



Relive Mathe's Vietnam heroism and follow his tentative steps as a Blue Angel and government agent. Read Mathe's boss's heartfelt and thrilling battle scenes—horrific tales of WWII air combat and a B-29 mission into China.

TRUE BLUE

By D. Stuart White

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AUTHOR OF TALL AIR

D STUART WHITE



A NOVEL

TRUE BLUE

A GRAND TALE OF ESPIONAGE, HEROISM,
AND FRIENDSHIP

Praise for True Blue

“A real treasure full of action, excitement, and intrigue!”

Jack Haughton

*‘Imagination –There are two worlds,
the world that we can measure with line and rule, and
the world that we feel with our hearts and imagination.’*

A quote from Leigh Hunt - Leaves of Gold

“This quote is particularly fitting for D Stuart White’s True Blue. A delightful read with sensitivity to his characters that provides a fitting background story - a must-read!”

Penny McCready

“True Blue sequel to Tall Air is a five-star yarn with surprising twists and enduring white-hot action as two missions during WWII form the nexus of a future worldwide holocaust.”

Publisher

"True Blue is a wonderful, cohesive blend of fact and fiction that puts the reader in the cockpit before, during, and after a battle. It is a well-woven storyline with many twists. Each turn of the page reveals more insightful clues. Or are they well-placed illusions to challenge your perceptions? You must read this exciting, fast-paced story to find out."

Tom Combs – author FLIGHT LINE

D Stuart White

“You will love this one if you like intrigue-packed espionage. Those words you bring to the page are so carefully chosen, words that make people forget about their struggles and concerns. You transform people. You take them places. Thank you for carrying me along.”

Al Cisneros – Blue Angels 75-76

“True Blue is a tangled web of military intrigue, friendship, and honor.

White is totally up to snuff with the glory and the irreverence of military aviation in True Blue. He has done remarkable work devising a storyline that steps up the pace in his Tall Air sequel. He places the reader squarely in the cockpit with Mathew Stone flying not only the A-4 Skyhawk, the F-4 Phantom and even flying left wing for the Blue Angels!

But the strength of the book is its story. It is diligently researched, skillfully told, and just plausible enough to keep you turning the pages. Mathe’s reunion with his father is the most vital part of the book and his best prose.

You’ll enjoy this book!”

D D Smith, Author- Above Average: Naval Aviation the Hard Way

TRUE BLUE

POW/MIAs - “We have solid evidence” that hundreds of captive Americans were held back by the Chinese and North Koreans, possibly as leverage to gain a China seat on the U.N. Security Council.

A Top American Commander - Korean Conflict

Espionage - “Several administrations have continuously been concerned over what US officials render active intelligence gathering, aided by Chinese diplomats. These concerns were the classified lethal and nonlethal weapons systems standardized in American and offshore universities across the nation since the sixties.”

UPI

This book is a work of fiction inspired by true stories—reflections of several aviators. But the names, characters, places, and events are the products of the author’s imagination and have been reimagined for dramatic purposes. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Historical details have been drawn from various published sources throughout the book and are intended only to provide a sense of authenticity from factual representations. Nothing is intended or should be interpreted as expressing or representing the views of the U.S. Navy or other departments or agencies of any governmental body. Although unable to trace all references for permission to quote, I have included many names and am grateful for their contributions.



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Cast of Characters

Captain Mathew (Māthe) Stone (USMC) is the son of William and Elizabeth Stone of Lancaster, PA. He grew up on a farm and lived there until he was nine. Elizabeth took her son to Michigan to be near his grandparents after her husband went MIA in WWII.

He resembles his handsome father to a tee. His new home is next door to Jonathon Finley (AKA Finn), who would become his lifelong best friend.

Mathe is an authority-challenging maverick with a good heart, high moral fiber, and intelligent as hell. He is willing to sacrifice himself for the right choices as his life and family find him dogged by the need to fill the hole in his heart for his lost father. His father's specter is the imprint of Mathew's vision of his future.

Since childhood, **Lieutenant Jonathon Finley** has been fair-haired, quick, and happy-go-lucky-outgoing but eager and ferocious.

Born in Michigan, he plays hockey and loves adventures in Northern Michigan. As Mathe's best friend, competitor, and confidant, he challenges him at every turn and helps him see who he has and will become. They are just what the other needs—a two-headed coin,

Admiral Jamie McCready – A hard-core military lifer and Mathe's mentor enigma but consistently his superior. He has spent most of his military career carrying painful secrets and a boatload of guilt for the loss of Mathe's dad.

Samantha Louise McKenzie (Rusty) - Mathe's lady is bright, fun, and red-haired with green eyes and a fireball. She is a robust and hardcore king nurse and Maddy's best friend. However, her free-

spirited ways find the rules of conduct as an officer's friend brutal to square at times.

Madeline Ann Harper (Maddy) - Jonathon Finley's long-term girlfriend and wife. She is a grade-school teacher and a spunky "get it done" type—no challenge too great...even Finn, who she loves dearly.

Chi Dung Thai - A Vietnamese pilot trainee and friend of Mathe who comes under suspicion for engaging in espionage.

Dan (Mudskunk) O'Shea - A squadron mate on the Raleigh who recovers from a severe combat injury and rejoins Mathe in the Blue Angels.

Admiral (Iron-Ass) Clifford Gillespie - The string puller with a wide net of political threads in the Pentagon and throughout the navy.

Lieutenant Colonel McVey - A staunch by-the-book Marine with a colossal ego and volatile temper. He appears to be the inescapable agent of Mathe's downfall and a grinding professional and emotional challenge.

Lieutenant Al "Taco" Chavez - This future Blue Angel is a seasoned aviator with the skill and courage to fly the A-4, then the F-4 into combat in the Vietnam conflict and survive. As a member of the "Death Angels," he registered the squadron's first MiG kill.

Lieutenant William Stone - Mathew Stone's father, reported as MIA on a WWII mission in the South Pacific.

Ensign Michael "Buttend" Jolly - A nugget on his first cruise with RIO air skills beyond his fleet experience.

Elizabeth Stone - Mathew's mother—is a heartbroken woman, trying daily to cope with her inner demons and doing her best to grapple with her husband's loss in WWII.

Marshal "Pappy" Coulter - Admiral McCready's Army Air Corp buddy, suspected of passing "The Coin" to McCready.

Lt David E Finley - Jonathon's Dad and WWII B-29 pilot. He is a father, teacher, and war hero who Mathe idolizes but to Finn is just "Dad." Their hero is responsible for Mathe and Jonathon's need for military understanding, and it is this need that causes their fighter pilot imprinting to occur.

Grandpa Pettibone – Cartoon character and curmudgeon who shares lessons learned from naval aviation misadventures to keep aviators from learning the hard way.

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One

Gun Fighter

OKINAWA
SPRING, NINETEEN FORTY-FIVE

There comes a time for pilots—a moment when you step into the cockpit and the flight—when everything becomes perfect. And you realize it is more than just your time. Then all you have is the question—who am I? Maybe it’s the familiarity of what you’re doing, perhaps a display of ego, or the realization that you’re doing what was meant to be. But, in the back of your mind, the emergency always hovers—the one you hope you can handle without missing a beat. It will be automatic, you tell yourself—but maybe not. The fear is always on your shoulder—that it could happen to you. It seeps in—your realization that it could all slip away instantly at any time in your young life.

Lieutenant Jamison McCready and Lieutenant William Stone are in a section of two, sweeping over the Okinawa chain of islands, hunting their enemy.

Their search takes their eyes out of the cockpit—alternately scanning the sky through lofty building cumulus cells for enemy aircraft, then down to the rich multicolored blues and greens of the sun-drenched twinkling seawater far below. Beautiful craggy islands and

tips of coral outcroppings separate this far-flung chain of Japanese target opportunities. But, the air today will become their battleground.

Stone straightens up as he squints in his search for life among the tiny lonely atolls—rimmed with their volcanic circles in the bright blue of the Pacific.

Straining to catch hidden wakes that would tell of possible motored sea activity below by the “Nips” have been unproductive.

Their powerful Corsair F4Us are actual fighter bombers. Those in “Fighting Three’s” flight today who have flown its predecessor, the F6F Hellcat, understood the F4U Corsair’s superiority.

They flew on in tense silence, both appreciating the newness of their aircraft's crisp, responsive handling after being ordered to strip their planes of needless equipment on this mission to lighten their weight. Their reach was farther into their enemies' world with smaller bomb loads and increased fuel.

Contrail condensation periodically streamed from their wingtips as they dive to lower altitudes on the suspected enemy. But returning to their hunting altitude always provides some welcome relief from the heat below. Heavy humidity levels and a 90-plus degree temperature in their wartime tropics pressure cooker were constant. The longer distances between the Okinawa topography and home base—small sand rock outcroppings in the island chain—required different fuel conservation and planning than their recent Solomon Islands bombing experience. Their assignment as fighter cover was welcomed from their repetitious roles as bombers as their *raison d'être* was getting tiresome.

The two men flew on in anticipation of a possible engagement with reported Japanese Zekes and Vals that had been overflying the area. They would need every advantage today. But unfortunately, McCready and Stone have no idea of the impending brutal battle that waits as they

approach the town of Naha from seaward on the southernmost Okinawa Island.

Suddenly they find themselves fighting for their lives.

McCready peers over at Stone, and without warning, his wingtip abruptly rises as he pulls hard away from the flight—*something is up, and it is not good.*

He quickly catches the tracers flashing by Stone's canopy, and his sudden descent tells the story as shells continue to pass under his aircraft and behind his wing.

“Sweet Jesus!”

I kick full right rudder (crab) to turn the nose away from the forward motion of his fighter briefly for a quick look behind.

“Where did those Zeros come from?” I shout. “How the hell did they surprise us?” As our enemy streaks past my canopy, I follow both down. The fight is on. Trailing the Zero, I scheme for the shot that will save one of “Fighting Threes” best.

Realizing I am now a *gunfighter*—a new and exciting but uncomfortable role—gives me a chance to stand out from the intensive ground attack missions we had been flying.

We were trained to initiate a fight at a superior altitude against the Zero and carry enough speed to ‘boot out’ in case things didn’t go our way.

And, oh, by the way—‘the Zero cannot turn right’—were their instructional words.

I see my chance for a shot as I continue my pursuit of Bill with the Zero-in trail behind him. The Jap turns aggressively, right following Bill’s maneuvers to escape.

“My chance? Ha, no right turn my ass!”

While pulling the trigger for a perfect deflection shot, the Jap disengages from Bill, half-roles his aircraft inverted, and executes a descending half-loop. His split-S maneuver is quick and effective as he jumps on my tail—and begins pounding away with his 20 mm on both of us. *How'd I get caught—this is not happening.*

It's time to get the heck out of here, but is it too late? My Corsair shudders from hits to my wing and engine as I tighten the right turn while trying to outturn the Jap, who stays with me and cuts inside my diving turn.

Glancing at the sky, looking for help above, Bill breaks away, and I notice the confused melee between my squadron mates and their enemy. I am now alone as his bullets chew up my aircraft. Steepening my dive, trying the few options I know to shake my opponent, 20mm bullets jackhammer my armored seat, and continue taking chunks out of my right wing.

With another glance down at where my wing joins my fuselage, the damage to the oil cooler and several bullet holes in the engine cowl dictate the obvious.

This is not good.

With another scan, my rising temperature and pressure gauge readings tell all—confirming the damage. To make matters worse, the prop will not cycle—a *shot-up prop governor—GREAT!*

Just a matter of time now!

Stan, my crew chief back on the boat, will not be happy with me. My airplane was now full of holes.

Whoever proffered that a Zero could not turn right had better rethink their position because I was finding out the hard way. Then, thankfully, the pounding stops as tracers from Bill's F4U fly off my port wing as he reenters the fight. My wingman had lured the Jap into

focusing on just me, and he got in a quick burst in his intersecting flight path. The “Thatch Weave” tactical maneuver we had practiced worked, and he might have saved my bacon.

Not all of the Nip's seasoned aviators had bought it earlier in the war. This guy is good! How had he survived a Kamikaze role or not been killed outright—like some of their best Japanese fighter pilots earlier in the war?

I turned again and saw Al Wood. Seeing our plight, he followed us, searching for a shot at the Jap. The four swastikas painted on Al's aircraft from our Mediterranean combat two months earlier probably caught the Jap's attention. Lucky for us, the Zero breaks off the engagement and heads home. However, he was experienced and motivated, and Bill and I had paid the price.

Suddenly Bill pulls up beside me—just off my wing with flames swirling out of his engine cowling and enveloping the side of his fighter.

“Bill, you're on fire,” I yelled—but I got no answer.

Bill catches my glance and kisses me off with his hand signal and a quick tap of his helmet—then points to me to take the lead. Unfortunately, both of our fighters are in real trouble.

Might his gesture be our last communication? As we both struggle to keep our Corsairs flying, he breaks away in a semi-controlled spiraling dive to the ocean. Oh God, oh no, not Bill!

I catch my breath while trying to control my anger and distress—holding onto a fleeting hope that he will pull out for a successful ditch in the sea or find land. I pray he will make it back, even as I see his smoking spiral.

Fixing his approximate position, I again refocus on flying the airplane, calling out to him several more times but getting no answer.

In what feels like a second chance, I finally succumbed to the realization that I am also going down. And again, temperatures and pressures pegged in the red tell the real story—can't coax the throttle and prop controls anymore, as the heat and humidity have finally caught up.

Adrenaline is only going to take me so far today. Trying to justify my predicament, *I know I'll be a puddle of Jell-O in short order if I don't get out of the Corsair—one way or the other. But, if I survive—an ocean dip might feel great. So, Jamie, concentrate on landing or ditching this crippled bird now*, I tell myself.

After further tightening my harness, I rolled back the canopy for some ram air and caught the immediate sea scent rush—solid and refreshing. While trying to level the wings, I noticed the fluttering metal blowing in the wind from a partially attached aileron trying to separate itself from the wing. My rapidly decaying airspeed now catches my attention, along with the loss of lateral control. Scanning the sky once more, searching for help, I broadcast my location and plight, but the sky is empty blue—I am alone. It saddens me as I realize that Stone shot the Jap off my tail and saved my life—but he might have lost his own.

I've got to keep flying as long as possible with the airspeed above eighty knots. There—off the nose to right—a tiny atoll. Waves curling onto a small lagoon beach caught my eye—it looks like it has enough room to make a gear-down landing possible.

My sink rate is critical as the variable pitch prop will not bite the air. I've got to maintain control and stretch the glide. Keep the nose down—no buffet/stall indications yet—just 300 yards to go.

A fully oil-covered windscreen forces my head out of the cockpit. Boy, did this bird have a snout. I can hardly see over the engine nacelle.

True Blue

Descending 150 yards now looks like 500—getting heavy on the controls.

I hope "Whistling Death," the Jap's name for the mighty Corsair, only half fits today.

Almost over the beach—time to dirty her up with the gear and flaps and hold enough airspeed to hit the atoll—Hold 77 knots, or it's all over, Jamie. Don't lose it now—we've almost made it!

Twelve

Big-Tuna

MAINSIDE, PENSACOLA, FLA

I found my way into the Blues pressure cooker—and a pressure cooker it was. Long, hot, exhausting days spent smoothing the good and bad in my “fleet” flying skills.

The learning curve was steep, and the push was on. It took intense concentration and precision to fly the left wing in the diamond formation. But I ate it up—every second. Unfortunately, Rusty was right—no time for anything else.

It was good to see some familiar faces at the first team meeting. My squadron mates from VA-33/Talons were well represented. In addition, Dan O’Shea, aptly named “Mud Skunk” from his Wolverine (University of Michigan) college days, and Al “Taco” Chavez, named for one of his heritage’s favorite culinary specialties—greeted me with back slaps and smiles.



Al Cisneros
Blue Angels Pilot 1975-
1977

"Take me into my coming of age, into the challenges of combat and the demands of extreme precision flying."

"I could not have been blessed with a more courageous and fearless companion and "back seater". Through countless impossible to describe combat missions, Steve Miller was my strength. Grace from above allowed us to come home."



"Last Dance With Sara"
Mission 154 1973

"She brought me home safely...
My War Bird... the phantom."

"Either way...up or down, hard to hold the pose. My third year, flying in the slot...#4."



Before our preflight brief, Dan (Mudskunk) O'Shea cornered me with a question. I immediately picked up on the same smile, remembering O'Shea's rep. from our days on the Raleigh

Our friendship was infamous because we had flown off the Raleigh and the Saratoga on two different deployments. But, as a navy man, he was more than a kindred spirit, and you could still actually visualize the skunkster's DA haircut that was once his trademark before his current occupation.

One of his old school buddies told me his story. 'Everything was going hunky-dory at the high school dance, and we thought we were in like Flynn until that murgatroyd showed up and hung us out to dry. Even in our best bib and tuckers, we couldn't compete, so we didn't even touch the dial. We were hoping for a chance as more poodle skirts saddled up to him. Unfortunately for us, O'Shea had a lot of moxie, and women found the skunkster even when he wasn't looking while the rest of us inherited his leftovers to pick through late most evenings. Our jealousy was on full display. He sure could choke a chicken in the middle of a dance floor.'

Despite his rampant social skills and good looks, O'Shea had another side. Even as a Navy man, his liking of Marines ran deep—maybe even more than the navy. He always wanted to fly as one, but it wasn't in the cards. Mudskunk knew being a Marine was serious business. They were a brotherhood of "warriors"—nothing more, nothing less—pure and simple. As Marines, their message to their foes had always been the same.

'We own this side of the street! Threaten my country or our allies, and we will come over to your side of the street, burn your hut down, and whisper, Can you hear me now? We will hold what's left of your heartbeat in our hands.'

He also loved dogs and always talked about his Chihuahua. We all thought it was a bizarre choice. Everyone knew a Doberman or Rottweiler would be more fitting for him, anything that attacks, not some candy-ass dog with big googly eyes. A short-haired tenacious throat grabber—sounded more likely a Marine’s choice or at least one with past strong aspirations to be one.

Mudskunk had attended the University of Michigan for two semesters before transferring out to take advantage of the more favorable female student bodies at Michigan State. But, I always found a new way to drive the name of U of M’s mascot, “Mud Skunk,” hard into him—instead of the real mascot name—“Wolverine.” But, today, the tables would turn.

“Hey, Mathe, it’s good to see you. Someone finally figured out that you weren’t as bad an aviator as everyone thought.”

He looked just as I remembered earlier—an impressively rugged demeanor with a long thin face and a pointed “Hatchet” like nose.

I smiled matter-of-factly at the skunkster’s dig and his acceptance while my insecurity slowly bubbled up—wondering who the hell thought that about me.

“Good to see you too, “One Nut.”

O’Shea had suffered the same humiliation to his manhood that Finn had endured, the combat loss of a testicle—in radically different ways. The thought of his testicle loss in a strike over Haiphong due to triple-A penetrating his cockpit—always made me cringe. But I saw the real thing when I picked up Finn and carried him to our shot-up rescue Huey.

In time, even without an extra arrow in his quiver, I knew O’Shea would never let us down, flying the eight-ball diamond formation with only seven balls.

“Heard you have something good going on here and thought maybe I ought to see what you guys are up to,”—trying my best to counter his slite coolly.

He smiled demonically.

“You know Mathe, besides your heroic save of Finn that day and Tacos’s shoot down—the Talon’s first kill—on the same mission, I have wondered about another mission over Haiphong a month earlier. But, unfortunately, I never heard the full story, only that you ran out of gas or something on that mission—any truth to that rumor?”

I hesitated. Boy, this community is a little tighter than I thought—how the hell did he know about that incident?

“So, what happened on that mission, Mathe?”

Remembering that day filled with tension, fear, and rage was never far away, for it, unfortunately, held too many conflicted emotions packed into such a small space in time.

“Well, Skunkster—Yea, it got pretty hot over Haiphong that day. We had a tough time identifying the target after some strange circumstances. That’s about the size of it—as I am sure you understand.

Trying to escape further questions, I eyeballed One Nut and frowned nervously to shut it all down with a new tone.

Catching OShea’s disbelief, I poked his chest and growled in a schooling, scolding manner in my best-accented godfather’s accent, “Listen up, Skunkster! You don’t know nutin—you didn’t hear nutin, and you don’t say nutin—got it!

Our flight lead for the mission was commander capo Sal “Egg Man” Lunchesi, Sammy “The Grave Digger” Luigi Gamberlini, Vincenza Rico “The Butcher” Abruzzi, and myself. We were aptly named “Casino.” But, of course, we weren’t into money laundering, casino

skimming, or bribery—just murder. But, our access to the “skims” was never in jeopardy until that day.”

O’Shea smiled back in bewilderment as he caught my direction and played along.

“Jesus, all in the same flight? How’d a substandard white guy work himself into that position with all those dagos? So you were the one in the Mafia Casino that day.”

“Yea, kind of—let’s say I know some people who know some people!

Okay, “One Nut,” I was just the consigliere, the underboss—the advisor to the boss in our section. They called me “Big Tuna” because I handled the money, and the flight listened to me—and respected what I had to say. I made things run smoothly for the boss until that day.”

“Big Tuna—Hah!”

One Nut was snickering—ready to burst with laughter.

“You remember our names from our JO (junior officer) days. We called ourselves the “Fighting Foul—Cocks on Top” —created in our spare time to keep everyone from losing their minds while not fully accepting our newbie status in the squadron. You kept asking us about the patches we had made and wore, and we never answered you?”

“Sure do, pard, I remember.”

“Well, we were “The Mafia” within the Talons.

“Getting on with the story—Luchesi was a dangerous man and had business to take care of that day—good old bloody killing up north. He was tough and respected in the community. Yes, he was the Boss and had done it all. He knew who to cut loose when they no longer served a purpose. We called him the “Egg Man.” But that day, he dropped one too many—and it was his turn in the barrel.”

One Nut’s smirk widened. “Go on, Mathe, all ears here.”

“Okay,” I said hesitantly.

“You want to know how it went down? We were talking to Sal on the flight deck after the strike. Umm—well, I don’t know what happened to Luchesi. He’s gone now, and there is nutin you can do about it.”

O’Shea tried hard to contain himself as the Team trickled past into the Blue’s ready room for the pre-brief.

Trying to protect my rep, I quickly turned to One Nut. “Looks like I’ll have to complete the story later, O’Shea.”

“Come on, Mathe, there is more. I know it. Spill it. We got a few minutes.”

“Well,” I muttered sheepishly and paused, turning to see who might be listening.

“Mathe, from what I have heard, there was guilt to be assigned, so it is not on your shoulder. Nobody’s attacking you beyond the mishap—your secret is safe with me, pal. Aw, come on. You can’t just drop a bomb like that and walk away!”

“If I tell you, you can’t tell anyone!”

His right hand raised a smirk, “Safe with me, pal, I swear.”

Sure, realizing too late that this guarantee ensured that my story would most likely now be told to all if I finished. Luckily, the room was filling fast, so there was no time to share this story.

“Okay, Big Tuna. I get it, and I can’t wait for you to finish your story. You’re not getting out of this one.” We entered and found our seats—*Thank God!*

During a pause in the pre-brief, my mind wandered back to the events of the “Mafia Wagon Train” mission.

That damned mission—why the hell did he bring it up? It’s a memory I don’t want to deal with again. But, like a dog with a bone,

he's not going to let go of this one. I looked over at O'Shea again. He was hanging on like a hair in a biscuit—what's with this guy? He wants it all.

I finally shook it off as the brief ended. Checking out the aircraft's pre-launch paperwork and signoffs, I found the smile I had missed as I walked out to the jets. I was alone in my mind until I looked to my side—The Team.

The season was getting close, and it was a critical hop for everyone. This session wasn't like the first time we formed up and walked the line. Today, I treated the hop as if it was our final exam. I was beyond pumped.

Standing in perfect formation in front of our aircraft, our professional line crew waited for us, at attention. Their professionalism girded me, the rookie Angel, to rise to meet their performance expectations. Each salute's snap and pop, walking out together in formation and breaking off, one by one, filled me with pride and anticipation. I had everything to prove repeatedly on each hop as we marched forward in lockstep along the flight line in front of the jets. But today, the jets seemed cleaner than I remembered.

Finally, I approached the number three bird, Angel A-4, coming up on my left—my bird!

As I mounted number three and moved up the cockpit ladder, I was met by my gold helmet perfectly positioned on the windscreen. It hit me with full force. Today had to be perfect—just fast-paced steady squared-away procedures with no fuck ups. I stepped over the cockpit rail and onto the seat.

Twenty–Nine

The Duck Conductor

YAN'AN, CHINA

The day was overcast, with a slight sporadic drizzle. As I looked east, the sun was doing its best to burn off the cloud layer above.

Then peering over the bamboo fence on the hilltop at the fields below, I tried to find something familiar from Chi's village description.

A high-angle view showed me a wide area of squat earthen huts separated by dirt alleys with market stalls in the middle. It was buzzing with people, carts, animals, and you name it. Without suspicion, I had reached the small peasant farmland and village outskirts. Although, after all I had been through in my search for Chi Dung Thai, being told my dad was here was almost more than I could take. It all seemed so unreal. But the village was just as described by Chi Dung.

'He will be right there, Mathew,' he recalled Chi saying while pointing to the National Geographic map a few days earlier—just a pinprick on the map—Yan'an, in the province of Shaanxi.

'See, there it is, that small village to the city's southwest. You will find his small farm there. He frequently sells his prized ducks to restaurants that cater to those who can afford them and, I suspect, offshore markets. Also, look for him in the town, a few miles down the road every Saturday and Tuesday selling his ducks to the local food distributors. But mostly, he is on his small farm.'

I had no reason to disbelieve Chi. He had more than just skin in this game. My desire to finally see my dad had overpowered any cause for

concern for Chi's credibility, rational or otherwise. The reality of meeting him was just too strong. Again, Chi's words resonated in my mind.

'You will find him there, Mathew!'

So my trek continued as I skirted the market and kept moving into the farmland beyond.

I fingered the heavy coin in my pocket given to me by Admiral McCready as thoughts of my dad's history and a sudden gastric disruption rolled through my mind and body. The grumbling in my stomach caused by the local food's digestive disturbance, coupled with the oppressive summer sun, was sucking my life. The fried scorpion and black beetle soup diet were wearing as I looked for shade to quench my thirst.

But shade would have to wait as I struggled to hold it together, trekking down the side of the hill to the meadow below.

I remembered my agreement with Chi to help his family leave the country if I found my dad. Chi's future hung in the balance. Why would he lie?

The figure of what appeared to be a non-Asian exiting a farming hut caught my attention. A small neat hut with a porch and a large pond full of squawking ducks were right in front of me. But, the fields beyond had rows of crops I didn't recognize. If he lived here, he sure was thriving by the standards of abject poverty I had witnessed in this country. The unmistakable shape of an apple tree standing outside the front door might be the cue.

As I drew closer, my heart jumped. I could not distinguish the man's facial features yet, but I knew something. With raging expectations, I quickened my pace, descending the hill.

It had to be him—much time had passed. Will he know me?

Worry spread through me. I never dared to believe I would see my father.

Mathe caught his irrational thoughts and tried to hold them in check. *But, hell, he doesn't even know I exist.*

Hesitating—I remember others I had mistaken for my dad in the last month. I focused on his flock. He hadn't seen me yet as I caught the wave of motion surrounding his feet. He was holding a long pole in the air and waving his arm as if he was the conductor of a strange, noisy feathered, quacking orchestra that spread from side to side in front of him.

With a tiger's eye now fixed solely on the figure at the far end of the property, I reached the base of the hill approaching the farm.

As the peasant directed his whole plummy mass toward me, I took in his tattered clothes, slumped shoulders, and slight limp. Then, as the wave of squawking at his feet moved closer in tight formation, the ducks' excitement became louder as it matched my own. As Chi Dung had predicted, it had to be my father, ducks and all. I now saw the round-eyed farmer, and he saw me.

Oh my God! Here we go!

The flock moved with him as he approached me, and I focused—trying to remember the details of every picture I'd seen of him. Then, finally, they parted in my path, coming down the middle of the road. Was he real, or was it the shadow of a father I had built in my mind? I was afraid of what he might have become. As my expectations took over, I realized I didn't care who he might be. I just wanted this man to be my dad. I swallowed his visage, ate it all up—as a memory of him from pictures in my mom's scrapbook—just like those ducks ate—everything in one bite.

Age had not erased his appearance—this peasant's essential character. His body was bowed from age, farm labor, and years of harsh captivity. My hope grew. He held the pride of who he was boldly, even with his aged frame. As he came closer, the glow in his round eyes showed just as brightly as I pictured them in my head.

I approached the farmer, the “American,” my dad, and held out my hand, but the farmer stared at me vacantly. He was mute with surprise. Then, I thought I saw recognition creep in as his face filled with conflicted emotion. He gave me a smile of surprised pain and then confused acceptance. He did not speak, but his eyes told me what I so badly wanted to see—that he innately sensed a recognition of me. But, was I fooling myself—for how could he know me? I wanted him to be authentic, which was beyond excitement and expectation. How can someone you’ve never met feel so familiar? Didn’t fathers wish for their son’s admiration?

Was he filled with shame from the guilt of not knowing his true family? Was I the actual apparition from his past that had haunted him as he had me for so long? We studied each other in silence.

Don’t rush this, Mathe.

His eyes were kind and questioning, and it was hard not to yell out— Are you William Stone?

My god, an older version of me!

It came over me. He was more than a specter.

I had so many mental conversations with him. Finn would be beside himself. He knew how much this meant to me.

For a moment, Mathe allowed his thoughts to take him back to his last annual mountain meeting with his friend in the northern Italian Alps. The place was special—their domain—a place Mathe and Finn understood and had traveled often with and without each other but

never alone in heart and spirit. The mountains had always given them one more chance to meet and touch the tall air of their high-altitude worlds.

He and Finn had drawn strength from their beautiful, energizing mountain meetings. They knew each other too well—they were a part of each other. They were the two sides of the same coin.

The farmer searched my face. Finally, his head dropped to his chest, and he nodded slightly, seeing the likeness and so much that was different. I was the foreigner in him. Then he straightened his posture to stare at me with little understanding. He was part of this world now, and it saddened me.

My idealized vision slowly disappeared as the profound truth in his presence shone through. The fact was—he was genuine and standing before me. Yet, I continued to struggle with my emotions. I had carried pieces of my dad for years and wanted this to be real. I still wasn't sure what to say.

And then—a tear of recognition ran down his furrowed right cheek.

I blurted out, “Your name is William Stone, right?”

In a pitch-perfect Chinese dialect, he hesitantly spoke.

“Yes, that is true, but let us sit.”

Though still not believing, my eyes I followed him toward a stone wall that bordered his farm. We eyed each other furtively as we walked, smiling now and then to keep things friendly but somewhat distant.

Perched on the rocks with the swarm of squawks enveloping our feet, I told him how beautiful his farm was, and he asked if I was there to buy some of his ducks.

“No, I’m not here for ducks.” *Oh God, can this be real? Where do I begin? I have so many questions for you, though—about your past.*

His wrinkled, leathery face held so much sorrow and regret.

“I didn’t think so.” He lowered his head but then suddenly peered off into the distance as his surrounding ducks closed in as if forming a halo of protection.

“I thought that was all behind me by now.”

I didn't want to hurt this battered version of him but thought, *I'm sorry, I have to know. I have dreamt of this for so long.*

“Does the name McCready mean anything to you?”

He looked at me with confusion and shock—written all over him.

“Yes. But?”

All I can do is smile, for it is so hard not to take this older man into my arms and cry.

Lord help me—keep it together.

“He is my boss and mentor. Although I didn’t know, he always watched my back—just like Elizabeth asked him to do.”

He then turned to me, searched my face and hands, and looked me in the eye.

“Elizabeth? Elizabeth, who?”

Of course, he doesn't know she is gone. How do I explain that?

“My mother's name is Elizabeth Stone—from Pennsylvania. A beautiful woman who missed you until the day she died.”

Again, that same confused, mournful look.

“She’s gone? How?”

“In a car accident several years ago.”

“I see—I’m sorry,” as the realization of her passage sunk in.

“I am, too.”

A breeze rustled leaves in the nearby apple tree as the sun peeked from behind clouds. Was it a signal for us to realize the moment's importance?

The look on his face is beyond description. I could feel his wheels turning and words trying to form in his cotton-encrusted mouth. He slumped a bit more and almost fell off our perch as I caught him with my hand on his back—steadyng him against the realization of the possible truths of our meeting.

I am actually touching my father—incredible!

“She must have told you. She was my mother, and you are my dad. I was born on December 3rd, 1945. Didn't she ever tell you?”

Finally, I couldn't hold it anymore, “Why didn't you come home?”

She needed you badly. I needed you to.”

“Did you call me dad? Who are you?” He was so confused.

I paused slowly and said, “My name is Mathew Stone.”

He gazes at the countryside and slowly says, “I did come home, son. I did. It was the first time I could leave this place freely without scrutiny,” he exclaimed. “So I entered the US under a supplied ID and began my search. I had missed her for all those years. Her vision had kept me alive during some horrible times. The memory and the good times we had together kept me going. I yearned to see her again. So when I could finally leave, I traveled back to the farm I left before the war. It was in severe disrepair. The fields were fallow—they hadn't been worked for years. I searched for family and knocked on doors, but everything and everybody was gone. I even tracked the farm's records and could not find any mention of her. It was like she had just disappeared.

Eventually, I thought she had probably accepted my death and moved on. It had been a long time. I didn't even know that you existed—that you were born. I just didn't know. So, I returned to China to make a new life.”

He turned to me, searching my face for acceptance. All I could do was nod my head. I still didn't understand.

“The Japanese imprisoned me in China and passed my confinement on to the Chinese. They never told me anything but kept asking me questions about my past until I broke down. It went on for years, and my loss of reality became a problem for me—I lost track of everything—time, my wife, the US—everything. The Chinese finally released me to a local village family that nursed me back to health. I had been in captivity for over 15 years but was unaware of my lost time. The family that adopted me had a daughter, and we eventually married.

It was almost as if that family had chosen me—for this to happen. I was attracted to her, but not in a sensual way. Her support and encouragement helped me heal. I gradually became accepted by the family and the community. It took a long time to be accepted. There seemed no reason to return to the US again. I had a new family and a new life. I even found a way to make a small living from farming ducks.

The US had changed so much, and I didn't recognize anything friendly or comfortable anymore. I am so very sorry.” The sadness in his eyes broke my heart.

“I was messed up after all those years in isolation, deprivation, and torture. I lost hope of ever seeing your mother. I had nowhere to go until that Chinese family took me in. After that, I did not know who I was anymore.

I was imprisoned for years. They wanted information from my work with the ONI. Looking back, there are so many projects. It might have been the laser or stealth technology I worked on for the US. I never divulged anything to them. Of course, I gave them snippets of misinformation as I feigned borderline insanity, which always seemed

to satisfy them for short periods. But I was losing it and was unsure how long I could carry on.

I did not know the war had ended. The Chinese were still unsure what I knew or had divulged and continued my imprisonment. Based on their perception, I surmised that if the Japanese had kept me in a special prisoner status, the importance of what they thought I knew should also be valuable and important to them. And the cycle continued. Gradually, their patience wore thin, as I was almost a useless incoherent mess to nearly everyone by that time. Finally, they pushed me out into their world, hoping I would disappear or die.”

He paused and suddenly blurted out, “If you were thinking of me coming home now, I can’t. I’ve done things I’m not proud of, and I don’t think you will like me.” He took my hand and held it so tightly my fingers turned white—*all this time, all his pain and sadness.*

I saw dad’s pain and felt sorry for him—that he had missed so much of his life. He had let down those who loved and missed him terribly. Yet, there didn’t seem to be a way of getting him out. Did I need to accept that this was his home now?

To have come this far and actually found him—alive—God. Of course, I should be happy beyond words, but selfishly, I wanted him in my life, every day, for as long as possible. I wanted him to be at my wedding, love Rusty and Finn, spend time with McCready, and maybe hold a grandchild. Was it too much to ask for—to have a quiet life, safe life with people who cared for him—his blood? How could I make this happen? *Shit, I can’t breathe.*

Thirty

A Boys Hero Found

As my father quietly rose from the rock fence wall, he motioned me to walk beside him—and we walked.

I looked over at this withering image of a man, my dad, and a quiet peace filled me. The peace that comes from finding him. I was somehow more complete.

“Dad, I have tried to make you proud for many years, even though I didn’t know you. Really, I have tried. I looked up to you—you have always been real to me, even though we have never met. Mom suffered your loss for years.”

“I’m sure she did. My memories of her kept me alive for a very long time. You have made me proud, Mathew, by just finding me and loving me. It was all my fault. I let you and your mother down for not knowing. I am sorry. I hope you can understand. You found me, and we are no longer strangers. We have a second chance, and I hope you can forgive me.”

Tears rolled down my face. I could not help myself. All those years. All that pain. All that lost time. I wanted a father so badly.

“I created expectations in my mind. I wanted you to be proud of me even though you weren’t there. So I tried to complete the vision of what I thought you wanted me to be—to achieve. Finn, my best friend, and his dad helped a lot, but it wasn’t the same. I have lived in your shadow for my whole life. But right now, this is good enough. You are my dad, I’m here for you, and that’s all that counts.”

He smiled, “I am so thankful you have found me, son.”

And then, I couldn’t help it and whispered.

“Please listen to what I have to say, dad, and carefully consider what could come next for you. Your country would like to provide you and your family with an avenue back home and will do everything possible to alleviate your situation. I’d like you to travel home with me. Arrangements can be made quickly. I know everything about you from mom’s albums and our abbreviated discussions about your life together. I have chosen a career that I thought you would be proud of, and I know people who want you back. Would you like to make a go of it back home?”

Knowing I had crossed orders now, out on a limb in more ways than one—there was no turning back. I knew it might not end well for both of us—but I felt it was the only way.

“I still love you, dad. I want you with me. Don’t you think it is time?”

He looked me in the eye, straightened himself up, and took a deep breath.

“I admire your courage coming all this way to look for me and the danger you have placed yourself in. But I cannot leave. The project is now more important than ever. If I leave, it will fail and have repercussions around the world. If I’m gone, people will die as the project will impact many.”

What was he talking about? What project? Is this real, or has he lost it? No, He’d never do that!

“Do not worry about this matter. It will be better. You will be safer if you do not know the details. But, unfortunately, I have to stay. I have no choice, son.”

I stared at him and felt terrible. He was confused and a little angry. *Am I getting used? Was he really in with the communists?*

I tried to make sense of his words. His response was like nothing I’d planned for in my head. As I pushed to hold back my frustration, I

wanted to beg him to return with me. I had pictured our lives together a thousand times. How could he even consider not letting me get to know him? It was unfathomable, and the confusion and disappointment were overwhelming.

I looked around, remembering what I'd seen in the last several weeks: poverty, fear, and loss of hope. Had he been duped? Was he a victim of all that? What had he done to stay alive? I turned to him. He put his hand in mine and then abruptly snatched it away. I felt like I had been dropped on my head. And then...

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