



Dark Fathom

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Zondervan, *Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Morrissey, Tom, 1952–

Dark fathom / Tom Morrissey.

p. cm.—(A Beck Easton adventure)

ISBN-13: 978-0-310-24408-0 (softcover)

ISBN-10: 0-310-24408-0 (softcover)

1. Divers—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3613.O776D37 2005

813'.6—dc22

2005015815

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Excerpt from *Wild by Nature: True Stories of Adventure and Faith*, by Tom Morrissey. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2001. Used with permission; all rights reserved.

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Interior design by Beth Shagene

Printed in the United States of America

05 06 07 08 09 10 11 • 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PROLOGUE

MAY 6, 1945

49,000 FEET ABOVE THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES, CANADA

“Captain, fuel pressure’s dropping – number-two drop tank.”

The flight deck, illuminated only by the red instrument lamps, was full of the sound of the engines, a background noise too loud to ignore and too monotonous to notice. Not even the leather flight helmets with their padded intercom headsets could cancel it out. It was like sitting under an avalanche with cotton stuffed in one’s ears.

“Captain?”

Luftwaffe Captain Ernst Grüber glanced at the altimeter; his aircraft was nearly fifteen kilometers above the dark and frozen earth. He was cold, his feet nearly numb despite the rabbit-fur-lined flight boots, his fingers thick and wooden within silk-lined, shearling-cuffed gloves. He switched on a red-lensed flashlight, checked the flow from his oxygen bottle, and turned it up. Almost immediately, his head became clearer and feeling crept into his limbs. He turned to the flight engineer.

“How long since we emptied number one?”

The engineer, a lieutenant, pushed up his jacket sleeve and glanced at his watch. “Five minutes, sir.”

Grüber nodded. The designers from Horten had said that the wing tanks would run dry within seven minutes of one another. That prediction was turning out to be accurate, just as all of their predictions had turned out to be accurate, beginning with the outrageous pronouncement that an aircraft such as this – with no vertical stabilizer, no rudder, and no fuselage to speak of – would fly at all.

“Watch the fuel pressure,” Grüber said. “Tell me when it hits zero.”



He was tired. Dog-tired already and only six hours into what was scheduled to be a twenty-two-hour mission. Fatigue was edging the Dahlem accent back into his German, a guttural undertone that he tried to hide from the high-blooded Berliners on his aircrew. But if anyone noticed, they did not show it.

“Zero now, sir.”

“Very good.” Grüber put both hands on the control yoke. He’d logged a hundred hours in training on this aircraft, but it still felt strange to have no rudder pedals beneath his feet. “Eject on my mark ... *now*.”

The engineer pulled a pair of levers. There was a distant, metallic *thunk* as the two huge, twenty-kiloliter, aluminum tanks dropped away into the night. The instruments registered the change – the airspeed rising, the altimeter creeping higher.

Grüber allowed the aircraft to climb and seek its own equilibrium. To give it the range required for this mission, the bomber had not been equipped with the belly guns, nose guns, or tail-cannons that had been part of the original design. The ball turret behind the flight deck had been replaced with a simple Perspex dome from which the navigator, who was also the radio operator, could make star-sightings every fifteen minutes, guiding them on their journey with the same technology used for centuries by ships under sail.

With no guns, no armor to speak of, no weapons other than the single bomb in its bomb bay, the bomber’s sole means of defense was altitude. It could not outrun most Allied fighters, but it could outclimb them; its service ceiling and range were a full two kilometers higher and 10,000 kilometers farther than any other aircraft in the world. That was the beauty of it.

That was the horror of it, as well.



The Horten Ho-18 *Amerikabomber* was unlike any other aircraft. It was a true flying-wing design, powered by six BMW 109-003

jet engines, capable of reaching well in excess of five hundred miles per hour in level flight. Sixty meters wide from wingtip to wingtip, the airplane was beautiful, a design seemingly snatched from some future time. With no nose and no tail, it was a shallow, batlike chevron in the evening sky. There was nothing about it that did not seek the heavens.

But that was also its principal flaw: one that Ernst Grüber had spotted within moments of first seeing a scale model of the aircraft.

“It has no vertical stabilizer,” Grüber had told the Horten representative who’d first briefed him.

“The side-to-side motion of the airplane, the yaw; it is controlled by the thrust of the engines, yes?” The Horten man had smiled as if what he’d just said was supposed to be obvious.

The thrust of the engines. The jet engines. And Grüber knew about jet engines. They were more powerful than piston engines, and much more efficient at altitude, but they could also be amazingly fragile. He’d been standing on the flight line in Cologne a year earlier when one of the new Me-262 jet fighters was being run up. A line mechanic’s glove had been sucked into one of the intakes; that was all it had taken to disintegrate the engine in rather spectacular fashion.

Which was why Grüber had asked his next question:

“And what happens when the thrust falls out of balance?”

That had gotten Grüber a look. “Then you must rebalance it, of course. We used this design on a fighter prototype last year. If the thrust goes out of balance and is not corrected immediately? Then the aircraft will spin. Quite violently, in fact. You would not be able to recover.”

That had gotten the Horten engineer a look. “I’m flying this aircraft into combat,” Grüber had told him. “It sounds a bit delicate, does it not?”

The engineer had shrugged. “For a fighter, yes. But for a bomber?” He’d shrugged again. “Just stay high, so they don’t shoot you.”



“Let us remember Dresden,” Hockheim, the bombardier, said from his ready seat.

Grüber did not answer. There were five Germans on the *Amerika* this late spring evening; none of them had been home for the better part of a year. They had shipped out on June first of 1944, five days prior to the Normandy invasion, leaving Norway on three U-boats loaded with aircraft components, plans, and machine tools, as well as a cadre of Horten Aircraft Company designers, engineers, and skilled tradesmen.

Since then, they had been living in Japan, initially in the port city of Nagasaki, and more recently in the tiny town of Okha, on the country’s northernmost island, the optimal takeoff point for a Great Circle route east over the Arctic.

They had been in the eighth month of their deployment when news had reached them of the fire-bombing of Dresden. Unprotected by anti-aircraft batteries and swollen with refugees fleeing from the advancing Red Army, Dresden had been attacked by the Allies with enough phosphorous bombs to turn the medieval city’s center into a veritable tornado of white-hot flame. Newsreels flown in from Germany had shown the aircrew the carpet of ash and rubble that a single night’s bombing had produced. An SS intelligence officer had described to them how the intense heat had created winds so strong that pedestrians were physically swept off their feet and hurled, screaming, into the inferno.

Told once, the story would have been terrible news from home, another horrifying example of man’s inhumanity to man. But Grüber and his aircrew had been told it again and again. Yet Dresden had been blanketed with more than 700,000 bombs, while the *Amerika* carried only a single weapon. That made Ernst Grüber’s blood run cold. After all, what manner of bomb was it that a single one could possibly make up for the destruction of Dresden, of Hamburg?

And why was it that Hockheim – an SS officer educated as a physicist – had been pressed into service as the *Amerika's* bombardier, rather than any of the legions of battle-trained Luftwaffe officers who were available?



“A penny for your thoughts, Captain.”

Grüber blinked. He turned and looked at Colonel Kenjo Matsushida, an experienced heavy-bomber pilot and the only non-German on the aircrew. The stoic Matsushida had been presented to Grüber and his men as window-dressing, a Japanese national to sit in the right-hand seat as the *Amerika* streaked down its steel launch track.

But the Japanese pilot had been a quick study and was easily the equal of Schmidt, the regular Luftwaffe copilot assigned to the mission.

“I’m thinking of revenge.” Grüber kept his eyes forward, on the empty black sky.

“Revenge.” Matsushida spoke in perfect Oxfordian English, the only language that he and the German aircrew had in common. “Of course; I understand.”

No – no, you do not. Grüber touched the Bible tucked inside his goatskin flight jacket. It had been a gift from his old pastor, Martin Niemöller, on the eve of Grüber’s departure to begin his military training, a joyous occasion because Niemöller himself was a decorated veteran of the First World War: a winner of the *Pour le Mérite*. That was before Niemöller spoke out against Hitler’s state religion policies, was arrested, held eight months, and then fined 2,000 deutschemarks and released from jail ...

... After which the Gestapo had seized the pastor and put him into the camps: first Sachsenhausen, and then Dachau.

Grüber had cut the dedication page out of the Bible, cut it out and burned it, it and the signature that tied him to an enemy of the state. But he had kept the Bible itself, kept it and had even

left his Luger behind in Okha so he could carry the worn book on this flight and still make his weight. It was, after all, the only tie he had left to the man who had led him to his Savior, even though the only things that would distinguish it from any other Bible were the three verses that Niemöller had underlined in the twelfth chapter of Romans:

Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Overcoming evil with good—Grüber wondered if that was even remotely related to what he was doing here.



Eleven hours later, the *Amerika* was closing in on the distant, dark void of Lake Ontario when the call came over the flight-deck intercom: "Navigator to pilot. Target in one hour, Captain."

"Understood: one hour out." The amphetamines prescribed by the flight surgeon were kicking in now. The whole crew had taken them half an hour earlier.

Grüber felt no better about what they were getting ready to do. Try as he could, he could only see two things good about it.

The first was that they were doing their duty.

And the second was that, once they had the big, strange, single bomb clear of the bomb bay, he and his crew would have a way out of the airplane.

The giant aircraft had no landing gear; it had taken off on rocket-assisted carriage units that had dropped away at the end of the launch rail. For training purposes, fixed gear had been

mounted in false drop tanks, but for the mission, wheels had been exchanged for extra fuel room. It was the last word in commitment, a single-use airplane; once airborne, the *Amerika* could not land.

The plan all along had been to bomb the target, fly on to a rendezvous point in the Atlantic, and then parachute into the water, where a U-boat would pick them up and carry them to Venezuela and safety. But mannequin tests had shown that the slipstream would bash a man against the aircraft if he tried to jump from the crew door. The only safe jump point was from the bomb bay, which had its own front airfoil when the doors were completely open. And that exit was only usable when the bay was empty.

“Forty-five minutes.”

“Very well.” Grüber turned and looked over his shoulder. “Mr. Hockheim, prepare to arm your weapon.”

There was movement to Grüber’s right as his copilots exchanged positions for the third time in the mission – Schmidt moving back to the bomber’s single narrow bunk, and Matsushida sliding easily into the right-hand seat.

Grüber could see lights ahead of them now. They had nearly cleared the lake. The *Amerika* was now in the airspace of the country for which she’d been named. Grüber glanced behind him; Hockheim was pulling on an extra pair of coveralls and donning a lead apron.

That was another thing that worried Grüber. Everyone else on the crew had left behind fountain pens and pocket change to conserve weight, but Hockheim was carrying a lead apron. And when Grüber had asked why, Hockheim had not answered.



It was just after ten in the evening, local time. They were closing in on half an hour away from target – time to arm the bomb – when the navigator got on the intercom.

“Message coming in on the radio, Captain. It’s encrypted.”

“Arm the weapon,” Matsushida said. “We can decrypt the message later.”

Grüber shot the Japanese officer a look.

“Disregard that last. Bombardier, arm your weapon. Radio operator, decrypt the message.”

“We don’t have time.” Matsushida tapped his wrist, where his watch was, under his flying gauntlet. “We’re only thirty minutes from target. We need that man to navigate.”

“Encrypted traffic takes priority; we can circle, if we need to. And you and I can navigate the rest of the way to the target. All we have to do is aim for the lights.”

He nodded at the slightly bowed horizon ahead of them. Through the curved nose canopy, a dim concentration of yellow-white light indicated the presence of a major city.

Matsushida said nothing.

Five minutes later, Grüber felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned and the radio operator handed him a sheet of paper with the square Enigma type running across it. Grüber switched on his red-lensed flashlight and read it. He read it again. Then he touched his throat mike.

“Pilot to bombardier.”

“Bombardier.”

“Safe your weapon.”

“Repeat, please?”

“Safe your weapon. We’re scrubbed.”

“Yes, sir. Understood. Safing the weapon.”

“Wait.” It was Matsushida. “What are you talking about?”

Grüber handed him the signals transcript:

REICHSKANSLER DEAD. BERLIN OCCUPIED. TRUCE STRUCK. CEASE HOSTILITIES
IMMEDIATELY. DO NOT REPEAT DO NOT ENGAGE. DISARM WEAPON AND
JETTISON AT SEA. PROCEED WITH ALL HASTE TO RENDEZVOUS.

JOHL, GEN’L

Matsushida ripped the order into shreds. “We never received this,” he said.

Slowly, Grüber slid his hand down to his hip, to his holster.

It was empty. Of course: he’d left the gun in Japan. He hoped the others were still plugged into the intercom.

“Kenjo ...”

“*Colonel*. I am a colonel, Captain, and I outrank you.”

“Very well. Colonel – the war is over.”

“Your war may be over. My war is not.”

“But this is a German aircraft.”

“Assembled on Japanese soil and dispatched from a Japanese base. Your flight path will make that obvious. No one need ever know that this was a Luftwaffe attack. Japan will claim responsibility. We will say it was our aircraft, our weapon. It will do for us what it could not do for you – break the wills of the Allies. Allow us to sue for a more advantageous peace.”

The light on the horizon was rapidly gaining strength.

“Colonel ... I have been ordered by my supreme commander to stand down.”

Nodding, the Japanese officer unholstered his sidearm, cocked it, and very deliberately aimed at the center of Grüber’s head.

Grüber swallowed. “There are five of us on this aircraft, Colonel.”

“That is not a problem, Captain. I have six bullets.”

“You can’t release the bomb from the flight deck. That takes a second man, down below, in the bombardier’s station.”

“Then I’ll shoot the bombardier last.”

The sound of the six jet engines came flooding back in. Grüber’s mind raced, trying to come up with a way to deal with this very placid madman.

As it happened, he didn’t have to. In the very next instant, there was a suggestion of movement in Grüber’s peripheral vision, a blinding flash, and then Grüber fell forward against his seat harness as the world faded into silence and blackness.



He blinked himself awake. His head throbbed. Above him and to his left, wind was roaring in through a thumb-size hole in the Perspex canopy. To his right was a tangle of men – Schmidt and the radioman, struggling with Matsushida; both had hold of the Japanese officer's right arm, in which he still gripped the pistol menacingly. Still groggy, Grüber reached out and twisted the gun from Matsushida's hand, turning it toward the man's palm, just the way they'd shown him in the pitifully brief hand-to-hand combat course during basic training.

Amazingly enough, it worked. Grüber depressed the thumb latch to release the pistol's magazine. Then he worked the action to eject the round from the chamber.

Done. That was done. What next? Still blinking stars away from his eyes, he scanned the instruments. Both throttles had been shoved all the way to 110 percent power in the scuffle, and the aircraft was in a bank to the left, nose down 30 degrees, losing altitude rapidly. Already they were dipping beneath 10,000 meters. Coming rapidly awake now, Grüber took the yoke in both hands and pulled back.

Nothing.

"Pull him back!" He was shouting at the top of his lungs, struggling to be heard over the scream of the engines and the wind roaring in through the punctured canopy. "Pull him back – he's up against the yoke! We're diving."

The struggle continued. Grüber peered at the struggling, red-lighted forms, judged which of the three heads was the Japanese officer's and brought the pistol barrel cracking down upon its crown. The struggle ceased, and he tried the yoke again – it was heavy from the wind pressure, but it moved. He reduced throttles to 50 percent and kept applying back-pressure. Slowly, over the better part of a minute, the big bomber pulled out of the dive. By the time the *Amerika* leveled out, the altimeter was reading

a bare 5,000 meters. Ahead, through the concave curve of the Perspex nose, Grüber could clearly see a shimmering arrow-head of electric lights, punctuated by landmarks familiar even to a German who had never seen North America before: the silver stiletto of the Chrysler Building, the Empire State Building dwarfing everything around it and, off in the blackness, all by itself, the patinaed form of the Statue of Liberty.

New York.

The city they'd almost bombed.

“Put him back in the ready bunk.” Grüber looked to make certain that his orders were being understood. “Strap him in. And give him an ampoule of morphine. I don't want him running around.”

Pulling off his flying gloves, Grüber felt the top of his leather helmet. There was a shallow groove there, where the bullet had scored him. But his hand was not sticky—no blood. So it had been close, but not too close.

Rolling the throttles forward to 100 percent power, the Luftwaffe captain positioned his yoke for its most fuel-efficient rate-of-climb, and the city lights dropped out of view. The big bomber passed 8,000 meters, then 10,000, and Grüber was just about to ask Hockheim what the weapon they were carrying would have done to the target when several loud bangs sounded against the underside of the aircraft, followed quickly by two more. Then metal and Perspex were clattering around the flight deck, the thumb-size hole in the canopy was joined by one large enough to accommodate a man's head, and wind was whistling up through a hole in the metal decking next to Grüber's feet.

Two seconds later, an aircraft went flashing by in the moonlight. Grüber had a glimpse of two engine nacelles and twin tail booms.

“Fighter! A P-38.” Grüber started to give the firing coordinates—“Ten o'clock hi ...”—and then stopped himself. His

aircraft had no gunners, no way of shooting back. He only had one defense.

Altitude.

Shoving all four throttles forward to their stops, he waited ten long seconds until the turbines reached speed, and then he pulled back on the yoke, aiming the aircraft up, at a gibbous moon, frigid air pouring in on him through the shattered canopy.

“I need flying goggles up here.”

Someone—he didn’t look to see who—handed him a pair of goggles, and he pulled them on, blinking to clear his eyes. Schmidt was strapping into the right-hand seat, helping him hold the yoke back, scanning the instruments for signs of trouble.

Grüber heard the trip-hammer sound of more rounds striking the bomber, and someone called out in pain on the intercom, but he didn’t have time to ask who it was. He was busy, keeping the big jet bomber at its maximum rate of climb.

Forty seconds later, he could see lazy arcs of tracer fire off their left wing. Then they were passing 14,000 meters, well above the service ceiling of their propeller-driven adversary. The wind howling through the broken canopy was freezing, but the controls all seemed to work, and the engines appeared undamaged—all producing equal thrust, and all within 50 degrees of one another in temperature.

“Navigator, give me a heading to rendezvous.”

“Make your heading one-four-three true.”

Good man. He’d had the heading ready, had kept his head through the attack.

“Who’s hit?”

“Hockheim.” It was the flight engineer who answered him. “It looks bad. We can’t stop the bleeding. Oh—and Matsushida took one through the chest. He’s dead.”

“Give Hockheim morphine, then. We’ll make the best time we can. They’ll have surgeons on the sub. Engineer—just as soon

as we're over deep water, clear the bomb bay. And for goodness sake, check with Hockheim before you put him out, and make sure that thing's not armed."

"Yes sir."

Ten minutes later, the engineer was kneeling on the flight deck next to him. Grimacing against the cold, Grüber pulled back the ear-cup on his helmet.

"What is it?"

"Sir, it's the bomb bay doors. Two of the hinges are jammed – hit in the attack, by the looks of it. We can't open far enough to drop the bomb."

The cockpit seemed to swim for a moment, and Grüber began to sweat.

"Can we open them enough to bail out? Crawl past the bomb – do it that way?"

The engineer shook his head.

"No, sir. I can only make a gap of ten or twelve centimeters. It's not enough."

"Can you close the doors, then?"

The engineer nodded. "I can snug them up with a chain hoist if I have to."

"Make it so, then."

"Yes, sir."

Teeth clenched, Grüber touched the Bible over his heart.



The submarine rendezvous was set at 60 degrees west longitude, 35 degrees north latitude – well out into the Atlantic Ocean and far from regular shipping lanes. The plan was to put the bomber over those coordinates with several hours of fuel left – but that plan presumed that the *Amerika* would arrive undamaged at the pick-up point, with her bomb bay empty. Self-healing fuel bladders had kept the fuel loss to a minimum, but there had been

loss, nonetheless. And the bomb added 4,000 kilograms of dead weight. They would have reserve fuel, but very little.

The navigator told him when they were half an hour out from their pick-up point, and Grüber, half-frozen in the windswept pilot's seat, nodded wearily.

"Very well. Get on the radio; see if you can raise the sub."

This should have been a pro forma. U-boats ran submerged only when hunting, or evading an enemy. There would be no other ships in the area of the pick-up – that was why it had been chosen – so the submarine would be on the surface, circling slowly, its engines making just enough turns to charge the batteries and run the air vents. It would have a radioman on watch, and a signal from this altitude would come in strong and clear, with no interference from the horizon. But five long minutes passed, and then ten.

"Radio – any progress?"

"No, Captain. I've tried the primary frequency and both secondaries. There's nothing."

Grüber turned and looked at his copilot.

"Schmidt – your thoughts, please."

The copilot pursed his lips.

"Perhaps their radio is out. If that's the case, I suggest we overfly the pickup point and try signaling with lights."

"I agree."

Grüber put the giant airplane into a slight nose-down attitude. It would get him closer to the surface of the sea, but there were no fighters or anti-aircraft guns to worry about this far out, and putting the aircraft into a shallow dive allowed him to maintain airspeed with the engines throttled back. He could feel the doubts nibbling at him.

Twenty minutes later, they were circling. Four sets of eyes peered down at the moon-washed sea. The telltale white feather of a wake was nowhere to be seen.

"Schmidt – lights, please."

The copilot leaned forward and used both hands to activate the aircraft's running lights and forward searchlights—what would have been its landing lights, if it had landing gear. On for three seconds, off for three, on for three, off for three. He repeated the sequence ten times, and then Grüber banked the airplane to give himself a panoramic view of the sea below.

Nothing.

He leveled off, opened the flare box at his feet, and took out a pistol-like launcher with a red distress flare.

“Schmidt—take the yoke, please.”

Finding an aperture from which to fire the flare was easy. Grüber simply stood, stuck the muzzle of the flare gun into the large shell-hole in the canopy, and pulled the trigger.

A brilliant red light streaked away in the slipstream, and Grüber reloaded and fired quickly until three red flares were drifting down toward the sea below.

One by one they winked out, and still there was no answer from the moon-burnished ocean.

“Perhaps they ran into trouble,” Schmidt said.

“Perhaps.”

Grüber did not say what was on his mind: *Or perhaps they were ordered home, so we could crash into the North Atlantic and take with us every trace of this mission.*

He looked at his fuel gauges. Perhaps they had forty-five minutes more, if they were careful.

“Navigator—where's our nearest land?”

A red lamp came on behind them, over the tiny aluminum chart table.

“Bermuda, Captain. We're less than 650 kilometers away.”

“Very well. Give me a heading.”

“Make heading 241 degrees.”

The copilot looked Grüber's way.

“Ernst, we aren't going to try to land without gear, are we?”

Grüber shook his head.

“No. We’ll have to ditch. But we may as well try to make it within swimming distance of shore.”



Thirty minutes later, they could see the distant shadowed shape of land and, on the far horizon, a cluster of lights, which the navigator identified as the town of Hamilton.

“It might be defended,” Grüber said. “What’s on the southwest side of the island?”

The navigator checked his chart.

“Not much, from what I can see here.”

“Fine. Then we ditch off the southwest shore, close as we can. Let’s overfly it first.”

They came in low, only a thousand meters up, and all hands looked as the water flashed by beneath them. It looked clear, with no telltale white foam, no indication of rocks or reefs.

Grüber touched his throat-mike.

“Crew, strap in. I’ll come in as shallow as I can, but this is going to be rough.”

He cut the big jet bomber around in a wide circle, barely banking, giving everyone time to get secured. They completed the circle and came in low, the sleeping island a dark shadow off to their right.

“Three hundred meters, Captain. Two fifty. Two hundred meters.”

The copilot called out the altimeter readings. From what he could see through the shattered windscreen Grüber could be a thousand feet above the sea, or he could be a hundred – he simply couldn’t tell.

“Fifty meters.”

They were a bit low, and Grüber wanted to touch down closer to land. He rolled on the throttle, adding thrust.

A vague shadow of black crept in from the land side.

“Schmidt – lights.”

The copilot turned on the searchlights and a hundred spots of fluttering white appeared, just in front of the plane.

“Birds! Help me pull up.”

Both men pulled back on the yokes, but the bomber streaked on into the flock of startled herring gulls.

There was a muted pop from the bowels of the aircraft, and the plane yawed swiftly to the right.

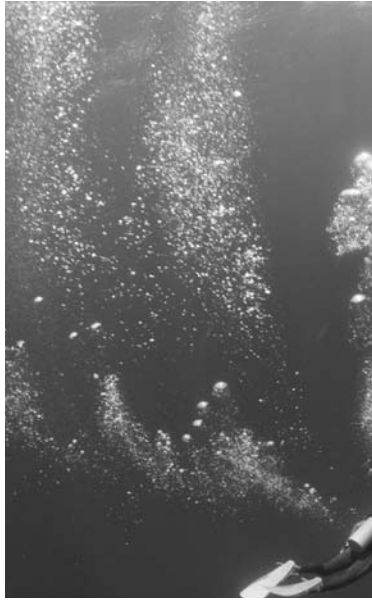
“Bird strike! Number One’s out. Two’s out. Three.”

Grüber pulled all six throttles all the way back, reducing the thrust to nothing, but he knew as he did it that it was already too late. The sea was wobbling crazily and coming up fast in the lights, the aircraft canting, spinning like a giant boomerang.

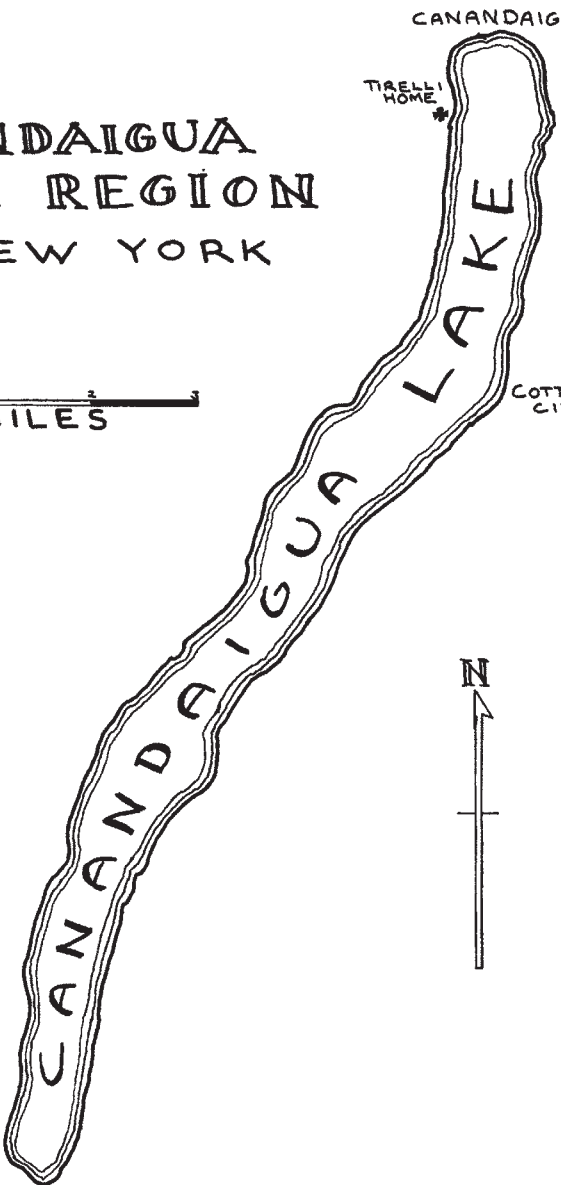
He touched his Bible and squeezed his eyes shut.

BOOK ONE

CANANDAIGUA LAKE



CANANDAIGUA LAKE REGION NEW YORK



CANANDAIGUA

TRILLI HOME

COTTAGE CITY

WOODVILLE



CHAPTER ONE

DECEMBER 24, 1999
OUTSIDE AQUADAS, COLOMBIA

Sprawled in rotting leaves and moss at the base of a banyan tree, camo greasepaint on his face and a ghillie suit covering his body, Beck Easton blinked the sweat from his eyes and marveled at the fact that even drug lords celebrated Christmas.

At least this drug lord did: Raul “Gato” Ortega, also known as “Gato Gordo,” although never to his face, convicted in absentia on seventeen counts of murder, three of them Colombian judges. And those were just the marquee crimes, the ones a Colombian court had deemed serious enough to merit his departure from the land of the living. Easton had seen Ortega’s full jacket: extortion, bribery, theft, kidnapping, fraud, assault, and enough instances of trafficking to fill up several pages of single-spaced type. It was an amazing list; one had to wonder how, in just thirty-five years of life, the man had found the time to break that many laws. Then again, with the single exception of Ortega’s marriage, duly licensed and recorded in Columbian records, virtually nothing the man had ever done was legal. It made Easton wonder whom he’d killed to get the house.

The house, a sprawling, terraced Frank Lloyd Wright-style villa, was perfectly situated on a rapids-dotted bend of the Rio San Sebastian, 587 laser-range-finder yards upstream from where Easton and his partner lay. So still, so perfectly camouflaged that a man could walk within six feet of them and never suspect they were there, the two men had been watching the place since well before dawn. Every once in a while the glass patio doors on the house would open and someone—a servant or a couple of women or a pair of giggling teenagers—would step out, and the barest hint of “White Christmas” or “Feliz Navidad”



would waft down the lush, green river valley. But other than that, there'd been nothing but birds and insects for eight hours. In two hours more, the light would be too low to see through a 20X spotting scope.

Sweat trickled down Easton's temple, into the crease at the corner of his eye. He blinked but did not rub, did not take the chance of putting a flesh-colored streak into the jungle greasepaint.

"Maybe he's not home," said Alvarez, Easton's partner, the one with the rifle, an M40A1 hand-built by the Marine Corps Weapons Training Battalion in Quantico, Virginia. It was the same weapon issued to Marine Corps snipers, only Alvarez's rifle bore none of the WTB's markings, not even the Remington serial number on the original Model 700 action.

"He's home." Easton let his voice nod for him. "This is his chance to show off. Lord of the manor."

"Well then, maybe he's not coming out."

"He'll come out. We've got it from two sources that he's afraid the house is bugged. His people sweep it twice a day. But on a day like this, lots of people coming and going, he's worried that maybe somebody leaves a pair of ears behind. Not just the law; the man's got competitors. So if he wants to discuss business, he'll do it out on the patio, let the river noise mask the conversation. And he always discusses business at these parties. That's why everybody shows up. You don't show, you might miss a nice, fat deal."

Alvarez stretched, slowly, no quick movements. "So what's keeping him?"

His voice was low, hardly a whisper.

"It's Christmas Eve," Easton said. "He's drinking eggnog."



The sun was setting behind them when a glint of light showed at the back of the patio. A man walked out, followed by another, and Easton bent to his scope.

“Okay,” he said. “Man leading is Number One, and man following is Number Two.”

The distant figures paused, Number Two lighting Number One’s cigar. Easton thumbed on a ruggedized iPAQ Pocket PC and checked a surveillance photo on its screen, comparing it to the first man on the patio.

Identical.

Easton’s chest tightened. He said nothing.

Low light. Distance. Simplest thing in the world to claim no positive ID. No ID, and no shot, and no kids lose their father on Christmas Eve.

“Still checking,” he whispered.

Then what happens? Another team has to infiltrate, run all that risk. And some other kid might lose a father—a kid who’s not the child of a convicted murderer.

Off in the jungle, a tree frog trilled, signaling the coming evening. Easton shook his head just a touch, throwing the sweat from his eyes.

“Number One is our—our primary,” he finally whispered. “Stand by. Checking Number Two.”

He tapped through a series of head-and-shoulder photos, stopping on the fourth one. “Two is—a secondary. Cousin of Ortega. Okay—they’re tight. He’ll move toward him when he falls.”

Alvarez didn’t reply. Easton could hear him inhaling and exhaling in long, slow drafts, slowing his heartbeat, getting ready.

“Checking the range,” Easton said, his voice steadier now. He bent to the scope again and looked at the telltales, two strips of brown nylon tape hanging from bamboo poles that he and Alvarez had placed at 250 and 500 yards the night before. The first tape was hanging slack, and the second was lifting and falling in a light southerly breeze.

“Wind’s same as before,” Easton told his shooter. “Range is hot. When you’re ready.”

Alvarez bent to the ten-power Unertl on his rifle, and Easton returned to his spotting scope.

Despite what the movies would lead one to believe, the man behind the rifle was almost always the more junior member of a sniper team, and this case was no exception. This was Alvarez's fifth mission, but Beck Easton's fourteenth. And because it was his fourteenth, he could hear the hundredth of a millisecond beat between the trigger break and the rifle report, and when he heard the report, he did not jump.

He stayed at the spotting scope instead, following the tiny, fleeting gray contrail of the .308 caliber bullet as it rose, fell, and drifted a full seventeen inches to the left on its journey downrange.

"One is down," Easton said, and Alvarez was working the action already, breathing in and holding it as the rifle cracked again. Sure enough, Number Two turned, moved toward his fallen cousin, and walked directly into the path of the second round.

"Two is down," Easton said, his voice still low. "Time to move."

Spotting scope and rifle in their arms, the two men slithered slowly backward, melting into the foliage behind them. They did this until the house was no longer visible. Only then did they rise to their feet and stow their ghillie suits in a rucksack on Easton's back.

They did not run. They took turns moving until they reached a trail. Then they moved swiftly, one after the other, Easton leading. They came to a faint rub mark on a tree and turned off into the undergrowth, following a compass heading to a second trail.

The two alternated between trails and cross-country. Behind them, they heard the shouts of men searching, but these faded quickly, and they covered the last twenty kilometers in silence, moving steadily, pacing themselves.

They got to the landing zone at midnight and slept in shifts until morning, when a Colombian Army Huey came clattering in from the south. Easton popped purple smoke as planned, the helicopter settled for the briefest of instants, and the two green-clad men swung themselves aboard. Moments later, they were skimming the jungle canopy, hurtling toward Bogotá.

As the helicopter slowly gained altitude, Easton closed his eyes and settled back against the grimy web netting of the seat. There was a tap on his knee, and he looked up.

It was Alvarez, hands cupped around his mouth. "Hey! I just thought of something!"

"What's that?"

"It's the twenty-fifth," the sniper said, tapping his day-and-date watch. "Merry Christmas."