

SUDDEN THREAT

A.J. TATA



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IN MEMORY OF:

COMMAND SERGEANT MAJOR JERRY LEE WILSON
CAPTAIN BILL JACOBSEN
MAJOR DOUG SLOAN

This book is dedicated to the memory of three soldiers killed in combat, two in Iraq and one in Afghanistan. These men are role models for all of us.

CSM Jerry Wilson was command sergeant major during my last six months of command of the Second Brigade, 101st Airborne Division. Jerry, a tall, strong man from Thomson, Georgia, was killed in Mosul, Iraq, in 2003, during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Jerry's heart was as large as he was tall, and as I said at his funeral in Thomson, we must all endeavor to earn his sacrifice.

Bill, who also served with me in the 101st Airborne Division, was killed the next year during the devastating attack on the dining facility near Mosul, Iraq, while serving as a Stryker Brigade company commander. Bill was a six-and-a-half-foot-tall Mormon who loved his soldiers. In the streets of Mosul, he was an icon among both his troops and the Iraqi people. He was the best officer with whom I have served. Speaking with Bill's wife and their four boys at his funeral near Charlotte, North Carolina, I again vowed to live up to the sacrifice of the many good men and women who were fighting both in combat and on the home front.

Doug served with me in the Eighty-second Airborne Division and Tenth Mountain Division and was killed by an improvised explosive device in Afghanistan in 2006, three months after he was scheduled to leave company command, but his soldiers had asked their commander to keep him in

place. Kneeling in front of Doug's rifle, helmet, smiling photo, and identification tags at his memorial service in Konar Province, Afghanistan, on a crystal-clear day amidst the towering Hindu Kush, I wept, proud of Doug's courage and the fact that he had achieved the highest praise a man can seek: subordinates who demanded his leadership.

Jerry, Bill, and Doug were the kinds of leaders soldiers loved to follow. They were selfless men who courageously and valiantly answered the call to duty. Men and women like them are not uncommon in our military. Indeed, they are a reflection of our society and the values of our nation.

The sacrifices of these men should galvanize all of us to recognize the reality that, indeed, freedom is not free, and we have enemies who seek to destroy our way of life.

And if you've read this far and don't turn another page, that's okay by me. Google Jerry, Bill, and Doug, and you will understand the sentiment that these men stirred in those around them.

If you choose to read on, this work of fiction attempts to capture the grittiness of combat against a realistic geopolitical backdrop. Any thriller must have a stage on which to play out, and that stage must be based on current events. In addition to the disclaimer that this book is, in its entirety, fiction, including all of its characters, I want to add that *Sudden Threat's* only purpose is to entertain. It is not a political statement and in no way, shape or form represents any official opinion of the government. *Sudden Threat* is the first in a series of books that follows the paths of two brothers, Matt and Zachary Garrett, CIA paramilitary operative and U.S. Army officer, respectively.

As for me, I am a soldier. I believe in and endeavor daily to accomplish the country's strategic aims, I despise and have fought the enemies of our nation, and I know the threat we face.

Late at night, as thoughts of combat and training spin through my mind, I'm always left with the images of Jerry, Bill, and Doug. So, if I've been able to capture a little bit of the qualities of men such as these in the characters of the main protagonists, then I will have succeeded.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The publication of this book would not have been possible without the friendship and guidance of Rob Hobart and Brad Thor. Rob's professionalism and years of dedicated, selfless service are the foundation for a character readers will discover in *Rogue Threat*, the sequel to *Sudden Threat*, and books beyond. Rob introduced me to Brad, who has simply been an unbelievable mentor through the publication process, not to mention a first-class friend and best-selling author.

I am deeply grateful to the Variance publishing team, Tim Schulte and Jeremy Robinson, who decided to take a chance on an Army officer who has enjoyed writing for the past fifteen years in his "spare" time. They absolutely live up to their goal of being an "author friendly" publishing house.

An author could not ask for two better editors than Bob and Sara Schwager, who have diligently compensated for my inattention in grammar class and plebe, freshman year, English at the United States Military Academy. For sure, any errors in the book are mine alone.

I also need to thank Rick "The Gun-Guy" Kutka for his weapons technical expertise and for his years of service to our nation.

To my entire family, who have been so incredibly supportive of me over the years during military deployments and the usual roller coaster of life, I say thank you. My parents, Bob and Jerri Tata, in particular have been steady supporters of my writing even when life seemed to get in the way.

And to Jodi Amanda, as you say, *all ways and always*.

**SUDDEN
THREAT**





PROLOGUE

NANGAHAR PROVINCE, AFGHANISTAN, DECEMBER 12, 2001

Matt Garrett pulled his white Gore-Tex hood over his forehead, warding off the biting winds that sliced downward from the 14,000-foot peaks of the Tora Bora Mountains and rifled through his layered Afghan garb like invisible sheets of ice. As he turned his head slowly to check on his three other men, the snow was more like pellets fired sideways at his face by enemy weapons.

Holding in position a mile inside the Pakistan border, overlooking a small, nameless village, he studied the hand-held monitor and watched the grainy, barely discernable Predator feed as it followed the ambulance that had passed through Torkum gate, the fabled Khyber Pass. The ambulance turned north on a small road out of Peshawar and then the video feed was lost due to the raging storm.

It was December 12, 2001 and Matt had led his team from Jalalabad through the rugged, snow-jammed trail north of the pass that separates Afghanistan from Pakistan while the Eastern Alliance, fortified by a consortium of special operators and some of his cohorts from the CIA, attacked into Tora Bora. The night before, Matt had stared at the map hanging in the small shack near Jalalabad airfield as he listened to the fight raging in the windswept mountains.

Then he heard the announcement of a cease fire. “Bullshit,” he had said. “Head fake.”

Matt figured that with all of the assets watching and listening to Al Qaeda in the mountains, he would form a supporting effort. His study of Bin Laden always led him to a small village in Pakistan. The one he presently viewed through the scope of his M24 sniper rifle.

Matt had pointed at the map with his team and said, "If he doesn't go the back way out of Tora Bora into Parachnir, he's going there." His finger had smacked the map north and west of Peshawar. "We've got enough dudes up in the mountains; this is where we're going."

Then as they were about to move, an Eastern Alliance checkpoint reported the pearl of intelligence to General Ali. An ambulance had appeared from nowhere in the snowstorm and was passing through Torkum Gate, heading east.

"That's him. Get Pred feed over it now," Matt had instructed. The Predator was unarmed and could only monitor. Matt's hunch, headquarters determined, was not the main effort.

Tora Bora was the focus and therefore received the balance of the armed assets.

Four men and two mules had walked all night from a drop-off point near the border. They shivered and struggled to keep their bottled water and Camelbak hydration systems from freezing. After a quick recon, Matt had selected this rocky crevice with superb fields of fire into the village.

Matt plugged a cable from his sniper scope into a USB port in his small handheld satellite communications device. He was transmitting his sight picture back to Langley, but he also knew that the national command authority in the White House situation room and the national military command center in the Pentagon routinely tapped into the CIA video; all in the name of post-9-11 intelligence sharing.

Matt could not give a rat's ass about who was watching the video feed.

They want proof? They can watch the bullet pass through his brain.

They were perched high above the village nearly 500 meters away. The driving snow provided ample cover, especially with their white gilleys suits that lay atop them. Two of his men were faced outward, securing their position from any passerby. Tony Macrini, known as X-Ray, lay next to him peering through a larger scope, confirming what Matt was seeing as well as providing redundant digital confirmation of the kill.

"Pred lost them, but they're heading this way," Matt said, confidently.

"Roger," Macrini said, then spit some tobacco into the bone-white snow. The brown juice disappeared instantly beneath a fresh layer.

Bones and McKinney tapped Matt every fifteen minutes. One tap meant all ok; two taps meant there was a problem. Better with minimal talking.

Matt's heart quickened just a bit. Though he was experienced, to know that he potentially had the shot on Al Qaeda senior leadership elevated his nervous system slightly. That was good, he thought. He wasn't nervous or anxious, but there was something nagging at him.

He had been told to call in approval for any sniper shot on AQ senior leadership. *It's okay to drop a bomb on a cave and kill the dude*, Matt thought, *but I can't pull this trigger without approval?*

"Movement," Macrini said.

Matt shifted his scope marginally and picked up two men with AK-47s slung across their backs standing outside in the snowstorm.

"That's it," Matt said. Pulling into the view of his scope was a makeshift ambulance with a large, red cross on either side. It slowly wound through a defile

and pulled to a stop in front of the larger adobe structure in the nine-building village.

Men clambered out of the ambulance and opened the back door, extracting a stretcher. After the AK-47-clad stretcher bearers pulled the litter from the back, a short man wearing wire-rim spectacles stepped carefully from the compartment into the snow.

Matt watched as the wire-rimmed, spectacled man rapidly ushered the precious cargo into the large building. Momentarily losing sight of everyone, Matt was pleased when they placed the stretcher on a table juxtaposed to an open window.

“I’ve got the shot.”

“You’ve got the shot,” Macrini affirmed.

Matt deliberated in his mind. *Make the call, not make the call?*

“You’ve got the shot,” Macrini said again, emphatically, as if to say, *screw the call*.

Before Matt could ruminate any further, his earpiece crackled with the sound of a distant incoming radio call.

“Garrett, standby.”

“Don’t answer it,” Macrini cautioned. “I don’t like it.”

“They can see my feed, they know we can talk.”

“Garrett, standby, acknowledge immediately.” Matt didn’t recognize the voice through the wind and static, though he assumed it was some bureaucrat seventeen times removed from his low level status as an operator. He registered that the voice could be coming from any of the outstations: Langley, the White House, the Pentagon, and God knows whoever else might be watching. The 8,000-mile screwdriver was going cordless.

“I’m telling you, man,” Macrini warned. “You know anything good to ever come from headquarters?”

Matt looked at his friend, a former Marine Force Recon scout. Macrini's beard, like his own, was thick. He wore a pakol and tan and green blankets beneath the white sheets they used to conceal their position.

He turned back to his sight picture and lined up the black dot of the cross hairs on the middle of the patient's torso. The medical team had stripped the man, a very tall man, down to his long johns. The white shirt was stained red on the left side. Shrapnel, maybe a bullet, Matt figured. The scope traced the body and then the black dot landed on the bearded face, actually just to the side of the elongated nose and just beneath the dark, brooding eyebrows. The eyes, though, seemed compassionate, or perhaps he had the faraway look of a wounded deer.

Matt nodded to his battle buddy, exhaled steadily and placed an exposed trigger finger on the trigger mechanism. He found that spot where he would have no pull on the weapon, just straight back, not moving the weapon, sending the bullet directly where the cross hairs were resting. He closed his eyes briefly, retreating into that inner sanctuary that allowed him complete focus. Opening his eyes, all he saw was the black dot and the man's face looming large in his sight picture, the way that a slow-spinning curve ball might look to Tony Gwynn, the greatest batsman of all time.

"Homerun," Matt whispered.

"Homerun," Macrini confirmed.

"Do not fire! Do not fire! Kill chain denied!"

"What the hell?" Macrini said, rolling away from the scope and yanking out his earpiece.

Matt didn't move. He was in his zone. Everything was in slow motion; his breathing, his trigger finger beginning the squeeze, the movement of the patient's head turning toward him, exposing the worn prayer callous on his forehead.

“Take the shot!” Macrini growled.

“Do not fire! Kill chain denied!”

“Take the shot!”

With the good angel on one shoulder, Macrini, and the bad angel on the other, the anonymous voice, Matt closed his eyes.

I've got the shot.

“This is a direct order. Entry into Pakistan was not authorized. Kill chain denied. Violation will be prosecuted.”

I've got the shot. I'm close.

“Take the shot!” Macrini demanded.

Matt exhaled again, keeping his sight picture, and squeezed the trigger at the same time a JDAM missile exploded perilously close to his position.

“Holy shit!” Macrini shouted, covering his face. Bones and McKinney turned toward Matt, who was still in his zone.

The bomb's detonation created a bright orange fireball that mushroomed into the sky nearly 100 meters from his position.

“Closer to us than the shack,” Matt said to his three teammates.

He looked at Macrini, who stared back at Matt and shook his head.

“We were punked.”

“Roger that,” Matt said.

“Kill chain denied, Garrett. Return to Jalalabad for new orders.”

Phase I: Chasing Ghosts



CHAPTER 1

**THURSDAY, APRIL 25, 2002, 1900 HOURS (LOCAL)
DAVAO CITY, MINDANAO, PHILIPPINES**

The one time my country asks for a head on a platter, Matt Garrett said to himself as he recalled the nightmarish scene in Pakistan. He let out a heavy sigh, watching the sun dip behind Mount Apo, just to the west of Davao City, Republic of the Philippines, on the island of Mindanao. From the freezing snow to the humid backwaters. From the epicenter to the periphery.

I had the damn shot!

Disappointed in himself, he shook the memory from his head and crushed a smoldering butt under the sole of his dingy work boot.

Keeping his gaze fixed on the gray evening, he noticed a few destitute, but nonetheless workman-like, Filipinos scurry around the concrete fishing piers that abutted Davao Gulf, a horseshoe expanse of water adjacent to the Celebes Sea.

Pulling the ratty Dodgers baseball cap down over his forehead, Matt shook off a bit of his clinging anger and discreetly strode next to a shack, watching the activities—nothing out of the ordinary. He had been cycling between Zhoushan Naval Base, China, and Davao City for over two months. Tonight, he had been given instructions in the form of a text message from his handler to meet a dockworker who would provide him information.

A few short months after being mysteriously

yanked from Pakistan while in hot pursuit of Al Qaeda senior leadership, Matt was now trying to locate a large number of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) called Predators. They were just being put to good use in the War on Terror, and it appeared that someone had traded this technology to the Chinese for financial motivations. Either that, or the Los Alamos debacle had contributed to the satellite imagery that indicated the Predators were being built and tested near Zhoushan. He had developed a lead in China when he suddenly received a message from his handler that there was a significant find in Davao City; and so here he was. *Every time I'm close, I'm moved*, Matt thought to himself.

Matt was large, a college shortstop, and looked comfortable in his cargo pants and khaki shirt. He tugged at the Dodgers baseball hat again and hid his eyes behind Oakley sunglasses.

"Muggy," the dockworker said to him in Tagalog.

"Always in the evening," Matt said in Mandarin.

A hazy mist rolled off the bay, distorting the presence of hundreds of fishing vessels. A gull stood guard atop a pylon and flapped its wings once, as if to shiver, though the temperature was in the nineties.

"Got any cigarettes?" the man asked, this time in Mandarin also. That was the key, he had been told.

He turned and looked at the slight Filipino. Matt, standing over six feet, towered above the diminutive man, who was shorter than five and a half feet. The contact had black hair and brown eyes, the norm in that part of the country.

"Sure. Here." This time in English. Matt grabbed his rumpled pack of Camels and held it out to the source, who took two, glancing at him for approval. Matt nodded.

"Running out of time," Matt said. He watched the man put a cigarette between yellow teeth and strike a match. Once he had lit the cigarette, the man

shook the match and tossed it on the pier. He looked in both directions, then nodded at a ship across the harbor.

“See that tanker?”

Matt looked past the rows of red and gray fishing ships in the direction the man had nodded. He saw several tuna rigs, then could make out a large black-and-red merchant vessel. It looked more like a container ship or an automobile carrier. He guessed the contact had mistaken it for an oil tanker.

“What about it?”

“Japanese. Leaves tonight. Didn’t off-load anything, but Abu Sayyaf put something on it.”

Matt continued staring at the ship and read the name on the side: *Shimpu*. That name registered with him, but at the moment he couldn’t remember why.

“What was it?” Matt asked, still staring at the ship.

With his peripheral vision, Matt saw the guard remove the cigarette from his mouth and begin to speak. What followed happened quickly: The orange tip of the cigarette fell from the man’s hand and dropped at Matt’s shoes as his contact’s body shuddered. Instinctively, Matt pulled his Glock 26 from beneath his untucked shirt and jumped onto a floating dock running perpendicular to the pier on which they had been standing.

As he leapt, he saw that the contact was prone on the pier and bleeding from a head wound. He also felt the hot wash of a bullet pass uncomfortably close as he ducked behind a junked generator, which he presumed was used as an auxiliary power unit for some of the ships. The generator pinged twice from gunshots. And Matt eyed a large Bangka boat with a roof, a ferry of some type, going somewhere.

The helmsman was removing a weathered bowline from a rusty cleat about thirty meters away. There were a few passengers that he could see; mostly fishermen, probably making their way home to

Babak on the eastern side of the gulf. He waited until the captain gave the boat a slight shove. As he watched the boat separate from the pier, he sprinted as if he were stealing third base against a catcher with a rifle arm, then did his best long-jump imitation, feet cycling through the air.

He landed with a thud on the roof of the boat, which promptly gave way and dumped him on the floor, which held.

The helmsman had put the engine into forward, and the ferry was moving slowly away from the pier.

No more shots followed him, but he thought that the ship captain might decide to take over where his other attackers had left off. The wizened man was screaming and baring his teeth, throwing his arms up in the air. Matt understood most of what he was saying and stood, brushed himself off, and pulled five hundred dollars from his wallet.

“Sorry about the roof. Buy a new boat,” he said in Tagalog.

“My boat. Had for twenty-five years. New roof.”

Clearly the man was bargaining with him, so Matt pulled two hundred dollars more from his pocket and handed it to the man but didn't release it. The helmsman tugged on the money with a weathered hand.

“Drop me off at the next pier up near the airport, and we're even,” Matt said.

The man yanked the remaining two hundred dollars from his hand and nodded.

Much later, true to his word and the seven-hundred-dollar payment, the captain of the ship pulled into the pier normally used for fruit transshipment. Night had fallen, and Matt effortlessly leapt from the bow of the Bangka ferryboat onto the concrete pier.

He reassured himself by patting his Glock, which had stayed firmly in his hand through the fall, and

which he had quickly placed in its holster while still on the floor of the boat. He walked a kilometer to the apartment he had rented, grabbed his gear, then discreetly moved another kilometer and a half toward the airport and checked in at the nondescript Uncle Doug's Motel.

Matt presumed that "Uncle Doug" was Douglas MacArthur, patron saint of all things Philippine.

He tossed his duffel on the floor, locked the door, and pulled out his satellite Blackberry.

Check out *Shimpu*. Contact KIA. New location. Standing by.

Matt sent the dispassionate note as if having contacts killed and being shot at were akin to signing an office memo or sitting in a meeting to discuss the next meeting. He removed the Baby Glock from its holster, ran his finger along the extractor, and felt the reassuring bump indicating he still had a round chambered.

Almost immediately he received a text message from his handler.

Airport. Midnight. More to follow. Feet and knees together.

Matt looked at his watch. It was 0200. *Like I'm on a wild-goose chase*, he thought, and shook his head.

Matt forwarded the text to his personal secure e-mail account; his way of keeping a journal.

"Feet and knees together" was paratrooper code for the way to survive a parachute landing. Matt understood that if you kept your feet and knees pressed firmly together, you stood a chance of not breaking an ankle or leg. If you reached for the ground with one foot, then all of your weight would come barreling onto one spot of one bone at the speed of gravity, usually resulting in a fracture.

He simply typed back: Roger.

Sitting on his twin bed with no box springs, he stared at his pistol, cycling the events of the last few

hours through his mind. He snapped his head upward and whispered, "Shimpu." Remembering the meaning of the obscure Japanese word sent a chill up his spine.

"Divine wind," he said to himself.

It's what the kamikaze pilots called themselves.



CHAPTER 2

MINDANAO ISLAND, PHILIPPINES

Garrett had spent the day resting, doing a few push-ups, and chowing on combat rations. One thing about a parachute jump that Matt knew for certain was that you rarely landed in your intended location. Therefore, he needed to be rested and well fed in preparation for the abundance of energy required once on the ground.

He cinched the parachute straps, tightening them against his legs and across his back. He patted the Duane Dieter Spec Ops knife he had taped beneath his cargo utility pants, then tapped his Baby Glock and visually inspected his SIG 552 Commando rifle. He felt the reassuring weight of his 9mm and 5.56mm ammunition in his outer tactical vest. All seemed to be in good order.

What was not in good order, in Matt's mind, was the text he had just received. A group of Filipino Rangers had just been shot down somewhere over the island of Mindanao. Matt's handler had sent a text indicating that one C-130 was a catastrophic loss, meaning everyone was killed, while the lead airplane had some jumpers get away.

The question he was to answer was, Were there any survivors?

I come here looking for Predator connections, and now I'm looking for dead Filipino Rangers, Matt thought, shaking his head. It was not that the task was a nuisance; just the opposite. He knew damn

well that the soldiers who had just died were fighting in the name of freedom.

More sacrifice.

The Casa 212 airplane bounced along the runway and lifted easily into the sky. Matt was jumping a square parachute so that he could steer it to a precision landing. He had asked the pilots to put him over the wreckage site, and he would work from there. The reported crash site was thirty kilometers east of Compostela.

Through a map recon, Matt had selected a drop zone about a kilometer away. It was the best he could do, and even at a kilometer, he believed that the blank level-looking spot on the map was probably a banana plantation or, worse, a recently harvested sugarcane field. Either way, he stood a good chance of being impaled on a freshly cut banana tree or sugarcane stalk. Neither was a particularly good option in Matt's view.

Once he had silk over his head, he would flip down his night-vision goggles and steer to the best possible landing point.

The flight from the Davao City airfield to his drop zone took about ninety minutes, even though the release point was only eighty kilometers north of Davao. Matt had asked the pilot to fly south over the water, then to circle around the island and approach the drop zone from the north, which doubled the flight route. He would be jumping from 3600 meters above ground level, which would put the airplane at about 5400 meters above sea level. The plains of Mindanao were surrounded by jagged volcanic mountains that ran parallel along the west and east coasts. The heat and rainfall had, over the course of time, spawned lush tropical rain forests on both the windward and leeward sides of the island. Matt would be jumping in the bowling alley between the two ranges, which topped out at about 4300 meters,

but he would be cheating toward the eastern range, where the airplanes had last been sighted.

As they flew, Matt used his goggles to survey the landscape. Once the pilot made the turn to fly from north to south, Matt saw the city lights out of the front right of the airplane. He was standing between the pilot and copilot seats, observing through the windscreen, and assumed the city was Compostela.

"There," Matt said, pointing to his left front. He saw the faintest evidence of fire. Stepping away from the cockpit, he walked over to the port personnel door, which was open, and held on to the rails of either side, leaning out of the aircraft but staying out of the slipstream.

With his goggles, the fire was more evident. He could see the smoldering remnants of something burning. As they approached, he saw he was looking at two spots of burning wreckage.

Seems right, he thought.

He walked back to the cockpit, lifted his goggles, and said, "Just get me over those two hot spots. I'll open at about a thousand AGL and find a good location. That's where I need to be."

Paramount in his mind was the fact that there might be some survivors. He was jumping in with a small rucksack, which included a first-aid kit. He would be able to treat a few patients, but that was all. Unfortunately, Matt knew, a few might be all that were left from a plane crash.

"Okay, sir, we're over top. Anytime now," the copilot said, leaning back and looking at Matt.

"Roger. Thanks, guys."

Matt checked his gear once more, then walked off the back of the open ramp, fell forward into a swan dive as if he were going to do a belly flop, and flared his arms to stabilize his free fall.

Initially he was unable to detect the two fires he had seen from the airplane, and as he checked his

altimeter, he saw he was approaching 1100 meters above ground level. He spun once, then again. On his second spin, he saw them and adjusted his airflow to direct his fall toward the wreckage.

At just above 350 meters, he pulled the rip cord on his parachute. It opened cleanly and he had good silk above him. The cool air offset the typically warm Philippine nights and felt good on his face.

He retracted his goggles from their pouch, steered them to his face, and placed the harness on his head, securing it with a chin strap. The “dummy cord” flapped against his windbreaker but would prevent him from losing the goggles should they come loose.

Through the green-shaded world of the goggles, he studied the wreckage. He saw an unpleasant sight at the southernmost airplane.

There were hundreds of people milling around the burnt remnants, but he could determine the oblong shape of the airplane and concluded that aircraft must have been the second in the order of movement. Making a snap decision at about 200 meters before landing, Matt pulled hard and steered about a kilometer away from the southern airplane and toward the northern wreckage.

The only obvious problem was that he couldn't see anywhere to land.

“Oh shit,” he whispered. He realized that talking to himself while under canopy never did much good, but thankfully he caught an updraft and rode it over a small ridge. His quick-firing mind realized that the reason there seemed to be no people near the northern fire was because the terrain was too severe. They might arrive soon enough.

At 40 meters above ground level, he could see the fire burning, and its ambient light gave him enough visibility to conclude that the only place he could land, if at all, would be in the middle of the plow field of the wreckage.

So, his two options were to land in burning, twisted metal or a stand of twenty-meter oaks, chestnuts, and mahogany trees.

His goggles refracted the glint of something elongated running perpendicular to his axis of descent and he realized, perhaps a bit too late, that it was the moon reflecting off water, which in those mountains could even be a waterfall.

Just as his feet were skimming the tops of the trees, he miraculously found a clearing of sorts and toggled hard into a spiral that took him into the hole. Beneath the jungle canopy, his goggles were less useful but still better than the naked eye.

His parachute caught on something, and he swung forward. He was suspended in air, oscillating back and forth as if on a playground swing set. He had his rucksack on a seven-meter lowering line, so he pulled the quick release and heard it thud into the ground shortly after.

Matt flipped his goggles back onto his head, removed a flashlight from his vest pocket, and shined it beneath his feet. He was a mere two meters off the ground.

He removed his Duane Dieter Spec Ops knife from its ankle sheath, cut one riser, then grabbed above his intended cut on the remaining riser, cut it and held on with one arm. He flipped his knife into the ground, heard it stick, then let go.

He kept his feet and knees together as he landed.

Collecting his rucksack and knife, Matt pulled a compass from his vest, set an azimuth north, and began walking quickly to the wreckage.