

CHAPTER ONE

CONSPIRACY

July 1

0300 Hours UTC+8

CSP Headquarters

Beijing, People's Republic of China

Rifle reports echoed within the concrete-walled courtyard. The nine man firing squad was called to attention by its commanding officer. Boot heels clicked and gravel crunched, as hands slapped rifles into position.

The officer, satisfied with the performance of his men, marched forward from his position at the left of the firing line. Stopping three feet from the first hooded and bound figure lying on the graveled ground with a blood-stained hole in the center of its back, he drew his sidearm, an unlicensed copy of a popular Sig Sauer model. After a brief moment of hesitation, the import of the moment testing his self-control, he aimed and fired a single bullet into the

Michael Scheffel

hooded head. Moving to his right down the line, he fired eight more bullets into eight more hooded heads. Finished, he turned to face his men and snapped to attention.

On cue, a physician, employed by the Chinese Secret Police, left his place behind the firing squad and walked forward. In turn, he checked each corpse for signs of life. Satisfied all were dead, he nodded to the officer and stood next to him.

Observing from a guard tower, in addition to being convenient for executions the courtyard was an exercise area for special prisoners, General Li Feng drew on a cigarette and inhaled deeply. Although CSP was outside the defense ministry's chain of command, its commander owed his rank and position to Li's patronage; therefore, the man's loyalty and cooperation had been a foregone conclusion. General Li had other men, similarly under his thumb, strategically placed throughout the hierarchy that ruled China. He had spent years and a considerable sum of his own money positioning himself for this moment. His moment.

General Li Feng was China's deputy defense minister. He was responsible for the day-to-day operations of the People's Liberation Army, Navy and Air Force. He was also a devote student of Sun Tzu and Chairman Mao. Like his personal idols, he believed China's power and greatness in the world were undeniable facts. His nation possessed the knowledge and tools to realize Marx's dream of a world united under the banner of communism. Chinese Communism. All that was missing was the political will to

act.

Exhaling a stream of bluish smoke, he dropped his cigarette on the floor and congratulated himself. Nine weak men content to corrupt Mao's glorious revolution for their own gain lie dead below. Those *traitors* to communism had been the final obstacles blocking his plan and China's path to glory. *In a few hours, eight true communists will be elevated to the Politburo and demand that I serve as their General Secretary. Nothing can stop us! The world is ours!*

Li clasped his hands behind his back and said, "You know what to do. Fail me and you will join them."

"It will be as you wish, sir."

Li continued to watch, as the firing squad finished loading the corpses into a truck driven into the courtyard for that purpose. Then, the CSP soldiers, their officer and the doctor boarded a second truck, and the small convoy drove away.

Three hours later, a turboprop transport aircraft carrying the dead Politburo ministers and their executioners crashed in a remote locale of China's vast interior.

Just minutes after receiving a visual confirmation of the crash, the deputy minister of information released a statement announcing a national tragedy. *The General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party and eight senior Politburo members died on the first leg of a military inspection tour, when their aircraft lost power and crashed. The flight crew, a CSP security detail and a physician, attached to the entourage, also*

Michael Scheffel

perished. This is a day of mourning for all Chinese.

In addition to being continuously broadcast throughout the country, the statement was made available to foreign news agencies. Voluminous requests, by international news media, for more information were answered with a universal, *no comment*.

July 8

1059 Hours UTC+4:30

Patrol Base Alexander

Helmand Province, Afghanistan

A string of mortar bombs rained down in rapid succession, *crump crump crump crump!* The experienced battle-hardened crews shifted fire a few degrees left and loosed another salvo, then shifted right and fired a third. With speed and efficiency born of long practice, each crew broke down its weapon and hurried off toward the next preselected firing position. The team leader was unhappy with his orders. Previously, these men had been content to lob a few shells and disappear into the village. Then, a few days or a week later, the exercise had been repeated. However, a new area commander insisted they step up their harassment of the British patrol base. Taliban and Al Qaeda leaders sought to hasten the UK's withdrawal from the valley, province and country. The leadership determined the best way to achieve their goal was consistently spilling

British blood.

Patrol Base Alexander was situated near the eastern edge of a large village, the name of which none of the British occupants could pronounce. Long before they had arrived, it had been dubbed Hell's Gate. All who had served at PB Alexander agreed the moniker was appropriate.

Hell's Gate lie near the eastern end of a long wide valley. Beyond it was a warren of stone-walled villages, shepherd huts, poppy fields and temporary encampments connected by a winding network of roads, tracks, goat paths and irrigation ditches. The valley was home to some of the most hardcore Taliban and Al Qaeda combatants and their supporters.

The British Army and Royal Marines had been trying to pacify the valley for more than a decade. Historically, British troops had been making on again off again attempts to tame this wild land and its backward unruly population for nearly two centuries.

Clouds of dust thrown up by the exploding mortar bombs had not yet settled, as scared men wondered if another salvo was inbound. Plumes of black smoke and flames rose from prefabricated barracks and storehouses that took direct hits. Lieutenant Colonel Harry Bushnel RM (officer commanding 40 Commando, 3 Commando Brigade, Royal Marines), standing near his command post, was too angry to be frightened at that moment. Two of his marines

Michael Scheffel

were down. One was headless, while the other was missing most of his left arm and a good portion of his face. Looking down at the young man who alternately screamed in agony and choked on his own blood, Bushnel silently cursed the villagers who queued up for food and medicine one day, then attacked his command the next. Just three weeks into a six month tour of duty, four young men had fallen to H&I (Harassment & Interdiction) fires, within the base perimeter. Turning away from the bloody gore, he thought, *right, time to remind these heathen savages of the meanings of superior technology and payback!*

Holding a compression bandage to his left jawline where a mortar fragment had cut a deep gash, Bushnel strode toward his chief signaler, right arm extended.

The signaler double checked the radio frequency setting and slapped the handset into his officer's palm, with a determined nod. *Fuck 'em up good and proper, Hardass!*

Though Bushnel was aware of his nickname, he feigned ignorance. He had decided there were far worse names his marines could use behind his back. Besides, it had a pleasing ring to his ear.

Bushnel pressed the transmit key, "Sierra Tango, Oscar Charlie, do you have eyes on target? Over."

A two man sniper team was hidden on the south ridge overlooking the village and patrol base. They had crept into position two nights earlier and lie waiting for the local *bad boys* to do something. With the aid of binoculars, the marines were able to see into most of the village's narrow

STORM ON THE HORIZON

paths and alleys, as well as the surrounding countryside. The observer whispered into his radio, "Oscar Charlie, we have them, two hundred yards north of reference point kilo-three. Target is four tubes and sixteen tangos. They are moving west. Over."

Bushnel acknowledged the report and repeated the information to his forward air control officer.

The Army Air Corps captain fixed the location on his map and replied, "Far edge of the village, outside the wall, the two nearest buildings are marked abandoned."

Bushnel nodded and spat out, "Hammer the fuckers!"

As the Afghans approached their next position, the leader had to shoo away two boys and a small herd of goats. The youths darted to and fro in an attempt to keep the animals together and moving in one direction, as the fighters yelled at them to clear off.

The leader paced off fifteen feet from each rear corner of two abandoned stone sheds. The mortar tubes had to be precisely positioned to hit the same target areas again. The plan was to catch the British out in the open tending to wounded and inspecting damage.

As final adjustments were made to azimuth and elevation settings, the leader scanned the surrounding area for signs of danger. He sensed something, but was not able to pinpoint the source of his concern.

An AugustaWestland Apache AH1 crested the ridge

Michael Scheffel

occupied by the sniper team. The pilot flared to hover, while the gunner scanned the target area with a nose-mounted optical tracker. The enemy mortar men were spotted two thousand yards away. On-target, the pilot spun several degrees left, dropped the helicopter's nose and twisted the throttle control to maximum. Like a giant hawk, the Apache swooped down the ridge slope, accelerating rapidly toward its prey.

Riding a thrilling, skin-tingling, erect nipple wave of adrenaline, First Lieutenant Lillian Atchinson, Billie to all but her parents, homed in on the enemy. She approached from an angle that kept the village out of the direct line of fire. The Afghans heard and saw her coming. Foolishly, they attempted to breakdown and save their mortars, instead of fleeing to safety within the village proper. Everyone knew firing into an occupied village was forbidden. She fully intended to make them regret their decision.

At five hundred yards, Atchinson ripple fired half a dozen rockets, as the Afghans shouldered their loads and began running. Then, she chopped the throttle and flared into a high hover. The powerful helicopter shuddered in protest at being reined in so forcefully. A stall alarm blared momentarily. She could not afford to overfly the area at speed and circle back. The action playing out below would be decided in a matter of seconds.

Ahead, high explosive warheads detonated in a brief series of flashes, accompanied by a handful of secondary explosions, that blotted out the ground around the stone

STORM ON THE HORIZON

sheds. Bodies, parts of bodies, mortars, rifles, stone and earth were flung skyward. One intact body was propelled considerably higher than the others, before cartwheeling back to the ground. Another trailed smoke and flames.

Moments later, a man burst out of the thick cloud of smoke and dust, running toward the village wall. He was quickly followed by four others. Ready for this possibility, Atchinson aimed the fuselage-mounted 25 mm chain gun, with an electro-optical gunsight built into her flight helmet. Everywhere she moved her head, the electronically slaved chain gun followed suit. She squeezed off several short bursts. *Bop-bop-bop-bop, bop-bop-bop-bop-bop, bop-bop-bop.* Depleted-uranium projectiles, designed to burn through armor plate, pulverized flesh and shattered bone. In less than three seconds, five human bodies were shredded within clouds of explosively expanding pink and red mist. The remains fell in disjointed piles of component parts.

While searching for additional targets, Atchinson and her gunner noticed a handful of goats and a child size body littering the ground beyond the kill zone. Obviously, ricochets had claimed unintended victims. First Lieutenant Naomi Parker keyed her intercom, "Not your fault, babe. I didn't see him either."

Atchinson responded, "I know, just wish it hadn't been a kid."

Yet another grisly scene was added to their shared cache of nightmare images. This was not the first time their weapons had caused collateral damage, nor would it be the

Michael Scheffel
last.

Lieutenant Colonel Bushnel accepted the report from the forward air controller, with a tinge of sad guilt. He turned to his operations officer, "Send a mounted platoon around to secure the area, gather evidence and clean up the mess. Then, round up the useless bastards who call themselves village elders. Today, I'm going to air my grievances while they listen. This shit is on their heads!"

An impatient medical assistant interjected, "Colonel, we must have a proper look at your wound. We don't want an infection, do we?"

July 15

1430 Hours UTC-3

Ministry of Defense Officer Quarters

Buenos Aires, Argentina

Monique Laval paced about the luxury, though amateurishly decorated, penthouse she reluctantly called home. The strikingly beautiful, lithe, brunette jumped back and forth between apprehension and anticipation from minute to minute. Though capable of going from zero to bitch in an instant, this particular situation required layered nuance rather than a sledgehammer.

Since early morning, she had carefully rehearsed her lines, experimenting with tone, pitch and inflection. Before a half wall of floor to ceiling mirrors, she had added

STORM ON THE HORIZON

combinations of facial expressions, body language and gestures to the script. All the while, Monique had tried to imagine possible responses, along with her own replies. It was nearly impossible, she thought, to envision how another person, even one as predictable as Jorge, would react to an unexpected confrontation. So, in her usual methodical fashion, she had rehearsed multiple running arguments with herself throughout the day.

Finally, as satisfied as she was likely to be, Monique plopped down on a chrome and vinyl sofa, with a double rum on the rocks, to reflect. All the varied performances she had put on for this man paled in comparison to what she had planned. Her one act play, for an audience of one, required Monique to be a perfect composer, choreographer and actor. If all went well, the evening would end on a bad note, and she would be free.

1740 Hours Zulu (UTC)

HMS *Iron Duke* F234

Gulf of Aden

For some time, modern day pirates, chiefly Somalis, had terrorized the shipping lanes leading to and from the Suez Canal. Trillions of dollars worth of commodities passed through these waters annually. While maritime security experts focused on the perpetually besieged Strait of Malacca, the Somalis had slipped in under everyone's radar. Their ploy was to approach a merchant vessel, climb aboard

Michael Scheffel

using grapnel hooks and ropes and take the ship, crew and cargo hostage. Then, the shipping line would be contacted with a ransom demand.

At first, the shipping lines and their insurance carriers had quietly paid the ransoms, to avoid embarrassing news media coverage that would undoubtedly scare shareholders, drive down stock values and spawn copycats. However, successful pirates and the warlords whom they served boasted to peers and adversaries. A realization, that a veritable sea of cash lie just offshore for those willing to go out and haul it in, dawned. Virtually overnight, a flotilla of leaky fishing boats, dhows and Zodiacs, manned by underfed illiterate thugs armed with AK-47s, RPGs and copious volumes of bravado, began hijacking ships all over the Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea and Gulf of Aden. The sheer volume of incidents guaranteed that the news would leak out. This was precisely what happened.

In short order, shareholders, manufacturers and import/export houses demanded cost prohibitive security upgrades. To stave off a dramatic rise in freight costs and a reciprocal spike in consumer prices, industrialized nations dispatched their navies to restore order. Naturally, intervention scrutinized by the public eye was sure to be encumbered by rules of engagement guaranteed to degrade effectiveness.

Commander Ralph Whitlock, captain HMS *Iron Duke*, directed his ship's surface action from the bridge. An hour

STORM ON THE HORIZON

earlier, his signal section had intercepted a distress call from a Dutch-flagged container carrier, over the horizon. The merchant captain had reported a fishing boat towing a Zodiac on an intercept course. A flank speed sprint brought *Iron Duke* to within two thousand yards of the container ship and its diminutive shadow.

With the frigate's crew standing to action stations surface, the Westland Lynx HMA.8 helicopter circling the suspect boat and his own marine boarding party ready to deploy in a RHIB (Rigid Hull Inflatable Boat), Whitlock studied the tiny boat through powerful binoculars. He observed three men on deck brandishing rifles, confirming his helicopter's report. *Ballsy bastards*. Normally, Somali pirates pretended to be innocent fishermen in the presence of his ship and armed helicopter. However, this boatload of would-be-millionaires was letting everyone know they were hostile, while pacing the plodding merchantman on a parallel course with a bare one hundred yards of separation.

Since intimidation was not working, Whitlock followed established procedure and spoke to his intelligence specialist, "Right, Mister Dobkins, see if you can reason with these gentlemen."

Dobkins, a MoD security contractor, was fluent in Somali, Swahili and Portuguese. He hailed the pirates on a broad ship-to-ship radio frequency. Several calls were answered with silence. Further attempts on half a dozen channels failed to elicit a response.

Whitlock sighed. "Looks like we're doing this the

Michael Scheffel

hard way. Officer of the Watch, send the marines.”

“Aye aye, captain.”

Forty minutes later, Whitlock watched the wooden-hulled pirate boat sink, as the Dutch merchant ship motored away from the scene. A few hundred seven point six-two millimeter armor piercing and incendiary rounds from the starboard minigun had done the job.

Five pirates were in custody after a struggle with the boarding party. Two marines were injured, a broken nose and a bitten hand. The Somalis were banged and bruised, but alive.

Could've been worse. But—

The bridge messenger announced, “Captain, radio reports a Swedish auto carrier is requesting assistance. Bearing one-seven-five, range twenty-two miles.”

Here we go again. “Very well, helm come to new course one-seven-five, flank speed. Launch the helo, action stations surface.”

1615 Hours UTC-3

Ministry of Defense Officer Quarters

Buenos Aires, Argentina

He was late. Although it was not unusual, Monique was annoyed. The moment had arrived, and she was ready to go. Enough time and energy had been wasted on a dry hole. Fixing another drink to calm her nerves, she recalled

how she had come to be there.

Fifteen months earlier, Monique Laval, a freelance photojournalist, had been working in Prague. In the midst of a contentious client presentation, her phone vibrated with a text from Claude, CALL ME. A reflective smirk accompanied her instant thought, *what does he want this time?*

Claude was a midlevel account executive for JWT Paris. Over the last few years, he had given Monique a considerable amount of business. He had also impressed her with his carnal talent and generosity, but that had been over for more than a year.

That evening, Monique called Claude, and he pitched her a lucrative contract. The Argentine Interior Ministry had engaged JWT Paris to entice European vacationers with a top tier advertising campaign. Claude had been assigned to the account and designed a comprehensive multimedia approach. One aspect of which was a feature article, for publication in various print and online travel magazines, highlighting Argentina's principal attractions. Naturally, he was offering the job to her first. They talked money, expenses and his vision of the finished product. After an hour, she said yes.

Two weeks later, Monique arrived in Buenos Aires. Characteristically, the twenty-seven-year-old approached her task with competent methodical professionalism. A deputy interior minister provided a list of his country's most popular tourist sites and offered to serve as her personal

Michael Scheffel

guide. She pretended to accept the former and declined the latter. Tourists were already patronizing the listed attractions. Her article would not spark new interest by simply offering a fresh image of known hot spots. Her job was to introduce readers to Argentina's little known or overlooked gems. Something to grab the attention of those who had previously discounted existing offerings.

Fifteen days later nearing the end of her assignment and expense account limit, Monique entered Sucre, one of Buenos Aires' most exclusive restaurants. She was late for a luncheon meeting with the curator of the city's Museum of Latin American Art. Just inside the unmarked entrance, she collided with an expensively dressed, mustachioed, middle-aged man. He wore an ornate wedding band, along with other expensive jewelry. After accepting his solicitous apology and an expertly discreet grope, she attended to the afternoon's business.

Two nights later, Monique returned to her hotel after a day long expedition to the Argentine equivalent of a dude ranch. Tired but nonetheless alert, she spotted the middle-aged man from Sucre seated in a lobby armchair. He rose and intercepted her en route to the bank of elevators. After apologizing for his clumsiness again, he invited her into the lounge for a drink. Slightly annoyed by the obviousness of his ploy and curious about how he tracked her down, Monique accepted the invitation.

The next morning, after the mustachioed man had departed, Monique roused herself from bed. On a personal

level, she was angry with herself for allowing the previous night to happen. Her much older companion had been an unnecessarily flamboyant self-absorbed disappointment. However, professionally, she could not so easily dismiss this unique opportunity. No matter how distasteful the very thought might have been.

Monique's internal conflict raged throughout the warm subtropical morning. At one point, she had nearly persuaded herself to pretend nothing had happened. However, in the end, professionalism trumped personal revulsion. She placed a cellular call, and expertly played her part as the awestruck, passion-starved, female conquest. Just before ending the call, she agreed to dine with Argentine Defense Minister Jorge Rota. Then, she sent an email to her *sister*, in Paris.

Unbeknownst to her mother, friends and colleagues, Monique Laval led a double life. She was a university educated, moderately successful, freelance photojournalist. She was also a contract intelligence officer for Mossad.

Her *sister*/control officer was, to say the least, intrigued by her contact report. She immediately encouraged Monique to pursue the opportunity that lie before them. Argentina was hardly a major player in world affairs. However, successful cabinet level infiltration of any government was a career making proposition. No one would care that this opening resulted from happenstance rather than a targeted operation. Intelligence was a game played and won by ruthless opportunists.

Michael Scheffel

Neither woman was particularly fond of employing the *honey trap*. However, both knew it had been used in intelligence gathering for millennia because it worked. Monique had personally proven the *honey trap's* effectiveness more than once.

So, the young intelligence officer allowed herself to be seduced. She played to Defense Minister Rota's substantial ego, while offering him a generous sampling of her carnal skills. In short order, she was installed in a luxury apartment, near the Ministry of Defense, in Buenos Aires. Rota owned the building, which he leased to his ministry for housing senior officers. As a perquisite of office, the penthouse was reserved for the defense minister's exclusive use. Also, he arranged for a ridiculously generous contract with the Ministry of Information. Monique was carried on the books as an official photographer, without any official duties.

A few nights a week and occasional afternoons, Monique entertained her lover/mark. Rota would attempt to impress her with his importance. Most of what she learned was, no doubt, exaggerated drivel. Nonetheless, he occasionally produced an interesting nugget of information.

However, after more than a year of working Rota, Monique and her control agreed that the end product was not worth their investment. Argentina was a very small fish in a very large pond. Monique's time and talents could be more profitably employed elsewhere. A Yemeni diplomat, with a weakness for French wine, decadent cuisine and

STORM ON THE HORIZON

western women, had been marked for a blackmail op. So, she was cleared to extricate herself from the relationship and return to Paris for reassignment.

1950 Hours Zulu

HMS *Triumph* S93

Naval Support Facility, Diego Garcia

Diego Garcia, a tiny speck of an island, belonged to British Indian Ocean Territory. It had been leased to the US Navy during the Cold War. Seabees had constructed an air field and logistics base, used by NATO navies for replenishment, repair and personnel transfer during extended Indian Ocean deployments. During the 1991 Persian Gulf War, USAF B-52 Stratofortresses had flown bombing missions from there.

HMS *Triumph*, a *Trafalgar*-class SSN, was tied to the submarine pier. She had arrived eighteen hours earlier to restock supplies of fresh produce and dairy items and pickup mail for the crew. Although recreational facilities were rather spartan, the men enjoyed a bit of shore time, relishing the fresh air and abundant sunshine.

Triumph's captain, Commander Martin Andrews, waited anxiously. A short time ago, he had watched a RAF C-17 land and park. The cavernous transport was allegedly carrying the boat's mail bag and other stores. He had remarried just four months prior to departing Plymouth on

Michael Scheffel

this IO cruise and was understandably homesick. Although a warship captain was supposed to be omnipotent and impervious to emotional frailty, he was only human. If he could not hold his bride and talk to her, a heartfelt gratuitously suggestive letter or two would suffice. She had developed a deliciously wicked penchant for playfully teasing him from afar.

Andrews answered a knock on his cabin door, "Come in."

The yeoman stepped through the door, handed Andrews a large stack of letters and manila packets, then exited to continue his rounds.

Andrews quickly sorted the large stack into three piles—important official correspondence, unimportant official correspond and personal mail. After two decades of naval service, he could prioritize mail simply by the department or agency where it had originated. He swore there were offices within the Admiralty that existed for the sole purpose of cranking out the bureaucratic equivalent of junk mail. Naturally, the authors considered these innocuous items a top priority. The first batch, items requiring his personal attention, he would sort through and read later. The junk mail, the largest pile by a wide margin, he would hand off to the first officer. His personal correspondence amounted to seven envelopes, four from his wife and one each from his daughters.

Andrews tore open the first letter from his wife and began reading. Halfway down the page, he stopped with

STORM ON THE HORIZON

shock and surprise and reread the same line several times. *I hope you are ready to be a father again. Our little bundle of joy will arrive in early February.* He exclaimed, "A baby! I certainly did not see that coming. I wonder what causes that." With a smile of anticipation, he continued reading.

1800 Hours UTC-3

Ministry of Defense Officer Quarters

Buenos Aires, Argentina

When Defense Minister Jorge Rota entered his official apartment, Monique Laval was prepared to provoke an epic row and hopefully get herself deported from Argentina. The first carefully chosen well-practiced line was on the tip of her tongue; however, his demeanor caused her to hesitate. She had never seen him like this before. He was animated like a child bursting to reveal a big secret. She started to speak, but instinct stopped her again. *Damn it! I'll wait and see what he has to say.*

After Rota sated his lustful appetite, his air of grandiose superiority became even more exaggerated than normal. Yet, he remained silent, toying with her. Monique, ever careful to play her role as the graciously submissive mistress, feigned solicitous interest. "Well, are you going to tell me?"

"Tell you what," he replied with unconvincing nonchalance.

"Whatever it is that has you so excited. You've done

Michael Scheffel

something remarkably important. I can feel it.”

He paused too long, a perfect caricature of the classic self-aggrandizing boor. “Today, I closed a deal that will catapult Argentina to the pinnacle of South American power.”

Monique’s professional curiosity waned, and she cursed herself for letting him use her body one last time. She had heard this kind of overstated bluster too many times. Nonetheless, she decided to play out the scene, just in case. “Jorge you’ve done something magnificent! I knew it! Please tell me everything! Everything!”

He scolded her for being too inquisitive. Then, at length, he related the most fantastically frightening tale Monique had ever heard. So fantastic, she feared it may have been a trap. But, if it was true—

Monique elected to delay her exfiltration plan to learn more.

Over the next week, Rota regaled Monique with his personal coup, adding more important details with each retelling. Finally, she determined that the information had to be reported. She was still concerned that this might be a counterintelligence *canary trap*. However, neither life nor covert intelligence were without risk. She sent a lengthy email to her *sister*.