

ROGUE THREAT

ADVANCED READER COPY

A. J. TATA



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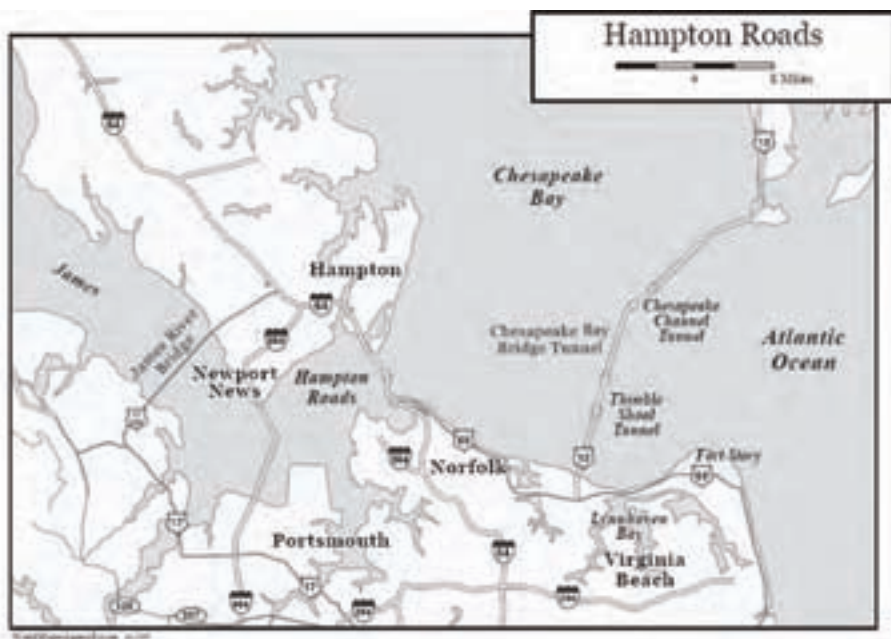
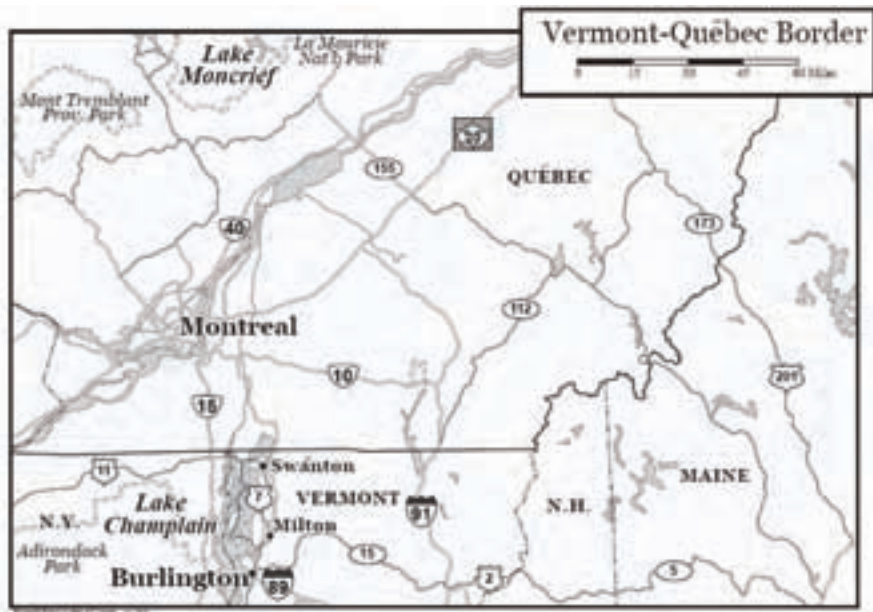
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To Amanda, My Dream Come True





PROLOGUE

IRAQ, FEBRUARY 27, 1991, DESERT STORM

Jacques Ballantine snatched his AK-47 rifle from the desert floor and raced toward his command vehicle, stumbling as the artillery volley shook the ground beneath his feet. A funnel of sand blew into the sky, already darkened from hundreds of oil-well fires that Saddam had ordered set the day before.

“Henri,” Jacques stammered, approaching the back of the drab olive vehicle filled with radios. “Are you okay?”

Henri Ballantine pulled a crewman’s helmet from his head and leaned out of the small hatch of the Russian-built armored vehicle. His face showed the strain of weeks of U.S.-led Allied bombing of their defensive positions.

“Fine,” Henri said. “Orders?” The two brothers spoke in English to keep their subordinates from eavesdropping.

“We fight,” Jacques said. “We stand and fight.”

Jacques’ younger brother stared at him a moment and then nodded.

“Hand me my backpack,” Jacques ordered, motioning with his left hand while holding his rifle in his right.

Henri looked at him briefly and then turned toward the inside of the small command center. A moment later, Henri’s hand reappeared through the hatch of the track with a dusty rucksack about the size of a high school kid’s book bag.

“This,” Jacques said, taking the bag and shaking it, “this will set us free.”

Henri looked at him with doubting eyes, the cackle of machine-gun fire

emphasizing his skepticism.

“The enemy is just over the ridge. What good will this bag do?” Henri challenged.

“This will save us, brother. Trust me,” Jacques said.

“I have always trusted you ...”

Machine-gun fire danced at Jacques’ feet as he turned toward the American line advancing upon them. “Give the order to counterattack. Now!” he shouted and dashed the fifty meters to his T-72 tank, where he saw his driver’s eyes wide with fear.

Jacques Ballantine commanded the Tawalkana division of Saddam Hussein’s Republican Guard. Childhood friends of Hussein’s, the Ballantine brothers had moved with their parents to France when they were adolescents. Their original names, Beqir and Aliwan, had given way to their mother’s hope for a new life. In the suburbs of Lyon, they had lived a simple life. Then the two boys left home and returned to Tikrit, where they reestablished loyalties with their childhood friend. When Saddam had decided to attack Kuwait, his loyal and trusted friends received high-level assignments in his elite Republican Guard tank corps.

Jacques scrambled inside his tank, chased by the loud report of American M-1 Abrams tank rounds whistling overhead.

“Launch the counterattack,” he shouted into the radio handset. “Attack! attack!”

Popping his head through the turret, he looked over the long bore of the tube. His driver had positioned the tank perfectly in a low spot so that only the main gun was visible as it stretched along at ground level.

“Counterattack is on the way,” Henri reported to his brother over the command radio net.

Jacques could picture his younger brother sitting in the command vehicle, peering through the periscope, wondering what would happen next. The Americans would surely overwhelm them, but they had always seemed to find a way to survive.

“I’m getting reports our infantry is surrendering, Jacques.”

Jacques Ballantine stared into the dark horizon, the sounds of war buzzing around him like a burst beehive. He could not surrender. Ever. Grabbing his AK-47, he radioed his brother, saying, “Meet me in the wadi to our front.” Then he jumped from the turret of his tank to the desert sand.

He ran toward cover, watching as twelve of his T-72 Soviet-produced

tanks raced from their hidden positions and began to suppress the American M-1s and M-2 Bradley Fighting Vehicles. The long bores of the T-72s awkwardly hung over the chassis of the tanks, spitting flame and causing the entire tank to heave upward at every shot. The counterattack accounted for stopping four enemy vehicles before Jacques noticed a larger formation moving to their flank.

The air filled with the incessant chatter of coaxial machine guns and the loud report of tank main-gun rounds breaking the sound barrier as they sought out their targets.

Crouching in the wadi, Jacques turned and began firing at an American infantry column that had flanked his position. He saw the American soldiers rushing for a few seconds and then hitting the ground, never allowing him to get a decent shot.

Jacques looked over his shoulder as a sabot round crashed into the hull of his tank just a few meters behind him, causing the turret to pop off and spin like a top on the sand. The fireball reached out and licked his face, a demon from hell saying, "Come with me."

Not yet, he thought.

Jacques shouted to the men of his unit, now beginning to run from their tanks as they watched the others explode in bright orange fireballs all around them.

Jacques turned to look for Henri and shouted, "With me, men! Fight with me!"

Suddenly someone was on top of him, wrestling him to the ground. "Cease fire!" the man shouted, holding an officer's nine millimeter Berretta to Jacques' head.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jacques saw Henri rushing over the hill. It took the man less than a second to fire two rounds into Henri's face, killing him. Jacques watched his younger brother's face explode as if someone had placed a stick of dynamite into his mouth.

Pumped with adrenaline, Jacques moaned, "No!"

He twisted free from his assailant's grip and attempted to fire, but the man butt-stroked him with the pistol, making everything seem like it was moving in slow motion. And before he knew it, the soldier had flex-cuffed him, and he was being carted away in the back of an American command post vehicle.

As Jacques bounced in the back of the dusty personnel carrier he felt a knife cut away his backpack. Turning to look, he watched the American paw

his way through the contents and then zip the bag closed before placing it near the radio mounts on the other side of the cabin. Jacques watched him pick up the radio handset and give crisp, clear orders to his men. Then he heard the call to higher headquarters.

“We have captured the Tawalkana commander, General Jacques Ballantine,” he said.

How do they know who I am? Ballantine strained to see the young man’s nametag. He was wearing a sand-colored battle dress uniform. The officer hooked the handset onto a piece of cord hanging from the top of the inside of the crew compartment and turned toward his prisoner.

Ballantine sat dazed as a medic applied ointment to the cut on his head. The medic’s skilled hands worked diligently on the laceration, applying bandages the best he could in the rumbling track.

“Speak English?” the lieutenant asked.

Ballantine nodded.

“We’re taking you to headquarters.”

Ballantine saw the lieutenant’s jaw tighten and flex. His green eyes radiated from a face coated with sand and dust as he leaned over to offer water. That’s when Ballantine saw the name.

Garrett. Lieutenant Garrett.

As Garrett’s face grew closer, Ballantine saw a scar that hadn’t healed properly, cutting across the man’s chin. It almost looked like a cleft, but ran horizontal to the ground. He stared at it.

“Brother shot me. Accident. Here, drink some water.” Garrett reached out to his prisoner with a canteen cup. “We need you healthy.”

Ballantine gave him a hard stare through his narrow, dusty eyes.

“You killed my brother.”

Garrett held his gaze for a few seconds, but it seemed like an hour. They bounced in the loud track. Metal clanked everywhere. The radio hummed a loud static buzz, pierced by rapid spot reports from scouts. Despite the noise, both men sensed silence.

Lieutenant Zachary Garrett was thinking about the time his brother, Matt, and he had been hunting. Their dog Ranger was about fifty feet in front, pointing with one leg at an old corn field. Five quail jumped and flew directly at them. Matt swung his shotgun, firing twice by reflex. A pellet from the second shot nicked Zachary. Zachary, older by three years, resisted the urge to punch his little brother. Instead, he worked him hard in the fields

with the horses and cattle. He was close to his brother, and Zachary wondered at that moment how he would feel if this man had just killed him. He lowered his eyes.

The moment was not lost on Ballantine.

Garrett held out a cup of water for Ballantine, spilling half of it as the vehicle lurched. He pulled on his crewman's helmet and climbed into the turret, leaving a young soldier to stand guard over the captive.

Jacques Ballantine listened as the lieutenant returned to his command role and delivered concise orders. *Professional*, he thought.

Exhausted, Ballantine's mind spiraled toward sleep. He watched endless replays of Lieutenant Garrett shooting his brother in the face. Henri was dead. His insurance policy was in the hands of his captor, its significance unrealized, for now. Secret deals for secret weapons were captured in a few conspiratorial conversations, and he was certain they would be useful with the right interrogator. He was glad he had done his homework. The seeds of a plan to use these insidious weapons came to him. The Americans had no idea of what had transpired or what was to come.

In his drifting mind, Garrett's quick-drawing pistol never stopped firing. To stop the noise in his head, Ballantine made a promise to himself: kill Lieutenant Garrett, kill his brother ...

And then retrieve his backpack.

PART 1

SEEDS OF REVENGE
(TWELVE YEARS LATER)



CHAPTER 1

APRIL 2003, FRIDAY EVENING, 1700 HOURS, LOUDDON COUNTY, VIRGINIA

Matt Garrett stood and stretched, physical scars sending waves of pain through his body. He looked at the fading blue sky from the deck of his Loudoun County home, perhaps seeking a nod, guidance—anything really—from his dead brother Zachary.

A paramilitary operative with the CIA, Matt had been wounded in the same fight in the Philippines last year, where his brother was killed. Coincidence, mostly, but the fact remained that Zachary was dead, and Matt had almost died.

He lowered his head and stared at his backyard, the terrain gently sloping away from his one-story brick rambler. Thoughts of Zachary had dominated him over the past year and had stymied his recovery. He knew he needed to move on, but he refused to let go.

Matt thought fondly of Zachary's graduation from West Point, his brother's service in Desert Storm, his agonizing decision to leave the service and work the family farm in the mid-nineties, and then, after the 9-11 attacks, his firm resolve to get into the fight. Which he had done.

Which had gotten him killed.

"If only he had stayed on the farm," Matt muttered.

It was nearly six p.m., and despite Matt's near-paralytic state regarding Zachary, he did sense an uncertain stir of change in the wind. Perhaps that

was what kept him hanging on. The towering pine trees in his back yard bowed with the breeze, and Matt closed his eyes, trying to understand everything that had transpired. Operation Iraqi Freedom had kicked off and was an apparent success so far, but he had his doubts. With all the fanfare over Iraq, he couldn't help but pick at the open scab of his failure to kill Al Qaeda senior leadership when he had had the shot. Now the opportunity was lost forever. True, high ranking officials had denied his kill chain, and a JDAM bomb had struck closer to his team than to the Al Qaeda leadership, but he still blamed himself. That failure, coupled with his brother's death and Matt's own physical wounds, were enough to make him doubt himself. And in his business, there was no margin for doubt—no second guessing.

Since when did you start following orders, Garrett? Should have stayed, taken the shot.

He shook his head and looked to his left, where a small hill rose above the stream. There was nothing but forest for about three miles. The April evening was filled with the hum of spring in the Virginia countryside. Through the pine thickets Matt saw budding dogwoods and darting squirrels. The temperature hovered in that optimistically comfortable range where he would begin to wear T-shirts and shorts when relaxing at his home. He stared at the pieces of a fading blue sky that shone through the pine tips to the rear of his property. Then he looked down at his batting cage.

Matt walked down the deck steps, grabbed a Pete Rose 34-inch bat, and stepped into the rectangular mesh netting. He liked the thin handle and the wide barrel of the bat. Even if Charlie Hustle had been banned from baseball, it was still the best bat in the sport. Matt flipped a switch on a small post, and the machine hummed to life. Some people meditated, Matt figured; he hit baseballs.

Absently, he wondered if he entered the cage to duel with himself. Whether it was post traumatic stress or prolonged grieving, Matt was in persistent internal conflict. Sometimes he had gnawing at him the urge to get in his old Porsche, fill the gas tank, and drive dark, dangerous roads at high speeds. Other times he stepped into the batting cage.

His angst was no different, he figured, than the way some of his soldier buddies who were suffering post traumatic stress might wake up screaming, grab for their elusory weapon in the middle of the night, and move through the house, methodically clearing each room, calling "One up" to invisible partners, buddies who had been killed right next to them in combat.

Matt needed to fill that emptiness left by Zach's absence and burn his adrenaline. The grief welled inside him, he repressed it, and then it reappeared somewhere else like a magician's trick. One moment it was an obvious thought; the next it was a repressed memory. Post traumatic stress was tricky that way. The repressed memory went latent, seemingly forgotten, only to surge forward at the least expected time, manifesting itself as a spontaneous action, sometimes benign, often not. Only on intense reflection or therapy could the sufferer follow the byzantine trail back to the original mournful feeling.

So today, instead of a suicidal drag race in the Porsche, Matt stared down 95-mph fastballs moving with enough velocity to kill him. No helmet. That was part of the risk, the game. This way, at least, his edginess was more predictable, like Russian roulette. Which bullet, which fastball, might hit him? He never knew when one tire might catch the stitches and spit at him a left-handed curve ball hard and fast directly at his temple. Just as bad as a bullet. Maybe worse. He would see it coming. Would he duck?

Or smile and stand there, ready to join his brother?

The first ball blew past him before he could even think about swinging. With each successive pitch, his cut migrated toward what it once was. He had been an above-.300 collegiate batsman. Soon he was hitting a few frozen ropes back at the machine, which was protected by a wire mesh fence. The calm evening rang resolutely with the distinct crack of the wooden 34 against the quiet hum of the pitching machine's spinning tires.

Matt focused, and he tried to forget about Zachary's death. The War on Terror had claimed many casualties. The fact that Zachary had survived, even thrived, during Operation Desert Storm, only to succumb to a small-scale action in the Philippines, would forever confound Matt.

As he rifled balls into the far netting, his mind drifted to a few men that he politely referred to as *those bastards*, the upper-echelon Rolling Stones groupies who conspired to start a war in the Philippines simply to avert another war in Iraq.

A fastball came whipping at him, and there was Bart Rathburn, killed by Abu Sayyaf rebels. Swing. Crack. Rathburn, who had been an assistant secretary of defense using the pseudonym Keith Richards, was gone into the back of the net. The tires then spit him a slider, low and away: Taiku Takishi, a Japanese businessman turned rogue, also known as Charlie Watts. Smooth swing. Solid wood. Takishi, who led the Japanese invasion of the Philippines, was gone into right field. Another pitch knuckled straight at him. He swung

defensively and swatted away the face of Secretary of Defense Robert Stone. Stone, using the nom de guerre, Mick Jagger, orchestrated the entire conspiracy. Following Stone's knuckleball was a 98-mph fastball that blew past him.

Ronnie Wood.

Though not located in the year since his disappearance, CIA director Frank Lantini, Matt was convinced, played the ever elusive Ronnie Wood.

Every time I was close, he moved me. But there were other possibilities, Matt knew. His mind briefly churned, visualizing these Beltway heroes who pulled the marionette strings of so many great Americans, using them as the fodder that they were. A bolt of anger shot through Matt when he realized that it was only those with whom you served that you could trust to be on your flank, to help you in a time of crisis. That notion brought his mind reeling back to Zachary.

Why couldn't I save him?

Like the baseballs punching into the far end of the net, Matt's angst over Zachary's death was tightly confined in his thoughts by a web of guilt and remorse.

The injuries to his body—the gunshots to the abdomen and shoulder and the bayonet slice across the forearm that screamed with every swing—had mostly healed. And with each pitch and swing Matt focused his mind on the task at hand, hitting the baseball, the action removing just a bit of the pain, working out physical and emotional scars. *Just keep swinging*, he told himself. *Stay in the game.*

“Keep your elbow up.”

Matt turned toward the voice just enough to move his body into the path of one of those ninety-five-mile-an-hour fastballs—bb's, aspirin tablets, rockets, as he used to call them—whipping in high and inside. It struck him squarely on the left shoulder.

“Son of a ...” Matt took a quick knee and pressed the stop button.

A woman came running toward him. “I am so sorry.”

“Aw, man.” Another pitch rifled above his head punching with a demonic thud into the back of tarp. “Go get some ice out of the freezer. Back door's open.” The machine spit a final ball that landed about halfway toward Matt, the rawhide rolling next to his knee.

Gotta go easy in there, Matt thought to himself. Adrenaline dumped, he shook his head. Truthfully, he had been pushing the envelope in his rehab in an attempt to get back into the fight.

Matt pulled up his shirt-sleeve and noticed a welt was already forming.

It took a minute to register that he had no idea who he had just sent into his house. An attractive woman returned with a towel filled with ice. She was wearing a blue pants suit with a white blouse. A string of Lapis beads circling her neck made Matt think back to Afghanistan, where Lapis was mined extensively.

“Who are you?” he asked through gritted teeth as she put the ice on his shoulder.

“Name’s Peyton O’Hara.” She showed him a badge. “The vice president of the United States requires your services, Mr. Garrett.”

“So he sent you?”

“It seems your phone is—”

“I shut the phone off.” Matt looked down at the welt on his shoulder.

“As I was saying, I work with the vice president. He needs your help.”

Matt grabbed the towel and took a step back, registering the concern on the young woman’s face. She was a natural redhead with hazel eyes and a nice figure. Setting the towel on the deck rail, he pulled off his shirt, catching her eyes glancing at his muscular frame. At six-foot-two, he was considerably taller than she. Though he had been recovering from wounds, he had also been lifting and running almost every day. Her quick glance confirmed in his mind that he was, perhaps, in the best physical condition of his life. He reapplied the ice to the bruise.

“What happened?” She pointed at his forearm.

“Hunting accident.”

“I see.” Peyton looked at him suspiciously. She took in his green eyes and light brown hair, strangely glad the vice president had asked her to come find this enigma. “And there?” She pointed at his stomach where a large scar that looked like a grotesque blossoming flower had healed, revealing minor lumps of skin that never reformed in exactly the right place.

“Appendicitis,” Matt said, stone-faced.

“Must have been one hell of a huge appendix,” she smiled.

“What are you? A hooker or something? Blake Sessoms send you here?” Matt asked. “Like those strippers dressed as cops?”

Blake was Matt’s closest childhood friend, save Zachary.

“Funny,” Peyton said.

Matt looked down at the welt on his shoulder.

“Another lump for the collection?” she quipped, following his eyes to the rising lump on Matt’s upper arm. “Adds some symmetry don’t you think?”

Ignoring her comment, he sat in a two-dollar lawn chair he had picked up from K-Mart a few weeks earlier. It was either that or five hundred dollars for deck furniture that was not as comfortable.

“So what’s Hellerman want?” Matt’s voice was flat.

“He wants you to come over to his Middleburg mansion. That’s where his alternate command post is now and where he’s set up a special task force on terrorism. He wants you to be a part of that. He’s talked to Houghton at CIA, who said you’re available. With the Iraq war going well, he is making sure we’re watching our six on other extremists.”

Matt stared at her a moment. He had been out of action since being wounded and was now being considered by the president to serve as a special assistant to the CIA director. He figured Houghton would never say no to the president or vice president after his recent confirmation as Lantini’s replacement at CIA. Matt was on a leave of absence from his position with his unit and figured Houghton thought this might be the best way to ease him back into the fight. But Matt was part mercenary and part intelligence analyst and had never participated in a special task force—other than raiding some dirt-bag’s hideout to kill him.

“And he wants me to ask you about your work on the Predator project,” she mentioned, almost as an afterthought.

Matt calmly looked to his left and then his right, and then turned his head toward her and leveled his eyes on hers.

“Predators? What are those?” Matt asked.

She stepped toward him.

“Everyone knows about the former administration’s technology transfers to China, Mr. Garrett. What I’m telling you is that we may have some new information, and we don’t have much time to sort it out. We’re five miles from civilization, and if it will make you feel better, we can whisper, but we really need to know what you saw in China.”

Matt had spent two months touring China as a photojournalist, trying to find eighteen absent unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) that were not so much missed for their aerodynamics as they were for their payload capabilities. The leads had taken him to the Philippines, where he got caught up in the insurgency that had wounded him and killed his brother.

“Sounds like you should speak to somebody who knows what you’re talking about. Maybe the Rolling Stones? You a groupie?” *Those bastards.* “This is a dead end.” *Literally, it was for Zachary,* he thought with a wince.

She stared at him with piercing eyes. She was a cross between Julianne Moore and a Fox News anchorwoman whose name he had forgotten. She crossed her arms and looked away, thinking. Matt saw her eyes fixate on the batting cage then return to his abdominal scar. Then she looked at him with a satisfied countenance, appearing to have figured something out.

“Well, the vice president thinks you know something you’re not telling us,” she said.

“You’re right.” Matt considered her comment. “The Predators are a hockey team in Nashville, right?” He placed the towel on the deck, stood and walked over to the railing of the deck and leaned back, towering over her by at least eight inches.

She pursed her lips and said, “Funny.” She showed him her National Security Agency badge again, which he agreed looked authentic enough. Then she pulled out her Top Secret White House Basement Operations Center pass.

“Impressive.”

“Need my shoe size?” she asked.

Matt smirked. “Screw the vice president.” Then, “Sorry, if that’s in your job description, you know.”

Peyton stared at him and smiled. “They told me you could be an ass. I just didn’t expect it to surface so quickly.”

Matt considered her a moment. He figured her mental calculations had been to determine which course to choose: sympathetic to his loss and injuries or hard-nosed negotiator completing an assigned task? Her selection of the firm approach caused him to gain a measure of respect for her. He didn’t want her sympathy.

“Who cares? I put everything in the report, and nobody believed it. We couldn’t get jack past the political appointees. If you’re truly working with Hellerman, then you know the Stones conspiracy set us back light years.”

“I know that was a difficult time for you—”

“Difficult?” Matt asked, incredulous. “You have no idea what you’re talking about, lady.”

Matt picked up his baseball bat and tossed it from hand to hand, working off his anger and frustration. Who was this person interrupting his sanctuary, his ritual?

Peyton eyed the bat. He figured that she had read his dossier and knew about his mandatory shrink visits. The psychiatrist said he had a hair-trigger temper. *Good, make her think*, Matt thought.

"This is important, Matt. You know my credentials," Peyton said, keeping an eye on the bat.

"So we discuss top secret, compartmented information on my back deck? Here's a clue. Check out a warehouse in Mindanao in the Philippines. I went there, got shot, and then came home. You know the rest."

"Well, actually, I knew what you just said, but something doesn't add up."

"What's that?" He was mildly interested but tiring quickly. He had baseballs to hit. With another month of convalescent leave on his docket before his return to Langley, he needed to sort out a few more things. Unscrew his head. On that note, he flipped the bat against the deck railing, walked into the house and grabbed two Budweisers from the refrigerator, and handed one to Peyton by the top. She knew the trick and turned the bottle while he held his vice grip on the cap. With a slight sound of gas escaping they opened the bottle, and she took a sip. He popped his open with the same hand and drank half the beer in one tilt.

"Let's just say we're concerned about the location of those Predators, based upon some intercepts we've received." She looked away as she spoke, holding her amber bottle chest high.

"Oh, I get it. I share top secret information with you, and you share bull-shit with me. Seems fair," he fumed, his temper edging to the surface. He took another long pull on the Bud.

"Listen, we've got traffic that says the Chinese might try to use those Predators against Taiwan, but it's not clear yet."

"Okay. But, I've told you everything I know. I tracked them to China and Mindanao by studying shipping logs, going to the ports, bribing dirt poor dockworkers, and even shooting a couple of people. I suggest you do the same," he said.

"Did you ever see any of the Predators?" she asked, ignoring his rebuff.

"It's all in the report, Peyton."

"If it was all in the report, Matt, I wouldn't be here."

They held their beer bottles in front of themselves as if they were ready to fence, Matt's tilting toward her, hers toward him.

They exchanged long, hard stares. The obnoxious ringing of Peyton's cell phone interrupted the painful silence. She answered and handed it to Matt.

"Matt, this is the vice president. I need you to meet me at Dulles Airport in an hour. VIP gate. Bring a suitcase. Tell Peyton to come along too. I'll be

waiting.”

“What’s this all about?” he asked, handing the phone back to her.

“Beats me, but we should probably get moving.”

The cool spring breeze snapped past them both. Truthfully, today he could not care less what the man wanted.

“Whatever. I’ll see you there,” he said as Peyton bounced down the steps. He casually followed her, a guard ushering an unwanted visitor to the exit. He stopped at the corner of his brick rambler and watched as she mounted a Ducati Street Fighter.

“Don’t be late, Matt Garrett.”

She shook her hair, donned the helmet, and turned the ignition. The bike roared to life. She punched the gear box and rolled away.

“Bizarre,” Matt muttered and then strolled inside his house.



CHAPTER 2

DULLES AIRPORT, NORTHERN VIRGINIA

Matt yanked his “go-bag” from beneath his bed, which he always kept ready and within arm’s reach as he slept. He checked the Baby Glock and ensured he had four magazines of 9mm ammunition, two with round point and two with hollow point. He opened his Duane Dieter Spec Ops knife with a quick flip of his wrist, then pressed the detent button to collapse the blade. Handling his weapons made him wonder just where the hell Lantini might be ...

He then quickly stuffed a variety of clothing and toiletries in the small duffel. A few minutes later, he jumped in the fifteen-year-old Porsche 944 he had purchased from the same junk yard in which he had found the pitching machine. He ran the “black bullet” wide open, quickly covering the short distance to the airport.

Pressing speed dial on his cell phone, he listened as Blake Sessoms, his childhood best friend, answered.

“This is Blake.”

“Blake, Matt here.

“Hey. How you doing?”

“Got a few things to talk about, but don’t have much time right now. How about we link up in the next few.” He paused, then continued, “It has been tough without Zach around.”

“I miss him, too,” Blake said. “It’s been a year ... a tough year, brother.”

The two friends let a moment pass over the crackling cell phone airwaves.

“Roger that,” Matt whispered.

“Going anywhere you can tell me?” Blake asked.

“I’m not sure what’s happening, but wanted to let you know I am heading out of town. We’ll catch up later.”

“Sure thing, bro’.”

“Are you going to be around in the next few days?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll call you.”

The two friends hung up, and Matt reflected briefly that it had been months since he had spoken to Blake, with whom he used to chat a few times a week. They had grown up together in the Blue Ridge, playing baseball and fishing. They had both started college at the University of Virginia. Matt opted for a career in the military, while Blake chose a path that eventually led him to Virginia Beach and a small fortune.

Downshifting into the arrivals/departures fork in the road leading to the airport, Matt saw the sign for the VIP gate and followed the arrows until he was stopped at a closed chain-link gate in a remote area about a half mile from the main terminal. The gate opened as he slowed..

Pulling through the opening, he saw the shiny, black scalp of Alvin Jessup, the vice president’s lead Secret Service agent.

“Hey, Alvin,” he said, rolling down his window. Jessup, a hulking man dressed in a black overcoat, looked every bit the former collegiate fullback. He walked up to Matt’s window with a dour face.

“Finally coming out of your hole, Garrett?” Jessup asked.

“Just following orders, Alvin. What are you complaining about? Last time I saw you, I ended up with all your money,” Matt said.

“Ain’t playing poker with you anymore. That’s for damn sure. Whoever heard of giving all the money to a homeless shelter, anyway?”

“Well, didn’t feel right keeping your life’s savings,” Matt said. “What’s going on?”

“Not sure, but the man’s been on the phone with Fort Bragg a lot.”

“Okay, Alvin, let me get in here and see what’s happening.”

“All right, my friend. There’s another land mine over there, so watch out.” Jessup motioned with a turn of his head to the airplane.

Matt drove through the open gate and steered toward a U.S. Air Force Gulfstream airplane parked about a hundred meters away. He stopped next to a car that was parked against the chain-link fence. He could see the vice president’s armored Suburban next to the airplane.

Matt stepped from his Porsche and walked to the folded down steps of the Gulfstream, wondering what Jessup could have meant. *A land mine?* He saw the vice president walking down the small step ladder from the jet.

Then he saw the land mine: Meredith Morris, her blond hair bouncing off her shoulders as she followed the vice president down the jet stairway.

My Virginian, Matt wanted to say, but he didn't dare utter those words. Still, he waited for Meredith to lift her eyes and notice him. Though he knew he should look away, it was impossible. He could not deny the flutter in his chest. As recently as four months ago, she had been his fiancée.

"Matt," Vice President Hellerman said. "Join me for a few seconds if you can, son."

Hellerman was motioning Matt into the back seat of his Suburban for a private chat.

"Yes, sir," Matt said without moving his eyes from Meredith's face. She looked up at him as she reached the tarmac, lifted her face slowly and smiled. His heart leapt, but his mind locked tighter than a vault door.

"Hi, Matt," she said. "Good to see you."

"Meredith," he said.

The vice president's hand pulled at his shoulder, breaking the spell. He slid into the Suburban, watching as Meredith climbed into the back seat on the opposite side. Interesting that she would be with the vice president, Matt thought, because she worked for the national security adviser, Dave Palmer.

Matt had taken the time to grab a sport coat and pulled it over his black Underarmor shirt that looked painted onto his muscular frame. He wore khaki cargo pants and lightweight brown Belleview boots. Not a typically snappy dresser, Matt figured the blazer concealed his weapon relatively well.

"Matt, glad you could make it," Hellerman said, closing the door of his vehicle. "We've got some leads on a terrorist named Ballantine, former Iraqi general."

Matt paused, thinking.

"I know the name." There was no escaping Zach's death, Matt thought. He remembered talking to Zach after his brother had returned from Desert Storm back in 1991. The detail with which Zach had described the fight that led to the capture of Ballantine was incredible. Zach, most likely the best story teller Matt knew, had painted such a clear picture that Matt had long savored the pride he felt for his older brother in securing perhaps the most prized capture of Operation Desert Storm.

“Yes, Ballantine,” Hellerman continued. “I thought you might recognize the name. We think he’s established a fishing guide service up in Quebec and that he uses a lightweight float plane to ferry supplies, deadly attack materials, into the United States. He may even be part of a supply chain that has funneled the WMD out of Iraq.”

Matt considered what the vice president was saying. He remembered that Hellerman had served in the army reserves as a military intelligence officer, which caused Matt to place some credence in Hellerman’s analysis.

“My team in Middleburg is running our own operation with limited support,” Hellerman said. “We had a CIA agent have a small world moment with this guy when he was actually on leave doing some muskie fishing in Canada. Seems Ballantine opened this small enterprise a few years back and called it Moncrief Fishing Company. Flies a Sherpa into a small airport outside Burlington, Vermont, where he picks up his customers, and, we suspect, a few other things.”

“We got anybody working this?” Matt asked. His mind continued to drift back to the day Zach had returned from Desert Storm. Their small hometown just north of Charlottesville, Virginia, had thrown Zachary a huge welcome home party. After the festivities, Matt and Zachary, both in their early twenties then, had sat by the river that framed their property. They drank a six pack of Budweiser while Zachary discussed the details of capturing Ballantine and then delivering him to military intelligence for interrogation. As the laundry bag full of beer, anchored to a rock next to Matt, shifted with the subtle currents of the river, Zach conveyed that he believed that Ballantine had been released in a prisoner exchange and then had mysteriously gone missing. Now, when Ballantine wasn’t found in Iraq after the Americans had seized Baghdad in Gulf War II, the intelligence community dismissed his absence in favor of their vaunted deck of playing cards.

Matt, though, was intrigued by Hellerman’s assessment. Ballantine was more dangerous than either Hussein or Bin Laden because he not only had means, motive, and the courage of his convictions, but he was on nobody’s screen. The intelligence world dismissed him in favor of rounding up the deck of cards.

Hellerman stared at Matt a minute and said, “Yes, we’re about to get an agent in there. Canada doesn’t want us making a mess up there, but they also don’t want to get involved.”

“Screw a bunch of Canadians. Anybody I know?”

“There aren’t many you don’t know, but you know I can’t answer that,

Matt.”

“Right, so what am I doing here?”

“I want you to head down to Joint Special Forces Command at Fort Bragg and talk to some of the special ops command down there. You’ll be a presidential envoy. You know all those guys anyway,” Hellerman said.

“Presidential envoy?” Matt chuckled. “I’ll get laughed out of there. Now, maybe if I’m part of a take-down team, they’ll believe *that*.”

Matt’s thoughts trailed off as his mind reeled with the possibilities. As an operator in the most elite counterterrorist outfit in the CIA, he was already visualizing the enemy situation. Then, as it always did, his mind spun back to that day in December 2001 when he had his sniper rifle, his team, and a good radio with communications to about a thousand airplanes all wanting to drop a bomb on bin Laden and claim victory. As he had radioed in, he received, “Kill chain denied. Say again, kill chain denied. Return to base.”

Matt looked at Hellerman, letting his thoughts play out on his face.

“I had nothing to do with that, Matt. I’m one of the good guys here and I’m bringing you into this thing to get you back into the action. That’s what you want right? While you can’t go on the eventual raid you can work with me on this thing in my command post. Advise me.” Hellerman continued, “With your injuries, you’d be no good anyway. Plus, the president would have my ass if I sent you on a tactical mission while he wants you to be preparing for this job advising the director.”

“I’d much prefer to go after Ballantine.” Matt’s voice was stone cold.

“I’ve talked to the president and your director, Houghton, already.” Hellerman ignored Matt’s comment. “They both want you on this mission.”

Matt waited a moment with his eyes fixed on the vice president, then spoke. “I’m an operator, sir. That’s what I do.”

“I know you’re an operator. Hell, the entire world knows you’re an operator, and that’s part of the problem. Everyone knows you. Anyway, you’ll be representing the president. Our Department of Homeland Security isn’t even an agency yet. It’s just some people looking for office space. You know how to wade into the middle of chaos and sort it out.”

“That I do,” Matt said. “What do you want me to talk to them about?”

Matt had never turned down an interesting assignment in his life, and now was not the time to start. If terrorists were coming after the country again, he wanted in on the hunt. He had made his case, so now he would just see where the situation led him.

Hellerman smiled. "Look at their plan. It's called Maple Thunder. Then see what they've got on the missing Predators while you're at it."

Matt stared at Hellerman, wondering, *Why is there so much interest in these Predators all of a sudden?*

Ignoring his thought, Matt said, "Right, so my mission is to get down to Bragg and be a spy for you, is that it?"

"Exactly. Here's a satellite phone. Keep in touch. I'll be at Middleburg, which of course is top secret. And tell Peyton everything you know about those Predators, too. That's at least as important as Ballantine." Hellerman handed Matt a small black object, which Matt promptly put in his shirt pocket.

"One thing," Matt said, returning to his personal albatross.

"What's that?"

"No Rolling Stones? No Fox and Diamond type antics? No bullshit, right?"

"We've cleaned that mess up, Matt," Hellerman said. "President Davis understands your sacrifice and appreciates your service."

"Then why does Stone still have a job as Secretary of Defense?" Matt's voice was like granite. "And where the hell is Lantini? You telling me you guys can't find a former CIA director?"

"I've got nothing to do with Lantini. Matt, get over yourself. We've got a war going on in Iraq. We need as little turbulence as possible after last year's nightmare in the Philippines, so the president decided to keep Stone in place; keep the momentum going."

Matt looked at Hellerman and then Meredith.

"I made a promise to Stone," Matt said, "that if he ever came after me because of what I know *I* would know about it. And then I would execute what I believe you people term 'preemptive actions.' I know you and Stone are close. I need you to look me in the eye with Meredith as our witness that this is a legitimate mission directed by the President of the United States."

Matt kept his cold gaze locked onto Hellerman's gray eyes, which never fluttered.

"I know you're not making a threat against the Secretary of Defense, which would be illegal. So, I'll ignore the comment and interpret 'preemptive actions' as meaning actions that are nonthreatening, in particular, nonlethal."

Matt shrugged and ran his hand along his blazer beneath which his Glock was holstered.

"This is legit, Matt. We're trying to get you back in the game. This is the

first step," Hellerman said. "Trust me."

"You had me until you said, 'Trust me.' I don't trust many these days," Matt said, his eyes shifting to Meredith, who looked away, a tear possibly sneaking out of her right eye. "Produce Lantini, Ronnie Wood, for me, and then maybe we can build on our relationship."

Hellerman stared at Matt a moment and said, "I don't think we'll be seeing anymore of Ronnie Wood or the Rolling Stones. Only a select few people know about that, so let's just leave it be."

Matt shook his head, then looked at Meredith. There was something about her countenance that rang hollow, sort of a vacuous gaze.

"Then don't trust me. Trust your instincts. I'm giving you a jet to fly to Fort Bragg to get back into the game here. You can't be in Iraq right now where all of the action is and I know it's killing you."

That much was true, Matt thought, returning to Hellerman.

"Okay, if you're getting me back into the game, then *I'm* game." Matt said.

"Good," Hellerman said, then leaned back, shaking his head, as if to move on to other pressing issues. "Maybe one day this country will wake up," Hellerman added as Matt was opening the door.

Matt stopped and looked over his shoulder at Hellerman, catching the sour look on the vice president's face. *What was he talking about?*

"Excuse me, sir?"

Hellerman looked at Matt. "Just talking to myself. Damn people in this country are so complacent, take everything for granted. Not even two years removed from 9-11 and we're back to our old ways. Political infighting, stupid debates about the Iraq war, and everyone's so consumed with themselves. No sacrifice, except the military." Hellerman stopped a moment and then looked at Matt.

"You know the other day I was at Fort Bragg talking to a soldier who told me, 'Sir, the military's at war, the country's at the mall.' Pretty insightful."

Matt shrugged. Privates usually had a pretty good perspective on life, he thought. Rang true. Still, he kept his mouth shut as he watched the smoke clear off the vice president for a moment and then turned toward the Gulfstream.

"You ever read Rostow?" Hellerman's question caught Matt off guard.

"Maybe once," Matt said, lifting his duffel bag, and looking over his shoulder.

“Think about the term, ‘secular spiritual stagnation.’ Then we’ll talk later.”

Matt nodded, barely interested, then leaned back into the Suburban and said to Meredith, “Nice to see you. You look good.” It was all he could allow himself.

He saw a brief flash of the woman he had once known. It was a moment of recognition in her face. He didn’t know if her eyes were wistful ... or pleading. He knew full well, though, that heady politics had vaulted her into a new circle that perhaps she had been gunning for all along. Or perhaps she was operating in a realm for which she was unprepared. Either way, she had broken off the engagement four months ago and had become aloof. Not fully understanding what had happened between them hurt the most. The moment was an awkward one, with the vice president between them. Matt felt the pluck of a banjo string in his heart and then did the only thing he could do.

He turned and walked up the steps, ducking as he entered the small airplane and nodded to the two Air Force officers who would fly him to Fort Bragg. One was blond with blue eyes and looked like he had just graduated from the academy the day before. He wore lieutenant’s bars. The other was a bit older, more ethnic-looking and, with eyes staring at his cockpit instruments, focused on his preflight routine. He was a captain, and, Matt presumed, in charge of the flight. He noticed a cell phone sitting in the pilot’s lap and a Bluetooth headset in his ear like some Star Trek device.

As Matt turned into the small, eight-seat cabin, he was greeted with another surprise.

“So we meet again,” Matt said, standing next to Peyton’s seat, holding his duffel.

“How’s the arm, slugger?”

“I’ll live,” Matt said with a shrug.

“The vice president asked me to accompany you. I couldn’t get out of it.”

Matt surmised that she didn’t seem too disappointed.

“Well, name’s Matt Garrett,” he said, sticking a large hand out and giving hers a quick shake. He noticed she had firm hands. “Don’t think I ever formally introduced myself.”

She looked at him briefly and squeezed his hand. “Peyton O’Hara.”

“Nice grip,” he said, offering her a polite smile.

He walked to the back of the small airplane, sat down, put his duffel in the seat next to him, patted the weapon beneath his jacket, leaned back and shut his eyes.