIA or any affiliation with the United States government. The soldier nodded approval. "We have been instructed to assist you in every way possible, Mr. Ramsi."

Once the boy lowered his weapon, Wyley lifted his camera, relieving the pressure on his neck. "You could start by telling me what happened here."

"I don't know. I'm not sure anyone knows, not yet anyway. We were given orders to empty these apartment buildings and bury the dead in a long open trench outside the city."

Wyley shot the young man a skeptical glance.

"I'm sorry to startle you, Mr. Ramsi, but we can't be too careful. We aren't welcome here."

“I can imagine,” Wyley nodded understanding. “Are you, or any of these soldiers from Hama?”

“No.”

“I’m sure that’s no accident. How many died?”

“I don’t know. Every hospital’s overflowing, people’re still dying and the doctors don’t know why. It’s like a black plague epidemic or some sort of killer stomach flu. Most of the injured feel sick and puke a lot.”

Wyley agreed at first, then remembering the Syrian, he shook his head from side to side. “No, that plague idea doesn’t explain the dead fish along the river bank.”

“You’re right,” the boy agreed. “Dogs died too, rats, mice. I dunno, hundreds, maybe thousands of ’em. We haven’t begun hauling dead animals out of these buildings and I hope we get more help in here before we do.” The boy went silent, trying to decide to what extent he should trust this reporter.

Wyley could see the young man was overwhelmed, but at sixteen years of age, he didn’t have the experience to recognize it. After all, as a sixteen year old male, you’re practically immortal; you’ll live forever and can handle any situation. Ramsi decided to pick the boy’s brain. “What parts of the city were stricken?”

Suddenly, the boy’s expression conveyed relief, as if the weight of the world had been lifted off his shoulders. “I’ll show you.” The boy laid out his city street map and pointed to their barricaded sector. Marked with blue highlighter, it stood out as a square about four thousand yards on a side, bordered by the river. “This area, here in the center, nearly everyone died. We called it the dead zone.” The soldier swept out a circular region near the middle of the blue sector, about two thousand yards across. “Outside the dead zone to the barricade, some lived, some died, and some’re still sick. It all stopped at the river. Doesn’t make sense, does it?”

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“No, no it doesn’t. We’re missing something important somewhere. Did you check the water?”

“They checked it first thing. I’m told it’s as good as it gets in this part of the city.”

“How bout poison gas? I heard talk of chemical weapons on the road to Damascus.”

“The Syrian army had nothing to do with this.” The boy spoke in a defensive tone. “They’re already over extended, spread out across the Turkish border. I know, both my brothers are there.”

“I wouldn’t want to fight the Turks,” Wyley said. “But what about the gas? Did’ya check anyway? Hama could’ve been attacked.”

“A team came through earlier today and found no trace.”

“What about radiation?”

“We were trained for that and checked it first thing. Background radiation levels were normal.”

“If someone set off a nuke, we’d know it,” Wyley concluded. “The fireball telegraphs it to satellites around the world. We’ve all seen the pictures. There’d be a blast, fireball, debris, and radioactive fallout everywhere. Is there anything else you’ve seen? Anything else you could add?”

“I talked to many of the survivors, Mr. Ramsi, and nobody knows anything.”

“There’s no devastation,” Wyley observed, “no cratering, no evidence of any blast or fire ball, no trace of radiation or poisonous gas, only the sick and dying.”

The young soldier looked down for a few moments, then raised head, never looking Wyley in the eyes. “Nobody saw anything, nobody heard anything, nobody’s claiming responsibility, and nobody’s talking. It’s like the death angel passed over Hama and these people just died.”

Wyley hurriedly jotted down what the boy had said,

verbatim. It took a few minutes, but the boy was patient. Once he'd gotten it on paper, he read it back and the young soldier concluded, "That's the way I see it."

After a few moments thought, Wyley said, "I need to see the mass grave before it's... closed."

Focusing only on the here and now, the boy seemed surprised by the idea. "You're thinking about where to go from here? What's next?"

Wyley nodded.

The boy grimaced as he spoke. "Pictures?"

"Yeah, pictures."

"You're probably safer if I go with you. You'll need directions anyway."

"Thanks, thanks a lot," Wyley smiled for the first time. Now his expression telegraphed relief. "I could really use your help. Do you have a car?"

"No, they dropped us off here for the day."

Ramsi studied the soldier's street map. "Mine's back here, just outside the barricades. You have any other suggestions?"

"If you're determined to understand what happened, visit the hospitals. They're jammed full with the sick, dead and dying, but there doesn't seem to be much anyone can do that really helps."

"They've been working round the clock for three days now. Maybe the doctors have come up with something, maybe they've got some idea what's behind this."

This time, the soldier shot Ramsi a skeptical glance. "I doubt it. Hama hospitals are the place people go to die."

Dream Boat, 02/09/2010, Tue, 02:38 A.M.

Ashburn, Virginia

“Daddy, Daddy!” Turning on the light, Doctor Graham Higgins’ first grade daughter bolted into his bedroom with news that could not wait. “Somebody’s at the door.”

Startled out of a sound sleep, Graham covered his eyes with a pillow, struggling to make sense out of the energetic little whirlwind that just blew in. He’d been in bed only two hours when the storm hit. Downstairs, he heard the muted sound of the doorbell ringing.

“Who could it be at this time of night?” Graham’s wife muttered. Regrettably, she hadn’t escaped the disturbance either. Before Graham could speculate, the phone rang.

“When it rains, it pours,” Graham said, picking up the portable. *Must be an emergency.*

“Hello... Hello... Is anybody there?” It was a man’s voice, an unfamiliar man’s voice with a distinctive Texas accent, which was odd because Doctor Higgins’ residence was unlisted.

“Who is this?” Graham demanded.

“My name’s Russum, Billy Ray Russum. I work for the government, Counterterrorist Center. I apologize for waking you but my business is urgent. Could I speak with Doctor Graham Higgins?”

“Speaking, but I think you’ve got the wrong man. I’m a civilian now, a surgeon.”

“You were in the Air Force, right... specialized in the medical effects of neutron radiation?”

Taken aback, Graham was quiet for a moment. Years ago, when he was hungry for tuition and the United States military

needed doctors, the Air Force paid for his medical training in exchange for time in blue. He'd served his hitch then, but periodically it still haunted him. "That's true. I specialized in neutron radiation injuries."

"I understand you pioneered work with bone marrow transplants from mis-matched donors. From what I read, your work's helped save thousands who were unable to find suitable donors."

"My transplant procedure was an extension of existing work, built on the shoulders of those who came before me. Now tell me please, what exactly do you want?"

"If you'll take a look out your bedroom window, sir, you'll see me. I'm across the road waving a cowboy hat. I need to speak with you in person because we can't discuss this matter over the phone. I don't mean to alarm you, but those marines standing outside your door are pretty tough hombres. They're here to make sure nothing happens to you."

"Marines? What's the Navy got to do with it?" From a distance, Russum's appearance reminded Graham of a marine drill sergeant, a tall man in his late thirties, massive forearms. His bald head and thick neck combined to form the silhouette of a fireplug.

"Everyone in Washington with a need to know is keenly interested in this one, I assure you."

"Oh, I see." A pause. "Am I being drafted? You know what I mean, roped back in again to active duty?"

"No, not exactly. Like I said, I need to talk to you in person."

"Well then, Mr. Russum, if I'm not being shanghaied, you'd better understand one thing. People's lives are depending on me tomorrow and I've gotta get some sleep. I'm scheduled in surgery all morning and..."

"If I could interrupt, Doctor. We've taken care of your hospital commitments so don't worry about

tomorrow's surgery."

"The hell you say! You had no right to interfere with my patients. What do you mean exactly, taken care of my hospital commitments?"

"We had a talk with the chief of surgery and explained the situation. Like I said, we're here in the hopes that you'll help us. He'll cover for you tomorrow and you have his complete support if you come with us. You can call him any time you like and check out our story, but I assure you we're in earnest. Now, we're freezing our butts off out here so can we come in?"

"No, not until you tell me one thing first. Are people's lives at stake here? Don't give me weasel-words, a straight yes or no will do."

Russum released a breathy sigh into his phone. "Yes."

"Very well then, pull out your ID for me. I'll meet you at the door." Graham hung up the phone and spoke to his wife and daughter. "You two may want to stay up here."

Puzzled, his wife asked, "Why? What'd they want?"

"Those men downstairs are from Washington. They want to see me immediately and they say it's important. I don't know what's going on yet, but my gut tells me the Navy's had a reactor accident, probably a big one. They're looking for someone who knows about radiation sickness."

"Not again. They're not pulling you back on active duty, are they?"

"After what happened last time, not without my kicking and screaming."

Hearing the tone in his voice, Graham's wife was not convinced. Approaching him, she got out of bed as he hurriedly threw on some clothes. "You're not going with them, are you?"

"No, I doubt it, but it's too soon to know for sure. It all

depends on the situation. I mean, if our boys were hurt and they really needed me, I'd go. I'd have to; somebody's gotta do it."

* * *

Russum entered the house first followed by Wyley Ramsi and three uniformed military officers, one admiral and two generals, each from military intelligence. Wyley carried a briefcase filled with photos and his laptop computer. Graham led them into the kitchen where the six men sat down around the table. Outside, eight armed marines wearing night vision goggles silently dispersed around the house. One minute they were in plain view under the front porch light, the next minute they'd simply disappeared.

Russum took off his hat and introduced Wyley Ramsi as a *Times* correspondent. He didn't mention CIA. Ramsi bore the dark, distinguished features of an Arab from the Middle East. Thick black hair and mustache, dark brown, near black eyes, and massive bones formed his solid, five foot nine inch frame. Graham couldn't be as sure about Wyley's age, but ballparked him at thirty-five.

From almost any perspective, the conclave looked extraordinary. One sleepy-eyed, middle-aged doctor sitting at his kitchen table surrounded by this high-powered government entourage—three uniformed, silver-haired intelligence officers, a Middle Easterner, and one barrel-chested cowboy doing most of the talking. When Graham had gone to bed that night, he'd never have believed he'd be in his kitchen surrounded by military top brass at three o'clock in the morning. *Normally*, Graham mused to himself, *midnight meetings like this were reserved for American history books.*

Without wasting words, Russum summarized the background behind the ghastly situation in Syria.

“Something’s happened in Hama and we’ve got to know what. Assad’s regime has been under siege for the past year. Once a week, the Muslim Brotherhood set off a bomb outside some government office building or officials’ home, several of his officials were gunned down in broad daylight, even his secretary was abducted and tortured. Two weeks ago, assassins tossed several live hand grenades at President Assad inside the official visitors’ palace at Damascus. He escaped unharmed, thanks to a bodyguard and his own quick thinking. One bodyguard was killed smothering a grenade while Assad kicked two others away.”

Graham listened, but was neither moved nor impressed.

“So, what else is new in the Middle East? Assad’s not popular, why should I care?”

Russum paused, thinking how he might best convey the essence of their concerns. “The rebels backed him into a corner, wedged him between a rock and a hard place. His troops were already over-extended across the border and he couldn’t redeploy them to put down this uprising without jeopardizing his Turkish front.”

“And?” Graham’s patience was short.

“We think he may have nuked his own people—wiped out the rebels’ stronghold in Hama—to stay in power.”

Graham’s jaw went slack, his expression revealed disbelief.

“This type of revenge is not without precedence. His father and uncle did it before. In 1982, they claimed responsibility for killing thirty-eight thousand people in Hama for the same reason. They used their latest weapons back then, against their own citizens, to maintain control.”

“No, no. That happened forty years after World War II; it’s too fantastic to believe.” Graham considered Russum’s story, then focused on one obvious conclusion he felt he should challenge directly. “You’re telling me Syria’s got

nuclear weapons?”

“We’re working on confirmation with the Russians, but our latest information out of Hama leads us to believe they do. That’s where Wyley comes in. He was one of the first reporters on the scene after Assad lifted his ban on the press.”

“And they used these weapons against their own population?”

“Yep. That’s about the size of it. Wyley’ll pick up the story from here.”

Showing countless photos along the way, including a poster-sized enlargement of Hama’s city map, Wyley summarized his observations. Folding the human aspects into the story as only an eye-witness could, his delivery was both passionate and heartfelt. Once he’d said what he needed to say, he told Graham what was on his heart. His plea, an emotional call for support, concluded with “No one is safe anywhere. If this can happen in Hama, it can happen here.”

Still, Graham was not convinced. “What’s this got to do with me? Syria’s half way around the world. I don’t like it, but if they want to blow themselves off the face of the earth, there’s nothing I can do to stop them.”

Graham heard him say these people needed help, they were dying by the score. He was shocked at the images of human devastation, though the massacre seemed like a bad dream, something that happened in a history book a long time ago, someplace far away. Graham didn’t know these people, didn’t know their families, didn’t understand their culture, values, or religion. Sure, it was a tragedy, every story that comes out of the Middle East is a tragedy, but he didn’t feel any immediate threat to his family or the security of United States.

Sensing the pulse of his one-man audience, Wyley recounted his interviews. “Speculation was rampant

regarding what happened, and conflicting eye-witness reports were everywhere. One thing I learned is especially important because it clears up some of the inconsistency. No one trusts the Syrian army, so what survivors told them and what they told me privately were two slightly different stories. As it happened, many survivors admit to hearing something like an explosion, or sonic boom but we can't say with any certainty where it came from. Most said it came from the old Barudi district, a few survivors insisted it came from overhead, some couldn't say where it came from but they heard something, others considered it an act of God against the unbelievers. These people insist an explosion erupted from the enormous Barudi mosque, but left their holy structure untouched. I checked out the mosque first hand and there's no crater, no shattered glass, no evidence of blast damage of any sort."

"Show me its location."

Wyley pointed to the center of the dead zone.

Graham looked puzzled. "And no lingering radiation?"

"No. Syrian soldiers were working without protection and they assured me radiation levels were normal."

In conclusion, Wyley recounted his hospital visits. Instantly, he sensed a shift in Graham's interest level. *No surprise*, he thought. *The man's a doctor*. "The hospitals are in utter chaos."

"I can imagine. How long since this happened?"

"One week ago today."

"Can I assume you brought medical information you'd like me to review?"

"That's right. I brought enlargements of some records and translated them for you. These people were the first to die." Wyley handed over a considerable stack of paper-sized, glossy black and white photographs.

"You pretty much read my mind," Graham quipped,

scanning the records. “First off, I need to know the leading causes of death.” Hurriedly, in handwriting only he could read, the doctor constructed a table on a separate piece of paper, then summarized his findings. “Respiratory failure, brain edema, and shock.”

Everyone nodded agreement.

“Time till death?” Graham looked to Wyley.

“Some died immediately, others died one or two days later.”

Next, Graham reviewed their symptoms and his expression turned grim. *Ataxia, a complete lack of muscular coordination, convulsions, tremors; lethargy; fever; anorexia, lack of appetite, dislike for food; respiratory distress; intermittent stupor; frequent and severe diarrhea, watery at first turning bloody.*

“Show me what else you brought.”

“I left Hama on day five, so in effect, that’s when these records stop.” Wyley handed over a massive folder containing far more records than the first batch. “These people died in two to five days.”

Everyone waited quietly as Doctor Higgins absorbed the information he’d been presented. After jotting down notes for almost half an hour, he set his records aside and summarized his results. “I don’t want to jump to conclusions here gentlemen, however, this preliminary evidence is very nearly overwhelming. I’m afraid your concerns are justified. I wish they were not. It’s radiation sickness all right, very large doses of whole-body radiation.”

“Pathological changes in the gastrointestinal tract are undeniable. Malaise, depression, and fatigue often show themselves for no apparent reason. Some people seem to improve for a few days, their symptoms temporarily disappear, only to come back with a vengeance. Changes take place in their blood-forming tissues, their early symptoms

recur, followed by delirium, coma, and death. White blood cell counts—the neutrophils—are dropping off the charts. These neutrophils are formed by bone marrow and resist bacterial infection. You've gotta have 'em. Believe me, this is no laughing matter."

"I recommend you keep an eye on the survivors for the next twelve weeks. Many will lose their hair, but when you see an increase in deaths from hemorrhage and infection, your case for radiation sickness will be indisputable. White blood cell counts showed an increase for the first couple of days, but have begun to drop, some're already below normal. Fact is, if it's radiation injury, white cell counts will be all over the map. During the seventh or eighth week, the white cell counts should stabilize and bottom out below normal. God willing, an upward trend will follow for some, but complete recovery will require several months, maybe longer."

The general from Air Force intelligence spoke for the first time. "Any idea regarding radiation doses, Doctor?" Technically, the unit used to measure radiation dosage on the body is called the rem, an abbreviation for Roentgen Equivalent in Man.

Graham nodded grimly. "For this second group, and it's only a kneejerk, somewhere between one to five thousand rems. I say this because on average, circulatory collapse followed exposure within two to five days. The first group probably received in excess of five thousand rems. Neither group had any hope of survival."

Graham hesitated for a moment, looking desperately for something positive he could say. "People who survive more than a week or two have good reason to feel more optimistic. Keep an eye on their lymphocytes and platelet counts. Plate count is our best method for determining radiation dosage in the sublethal range. Using platelet counts, we can estimate

their chances for survival by gauging their level of exposure. The neutrophil count parallels the white blood cell count so we can't use it as an index."

"What are platelets?" Wyley wanted to know.

"A constituent of blood which helps clotting. You're familiar with the appearance of hemorrhage and purpura in radiation injury?"

Wyley cringed. "I'll never forget it as long as I live."

"Without clotting, you have hemorrhage, often visible beneath the skin."

Graham mentally shifted gears, assembling their story, recounting his experience in the U.S. military, drawing his own conclusions. Some important information was missing from this picture. He couldn't put his finger on it exactly, but he was sure of it. Three years ago when the Air Force recalled him from civilian practice to active duty, he'd been intentionally kept in the dark and he wasn't going to stand for it again. If government service hadn't taught him anything else, he'd learned to think for himself. He looked Russum straight in the eyes and stated flatly, "I think you're holding something back from me. You know something you're not letting me in on."

Russum didn't deny it. "You know the drill, Doctor. We're telling you what you need to know." Like many men with honor, he was a terrible liar and knew it.

"You want me to believe a nuclear bomb went off in Syria and somehow, we were too blind to detect it. Nothing showed up on satellite?"

"Nothing conclusive, nothing even suspect, really."

"And no lingering radiation, no blast, no burns."

"That's about the size of it."

Graham addressed the group. "I think we need to understand each other, gentlemen. I wasn't born yesterday

and I won't be played for a fool, not this time around. If you know something you're not telling me, you'd better come clean. Don't expect to keep me in the dark and get any help from me. From what you've told me so far, this is a weapon unlike anything I ever heard of."

"Nuclear weapons are my specialty, Doctor," Russum acknowledged. "I know some of'em better than my own family. I follow'em around the globe and this one's outta my league, too. It's got me stymied." Russum looked across the table to Wyley and his three military colleagues. They communicated without speaking. Their expressions read *go ahead, tell him*. "Our biggest concern is that Assad and God only who knows who else may have gotten their hands on a new kind of nuclear weapon—a pure-fusion neutron bomb."

"Yeah, right." Graham almost laughed out loud. "Pure-fusion? Not likely, not in my lifetime."

"I'm not kidding, Doctor. What I'm about to tell you is my own opinion based on publicly available information dating back to the middle of the last century. This is in no way, shape or form our government's official position."

"I understand," Graham said, feeling he was about to hear the heart of the matter for the first time. "You're laying your cards on the table." Russum hesitated and Graham took notice. For the second time, Russum would neither confirm nor deny Graham's statement.

Once he'd collected his thoughts, Russum began. "Russia started work on a pure-fusion weapon in the early fifties. Theoretically, we know it's possible and they published hard data in the early sixties which made us think they had it. In 1952, a Russian named Artsimovich reported fusion was possible during the compression and implosion produced by a charge of conventional explosives. He completed a series of experiments where fusion was achieved without using the

radioactive fission trigger. As follow-on to Artsimovich's work, sometime during 1961, Colonel Pavlov published an article in a Soviet military journal about their plans for a neutron bomb. According to Pavlov, their neutron weapon's lethal radiation effects would reach out five hundred yards without destroying property."

"It could have been a simulation or mis-information, we couldn't know for sure, but it led us to begin work on the neutron bomb ourselves. We took the easy way out though—a fission-fusion device destined for use against the Russians if they invaded Europe."

"Cheap and dirty," Graham observed.

"Radioactive as all get-out," Russum affirmed. "You need to understand though, the Russians were in a different position than us. They didn't want to contaminate Europe if war broke out because in a blitz, they needed land they could occupy immediately. My bottom line is this. They needed this pure-fusion weapon in Europe and we have a wealth of circumstantial evidence indicating they pulled it off without fission. They certainly understood the principles and their military would be well served by such a weapon. Short of analyzing one, Hama may be as close as we'll get."

"If they had developed pure-fusion devices, their low explosive power and near zero radioactivity make it likely they could've tested'em without our knowing it. Our official position is that we don't know what the Russians have accomplished since 1963."

"That's hard to believe," Graham interrupted. "What happened in sixty-three?"

"The Atmospheric Test Ban Treaty."

"Yeah, I guess that makes sense. Testing moved underground."

Russum sensed he had Graham's attention and continued. "Do the Russians have the neutron bomb? Sure, why shouldn't

they? Have they achieved pure-fusion? They needed it in Europe so what's stopping 'em? Nothing, not a damn thing. They began working on it sixty years ago. Their pure-fusion program promised a clean, dream boat version of the neutron bomb and ten years later, they showed a full understanding of its principles. We know they got off to a splendid start, then their technical work dropped off our radar screens. They've even published military doctrine which use 'em as tank killers. We're talking about small, clean, tactical neutron weapons here. For any field commander who likes nukes, this is as good as it gets."

"That's fine, just fine," Graham said sarcastically, disgusted by Russum's enthusiasm, "but we were talking about Syria."

"Since the Russian bear crawled back into its hole, their nuclear arsenal's been run like a leaky bucket. They keep up with most of 'em, but last I heard, they can't account for over one-hundred warheads. That's not to say they don't have 'em, it's only to say they can't find 'em. More troubling than this is the underground pipeline. It's generally understood, there's a black market pipeline set up for delivering these weapons to the Middle East."

"That's a confirmed fact and publicly available information," the Air Force general added.

"Makes me feel a whole lot better knowing it's public information," Graham snarled, fed up with the whole insane affair. After recovering his composure, he asked Russum for the truth. "You're really only guessing, right? You don't have one shred of physical evidence, do you?"

"We don't have anyone on the inside, if that's what you mean," Russum agreed. "We have solid, circumstantial evidence regarding Russia's pure-fusion neutron bomb. The whole world knows they're missing over a hundred warheads, but no one outside Russia knows the types. We've

seen evidence of the pipeline, but have no solid trail of money changing hands, not yet anyway.”

“So what do you think really happened in Hama?”

“Retribution.”

“Based on what you told me, I expect you’re right.” Graham was not satisfied and continued to press. “What are you really afraid of?”

Russum scanned the poker-faced expressions of his colleagues. “We aren’t at liberty to say, not yet anyway.”

“I see.” Graham rubbed his chin knowingly as if to say he’d been in this situation before.

“That’s our story and we’re stuck with it,” Russum forced a smile. “We’re pulling together a small, flexible team to sort through this situation in the Middle East. If Syria’s stockpiling Russian warheads, in all probability, they’re not alone. Iraq, Iran, Libya and God knows who else may be involved. In our worst case scenario, some government-backed terrorist outfit buys the manufacturing technology, reverse engineers a pure-fusion device, copies it and puts it into production. Pure-fusion requires virtually no fissile material so mass production is possible, but not likely. It’d be darn near impossible to manufacture one of these babies without our knowing about it.”

Russum paused, couching his words more carefully. “At least, we think it’s unlikely for several technology-based reasons. Fact is, we’re depending on technology barriers to protect us from this nightmare. We’ve never gotten our hands on a pure-fusion device to analyze so we must eliminate this production possibility up front. Looks like special forces will be involved and chances are, we’ll be going places we’re not invited. We need a medical officer, someone with your background, who’ll keep us out of trouble. Will you help us?”

Graham answered without hesitation, sensing he had the

upper hand this time around. “I’ve got to push back on you fellas and think about this. A surgeon can’t just pull out on his patients and I’ve got my family to consider. Three years ago, I was corralled back into active duty and spent twelve months sitting on my thumbs, waiting for an accident that never happened, thank God.”

Russum nodded understanding. “Live and learn. I remember when...”

“That was different,” Wyley interrupted. “People are dying as we speak and we need your help getting to the bottom of this.”

At first, Graham didn’t reply, as if his silence would make the problem go away. A few moments later, he looked at Wyley and spoke as compassionately as their situation allowed. “If you believe what you told me, get your family out of Beirut and do it now, today.”

Wyley looked back at Graham, Russum, and the senior officers sitting across the table. “They’re already on the move, en route to the states, but it’s slow going. There’s a mass exodus from the area and the place is in gridlock. Flights out’re booked solid and car traffic’s ground to a halt, roads crowded with refugees on foot. They’ve got my satellite phone though and we’re in touch. They’re out of harms way.”

“That’s what’s important,” Graham said, feeling relieved. While escorting the men to his front door, Graham offered them an olive branch he hoped he wouldn’t live to regret. “If you find out anything earth shattering about those missing warheads and you’re willing to tell me about it, let me know. Otherwise, let’s consider my government obligation paid in full.”

“Very well, if you’re sure that’s the way you want it.” Russum said somberly, shaking Graham’s hand on his way out.

“That’s the way I want it.” As Graham opened the door, rays from the early morning sun broke above the horizon, their glare reflecting off his snow covered lawn.

A few minutes later, after everyone was gone, Graham’s wife appeared at the bottom of the stairs. “Well?”

“Well what?” Graham was tired and simply didn’t get it.

“Well, what’d you tell them?”

“I told’em I gave at the office.”

Author Information

Bill Buchanan, an electrical engineer formerly with Bell Laboratories and Raytheon, developed control systems and communication protocols for computer networks. In his past, as a captain in the U.S. Air Force Electronics Systems Division, he helped develop and test a side-looking prototype radar designed to penetrate foliage, eliminating the need for Agent Orange. He received a masters degree in electrical engineering from Mississippi State University after working as a graduate assistant at NASA. He and his family lived in Hampstead, New Hampshire until moving closer to his parents. He lives in the southeast now where he's writing his next novel.

Berkley titles by Bill Buchanan:

VIRUS, ClearWater, Pure Fusion



DECLARATION OF TERROR

It swept through Hama, Syria, like a plague. It affected every man, woman, and child, leaving thousands dead in its wake. It left the survivors begging for death—suffering from symptoms that could only be attributed to radiation poisoning. But whatever struck Hama left its buildings and structures intact and undamaged.

The operatives of the United States's Counterterrorist Center believe a pure-fusion neutron bomb was detonated in Hama. Devised by the Russians as far back as the 1960s, the weapon possesses the killing potential of a twenty-kiloton nuclear device—yet can be carried by one man.

And now, it will be up to another man—Dr. Graham Higgins—to help CTC agents search out and destroy the facilities manufacturing the bombs, before America's enemies set one off on U.S. soil...

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