

SPEED



GRAPHIC



ROBERT BRACE

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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I

WE WERE STANDING ATOP the pyramid, high above the jungle canopy, when I first heard the helicopters. I had not yet seen them but I knew from the sound they were not civilian—the rotors made that distinctive hard thump characteristic of heavy military helicopters. The Guatemalans sometimes use old Hueys to patrol their border, just a few miles west of us, but this noise was coming from the other direction, from inside Belize.

The Belizeans have no military helicopters.

I used the binoculars to scan the east—an endless sea of endless jungle rolling away to the horizon, uninterrupted except for the occasional patch of morning mist rising from a river valley. A red-tailed hawk soared nearby, searching for breakfast, and in the distance there was smoke from an early morning slash and burn clearing operation, but it was just past sunrise and due east I could make out nothing against the glare. The sound was still low, a background bass you might miss if not attuned to it, but from the slowly increasing volume I could tell that whatever they were, they were headed our way.

I considered gathering my group and retreating into the jungle.

Most of them were with me, roving among the intricate maze of royal apartments that top the Caana, the broad-shouldered 140-foot tall

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pyramid that towers above Plaza B. Some of them had found a large scorpion sunning on the stones—guardian of the imperial tombs perhaps. I had warned them to take care since it was poisonous, and they were studying the creature with morbid fascination. Others were winding through the labyrinth of the palace or climbing the pinnacles or trying a hand at deciphering the pictographs on the stela. The Caana is over a thousand years old but is nevertheless the tallest building in Belize. To gather the party together and get them back down the hundreds of steps to the bottom would take time, too much time.

I always end the tours in Caracol, and always at sunrise. By this stage the party is usually exhausted, invigorated by the adventure but worn down with the hard trekking of the previous five days. Caracol is a special treat, a way to end on a high note. On the last morning we break camp at first light, and after the best part of a week spent in the shade beneath the canopy the party emerges at sunrise into the wide-open plazas and sky-reaching ruins of the ancient Mayan city.

Down here in this part of the world it is usually Tikal, in neighboring Guatemala, that attracts the archeological tourists. Despite four centuries of Spanish conquest Caracol had remained hidden deep in the jungle until 1938, when it was happened upon by mahogany loggers who must have been amazed at what they found. Serious excavation did not begin until 1985 and is not yet complete. The site is very difficult to get to and is much less well known than Tikal. All this is a blessing: there are no shops or souvenir stalls here, no guides touting their services, no mobs of charter bus tourists—it is the world's greatest attraction at which it is not possible to buy a Coke. There are few enough people at any time, but at first light the only other occupants of the ruined city are the howler monkeys. These last add nicely to the atmosphere, their ominous gates-of-hell screeching resonating throughout the jungle, incredibly loud, as if in urgent warning against entering a forbidden city best left undisturbed.

Not loud enough to cover the approach of those helicopters, however. Quietly, so as not to alarm anyone, I chambered a round in the .308 and then sat on a step to wait and see what transpired.

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I DID NOT HAVE TO WAIT LONG. They came directly out of the sun, swooping in close by the pyramid, low and fast and suddenly loud, their roar deepening with the Doppler shift as they zoomed past us just above the treetops. There were two of them, the second flying behind and a little to the side, clear of the lead ship's rotor wash. If they had meant to arrive unseen, they could not have planned it better.

Now everyone was aware of their presence, and the people around me stopped whatever they had been doing to stare. The helicopters banked steeply to the left and turned back for a second pass. They were big and humpbacked, an airframe I knew well: Black Hawks. But this pair was painted in plain gray instead of camouflage pattern—Seahawks, then: the navy's version of the basic H-60 platform.

The second pass was slower, and I was able to get more detail for identification. There was a round pod protruding from the nose: forward-looking infrared. Squadron markings on the fuselage, but I could not make them out. Two wing-like projections on either side of the airframe: hard points for the mounting of Hellfire missiles, currently unoccupied. But that is not to say that the helicopters were unarmed: the port-side doors of both aircraft were open, revealing crewmen in helmets with darkened visors crouched behind six-barreled Gatling guns—miniguns, as we used to call them, although there is nothing mini about the carnage they can wreak.

So the helicopters were HH-60Hs, a combat SAR and special forces variant with which I was well familiar. Armored, to withstand enemy groundfire. Night vision capable, to allow the aircrew to fly them into opposition territory low in the dark without radar. Heat signature suppression, to make it harder for shoulder-mounted IR-guided missiles to take them down. And finally those miniguns.

Miniguns are zone suppression weapons, designed to put down a mass of lead in a very short space of time. The idea is that with so much metal flying about the opposition will take cover rather than risk returning fire when the ship comes in to rescue a downed pilot or enter a hot landing zone to extract people of the type that I once was. They are 7.62 caliber weapons, exactly the same as my .308, except that

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miniguns sprout 4,000 rounds a minute, whereas my weapon's rate of fire was limited to how fast I could work the bolt.

A rifle was a waste of time in this situation—it could only make the gunners trigger-happy, and that would endanger my party. I ejected the chambered round and put the weapon down, bolt open, where it could be clearly seen from the air. I noticed the gunner on the lead ship nod, whether to himself or me I was not sure, but I could tell that he was thinking *wise move*.

They made several orbits of the site, like a dog circling a patch of ground before lying down.

The howler monkeys were dead silent now.

Eventually the lead gunship landed on the broad grassy expanse of Plaza B. The other continued to circle, minigun at the ready. Two men pushed past the lead ship's door gunner and out of the helicopter. Camouflage uniforms, assault vests, M-16s at the ready—they were not sailors; they were marines. Their cammies were desert MARPAT instead of the woodland coloring they should have been wearing for jungle work. I wondered why; marines don't normally make mistakes like that. They trotted clear of the rotor wash and came to a halt halfway between the gunship and the base of the Caana. They stared straight up at me.

One of them stepped forward, cupped his left hand around his mouth, and yelled above the turbine whine.

“Captain?”

Not since the court-martial, but I guessed he meant me.

I turned to Eduardo. He was standing nearby, staring down at the scene in the plaza, his face bearing the universal look of wary distrust with which the downtrodden view all authority.

When I first decided to work down here I had begun at the marketplace of San Ignacio, the last outpost on the Western Highway before the Guatemalan border and the only town of any size in the Cayo district. San Ignacio conforms to the common pattern of provincial towns in the third world—whether in Belize or Somalia or the Philippines they are all, apart from details of language and race and climate, much the same: concrete boxy buildings rarely more than two

stories tall; in the center of town a jam of people and sidewalk vendors and small vehicles with rattling exhausts; then as you head out heaps of masonry, dogs running wild, folks standing or sitting, content to let time pass. Soon the streets turn into dirt tracks or simply end. And they all smell alike, a pungent mixture of diesel fumes and cooking grease, sweat and spice and sewerage—the results of poor plumbing and open-air cooking, but not as bad as it sounds.

If you want to recruit labor in such a place you begin at the marketplace, in this case a dusty expanse of ground with several rows of stalls under long thatched rooves. I had spoken with a few of the proprietors to put the word out, telling them what I wanted and where I could be found. Among the men who had subsequently shown up was Eduardo, somewhere between thirty and fifty years of age, short and stocky, skin the color of old leather, and with a past on which he did not elaborate but that I gathered had included several stints of delivering goods across the border without the inconvenience and expense of a customs inspection. That meant he knew the jungle, so I hired him. By the end of the first season—I only run treks during the dry—he had my confidence. Now, at the end of the second season, he had my trust.

“If I have to go with these people you’re in charge,” I said. “Don’t alarm the guests, just give them my apologies and tell them I was called away in an emergency. Let them have their fill of the ruins, then drop them off at the lodge as usual.” After Caracol we take them to a luxurious jungle lodge on the Privassion River to end the tour, an opportunity for a proper shower, a celebratory dinner, and a good night’s sleep in a real bed before flying back home the next day.

Eduardo just nodded, a man who wasted no words. I shouldered the backpack and began the long descent down the broad steep staircase scaling the southern face of the Caana, much as prisoners destined for human sacrifice must have a millennium before.

The marines were waiting at the bottom. I stopped ten feet in front of them. The one who had yelled up at me was the older of the two, a black man wearing three chevrons with two rockers below and crossed rifles in between. A little gray among the stubble of his buzz cut. Long

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past his twenty; he was in for life. His name tape said Gandry. He held his M-16 in his right hand only, barrel-down. The other marine was an E-2, probably still in his teens, fresh from Parris Island and Infantry School, gripping his carbine like a security blanket, a kid who did not have the look yet. Gandry had brought him along to help toughen him up, I guessed—get him into a situation where he could not just blend in with the rest of the platoon.

My eyes reverted to the older man.

“What can I do for you, Gunnery Sergeant?”

“Captain Dalton? Captain Lysander Dalton?”

“Just ‘Mister’ now.”

“Would you come with us, sir?”

He gestured toward the waiting helicopter with a jerk of his head and took a step in its direction, expecting me to follow. The PFC went the same way.

I remained where I was.

Gunnery Sergeant Gandry stopped. The private first class took a little longer to figure out that I was not following them.

Gandry nodded to himself and turned back around. Left hand on the fore-end now, right thumb at the fire control lever. I doubted that he was even consciously aware of the changed grip—by this stage of his career that M-16 was as familiar to him as a hand, its use automatic, something accomplished without conscious thought.

He took a step forward before speaking again.

“Sir, I was imprecise. What I meant to say was that we have orders to bring you back with us. Sir.”

He was right, he had been imprecise. *Would you come with us?* suggests choice, but in the Marine Corps anything that begins with the words *We have orders* means that there is absolutely no choice at all.

I stepped forward and ducked under the rotor blades.

EXCEPTING THOSE FOR the aircrew, there were no proper seats in the Sea Hawk. Instead, there was aluminum-framed webbing that included lap belts that I had learned from long experience it was wise

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to wear. I strapped myself in and across from me Gandry did the same. The PFC was too busy slapping at mosquitoes.

I reached into my backpack and pulled out a plastic bottle of Skin-so-Soft. Pretty much all marines who do jungle work use Skin-so-Soft, a commercial moisturizer that has the unintended quality of also being an excellent insect repellent. It is favored over service-issue repellent not because marines like to care for their complexions but because it does not smell as much and so the odor will not give your presence away. Every PX stocks it. I wordlessly passed the stuff to the kid, but when he read the label he looked up at me in disbelief.

“So you just deployed down here,” I said.

The PFC nodded dumbly. The gunnery sergeant looked annoyed—like any good NCO, he was not happy at having his people shown up.

The engine note changed, and the rotor began increasing RPM. The door gunner stayed by the minigun for the extraction. I shook my head in disbelief: all this firepower for a simple transport job—our tax dollars at work.

I caught Gandry’s eye.

“Where are we headed, Gunny?”

“The Big Stick, sir”

At that moment the pilot came onto the throttle and pulled up on the collective, lifting us from the ground. The increased roar was too loud for me to ask Gandry what “The Big Stick” was.

II

I TRIED TO FIGURE OUT WHAT they wanted with me. The Big Stick was presumably the name of a base camp, probably just a landing field hacked out of the jungle somewhere. Back when I was a marine we used to do a lot of work in Central America, some of it public but much of it secretive and funded by creative means. I knew the DEA still operated down here, and all of a sudden I hoped that, whatever this was about, Eduardo was not involved. I had assumed that his off-season smuggling activities were of the benign variety, intended to bypass Guatemalan authorities who were notoriously corrupt, little more than criminals in uniform. But if the DEA was involved, that changed everything.

Maybe it would be something simple, perhaps just a friendly request to keep an eye out for signs of illicit activity during my own long treks through the jungle, although if that was all there was to it then why send armed gunships?

The helicopters did not continue into the jungle. Instead, we headed directly east, toward the coastal plain. The canopy below gradually gave way to wide flat fields and broad brown rivers. Soon we came to the coast and Belize City, a twenty-minute interval to accomplish a journey that would have taken several hours by four-wheel drive.

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We did not land in Belize City; the Seahawks continued straight past it and out over the Caribbean. Viewed from the air, the sea below revealed itself as a vast variegated sampling from the far end of the visible spectrum: lush turquoise in the sandy-bottomed shallows, vibrant jade-green around the coral reefs, and then the depthless dark indigo of the ocean beyond.

I suddenly realized what The Big Stick must be and looked at the patches on the door gunner's flight suit for verification. One of them had a trident symbol with 'HS 35' over the top: his squadron affiliation. A second patch bore the confirmation that I was searching for: 'CVN 71.'

In my day they had different nicknames. like 'Big John' (*Kennedy*), 'Battle Cat' (*Kitty Hawk*), and 'Connie' (*Constellation*), this last always expressed with the particular affection that sailors retain for the name of the navy's first-ever ship.

The aircraft carriers had changed and presumably so too had the nicknames, but what could 'The Big Stick' be other than the *Theodore Roosevelt*, an embodiment in steel and fissionable material of the twenty-sixth president's famously expressed foreign policy: *Speak softly and carry a big stick*. Sure enough, a series of long white wakes came into view, dead straight lines cutting across the calm blue below, soon followed by the battle group itself: a sprinkling of cruisers and destroyers and frigates, a big old supply ship lumbering along in the back, and at the center of the formation the vast flat deck of the great capital ship whose humble attendants they all were: the aircraft carrier USS *Theodore Roosevelt*.

The helicopter banked for the approach.

Helicopters do not land on an aircraft carrier in the way that might be expected: hovering above the deck then gradually lowering themselves. Instead, they go into a hover by the ship's side, matching her for course and speed, but over the water rather than over the ship itself—that way if something goes wrong they will drop into the drink and thus not foul the deck for continuing air operations. Launch and recover—carriers exist for no other purpose, and they would rather lose a helicopter than allow anything to interfere. With the helicopter just

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above the level of the flight deck the pilot edged it over and quickly landed, having spent the minimum amount of time over the carrier itself, and at a height where a sudden drop would have unlikely caused the ship any serious damage.

The deck crew rushed to chock and chain the aircraft. The pilots shut down the engines, but before the rotor had stopped spinning I was being escorted out and across the broad expanse of the flight deck, several football fields in size. The carrier had four catapults, but only the two at the bow were currently in operation. An EA-6B sat on one, about to launch, and an F-18 was being towed toward the other. The air smelled of brine and burning jet fuel. Between the wind and the turbine whine conversation would have been impossible, yet there was a mass of activity, much of it coordinated with hand signals, immensely complex and seemingly chaotic but actually it was just the opposite, something conducted with the precise choreography of a ballet. The carrier was steaming into the wind, as they always do for launch, and so great wafts of warm jet exhaust came washing across the flight deck from the two aircraft up front.

There was a sudden roar, the high-pitched howl of turbines throttling up to full thrust. The two marines and I stopped instinctively, turning to watch as the Prowler was launched, the deafening sound of its engines momentarily overshadowed by the almighty wallop from the catapult. The aircraft was briefly obscured as it dipped below deck level and then reappeared again as it gained airspeed and climbed. A carrier like the *Roosevelt* would weigh in at something like 100,000 tons, yet the blow from that mighty catapult reaching the end of its short run was sufficient to have sent a physical jolt throughout the entire ship, as if Zeus himself, perhaps feeling his own immensity challenged by that of the *Roosevelt*, had suddenly chosen to slap it with a thunderbolt.

It was hard not to be impressed. What an awesome and terrible human achievement is a Nimitz-class nuclear-powered aircraft carrier.

We continued across the flight deck, around an elevator the size of a house coming up from below, and over the braided steel lines that span the plating: arresting wires that slow the aircraft when the tail

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hook catches them on recovery. Eventually we reached the starboard side and the carrier's one piece of slender superstructure: the island. We went through a clipped steel door and entered a new world: calm and quiet, comfortably air-conditioned, a startling change from the noisy hubbub outside. I was expecting to head down below into the bowels of the great ship, but instead we took a ladderway up.

Aircraft carriers have two bridges. The first is like that on any other ship: the place from which the vessel is maneuvered and the preserve of the captain. But there is another bridge—the flag bridge—immediately below the first. This second bridge belongs to the admiral, the man who commands the entire battle group.

I was led to the flag bridge. We came to a halt outside. Gunnery Sergeant Gandry opened the door and indicated with a nod that I was to go on in alone. My marine escort would leave me here—I guessed that they wanted nothing further to do with whoever lurked on the other side.

I stepped inside. The door closed, and I could hear the rasping scrape of metal on metal as the clips were closed tight behind me.

The bridge was L-shaped, the long side running parallel to the flight deck, and the short side in front running athwartships. Wide windows lined both, giving a broad view over flight operations and the seascape beyond. The space was fitted with the equipment usual on a ship's bridge: heading and gyro compass repeaters, radar displays, a chart table and drawers, an array of microphones and squawk boxes. But there was no admiral's staff, indeed nobody at all apart from the lone figure occupying the large armchair that was raised high in the prime spot at the corner of the L—the admiral's chair.

Normally no one except the admiral himself would ever dare to sit in that chair, but the man whose corpulent bulk currently occupied it was no naval officer. He had not yet turned around but I recognized him, a creature only slightly less immense than the carrier itself, a man whom I knew well, but someone I had hoped never to see again.

III

I WALKED TO THE FRONT OF THE BRIDGE. Dortmund glanced at me dismissively—much as an entomologist might glance at a bug which properly came under his purview but was too common to be worthy of extended scrutiny—and then returned his attention to the flight deck. His expression was not of interest in the air operations but rather one of concern, even dismay.

“I have been observing the activities below,” he said after a while.

No greeting, no salutation. Perhaps he sensed that such an approach would have been rebuffed; more likely he thought me insufficiently important to warrant the expenditure of courtesy to begin with. He watched as the F-18 was hooked up.

“Do you realize that the planes do not take off in the normal manner, but are actually flung?”

“Catapult launch,” I explained.

His face assumed a look of ever-increasing consternation as the preparations advanced. The jet blast deflector came up, the engines were brought to full throttle, and through the bubble of the cockpit we saw the pilot salute, giving the final go-ahead. A momentary pause and then the fighter was launched. The entire superstructure reverberated with the shock.

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“Dreadful,” Dortmund muttered.

“Dreadful?”

He huffed a little before responding.

“After our little *tête-à-tête* today, my presence will be required back in Washington—there has been an incident in Kamchatka that requires my attention. I had thought that nothing could be as bad as the mode of my arrival on this wretched boat, but now that I have watched for a while I realize that the departure will be even worse. I do not look forward to being flung.”

I wondered what they would take him back in. Probably an old S-3 stripped down for cargo duty—he would be too fat to fit into a regular aircraft’s cockpit.

As he continued to watch the flight operations I inspected him, a man who although not technically my enemy was nevertheless someone for whom I bore an unusual degree of ill-will. Massive bulk encased as always in the finest of hand-tailored suits, made from black priest-cloth and cut by a tailor skilled in lending dignity to *avoirdufois*. White button-down shirt and plain black silk tie. Black oxfords, highly polished but surprisingly small—like many fat people, Dortmund had little hands and feet. His hair was shot through with gray. The Richelieu-like mustache and pointed goatee were unchanged, as was the cold hard stare of those steel-gray eyes—in both face and temperament he remained a living avatar of the Iron Cardinal, a Machiavellian man who pursued the interests of state with a relentless and unapologetic ruthlessness.

He seemed not to have aged since the day I had last seen him, more than a year ago now, at the Mayflower Club in Washington D.C.—despite being a government man Dortmund preferred to conduct business from his private club, where there were no visitors’ entry logs or requirements to present a photo ID, just a discreet place in which his guests could remain unknown and unremarked. It also happened to be conveniently located a few blocks west of the White House, the maximum distance that Dortmund was capable of covering on foot.

At least there was one positive quality, previously unsuspected, that I could now attribute to him: physical courage. If I was in his shoes

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I would not have risked meeting me again without having those marines, armed and ready, in close attendance. But then perhaps he had no choice: Dortmund was the sort of man for whom human transactions were best conducted without witnesses.

He turned away from the flight deck, having seen enough.

“Captain Dalton, you have greatly discommoded me,” he said. “What is it that you actually do down here in this malarial bog?”

Vintage Dortmund: he sends two gunships with armed marines in what was little more than a polite abduction and then demands an explanation from the abductee.

“Jungle tours.” I did not expand upon the answer.

“And your vineyard?”

This time I did not bother answering at all. Ever since my involuntary separation from the Marine Corps, many years ago now, I have lived quietly on my vineyard in northern Virginia, tending the vines, reaping the harvest, turning grapes into wine. I have survived a number of challenges over the years, from ravenous gophers to armed assault. To resolve the former I built owl boxes in the nearby trees, whose grateful occupants soon disposed of the varmint problem; the armed assault I had to deal with myself. But then had come a new threat in the form of a tiny aphid-like parasite—*phylloxera*—barely visible to the naked eye, but a creature whose infestations rapidly destroy grape vines. American vines are resistant to the bug and for this reason the majority of the world’s commercial grapevines are grafted onto American rootstock, as too were all the new plantings that I had made. But most of the vines on my property had been there when I bought the place, and they were not grafts but French-American hybrids. Each year I gradually replaced some, but not fast enough. *Phylloxera* came and infested the remainder, more than half the total production.

That put a temporary halt to my winemaking. I ripped out all the old vines and replanted by grafting cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc scions onto 1103P or 110R rootstock, both of which suit the varieties and the soil, and are resistant to not just *phylloxera* but also nematodes, the other parasitic threat to grape vines.

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But it takes three years for new vines to produce grapes suitable for table wine, five to reach full maturity. My bank manager was not going to put a three-year moratorium on the mortgage payments. So while waiting for the new vines to come in I sold the remaining harvest to other producers, and meanwhile looked around for a suitable way to supplement my income.

In the marines I had been a captain in force reconnaissance, the Marine Corps' version of special forces. In force recon you learn a lot of interesting skills but unfortunately there is little demand for them outside of the military. However, as I sat back among the ruins of the vines and made a mental inventory of my minimal marketable talents, I had realized that one thing I did know was the jungle, particularly the jungles of Central America, where I had been involved in numerous operations in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Grenada, Panama. So during the dry season I began running specialist jungle treks into Belize—least corrupt of the Central American states—and which I restricted to the fit and adventurous: part eco-tour, part archeological expedition, part jungle warfare training. The groups are platoon-sized, mainly couples. The women are usually tougher than the men, confirming my long-held view that all military specializations, including combat roles, should be open to females. We begin in the appropriately named Hidden Valley, deep in the Mountain Pine Ridge area, and hike upriver to the base of a spectacular fifteen hundred foot waterfall, a magnificent sight inaccessible except by a combination of machete and climbing gear. We camp there for the first night, swimming in the deep pool at the bottom and showering under cool water cascading down from a quarter-mile above. The next day is spent working from the base to the summit, then further into the jungle, until after five days we arrive at the crown jewel: Caracol.

Meanwhile, the fecund immensity of the jungle was ours to savor: fabulous flora and fauna, from the smallest—like *Pyrophorus noctilucus*, a bioluminescent beetle whose twin thorax spots glow like little green LED lights, bright enough to read by—to the biggest: giant ceiba trees, two hundred feet tall, five hundred years old, with trunks like grain silos and massive root buttresses bigger than a man. In

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between, we experience everything that the jungle has to offer, eating fresh fruit and fish and occasionally fried snake, sharing sunset cocktails in the company of sociable toucans and chatty macaws, and sometimes confronting the fearful, like free diving through black water into a cave containing the burial jars of the ancient Mayans, a place whose flooded entrance has protected it from looters, and once having an unexpected encounter with a jaguar, an animal that after a long contemplation of my party had quietly turned and disappeared back into the undergrowth, leaving me thankful that I had not been required to shoot it.

All of this would have been lost on Dortmund. He thought of nature as he thought of everything else, without sentiment, something to be either used or destroyed at will, whichever happened to be most convenient to his purposes at the time.

After I failed to answer Dortmund nodded to himself, having gotten the message that the time for small talk was past.

“Perhaps we might be of service to each other, Captain Dalton.”

“Perhaps you can start by paying me what you owe me.”

Fifteen months ago I had run an operation for Dortmund. It was not until its conclusion that he had seen fit to reveal that the operation had been off-the-books, completely unauthorized, and intended to have been funded with gold bullion aboard a tramp steamer which by then lay at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. My fee, which would have paid off the mortgage and left me in full possession of my vineyard, was utterly unreachable, a mile beneath the surface of the sea. He cleared his throat before responding.

“I believe that an arrangement accommodating your requirements might be made.”

Dortmund: accomplished master of the noncommittal double-talk that is the *lingua franca* of Washington D.C. I leaned on the window frame and looked out over the carrier’s flight deck. The helicopter that had brought me was still there. They had not yet folded the rotor blades, a good sign.

“I’m ready for my ride back now.”

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“I ask that you first hear me out, Captain Dalton. After that, I will be happy to return you to the place from whence you came.”

If I could have walked out I would have done so, but in a ship at sea there is nowhere to walk to. I had no choice but to hear the old devil out.

“Okay, what do you want?”

“For you to recover a piece of missing property.”

“What sort of missing property?”

“A notebook.”

He reached over to a briefcase stowed in a rack on the bulkhead. It was of the old-fashioned type, thick leather, soft-sided, and with a flap folding over the top that was held down with two brass buckled straps. The leather was dark brown, scratched here and there, shiny like an old saddle with age and use. Dortmund unbuckled the straps and withdrew a notebook—octavo sized, about six-by-nine—bound in blue and bearing a gold emblem embossed on the cover. He passed it to me.

“A notebook like this one,” he said.

I inspected it. Three-quarters of an inch thick. The pages were lined but otherwise blank. Good quality paper, fine Morocco binding. I looked at the front cover.

It was not an emblem but a seal, circular, with an eagle in the center, wings spread and holding a banner in its beak which bore the familiar motto *E Pluribus Unum*. Around the circumference were the words *United States Senate*.

“Been stealing from the Capitol supply room, Mr. Dortmund? You ought to be ashamed.”

“The missing notebook does not belong to me.”

“Whose is it?”

But instead of immediately answering Dortmund sat back and sighed. I understood why. Until now he had told me nothing definite, nothing whose revelation in the wrong quarter could come back and bite him one day. But as soon as he uttered a name, he knew all that would change. I would possess knowledge then, a commodity which to Dortmund equates with power, and when it came to power Dortmund was a paragon of parsimoniousness. Like a starving miser reluctantly

opening a cobwebbed wallet, Dortmund could only be separated from his secrets by the most pressing of needs.

“William Stolper,” he said at last. “You recognize the name, I take it?”

“The senator, I assume.”

Dortmund nodded.

Stolper was an up-and-coming politician from one of the deep Dixie states, Alabama or Arkansas or the like. Tough, ambitious, photogenic, someone who had raised himself to the front ranks of his party leadership in a short space of time. Staunchly conservative, but with a gloss of New South sophistication to make him more palatable above the Mason-Dixon line. Intelligent, articulate, and a phenomenal fundraiser, particularly from the K Street outposts of the defense industry. He was sometimes called ‘Battleship Bill’ because of his strong support for the armed forces, especially the navy. I wondered if that was how Dortmund had managed to have an entire carrier battle group placed at his disposal.

“Since the mid-term election, Stolper is the senior senator from Mississippi,” Dortmund explained. “He has been given the chairmanship of both the select committee on intelligence and the appropriations subcommittee on defense—two very powerful positions.”

Mississippi, of course: there is a huge naval shipyard in Pascagoula, easily Mississippi’s largest private employer and a certain source of support every six years for any senatorial candidate demanding a bigger navy.

“I take it that the missing notebook was not blank.”

“It was not.”

“What was in it?”

“Notes for his memoirs.” Dortmund gave a snort of contempt. “It seems that the honorable senator has convinced himself that posterity will be enlightened by a detailed account of his career, something that he believes may yet reach higher than the senate chamber. Accordingly, he keeps notes. Like a diary, apparently—something that

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he updates every day. I think he imagines the wretched things ending up in his own presidential library someday.”

“And the missing notebook contains classified material?”

“Unfortunately, *classified material* is an understatement. As the intelligence committee chairman Stolper is the recipient of the most sensitive information.”

“Which he wrote down?”

Dortmund merely nodded.

“What was it?”

He took a deep breath before responding.

“Our country has entered into certain contingent security arrangements with respect to the containment of a particular rogue state. These arrangements were mostly negotiated with countries ruled by families. It is customary in such negotiations to offer the parties involved a *douceur*, appropriately cloaked in the guise of aid or some such. Since Congress holds the purse strings the funding for these must necessarily go through an appropriations bill, but of course the money cannot be held accountable since it is ultimately destined for the private Swiss bank accounts of those involved. Therefore the funding goes into an intelligence appropriations bill. The details of intelligence appropriations bills are kept secret from the public, and indeed from most members of congress, but unfortunately the chairmen of the house and senate intelligence committees must be fully briefed.”

He shook his head in discontent at this last requirement. Dortmund had nothing but contempt for politicians, whom he considered as irrelevant impediments to his own grand schemes. Strange that a man who had devoted his life to the buttressing of American power should be such a fervent despiser of democracy.

There were only two rogue states with which the US was so concerned, and only one of them was surrounded by family-ruled kingdoms, so I assumed that they were bribing the rulers of the Gulf states to help contain Iran. There was a certain irony to the fact that we were paying bribes to people already made immensely rich by our unquenchable thirst for oil.

“Stolper wrote it all down?”

“Everything.”

“And lost it?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

In response, Dortmund pulled out a manila envelope from the briefcase and passed it to me. I undid the clasp and withdrew the contents: a single glossy eight-by-ten photograph.

A woman. A portrait shot, professionally done. She had a sort of startling, in-your-face attractiveness: buxom and blond, smooth even features, wide smile revealing either naturally fortunate dentition or expensive orthodonture. Dimples, whose cuteness was offset by long gray eyes that saw much but gave away little. Fine skin: she was a woman who looked after her complexion. The slip dress she wore displayed the taut well-toned arms of someone who spent a lot of time at the gym.

Hard to tell much from a single photograph. Early thirties, I thought, but I am not good at guessing such things. I had the impression of someone with more cunning than intellect, but I often get women wrong, and she could have been a rocket scientist for all I knew.

Not a woman easily dismissed, that much was certain.

“Who is she?”

“Her name is Hanna Moran,” Dortmund replied. “Stolper met her at a fundraiser six months ago. To cut a long and predictably tedious story short, he ended up installing her in an apartment in Washington. His wife and family remain at home when congress is in session. Apparently, he gets lonely in D.C.”

Now I knew why they wanted an outsider like me. An official investigation would inevitably leak, in the way that they do. Stolper’s core constituency was Southern conservative: godfearing souls who took the Ten Commandments seriously—they would not forgive such a blatant breach of item number seven. A passing lapse might be survivable, but installing a woman in an apartment was something else altogether. If the affair were revealed, Battleship Bill’s political career would run aground. No shot at that presidential library.

“What’s she got to do with the missing notebook?”

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“She has it.”

“Then Stolper should ask for it back.”

“It is not just the notebook that is missing—so also is Miss Moran.” Dortmund shifted his great bulk awkwardly, uncomfortable in the seat or perhaps just uncomfortable in revealing so much to me. “Stolper last saw her Wednesday two weeks ago. It was his habit to make notes of the day’s activities each evening, and he did so that night when he was at her apartment. Either he inadvertently left the notebook there, or else she removed it from his attaché case before he left—he cannot be sure. The senator flew home straight after Thursday’s senate session and remained there for the following week, the usual recess after Memorial Day. He returned to Washington this past week. When he went to Hanna Moran’s apartment he found it empty. My assumption is that in the intervening fourteen days she went through the senator’s notebook, probably only to see if there was anything about herself inside. Instead, she discovered that it contained a full disclosure of our containment strategy, including a detailed list of which countries had committed to what actions and how much they had been paid to do so. Undoubtedly Moran realized that what she possessed was something of enormous value. Now she will try to sell it, perhaps back to the senator, but as yet she has not contacted him. I think it is more likely that she will enter into negotiations elsewhere. Perhaps with the parties named, more likely with the rogue state in question.”

“Are you watching the embassy?”

“There is no embassy to watch.”

Confirming that it was Iran, a country with which we have no diplomatic relations.

“For obvious reasons, the senator could not go to the authorities,” Dortmund continued. “The one wise thing he did in all this was to come to me.”

Actually, it was probably the least wise thing of all. I could imagine it: a hastily arranged lunch in the dining room of the Mayflower Club, or maybe just a quiet drink in the library. Stolper doing the talking, explaining the situation with an occasional rueful shrug of his shoulders. Dortmund listening, nodding from time to time, saying little

while rapidly calculating how to best take advantage of this delicious little morsel being unexpectedly delivered into his lap. What Stolper had done was to address one problem by creating a bigger one, because from that moment forward he would forever be in the clutches of Dortmund, a man who would be sure to wring from him every political favor he could grant.

“You must find Hanna Moran,” Dortmund said. “Find her, and you will find the notebook, too.”

I passed back the photograph.

“Sorry, I’m busy.”

“Busy doing what?”

“I told you: jungle tours.”

“I am assured that you only conduct these jungle tours during the dry season, Captain Dalton. I am further assured that the dry season down here is January through May. Since it is now the beginning of June, I therefore conclude that the tour you have just completed will be the last for this year.”

I should have known better than to have imagined that Dortmund would inconvenience himself without having first conducted a thorough background investigation. Right now he probably knew my schedule better than I did.

“It doesn’t make any difference. I’m an ex-marine; I don’t know anything about tracking people down.”

“You forget that I have access to your service records,” Dortmund said. “All of them.”

“That was different.”

“Not really. You tracked people down, Captain Dalton, just as I am asking you to. The only difference is what happened when you found them.”

I did not respond. It was not a subject open for discussion.

Dortmund reached into his brief case and removed another large envelope, this one thicker than the first.

“Everything you will need is in here: money and credit card, notes from the interview with Stolper, his copy of the keys to her apartment.

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Find her and recover the notebook, Captain Dalton, then you will be forever relieved of your mortgage.”

“I’ve heard that song before.”

“This time the funding is assured. The senator himself will insert the appropriate earmark into an appropriations bill. He gets what he wants, you get what you want, and you both have a strong motivation to see that the other is fully satisfied. A perfect arrangement, I think.”

“And what do you get out of it, Mr. Dortmund?”

He almost smiled, a rare event.

“The senator has kindly undertaken to earmark further funds for some as yet unspecified future operations,” he said.

So it was a three-way deal. Stolper saves his career, I save my vineyard, and Dortmund gets a slush fund. A cozy arrangement of mutual dependence conducted in classic D.C. fashion.

I would have liked to just turn and leave, ask the first person I saw for directions to Flight Control, then go and arrange a ride back to Belize. But in the special forces you learn to be a clear-eyed realist, and the hard reality was that these days I was at a greater risk of losing my vineyard than I had ever been and would remain so until those new vines started producing. The vineyard was all I had. Dortmund knew this of course—he had made a career out of the careful manipulation of other people, locating their vulnerabilities like little veins of precious ore, then relentlessly digging away until the lode was exhausted. He knew my weakness well, and he was mining it right now.

I took the proffered envelope.