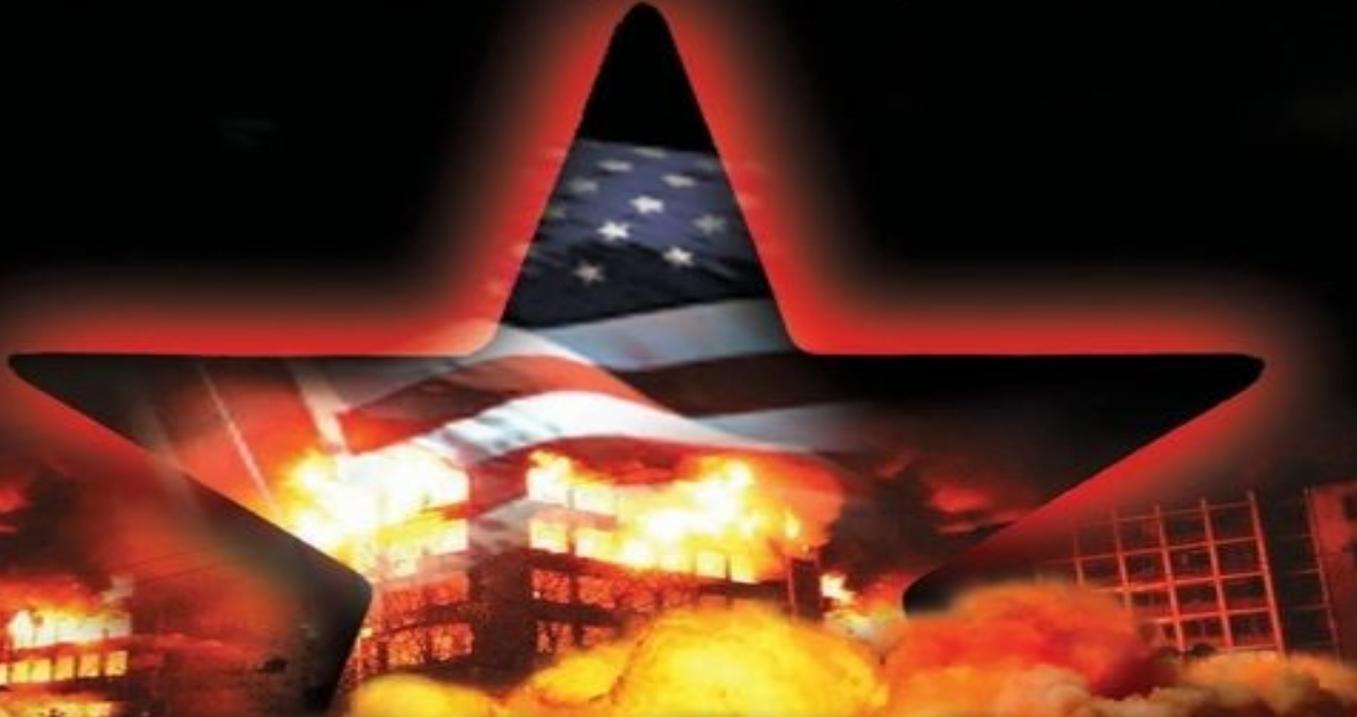


“GRIPPING AND GRITTY.”

—**RICHARD NORTH PATTERSON,**
#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A. J. TATA

AUTHOR OF *HIDDEN THREAT*, *ROGUE THREAT*, AND *SUDDEN THREAT*



FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC

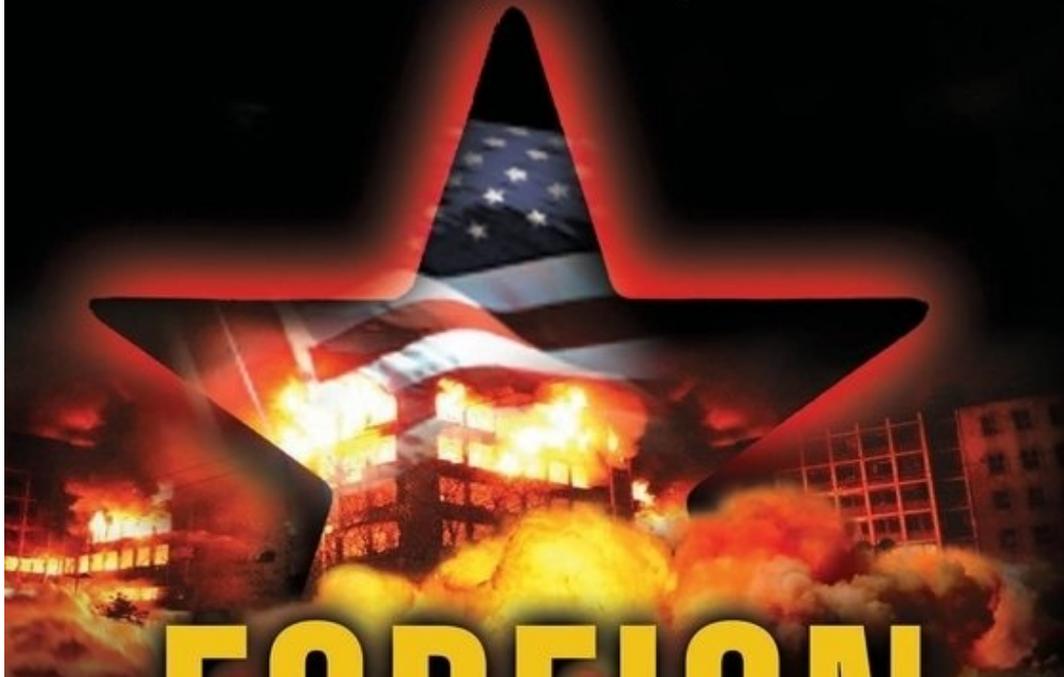
Attributor
PROTECTED

“GRIPPING AND GRITTY.”

—RICHARD NORTH PATTERSON,
#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A. J. TATA

AUTHOR OF *HIDDEN THREAT*, *ROGUE THREAT*, AND *SUDDEN THREAT*



FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC

Advance Praise for *Foreign and Domestic*

“*Foreign and Domestic* delivers . . . absolutely fantastic! It captures the pulse-pounding intensity of *Lone Survivor* and wraps it in a brilliant, cutting-edge plot that will keep you on the edge of your seat . . . Tata *truly* is the new Tom Clancy. Turn off your phone, lock your doors, and jump into the phenomenal new book that *everyone* is going to be talking about.”

—**Brad Thor**, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Black List*

“Tata writes with a gripping and a gritty authority rooted in his matchless real-life experience, combining a taut narrative with an inside look at the frontiers of transnational terrorism. The result is so compelling that the pages seem to turn themselves.”

—**Richard North Patterson**, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *In the Name of Honor*

“General Tata’s story mixes high-threat combat with an intriguing and surprising mystery.... Vivid and complex characters make this a fascinating read.”

—**Larry Bond**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Exit Plan*

“Grabs you and doesn’t let go . . . Written by a man who’s ‘been there,’ this vibrant thriller will take you to places as frightening as the darkest secrets behind tomorrow’s headlines . . . bound to be a breakout book for a gifted storyteller who served his country as splendidly as he writes!”

—**Ralph Peters**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Lines of Fire*

Praise for A. J. Tata’s *Sudden Threat*, *Rogue Threat*, *Hidden Threat*, and *Mortal Threat*

“An explosive, seat-of-your-pants thriller!”

—**W. E. B. Griffin and W. E. Butterworth IV**, #1 *New York Times* bestselling authors

“Topical, frightening, possible, and riveting!” —**James Rollins**, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Powerful and timely. Great stuff!”

—**John Lescroart**, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Electrifying!”

—**Brad Thor**, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Black List*

“Tata masterfully weaves a plot.”

—**Jeremy Robinson**, author of *Island 731*

“Every military thriller writer wants to be compared to Tom Clancy, but to be called better? That’s what A. J. Tata is hearing . . . very realistic.”

—**Paul Bedard**, *U.S. News and World Report*

“Riveting entertainment at its best!”

—**The Military Writers Society of America**

“Captivating, riveting . . . you won’t want to put it down.”

—**Grant Blackwood**, *New York Times* bestselling author

“I highly recommend *Foreign and Domestic* and *Mortal Threat*.”

—**Dick Couch**, *New York Times* bestselling author

FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC

A. J. TATA



PINNACLE BOOKS
Kensington Publishing Corp.
www.kensingtonbooks.com



All copyrighted material within is Attributor Protected.

Table of Contents [Advance Praise for *Foreign and Domestic Praise for A. J. Tata's Sudden Threat, Rogue Threat, Hidden Threat, and Mortal Threat*](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[MILITARY OATH OF ENLISTMENT](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

For my beautiful wife, Jodi, as always.

MILITARY OATH OF ENLISTMENT

I do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, **foreign and domestic**.

Chapter 1

September 2014, Nuristan Province, Afghanistan

The generals had labeled the mission “Kill or Capture.”

Though Captain Jake Mahegan refused to consider anything but capturing the target.

With one hundred mph winds whipping across Mahegan’s face, he was running through the checklist in his mind: insert, infiltrate, over-watch, assault, capture, collect, and extract.

Mahegan knew his men were fatigued from days of continuous operations. They couldn’t afford any mistakes this morning. He felt the mix of emotions that came with knowing they were close to snaring the biggest prize since Bin Laden: The American Taliban, the one man who had posed the gravest threat to United States security since Army aviators and Navy SEALs had killed Osama. Concern for his troops gnawed at the adrenaline-honed edges of excitement. Mission focus was tempered with empathy for his men.

This morning’s target was a bomb maker and security expert named Commander Hoxha, who would lead them to The American Taliban.

Mahegan and what remained of his unit were flying in on the wing seats of an MH-6 Little Bird aircraft to raid Hoxha’s compound. Doubling as both expert bomb maker and the primary protection arm for The American Taliban, Hoxha had weathered wars in the Balkans, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Mahegan’s review of Hoxha’s dossier told him this could be the toughest mission he’d ever faced.

No mistakes.

The generals gave Mahegan this mission because they were on a timeline for withdrawal and he was the best. From the start of his special operations career, his Delta Force peers had called him the “Million-Dollar Man.” The other twenty-nine of the thirty candidates in his Delta selection class had washed out. Each selection session cost the Army one million dollars.

For a year, Mahegan’s outfit was casualty-free with impressive scalp counts of sixty-nine Taliban and al-Qaeda commanders. The better and more consistently he’d performed, the more Mahegan’s legend had begun to take on mythical status within the military.

But that had mysteriously changed two months ago. A twenty-man unit had been whittled to eleven men over the past eight weeks, during which they had conducted twenty-two missions. The pace had been relentless and Mahegan knew his team was sucking gas.

The brass, however, had insisted on this early morning mission. They had told him that the President wanted The American Taliban captured before the final troops withdrew. His senior officers directed him to press ahead based on what they called “actionable intelligence.” Translated to Mahegan and his men: They were on their third night with no sleep as they kept pressure on the enemy like a football team

blitzing on every play with the added threat that their lives were at stake.

In the two helicopters, Mahegan's team whipped through canyons so tight the rotor blades appeared to be sparking off the granite spires of the Hindu Kush Mountains. Through his night-vision goggles, Mahegan could see the static electricity produced by the rotors painting a glowing trail, like a time-lapse photo. The helicopters, called Little Birds, were nothing more than a light wind through the valleys. Two canvas bench seats on either side were supporting him and his three teammates with a similarly configured one in trail.

As a backup extraction plan, Mahegan had his pro-tégé, Sergeant Wesley Colgate, leading a two-vehicle convoy from the ground a couple of miles away. The lead vehicle carried Colgate and two more of their Delta Force teammates. In the trailing Humvee was a contract document and detainee exploitation team, known as Docex, from private military contractor Copperhead, Inc. Mahegan had fought Copperhead's inclusion, but the generals had insisted.

The Task Force 160th pilots skillfully flared the aircraft and touched down into the landing zone at a twenty-degree angle like dragonflies alighting on grass blades.

"Blue," Mahegan said into the mouthpiece connected to a satellite radio on his back, giving the code word for a successful offload in the landing zone. He expected no reply, and received none, as they were minimizing radio communications. The two helicopters lifted quietly out of the valley and returned to the base camp several miles away in Asadabad.

It was nearly 0400, about three hours before sunrise. As always, as on every single mission it seemed, the fog settled into the valley as if the helicopters had it in tow. He considered Colgate and his two vehicles a few miles away. Moving quickly through the rocky landing zone, Mahegan found the path to their target area.

"Red," he said, as they passed the ridge to be used by the support team. He watched through his night-vision goggles as Tony "Al" Pucino and his three warriors from the trail helicopter silently chose their support-by-fire positions.

Moving toward the objective, Mahegan noted the jagged terrain and ran the remainder of the checklist through his mind: assault, capture, collect, and extract. Eyeing the darkened trail above the Kunar River a half mile to the west, he paused. His instincts were telling him it would be better to walk away from this objective than to have Colgate risk the bomb-laden path to the terrorists' compound.

Registering that thought, Mahegan knelt and adjusted his night-vision goggles. He spotted the enemy security forces milling around. They were not alert. To Mahegan, they looked like a bunch of green-shaded sleepy avatars. The offset landing zone had kept their infiltration undetected. They were good to go.

Mahegan gave the signal; they had rehearsed the assault briefly in the compound a few hours ago. From over fifty meters away, he put his silenced M4 carbine's infrared laser on the forehead of the guard nearest the door, pulsed it twice, which was the cue to the rest of the team, and then drilled him through the skull. He heard the muffled coughs of his teammates' weapons and saw the other guards fall to the ground, like marionettes with cut strings. Motioning to his assault team, he led them along a defile that emptied directly into the back gate of Commander Hoxha's adobe compound. With a shove of his massive frame against the wooden back door of the open compound, Mahegan breached the back wall just as the target was yanking his tactical

vest up around his shoulders and reaching for his AK-74. Mahegan knew questioning Hoxha was key to the ultimate mission, so he shot him in the thigh, being careful to miss the femoral artery. Hoxha fell in the middle of the open courtyard between the gate and the back door. Several goats bleated and ran, bells around their necks clanging loudly.

“Target down,” he said. “Status.”

“Team One good,” Pucino reported.

“Move to the objective. Help with SSE,” Mahegan directed to Pucino. Not only had they come to capture Hoxha, but Sensitive Site Exploitation usually garnered the most valuable intelligence through analysis of SIM cards, computer hard drives, and maps.

He led the assault team into the courtyard and Patch, one of his tobacco-chewing teammates from Austin, Texas, strapped the terrorist’s hands behind his back using plastic flex-cuffs. Two more men were already making a sweep through the compound, stuffing kit bags full of cell phones, computer hard drives, and generally anything that might be used to kill American forces or provide a clue as to The American Taliban’s location. Mahegan’s agenda included searching for something called an MVX-90, a top-secret American-made transmitter-receiver he believed had fallen into enemy possession.

Mahegan pulled out a picture and a red lens flashlight to confirm he’d shot the right man. He felt no particular emotion, but simply checked another box when he confirmed they indeed had Commander Hoxha, the leader of The American Taliban’s security ring.

With the fog crawling into the narrow canyons, Mahegan confirmed his instinct to call off the Little Birds and Colgate’s team. They were walking out.

With the terrorist flex-cuffed in front of him and the place smelling like burned goat shit, he radioed Colgate, “We are coming to you. Do not move. Acknowledge, over.”

“Roger.” He recognized Colgate’s voice.

On the heels of Colgate’s reply, Pucino radioed, “Team One at checkpoint alpha.” This was good news to Mahegan. Pucino’s team had completed their portion of the sensitive site exploitation and was now securing the road that provided for their egress toward Colgate’s vehicles.

Mahegan checked off in his mind the myriad tasks to come. They were in the intelligence collection phase. He entered the adobe hut, saw his men zipping their kit bags, and then moved outside where Patch was guarding Hoxha.

He heard Hoxha speaking in Pashtun at about the same time he noticed a small light shining through the white pocket of his *payraan tumbaan*, the outer garment.

Mahegan thought, *Cell phone*.

He also thought, *Voice command*. Like an iPhone Siri.

“Patch, shut him up!”

He went for the cell phone in the outer garment, while Patch stuffed a rag in the prisoner’s mouth, tying it off behind his head. Fumbling with the pockets, Mahegan grabbed the smartphone, but saw the device had made a call.

His first thought was that the adobe hut was rigged with explosives. He pushed the end button to stop the call and wondered if he had prevented whatever the phone was supposed to trigger. He smashed the phone into a nearby rock, knowing the SIM card would likely be undamaged and still valuable.

“Everyone inside, get out of the house! All outside, get down! Now!” he said to his men in a hoarse whisper. Mahegan landed on top of the bomb maker, crushing him beneath his 6’4”, 230-pound frame. He saw Patch and two others digging into the dirt, wondering. Patch silently mouthed the letters, “WTF?”

A few seconds later, he heard an explosion beneath the house as the rest of his team came pouring out of the back door.

“There was a tunnel. Put a thermite in it,” Sergeant O’Malley, from southeast Chicago, said.

“Roger,” Mahegan replied. A thermite grenade would have only stunned anyone in the tunnel, but Mahegan didn’t want to risk going back inside. Two minutes passed with no further activity.

Mahegan stood, pocketed the crushed smartphone, lifted the terrorist onto his back, and said to his team, “Follow me.”

Colgate

About ten minutes before Mahegan said, “We are coming to you,” Colgate was getting eager. He inched his way forward from the rally point along the raging waters of the Kunar River, assuming the worst when he noticed the weather would most likely prevent aircraft from conducting the extraction.

Colgate kept easing forward, pulling the contractors along behind him. The trail they were on was rocky, filled with potholes. It made the Rubicon Trail look like the Autobahn. His gloved hands gripped the steering wheel, sensing the tires on the Ground Mobility Vehicle pushing dirt into the raging waters fifty meters below as he crept toward his mentor.

He and Chayton Mahegan had been together in combat for two years now. To Colgate, Mahegan was a brave warrior, a throwback to his Native American heritage. Chayton and Mahegan were Iroquois names for “falcon” and “wolf,” and Colgate had no doubt Mahegan possessed the ferocity of both predators.

He was proud to be one of Mahegan’s Quiet Professionals. Colgate adhered to his boss’s motto: “Keep your mouth shut and let your actions do the talking.” After two months as Ranger buddies and then being one class apart in Delta selection, Colgate and Mahegan had bonded. Combat had made them closer, like brothers.

Colgate was a big man, a former college running back for Norfolk State University. He had almost made the big time. As a walk-on for the Washington Redskins, he had been cut the last day and enlisted a few hours later. After basic training, he was assigned to the Rangers and graduated Ranger school with Mahegan as his Ranger buddy. They got the same Ranger tab tattoo on their left shoulders and Colgate later made sergeant.

Now, Colgate flexed his left arm, thinking about the Ranger tab tattoo. He inched the vehicles closer. Not all the way, but closer, expecting the call. He was Plan B. Then Mahegan called: “We are coming to you. Do not move. Acknowledge, over.”

“Roger,” Colgate replied. But on the single-lane dirt road with a drop to the violent river beside him, he couldn’t turn around. He was committed. He had to continue.

He heard a dull thud in the distance, like a grenade, and stopped momentarily. But he had to find somewhere to turn around, so he continued toward the objective. He

leaned forward straining to see through his own goggles.

His gunner was getting nervous. “Colgate, I can’t see jack, buddy,” he said through the VIC-5 internal communications radio set. “No place to turn around. We better hold up.”

But Colgate had state-of-the-art jammers that could detect buried mines and roadside bombs better than cats could find mice. He had passive finders and active jammers. He had a heads-up display and wide-angle night vision that made it seem he was watching high-definition TV as he drove. He could see thermal out to thirty meters in front of his vehicle and he was scanning every radio frequency every second with a jammer so powerful he figured they were sterilizing the men in every village they passed. To Colgate, this vehicle was like the Terminator on steroids. He was good to go and so he kept going. Besides, he couldn’t even Y-turn where they were without tumbling into the river. He considered calling Mahegan to tell him he had already committed, but knew his friend was busy.

Then he heard Holmesly say, “Hey, man, big-ass rock pile in the road!”

Never a good sign, the rock pile loomed large in the HD viewer. Colgate slowed his vehicle and noticed through his goggles that they had crossed an infrared beam. He knew it was too late and muttered, “Oh shit.”

Then he heard his radio come to life. It was Mahegan’s voice. “Colgate—”

Mahegan

As Mahegan led his team single file down the road away from the village they had just raided, he stopped. He heard the GMVs moving not too far away, which was not good, not part of the plan.

He pressed his radio transmit button and said, “Colgate—”

A fireball erupted through the night mist. The billowing flame hung in the distance, a demonic mask sneering at Mahegan and his men. Shrapnel sizzled through the air with a torturous wail. Mahegan felt the pain of burning metal embedded into his left deltoid.

The shock wave knocked all eight of them down, plus the terrorist Mahegan was carrying. Hoxha, bound and gagged, was getting up to one knee. The fireball had momentarily destroyed Mahegan’s night vision, but he could see enough to tell that the prisoner was standing, squaring off with him. Mahegan calculated Hoxha’s options. Run toward the wreckage? Jump into the river rapids with hands bound? Scale the cliffs to the east? Or move back toward his compound?

The fireball receded but still flickered brightly about one hundred meters away. The shadows of the jagged rocks were black ghosts dancing in ritual celebration of more foreign blood spilled in this impossible land.

Mahegan ignored the burning and bleeding in his left deltoid as he fumbled for the weapon hanging from a D-ring on his outer tactical vest. A secondary explosion sent another fireball into the sky, probably the ammunition from Colgate’s GMV, he thought. The second blast gave the terrorist more time, but Mahegan still had him in his field of vision. Instead of choosing the three options away from him, Hoxha ran directly at him.

Hoxha faked one way as if he were a football running back and then attempted to

get past Mahegan. Mahegan thought about Colgate and the casualties his team had suffered over the last two months. Then a flywheel broke free in his mind.

“Impulsive and aggressive,” the Delta Force psychiatrist had said.

Mahegan figured, this time, the man was correct.

He cocked his elbow with his right hand on the telescoping stock of his M4 carbine and his left hand on the hand guard and weapon’s accessory rail. He stepped forward with his left foot and propelled the leading edge of the butt-stock forward toward the terrorist’s torso. He rotated his upper body and extended his right arm, locking his right elbow as he connected with Hoxha. His aim was high, or Hoxha ducked, and the weapon caught him across the face. The claw of the butt-stock connected with the man’s temple. Hoxha crumpled to the ground, dead.

Mahegan saw the flesh and brain matter hanging off the end of his weapon and knew he had unleashed mortal fury onto the prisoner. He sprinted one hundred meters to Colgate’s vehicle and found what he’d suspected: burning bodies. He reached in through the fire, his own shoulder burning from the shrapnel, and pulled at Colgate. All he got was charred skin coming off in his hands. He grabbed for Colgate’s upper body and wrenched him out of the GMV, placing him on the ground. Patch and O’Malley were crawling over the burnt windshield to grab Coleseed. No one could find the gunner, Holmesly.

“Search away from the vehicle. He probably got thrown into the river. We’ll have to search downstream,” Mahegan said. Inside, he was a raging storm. Three more of his men were dead.

Eight left.

He stared momentarily at the trail vehicle in the distance, undamaged, with its crew of Copperhead, Inc. contractors standing stunned and motionless in the eerie darkness. Turning back to the burning vehicle, he only cared about piecing back together the bits of Colgate so that he could make him whole again. He was furious. He wondered how all the jammers, scanners, and thermal equipment had failed to defeat a homemade bomb in Nuristan Province, Afghanistan. In fact, there was only one way it could have happened and Mahegan refused to believe what he suspected.

As he stood over Colgate’s remains, the charred flesh and the horrific grimace seared onto his face, he asked him, “Why, buddy?”

Pucino approached and said, “I don’t know why, but I do know how, boss.”

Mahegan, towering over the Italian soldier from Boston, looked down at the box in Pucino’s hand.

“An empty MVX-90 box. From the bomb maker’s hut. Made in the Research Triangle Park of North Carolina. Several more in there, unused,” Pucino said.

Mahegan internalized this information. This was the only device that could have guided an electronic trigger signal past the jammers in Colgate’s vehicle. And it had come from the U.S. of A.

The raging storm that had been building inside him for two months, ever since he had lost his first soldier in combat, finally unleashed. Mahegan howled with a primal ferocity that roared through the distant canyons, the valleys echoing with his anguish. Then he turned toward the Copperhead, Inc. private military contractors and stared at them, wondering why they were on the mission at all.

Chapter 2

September 2015, Roanoke Island, North Carolina

Mahegan knew he was being watched. After a year of drifting in eastern North Carolina, he had finally been found.

Which wasn't all bad.

The black Ford F-150 pickup truck had driven past his rented above-garage apartment on Roanoke Island one too many times. Mahegan had noticed the unusually clean exterior of the vehicle the first time. Here in the Outer Banks of North Carolina, a shiny, waxed truck was as obvious as a gelled playboy among seafaring watermen. The second and last drive-by, a day later, coupled with a slightest tap of the brakes, confirmed that either the Department of Homeland Security or the Department of Defense had located him.

He kept to his routine.

At five a.m. on a typically warm September morning, he ducked out of the Queen Anne's Revenge, a guesthouse owned by Outer Banks proprietor Sam Midgett, and walked along Old Wharf Road of Roanoke Island. Mahegan slid around the fence that blocked the pavement a hundred meters from Croatan Sound, and found Midgett's twelve-foot duck-hunting boat. Pausing to listen to the bullfrogs and inhale the brackish odor, he shoved off through the low marshes, pushing through the reeds. A small white-tail deer darted past him, splashing through the knee-deep water. Stepping into the boat, he used the paddle to get some momentum and then he was in the deeper water of the sound, which was to the western side of the island. About one hundred meters out was an orange channel marker. He reached it, pulled a half hitch through a rusty cleat on the buoy, kicked off his mocs, and dove into the black water.

The sun was about an hour from cresting over the horizon of the Atlantic Ocean less than half a mile to his rear. He pulled with broad-shouldered strokes, the lightning-bolt scar from the shrapnel of Colgate's vehicle explosion screaming with every rotation. The doctors had removed the embedded metal from just beneath his Ranger tab tattoo on his left deltoid and had told him to swim for rehab.

So he swam. Every day.

He preferred swimming this way, in the darkness. Alone, he was able to rehash the botched mission and its aftermath. And here he was also able to evade the vigilance of the Homeland Security noose that was tightening around him. He let his mind drift again, from being watched now to what had come before.

He latched on to the moment he had turned in his papers to resign his commission as a military officer. His teammates had written seven too-similar statements about how Mahegan had thwarted an escape attempt by the clever terrorist who used the bomb blast as a diversion. The Army Inspector General had balked at the carbon-copy testimony of his teammates.

"What my team says is essentially true. But I let my emotions take over," he told his commander, Major General Bob Savage. "Colgate was dead. Hoxha may have given

us something useful on Adham. Hoxha *did* try to escape, but he was still cuffed and gagged. I killed him. I failed. And we're no closer to Adham than before. It's that simple."

Mullah Adham was the nom de guerre of The American Taliban. Actually, Adham was an American citizen in his mid-twenties from Iowa named Adam Wilhoyt who had gone native with al-Qaeda.

General Savage nodded, trying to persuade him not to resign, but Mahegan never wavered.

"I could drive on like this never happened, but without my integrity, what do I have?" Mahegan said. Savage stared at the captain like a seasoned poker player.

"You know it was an MVX-90 that killed Colgate, Holmesly, and Coleseed. And I'm sure you have thought this, but once Hoxha was able to make that call to activate the trigger on the bomb, all you had to do was initiate a radio call to trigger the blast. Only the MVX-90, US manufactured and tested, could allow our radio signals, which operate on a very specific bandwidth, past all of the jammers that were operating."

Of course, it was all he could think about. He had technically killed his own men. In order to simultaneously jam enemy trigger signals and communicate to friendly forces, the American Army had developed the MVX-90. The device left discreet, protected gaps in the radio spectrum so that friendly communications could enter and exit while still searching for ill-intended incoming signals to block. The only way to find those gaps and know how to program a trigger device on the American frequency, Mahegan knew, was for the enemy to have an MVX-90 operating in the area. Effectively, it was like finding a programmer's back door into a software operating system.

A flash burst in his mind from the fateful radio call: "*Colgate—*"

Running his hand across his face, Mahegan said, "I know I killed them, sir."

After a moment, Savage responded. "Your radio did. Not you." Reacting to Mahegan's silent stare, he continued. "And whoever gave them the MVX-90."

Mahegan looked up at his commander and said, "I have an idea."

He explained as Savage listened, sometimes nodding and sometimes frowning.

"I have a different thought," Savage said.

Mahegan listened to his commanding officer, who pushed the papers toward him across the gray metal desk in Bagram Air Base. Mahegan looked down, shook his head, and pushed the papers back at his general.

"I've got to do this my way, sir," he said.

Savage nodded, saying, "You always do, Jake. But if you stay over here in the sandbox you can get your revenge for Colgate . . . and the rest of your team."

Mahegan grimaced. "You know what they say about revenge, sir."

"What?"

"It's all in the anticipation. The thing itself is a pain."

"Twain," Savage had replied. "Since we're discussing authors, then we might as well state the obvious: You can't go home again. You ought to take me up on my offer."

"I'll think about it, sir. Like I said, it's got to be done my way. And maybe there's another way to do it." Mahegan paused, and then said, "Thomas Wolfe, by the way."

"Roger. And that means you know what I'm talking about. You go back to America, especially with Homeland Security all over your ass, and nothing will look the same.

You'll be blacklisted by that new moron they have running the nut farm at DHS and this list of vets she says are threats to society. You've gotten some press over this thing, too. And, Jake, General Bream, the Army Inspector General, is sniffing all around this faster than a blue tick coonhound. He's an ass hamster of the highest magnitude and wants to be Army Chief of Staff. They are calling him the 'Chief of Integrity' or some such bullshit. If you go back, he will be gunning for you."

Mahegan shrugged. "Got a fair amount of that kind over here, too. I'll be okay."

"He's putting on his best indignant performance for the press. He's going for a dishonorable discharge, you know."

Actually, no. This was news to him. Bad news. He had fought with honor, risking his life for his fellow Americans and his teammates. Endless days and nights with no sleep, little food, and unspeakable danger.

"Didn't know that, sir." Mahegan looked away at the maps of Afghanistan on the plywood walls, reminders of firefights, combat parachute jumps, and helicopter raids everywhere.

"Don't sweat it for now, Jake. Cross that bridge when we get to it. Your team covered for you."

"They didn't cover for me, sir. They reported what happened."

Savage waved off Mahegan's statement and continued his sales pitch for Mahegan to stay in the Army.

"For the record, you belong here, with us, doing this," Savage said, pointing his finger at the maps. "This is your home. I took you in despite your psych evaluation, Jake. That counts for something."

Mahegan nodded, recalling how the Army psychiatrist had identified Mahegan's sometimes "impulsive, aggressive behavior," and recommended against inclusion in the elite force. Savage had stood firm and the "million-dollar man" was born. Oddly, Delta Force *had* been Mahegan's home, and he had left all that he loved.

"I just need time, sir," he told Savage. "Then, maybe I can do what you suggest."

Now, this morning, pulling hard through the black water, he wondered whether or not he should have accepted Savage's deal. The general had been right. Someone was looking for him and General Bream was gunning for a dishonorable discharge. He tried to push the black pickup truck and the Inspector General out of his mind.

His broad shoulders and powerful legs propelled him through the sound. After a shark incident while swimming off Wilmington's fabled Frying Pan Shoals, Mahegan was determined to appear dominant in the water. He swam with purpose, as if he were the apex predator, some kind of savage beast on the prowl.

His mind drifted from Colgate to The American Taliban, Mullah Adham, to his shoulder and to Martin Strel, who owned the world record for the longest continuous swim. Before beginning his swimming rehab, Mahegan had researched the sport. Strel swam 312 miles in the Danube River in 84 hours. Mahegan did the math. He was doing 5 miles max each way. Strel had cruised at a sustained rate of 3.7 miles an hour. Mahegan was doing something less than that, but not by much. Plus, Strel had a helping current while he was going cross-current. The tide was either coming in or going out, which was always perpendicular to his axis of advance. Mahegan knew he wasn't doing the miles all at once, of course.

He swam that way for an hour and a half until, on a downward stroke, his hand hit

sand, touching the small beach of the mainland of North Carolina. He pulled himself up, strode through the knee-deep water, and sat on the jutting spit of land that was the easternmost point of the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge.

He sat about twenty meters back from the water, facing east, and watched the dawn appear over the Atlantic Ocean, Outer Banks barrier islands, and Roanoke Island. The sun cast an orange streak along the spreading vee of his swimming wake. The water rippled outward, inviting the coming day. The vee eventually disappeared, and he wondered about his life path. What was left in his wake so far? What more would there be? Would his trail simply blend back into the environment with no remaining signature?

As Mahegan stared at his diminishing path, he felt welcoming eyes surround him from behind.

He smiled. They had learned to come to him, or perhaps he to them.

The red wolves crept from their Alligator River refuge and joined Mahegan as he watched the sun and wondered about life. Mahegan had researched the terrain of Dare County Mainland, and among other valuable lessons, he learned that at one time there had been only sixteen red wolves left in the United States. The National Wildlife Refuge had tried an experimental repopulation program by placing a few of the sixteen in Alligator River National Park. Fierce hunters, the red wolves began to thrive on the abundant wildlife in the remote national park.

They traveled in family packs of adults and cubs. Mahegan turned and saw a youngster lying in some saw grass, staring at him. The pup looked more like a red fox than a wolf.

Mahegan felt a comfort here, removed from even the sparsely populated Roanoke Island. Drifting up the Outer Banks of North Carolina for a year, he had worked the odd job for a couple of weeks before moving on. He was a deckhand on a fishing boat out of Wilmington, a bouncer at a bar in Beaufort, and part of a landscaping crew in Hatteras. Remaining obscure was paramount.

But a year was enough. The one-year anniversary of his failed mission in Nuristan Province was tomorrow, and he was at the end of this particular trail.

Plus, they had found him. He needed solitude to finalize his plans. Today.

The first part of his plan, if he could call it that, was to borrow his new landlord's pickup truck, drive up to Arlington National Cemetery, and visit the gravesites of Colgate and the rest of his men who had been killed in action.

The second part was, well, complicated.

He stood and turned slowly, facing west. He counted the faces poking through the reeds and tall grass. Eight. Just like the remaining members of his team.

They seemed to be staring at his arm, where the scar that looked like a lightning-bolt welt ran from his left shoulder to his elbow. Mahegan suspected that somewhere deep down in the psyches of these animals, they knew the threat to their species. Sixteen left. Just as families passed stories from generation to generation, these red wolves, Mahegan was certain, were passing the story of their near extinction to their offspring.

One of the wolves circled past him. He didn't know, but perhaps his kinship with these animals had something to do with being backed into a corner, the very essence of their being whittled to the core. Would they survive or evaporate into thin air? He