

# THE KANDAHAR WINDOW

*A MATT SCALES PREQUEL*

KANDAHAR

31.61° N  
65.71° E

DONALD E. PATTERSON

# *The Kandahar Window*

*A Matt Scales Thriller*

*Prequel Novella*

Donald E. Patterson

*Copyright © 2026 Donald E. Patterson*

*All rights reserved.*

*No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.*

*This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.*

*Mattscaleshtrillers.com*

*Also by Donald E. Patterson*

*The Matt Scales Thriller Series*

*Bear in the Dragon's Shadow*

*Controlled Drift*

*(Coming September 2026)*

## *A Note to the Reader*

*The Kandahar Window takes place several years before the events of Bear in the Dragon's Shadow.*

*It is designed to stand alone.*

*No prior knowledge of the series is needed to enjoy this prequel.*

*If you enjoy this story, Bear in the Dragon's Shadow is available wherever books are sold.*

*Controlled Drift, the second full novel in the Matt Scales Thrillers series, is coming in August 2026.*

*Thank you for reading.*

# The Kandahar Window

*A Matt Scales Prequel*

*“You don’t get to know what might have  
happened.*

*You only get to live with what did.”*

— Matt Scales, personal journal

Kandahar, Afghanistan — 7:23 PM local

Matt Scales had chosen the front passenger seat of the gray Toyota Hilux for the same reason he chose every seat in every vehicle in every city where he had ever worked. Looking forward, he could see down the entire street. He had adjusted the outside rearview mirror so he could see the sidewalk behind him.

He sat with the window down and the street in front of him with his mind running the same quiet inventory it always ran.

The inventory was not nerves. Nerves had a clock. This was the thing underneath. The habit of seeing a street change before it finished changing. He had learned what it cost to see it a second too late. He did not plan to learn it again.

The tea house on the south side of Mir Wais Mena with an alley entrance twenty meters east. The two-story building across the street, with the windows facing the tea house, had the curtains drawn. There was no light coming from behind them.

Skip McCoy was behind the wheel. Delta Force, four days in country, attached to the team for the duration. Matt had recruited him the same way he recruited everyone, watching from a distance until he saw something he recognized. Skip had a quality Matt did not yet have a word for. He had been quiet for eleven minutes. Matt noted that too.

The Defense Clandestine Service operated in the space between intelligence and action. Its officers gathered information in places where gathering information could get a man killed. Sometimes the line between gathering and acting dissolved faster than anyone had planned.

Tonight was supposed to be the gathering side. Don Mercer would be meeting with the source. The source. That was all anyone called him. In this work, names were a liability.

Mercer had been on Matt's team for three years. Before that, Matt knew only in fragments. He was the best source handler Matt had worked with, which was why Matt had put him inside. Matt stayed on the perimeter where his particular set of skills was most useful.

He had been in enough cities to develop a feel for them, a low-frequency read on the way a neighborhood sounded when it was simply asleep versus when it was holding something back. He had felt it for the last four minutes and had not said anything about it. Skip did not know him well enough to understand the difference between Matt being quiet, and Matt being wrong.

A dark colored Nissan Patrol idled at the curb forty meters west. The driver hadn't looked at his phone once since it arrived. He was looking at the street. There was a person in the front passenger seat.

"Rahimi's people or someone else?" Skip asked.

Matt scanned the Nissan Patrol. The driver had shifted in his seat.

"Unknown until the meet closes."

Skip nodded and went back to scanning the street.

The target was a man named Nasir Rahimi. Mid-level facilitator. He moved money and men for a network that had been burning through coalition intelligence assets for two years. DCS had tracked him for six months. Tonight was the closest they had come to a confirmed position. The source was one of Rahimi's own people, a cousin who had decided that he was done protecting Rahimi after one of Rahimi's guards had raped his fourteen year old daughter. The cousin reported the incident to Rahimi and asked him to discipline the guard. Rahimi's response was that the cousin should not have allowed the girl to be alone.

Matt saw Mercer appear from the alley and head towards the front door.

Matt keyed his radio once. A single click.

St. Bernard came back with two.

\* \* \*

St. Bernard sat at the table on the right side of the café, next to the kitchen.

He had asked to join Matt's team based on Matt's reputation alone. Matt's record in DEVGRU lived in stories told over a beer in the team room. When the DCS posting came through, he had made one call and asked one question. Matt's answer had been "Yes."

He had been on Matt's team for three years. Before that, DEVGRU. Black Squadron. Deep reconnaissance in places that did not appear on the orders afterward. He had spent a long

time doing work that required patience and stillness in environments that punished mistakes. His real name was Chester Bernard. Everyone called him St. Bernard.

He scanned the room with his peripheral vision. A woman sitting at a table alone concentrating on the food. A couple at the next table having an excited, yet low conversation. The waitress talking to the cook through the pass through.

Mercer came through the front door with the pace of a man with somewhere to be but no reason to hurry.

His cover was simple. A contractor running logistics. A man who moved around a city like Kandahar because money moved through it and money needed watching. He had played the role for three days. Mercer was good at becoming whatever the situation required.

Mercer pushed open the door of the teahouse and shuffled in. He did not look at St. Bernard.

The source was already at the back corner table. Mercer greeted him in Pashto, the Kandahari dialect, and sat down with his back to the wall and a view of the dining room.

\* \* \*

Matt was looking at the dark colored Nissan Patrol when it started coming towards the café.

It stopped in front of the teahouse.

Four men got out of the Nissan Patrol. The driver stayed inside.

The way they dispersed said more than their clothing did. One went inside. Two moved to cover the south alley. One stayed by the front door. The driver stayed behind the wheel.

It was the man who stayed outside at the front and the two who went to the alley that raised Matt's concern. They were sealing the teahouse.

The Nissan Patrol's engine was still running.

"Rahimi's men?" Skip asked.

"Could be."

Matt keyed his radio. "Saint."

One click came over Matt's headset.

"Saint has the guy who went inside," said Matt. "What do you think?"

“Looks more like containment before an assault than an advanced security,” Skip replied.

“To me too.”

The front door was covered. The kitchen exit that was St. Bernard’s emergency exit route, was covered. One man inside. Engine still running.

Matt did the math. This wasn’t a security advance team. You sealed exits when you didn’t want anyone leaving. Someone inside that teahouse was the target.

He could hold position. Wait to see if he was wrong and Rahimi showed up. He could let Mercer and St. Bernard manage the situation inside. But if he was right, the probability of Mercer and St. Bernard getting out clean dropped with every minute that passed. If he waited, it dropped to zero.

Or he could move now and pull them both before the perimeter closed.

If he moved now, and Rahimi was coming to dinner, Rahimi would see the activity and run.

Six months of work against the lives of two men on his team.

Matt would always make the same choice.

The math was never the hard part. People got that backward; they thought the difficulty was in the choosing. It came later, in the carrying. He had room for it.

\* \* \*

Inside St. Bernard was drinking tea as he read the room. He had seen the man come through the front door, look around, and fix his gaze on the source and then Mercer.

The man had taken up a position against the wall, five feet from their table.

He was a big guy. Six feet two at least, 280 lbs. He was wearing Levi’s, a long sleeve western shirt and a cowboy hat. His eyes moved in a pattern from the source to Mercer, to the door, around the room and back to the source. He had completed two scans in twenty-five seconds each. After his second scan, he leaned against the wall and started his third scan.

St. Bernard looked at the source. The source had glanced at the man in the cowboy hat with eyes that were either frightened or calculating.

As the man in the cowboy hat completed his third scan, he stopped and held his gaze on St. Bernard.

St. Bernard looked back at him. If he looked away, it said he had something to hide.

The man in the cowboy hat shifted his weight toward St. Bernard.

At the back corner table Mercer said something in Pashto that St. Bernard did not catch. But he could hear Mercer's tone. His voice dropped into a tone that was personal and serious. The source leaned forward. Mercer's right hand hit the table. The sound pulled the man in the cowboy hat's attention back to the table. Mercer reached across the table and pointed his finger at the source.

St. Bernard moved. He covered the distance in four steps. The man was still looking at Mercer. St. Bernard put two fingers into the nerve cluster below the man's ear with the pressure that took three months to learn and less than two seconds to apply.

The man's knees went first. St. Bernard caught his weight and walked him the two steps into the gap between the counter and the wall, settling him against the stone.

He flex-cuffed his hands and pressed two fingers briefly against the man's throat, not hard enough to damage, just hard enough to keep him down for a few minutes. St. Bernard placed the cowboy hat on his head, tipped down over his eyes.

He searched the man's pockets and pulled out a phone.

The owner behind the counter, who was wiping the same section of wood he had been wiping since St. Bernard arrived, looked away.

Near the window, the young woman concentrated on the food in the bowl in front of her.

St. Bernard sat back down and looked at Mercer.

Mercer was at the table, talking, his right hand tucked back in his lap. The source leaned toward him.

St. Bernard had watched Mercer work for three years. He did not have a clean word for why Mercer was so good. Mercer did not play the role. He became it. And the room never saw the seam.

He had read the man in the cowboy hat before St. Bernard had. Had seen where it was going, dropped his voice, moved his hand, hit the table, and pulled the man's attention at the exact moment it was needed, while continuing to talk to the source.

He picked up his empty glass and watched the door.

Then he keyed his radio four times, fast.

Outside, Matt heard four fast clicks come through his headset.

Matt sent four fast clicks back as he looked at Skip.

"We're going in."

"We need the driver of Nissan out of play," Skip said.

"Yep."

"I'll take care of the driver. He won't see me until I'm at the window."

Matt evaluated the scene in front of him. Forty meters of open street. Rahimi's man in front of the café. Sixty seconds before his sight lines overlapped with Skip's approach to the Nissan.

"Sixty seconds," Matt said.

"I'll need forty."

"Go."

Skip crossed the street, turned the corner at the east end and was gone.

Matt keyed his radio. "Bernard. One minute."

One click came into Matt's earpiece.

\* \* \*

Matt slipped out of the Toyota and moved along the east wall of the teahouse that smelled of diesel and old stone.

At the corner of the teahouse, Matt stayed in the shadows. He kept Skip in his peripheral vision as he moved towards the front door. The man at the front door had a medium build. He was standing with his weight forward on his toes, the subtle forward lean of someone expecting to move quickly.

As Matt reached the front door, Skip came up from behind in the Nissan driver's blind spot. Matt saw the flash from the shot and a small pop escaping from the silencer.

The man at the front door spun around to look at the Nissan.

Matt came out of the shadows behind the man. He hit him on the back of the head. The man went down unconscious. Matt flexed cuffed his hands and drove a thin knife into the inside of his left knee. He wouldn't be running anywhere when he woke up.

Skip pushed the driver over to the passenger seat, got behind the wheel, drove the Nissan around the corner, got out, and joined Matt outside the front door.

"Two still in the back alley," Skip said. "One inside."

Matt clicked his radio twice.

Two clicks came back immediately.

Skip watched him do it. "You two have a whole conversation with that."

"Three years."

"Huh." Skip looked at the teahouse. "Delta uses voice."

"Delta operates in larger elements."

Skip considered that. "Fair point."

Matt pulled back against the wall and checked his weapon. The MP5SD hung down his right side.

"East end of the alley three minutes." Matt said to Skip as he reached for the front door.

Skip made two clicking sounds with his tongue, looked at Matt, smiled and disappeared around the corner.

\* \* \*

Matt opened the teahouse door two inches and listened.

He heard several soft voices inside, indicating no chaos or disturbance.

Matt pushed the door open and went inside. He held the MP5 at a low ready.

The tea house was one room. Eight tables, two occupied. An older man behind the counter who looked at Matt and looked away. A young woman near the window looked down at the floor.

At the far end, Mercer sat across from a thin man in his forties with a full beard.

Sitting on the ground against the wall next to Mercer was the man who had come inside earlier. He was slumped over on his right side.

Mercer looked at Matt and stood up. The source jumped to his feet.

Mercer put a hand on the source's shoulder.

"Sit down," Mercer said in Pashto. "We are leaving. You are going to sit here for ten minutes and then walk out the front door and go home."

The source looked at the man on the floor, looked at Matt, and then looked at Mercer.

"They knew," the source said. "I told no one. They knew anyway."

"I believe you," Mercer said.

\* \* \*

St. Bernard got up and went into the kitchen. He stopped at the door leading to the alley. He turned to make sure Matt and Mercer were with him.

As St. Bernard pushed the exit door open, it swung outward. A guard came into the doorframe. For a half-second the two men were close enough that neither could draw. St. Bernard grabbed the front of the man's jacket with both hands, dropped his weight, and used the guard's own momentum to take him up and over. The guard went airborne and came down hard on the kitchen floor directly in front of Mercer, as he ducked left. Matt put three rounds into the guard on the floor.

The second guard came through the door, holding a pistol. Matt sent two suppressed shots into the second guard. The man folded into the doorway.

They went outside into the dark alley. Somewhere a dog started barking. Matt watched the shadows at both ends of the alley. Nothing moved.

St. Bernard moved toward the east end of the alley, keeping along the left wall in the shadows, away from the light bleeding out of the kitchen doorway. Matt and Mercer followed.

St. Bernard got to the alley mouth and checked the street. He held up one finger. A vehicle moving west. They waited. It passed. St. Bernard dropped his hand.

Their gray Hilux came around the corner and stopped next to St. Bernard.

He did not ask how Skip timed it so well.

They got in. Skip pulled away before the doors were fully closed.

St. Bernard pulled the phone out of his pocket, that he had taken from the man inside the teahouse. He held it up so Matt could see it.

“Head West,” Matt said. “Slow.”

At the junction of Mir Wais Mena and the Herat Road, a jingle truck sat idling at the junction. The kind of ornately painted cargo truck that moved goods across the city at all hours. Skip pulled alongside. St. Bernard lowered his window and dropped the phone into the cargo bed as they passed.

“That buys us twenty minutes,” St. Bernard said from the back seat. “Maybe thirty.”

“Enough,” Matt said.

Matt adjusted the rear window mirror. The teahouse front was quiet. The jingle truck was moving west, carrying its cargo and the phone deeper into the city.

“The source said they knew,” Matt said.

“Yes.”

“Someone talked.”

“Or someone followed him.” Mercer paused. “He believed he was clean. I believe him.”

“Which means the network has better intel than we thought,” Matt said.

Skip turned north. The streets were empty this far from the center. A dog crossed ahead and vanished between two buildings.

Skip drove north.

Matt watched the mirror.

\* \* \*

Kandahar, Afghanistan — 8:27 PM Local

The safe house was a two-room structure on the north edge of the city that smelled of concrete and cooking oil. Matt had kept it off the primary asset list for exactly this kind of situation. A place that didn’t exist on any official document.

He was going to have to explain that, eventually.

Skip was at the window with his back to the room, watching the street below. St. Bernard sat against the far wall with his arms across his knees. Mercer was on the floor near the door with

his equipment laid out in front of him, checking it from left to right. The same way he always did after an op.

Matt put the satellite phone down on the table in front of him. He was waiting for a call from James Jordan.

Jordan ran Middle East operations out of Bahrain. Matt had never met him in person.

Jordan's call was going to come. The only question was when and how much he already knew. The extraction had been clean enough that they had about four hours before anyone started asking questions. After that, the window on a clean extraction closed the same way the window on Rahimi had closed.

He picked up the satellite phone.

Skip turned from the window. "You're calling him."

"Yes."

"You want us to step out?"

"No."

He keyed Jordan's number. Jordan answered before the second ring.

"Jordan."

"It's Scales."

"Talk to me," Jordan said.

"Mercer and St. Bernard are out. Team is intact. We are at a secondary location."

"And Rahimi."

Matt pulled back the curtain on the window. The early light was coming through in a flat line across the floor.

"Rahimi is gone."

"Walk me through it," Jordan said.

Matt walked him through the brief and the plan. Matt told Jordan about the four men who got out of the Nissan, how they dispersed, and that the driver had stayed in the Nissan.

Jordan said, "Sounds a little out of the ordinary for a protection team."

"We were still evaluating the situation when we got the four clicks from Bernard."

"That told you the op was compromised they need immediate extraction?"

"Yep," Matt said. "The source had told Mercer the man who came in was Rahimi's enforcer."

He walked Jordan through the rest of his observations, what he had assessed, and what he had decided.

When he finished, Jordan was quiet for a moment.

“You exceeded your authorization,” Jordan said.

“Yes.”

“The directive was to observe and report.”

“Correct.”

“And you moved anyway.”

“Mercer and St. Bernard were going to be taken or killed. The perimeter was almost complete. I had the team and I had the small window before we lost the advantage of surprise.”

“You had a window on Rahimi too,” Jordan said. “That window is closed now. Six months of work. Three assets burned to get him into position. Gone.”

Matt did not respond.

“Do you understand what Rahimi represents?” Jordan said. “Not the man, but his network. He moves money. We lost three assets getting here. Do you understand the cost of what you did tonight?”

“Yes, I do” Matt said.

“Rahimi is going to go to ground.” Jordan paused. “Disappear. Could be six months before he surfaces again. Could be longer. Every asset connected to tonight’s operation is compromised. We have to assume the source is burned. We must also assume your safe house is a temporary solution at best.”

“Understood.”

“Get your team out of Kandahar,” Jordan said.

Jordan paused. “And Scales.”

“Yeah.”

“We are going to have a longer conversation about this.”

“I know.”

Jordan cut the connection.

Matt set the satellite phone on the table.

The room was quiet. St. Bernard had finished cleaning his equipment and was looking at the wall. Skip had turned back to the window. Mercer had not moved.

“How bad?” Skip asked. He was still looking at the street below.

“Bad.”

“But manageable?”

“Jordan decides that,” Matt said.

Skip nodded. “For what it’s worth. I’d have made the same call.”

Skip picked up his weapon and began his own post-op check.

St. Bernard looked across the room at Matt.

Mercer had finished cleaning and checking his equipment. He was repacking it from right to left this time.

Mercer looked over at Matt. “I had two more minutes in there. Maybe three.”

“Maybe,” Matt said.

“Two minutes might have been enough.”

“It might have. Or maybe you only had one minute.”

Mercer looked up. “But you couldn’t know that from outside.”

“No.”

There it was. The version of what might have happened if he held outside, and Mercer and St. Bernard walked out on their own. The successful version would sit next to the version where he held, and it didn’t work out. Neither had happened. He put them where he put the rest and reached for the radio.

Mercer held his gaze for a moment. Then he went back to his equipment.

Matt picked up the radio and began working through the exfil organization.

He thought about Rahimi. He thought about the six months and the three lost assets, and the network that was going to keep operating.

\* \* \*

Camp Bastion, Helmand Province — 6:41pm local

The British had built Bastion to last and then handed it over to the Afghan National Army. They had held it for two years and allowed anyone who paid them to use it. They never inquired about its purpose.

The exfil team had been waiting on the flight line when they arrived. Two men Matt recognized. They moved the team through processing and into a low building at the south end of the base that smelled of dust and generator exhaust and had four cots and a table and nothing else.

Mercer was asleep within ten minutes.

Matt watched him from across the room and thought about what that meant. Either Mercer was completely at peace with the night's events, or he had made a decision that had settled something in him. Both possibilities pointed in the same direction.

Skip sat at the table cleaning his weapon for the second time since Kandahar. Matt assumed he was doing it because his hands needed something to do while his mind worked.

Matt got up and went outside.

St. Bernard was standing at the edge of the flight line looking west. The sun was setting behind the mountains. A C-130 was turning on the far runway, its four turboprop engines building toward takeoff power. The sound carried across the whole base.

They watched the C-130 roll, lift, and disappear into the darkening sky.

"He's done," St. Bernard said.

"I think so too," Matt said.

"I think he made that call before tonight. Tonight, just confirmed it."

Matt looked at the mountains. The last light was leaving the peaks. "How long have you known?"

"Few months." St. Bernard kept his eyes on the horizon. "He stopped talking about the next op. Men who are staying talk about the next op."

Matt had not noticed that.

"He's good," Matt said.

"He's the best I've worked with outside of you." St. Bernard paused. "Lately, anyway."

Matt smiled. "Skip is going to be fine."

"I know he is."

They stood in the cooling air while the last light left the mountains. The flight line lights had just come on in a long pale row. A vehicle moved across the base in the distance. Somewhere behind them a door opened and closed.

“The source was burned,” St. Bernard said. “Rahimi was never coming to the teahouse, It was a set-up to capture us and kill the source, Rahimi’s people had coverage on that block independent of the meet. They were already watching.”

“Mercer said the same.”

“Which means Rahimi knew we were in the city. He probably suspected the source and had him followed.”

Matt considered that. “He’s careful.”

“Careful enough to survive six months of us looking for him.”

“Jordan’s going to want a full assessment.”

“Jordan’s going to want a lot of things,” St. Bernard said.

Matt almost smiled. “You’ve dealt with Jordan before.”

“Once. Beirut. Three years ago.” St. Bernard was quiet for a moment. “He’s fair. He doesn’t move the target after you’ve taken the shot. Whatever he said on the radio this morning is what he meant.”

That matched Matt’s reading of the call. Jordan had stated matter-of-factly what it cost.

“That’s something,” Matt said.

“It’s enough,” St. Bernard said.

They were quiet again. The C-130 was gone, swallowed by distance and darkness.

“Mercer saved me in there,” St. Bernard said. “Before you came through the door. The man they had standing next to the source made me. Mercer saw it coming and moved the conversation. Bought me ten seconds.”

“He didn’t tell me that,” Matt said.

“He wouldn’t.” St. Bernard finally turned from the horizon. “That’s why I’m telling you.”

Matt held that for a moment. Mercer had been managing Bernard’s exposure from inside the tea house while simultaneously running the source and planning his own exit. Three problems at once, none of them visible from the outside.

“I didn’t know,” Matt said.

“Now you do.” St. Bernard looked back at the flight line. “Doesn’t change your call. But now you have the full picture.”

They stood there until the cold hit them. St. Bernard went back inside. Matt stayed at the edge of the flight line a while longer. He thought about how Mercer had designed the plan to give St. Bernard ten seconds he needed to move on the man who was there to kill him and the source.

Matt couldn't remember when Mercer had stopped talking about the next op. He had missed that.

Matt read streets for a living and he'd missed these signs on this one, not because the signs weren't there, but because seeing them meant admitting Mercer was already half gone.

Some things he didn't let himself see until someone said them out loud.

\* \* \*

Skip looked up from his weapon when Matt came back in.

"St. Bernard talk to you?" Skip asked.

"Yes."

Skip finished reassembling his weapon and set it on the table. "I didn't know Mercer distracted the man in the tea house either. St. Bernard told me when we were in the alley."

"He's thorough," Matt said.

"He's something." Skip looked at Mercer sleeping on the cot. "What happens to him now?"

"That's his decision."

"And if he decides he's done?"

"Then he's done."

Skip looked at the weapon on the table. "You'd have a slot to fill."

"Yes."

Skip picked up his weapon and set it on the cot beside him, lay back and closed his eyes.

Matt sat at the table in the quiet of the room and listened to the base settle into night around them. He thought about what it meant when one of his team decided they had given enough.

Outside, somewhere on the flight line, another aircraft was taking off.

\* \* \*

Camp Bastion, Helmand Province — 6:23 am local

Mercer was already up when Matt woke.

He was sitting at the table with his hands wrapped around a cup. He was staring at the coffee inside it.

Matt poured a cup and sat across from him.

Outside the building the base was coming alive with vehicles moving, distant aircraft engines, and the low mechanical rhythm of the machinery.

Neither of them spoke for a while.

Mercer said, "I'm going to put my papers in when we get back."

Matt took a sip of his coffee.

"Okay," he said.

Mercer turned the cup slowly in his hands. "Sarah's been patient. Longer than I had a right to ask for. There's a point where patient becomes something else. I don't want to find out what that is."

"No, you don't." Matt said.

"She doesn't know the details. She knows enough." Mercer set the cup down. "A man can only ask a woman to live with enough for so long before enough becomes too much."

Matt thought about that.

"Is it just Sarah?" he said.

Mercer looked at him. The direct look he reserved for direct questions.

"No," he said. "When I came into DCS I understood the mission. It was intelligence work. Work that happens so the shooting doesn't have to." He paused. "The shooting keeps happening."

"It does," Matt said.

"And you're good at it. You and Bernard. Skip's going to be good at it. That's not a criticism. That's just a true thing." Mercer picked up the cup again. "I'm good at the other part. The part we keep leaving behind to go kick doors."

Mercer was the best source handler Matt had worked with. In the teahouse he had managed three simultaneous problems with the precision of a man built for that kind of work. Putting him in a stack was like using a steak knife to open a crate.

“The job changed,” Matt said.

“The job changed,” Mercer agreed. “Or I changed. Probably both. Either way I’m not the right fit for where it’s going.”

They sat quietly for a moment.

“You should know St. Bernard told me about the man in the teahouse.”

Mercer looked at him.

“He told me what you did,” Matt said. “You gave him the ten seconds he needed.”

Mercer was quiet.

“You saved him,” Matt said.

“He would have made the same call for me.”

“That’s not the point.”

“That’s exactly the point,” Mercer said. “That’s what the job is supposed to be. People looking out for people. That part I’m still good at.” He looked at the empty cup. “It’s the rest of it I’m done with.”

Mercer looked out the window for a moment. Then he said, “Why did you come in when you did?”

“St. Bernard sent me four clicks.”

“I didn’t know that. But there was still a window on Rahimi. You could have held.”

“The perimeter was closing,” Matt said. “The five men they put on that building changed your odds. I was still running the numbers when Saint sent the four clicks.”

Mercer was quiet.

“You and St. Bernard came out,” Matt said. “That’s what I know. Everything else is a version of events that didn’t happen.”

“And if Rahimi kills fifty people next month?” Mercer said. “Massacres a village. Burns an asset network. Would it have mattered if you had played it out a little longer?”

Matt held his gaze.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Neither do you. Neither does Jordan. Nobody knows what the other version of last night looks like. The one where I held, and you tried to make it out on your

own or the version where you both ended up dead on the floor. You knew the op was compromised when you caused the distraction. So did St. Bernard when he broke cover.

Mercer looked at him.

“I made the call with what I had. The abstraction of what might have happened doesn’t live anywhere useful.”

“That’s how you carry it?” Mercer asked.

“That’s how I carry it,” Matt said.

Mercer nodded once. Slowly.

“I couldn’t do that,” Mercer said. “Carry it that way.”

“I know,” Matt said. “That’s not a failing.”

“No,” Mercer said. “It’s just a difference. It’s why you’re good at this. I’m not, at least that part.”

Mercer meant it as a compliment, and it was. It was also the loneliest thing anyone had said to him in a long time. The part of him that could carry it was the part that kept him in the work. It was also the part that kept a step of distance between him and everyone he carried it for.

He poured Mercer the last of the coffee.

Mercer drank the coffee and looked like he was trying to think of something to say. Matt changed the topic.

“Sarah,” Matt said. “Is she the one?”

For the first time that morning, something shifted in Mercer’s face.

“Yeah,” he said. “She’s the one.”

“Then go,” Matt said.

Mercer looked at him for a moment. Then he picked up the empty cup, stood, set it upside down on the counter, and walked out the door.

\* \* \*

Skip and St. Bernard were outside when they came out.

Skip was leaning against the building wall with his arms folded. St. Bernard was standing a few meters away, looking at nothing specific with the stillness that was how he existed in the world.

Mercer stopped in front of St. Bernard.

St. Bernard looked at him.

Whatever passed between them in that moment did not require language. It was the compressed weight of three years in difficult places with difficult stakes, of nights when one of them had been the reason the other came home.

St. Bernard put his hand out.

Mercer took it.

St. Bernard put his left arm around Mercer's right shoulder and pulled him in.

Mercer turned to Skip.

Skip pushed off the wall and offered his hand. "It was one op," he said. "But it was a good one to have."

Mercer shook it. "You're going to fit here."

"I know," Skip said.

Mercer looked at Matt last.

Matt put his hand out. Mercer took it. Matt's left hand closed briefly around Mercer's elbow, the way it always did, the silent acknowledgment that meant something specific between people who had been in the same places.

"Send me an invitation," Matt said.

Mercer held his gaze for a moment.

"You'll get one."

He picked up his bag and walked toward the flight line without looking back. The early light was flat and pale. His footsteps were quiet on the tarmac.

The three of them watched until he was gone.

"Good man," Skip said.

"Yes, he is." St. Bernard agreed.

Matt said nothing, just watched the empty flight line for a moment longer. Then he turned back toward the building. Mercer had made his decision cleanly and the cleanest thing Matt could do in return was honor it by moving forward.

For now, the vault stayed shut.

\* \* \*

Mihail Kogălniceanu Air Base, Romania — 3:40 pm local

In his first thirty seconds in the room Matt had noted the single door behind him, the window's distance from the ground, the absence of anything on the desk that could be used as a weapon and a side door that was either a closet or bathroom.

A metal desk, two chairs, a window that looked out onto a taxiway. A room that existed because operations required administration, and administration required a space for planning.

Matt sat across the desk from Jordan.

Jordan was younger than his voice suggested. Mid-forties. Lean in the way of a man who had once been operational and had not entirely let go of it. He had a file open on his desk.

"Mercer's papers came through this morning," Jordan said.

"That was fast," Matt said.

"I approved them. He's earned a clean exit." Jordan looked out the window. "We're going to feel that loss for a while."

"Yes."

"He was the best source handler in the Middle East theater. Men like that don't get replaced."

Matt did not respond. Jordan placed a picture of Rahimi on the desk in front of Matt.

Jordan looked at him. "The Rahimi situation."

"Yes."

"I've read your account. I've read Bernard's and McCoy's. I've read the exfil team's assessment of your condition when you arrived at Bastion. You know what it cost. That conversation is closed."

Jordan reached into the file and pulled out a photograph. He slid it across the desk. It was weathered and grainy. A man in his mid-forties, with Slavic features, caught in three-quarter profile outside what looked like a ministry building.

"Rahimi moves money and men. Someone tells him where to move them. We think this is him. This is the most recent image we have. It was taken in Ankara in 2018. He may also be the man who ran the chemical program in Syria."

Matt picked up the photograph. The man had the bearing of someone who gave orders that were not questioned.

“Russian?” Matt asked.

“We think so.”

Jordan pulled the photograph back and closed the file. “You’re going to need to fill Mercer’s slot.”

“I have someone in mind.”

Jordan looked at him. “Who.”

“Marine Corps. Scout sniper. His name is Dugan. Jimmy Dugan.” Matt paused. “He goes by One-Shot.”

“I know the name,” Jordan said. “He’s not DCS.”

“Neither was Skip six months ago.”

Jordan considered that. “What makes you want a sniper.”

“He’s more than a sniper. He reads situations the way Mercer reads situations. Differently, but the same quality of attention.” Matt thought about how to say the next part accurately. “Mercer managed three problems at once in that teahouse and nobody outside the room knew he was doing it. Dugan has that same quality. He makes it look like nothing is happening.”

“That’s a specific thing to know about a man.”

“I’ve worked with him twice. Helmand. Anbar. I’ve been watching him for two years.”

Jordan was quiet for a moment. “You recruited McCoy the same way.”

“Yes.”

“And McCoy performed.”

“Yes.”

Jordan opened the file again and made a note. “I’ll have his file pulled. Meanwhile, you make the call personally. Nobody else.”

“That was always the plan,” Matt said.

Jordan closed the file.

“One more thing. The safe house. The one off the primary asset list.”

Matt held Jordan’s gaze.

“I’m going to need the address. And the other one.”

“There are two others.”

Amusement moved briefly across Jordan's face. "Of course there are." He slid a notepad across the desk. "Write them down."

Matt wrote them down. Jordan took the notepad, folded it once, and put it in the file.

"The call you made in Kandahar. I've been running operations in this theater for nine years. I have made calls that cost more than Rahimi and calls that cost less. Every one of them lives somewhere." Jordan tapped the file. "I'm not saying it was the right call. I'm saying I understand the architecture of it. A man who cannot make that call when the situation requires it is useless to me. A man who makes it and doesn't understand the cost is dangerous." He looked at Matt. "You understand the cost."

"I do," Matt said.

"Then we're done here."

Jordan opened another file and began reading.

Matt stood and picked up his jacket and left.

\* \* \*

The base was loud with midday activity. Aircraft on the flight line. Vehicles moving between buildings. The noise of a place that ran on schedules.

Matt found a quiet spot at the edge of a maintenance yard and took out his phone.

He had his back to the wall and a clear line of sight to the only entrance.

Dugan picked up on the third ring.

"Scales," he said.

"You have a few minutes?" Matt said.

"I can give you five. Ten if this is important."

Matt looked at the flight line. A transport was taxiing toward the runway, slow and steady, engines at low power.

"I have a slot," Matt said. "I want to talk to you about it."

"What kind of slot," Dugan said.

"The kind that fits your talent," Matt said. "One that matters."

"Where are you?" Dugan asked.

"Romania."

“I can be there in four days.”

“Three would be better,” Matt said.

He heard something that might have been a quiet laugh. “Three,” Dugan said.

The transport reached the runway, turned, and held. As the engines built toward takeoff power, the sound rose across the base. Then it rolled forward, lifted and climbed. The noise fell away.

Matt watched it until it was gone.

He thought about Mercer at the table with his hands around a coffee cup and his eyes somewhere else. St. Bernard at the edge of the flight line watching the mountains go dark. Skip with his weapon on the table and his eyes closed, probably already moving forward.

The men who filled the slots. The ones he had brought home and the ones he hadn’t.

Mercer, he had brought home and let him go. In this line of work, that was everything.

He put the phone in his pocket and went to find St. Bernard and Skip.

There was work to do.

*Before you go...*

*The mission in Kandahar was where it began.*

*Bear in the Dragon's Shadow is where it got costly.*

*Here's how it starts.*

# Bear in the Dragon's Shadow

*Where Deception Meets Strategy*

A Matt Scales Thriller

By Donald E. Patterson



# PART I

## Shadows Before Dawn

*“The first step in any deception is pretending*

*you have nothing left to hide.”*

Matt Scales, pre-op briefing note

## CHAPTER 1

### Day 0 - Kharkiv, Ukraine. 0530 Hours, Spring 2025

Matt Scales's pulse ticked at a steady 120 beats per minute, the optimal rate for combat. He felt no adrenaline. He was focused.

He sat in the front passenger seat of a four-year-old silver Volkswagen transporter van. The duct tape covering the hole in the brown leather barely shielded his left buttock from a spring sticking out of the cushion. The streetlights were too dim to reveal the cracked pavement that made the van jitter as it rolled down the street. As they turned the corner onto Vulytsia Universytetska, they hit a particularly big rut that threw the van into the air and bounced his head into the roof.

Matt gazed out the front window as the apartment complex came into view. The building at 37 University Street wore its years without apology. Its light green facade was faded, and rust-colored streaks crept from beneath the eaves. Paint flaked near the base, blending it into the line of older low-rise structures that ran along both sides of the street. It didn't draw attention, and that was the point.

The location was ideal for a command post. Perched at the corner of a busy intersection, the top floor offered panoramic sight lines in two directions. The wide bay windows gave clear views of both cross streets, perfect for monitoring foot traffic, vehicle movement, and anyone casing the area.

In the driver's seat of the van, Chester Bernard, known simply as "St. Bernard," tapped the steering wheel, his eyes scanning the mirrors. The former DEVGRU operator had a reputation for sensing trouble long before it appeared, and right now, he looked like a man smelling smoke but unable to find the fire.

Behind Matt, Don "Skip" McCoy, a Delta veteran with a keen sense of humor, shifted as his fingers brushed over the .40-caliber MP5SD in his lap.

Next to Skip in the backseat sat Jimmy “One-Shot” Dugan, the Marine Corps sniper who had earned his nickname the hard way, though he rarely spoke about it. “Talking doesn’t win wars,” he’d say. “Precision shooting does.”

Matt adjusted his equipment, giving it one last thorough check before looking around the van at his team. Skip’s and St. Bernard’s faces were focused and ready. In contrast, One-Shot appeared indifferent, almost bored, his MP5 resting casually across his lap.

“One-Shot, you always look like you’re heading to brunch instead of a mission,” Matt said. “What’s your secret?”

“Less worrying, more doing. You should try it sometime.”

Matt shrugged. “One of these days I’m gonna figure out what planet you’re from.”

One-Shot chuckled softly. “Keep dreaming, Scales.”

Officially, Matt’s team had been labeled “volunteers” by the Ukrainian government, assigned to the Foreign Fighter Unit. Unofficially, they were covert operatives for the US Defense Clandestine Service.

The DCS primarily focused on intelligence gathering, and tonight’s mission had emerged from precisely that kind of work. Matt had personally confirmed a crucial lead from an informant: a group of soldiers had arrived at an apartment complex the previous afternoon. The informant’s family lived on the top floor. His father had entered the building to retrieve some belongings and never returned.

Another unit arrived later in the evening.

When Matt showed the informant a binder filled with photographs, the informant immediately pointed to one face, Colonel Alexei Lebedev. Lebedev was among those who’d arrived after dark.

Lebedev was already on DCS’s radar as a high-priority target. Matt and his team had been pursuing him for over a year. Intelligence sources indicated Lebedev’s superior, Sergei Abdulov, had overseen Russian military operations in Syria years earlier. However, Lebedev himself had been responsible for ordering bombings and chemical weapon attacks on civilians, prompting Interpol to issue a Red Notice for his apprehension. Recent intelligence reports placed Lebedev as a key figure orchestrating the Russian invasion in northern Ukraine.

Lebedev rarely stayed in one place for more than a night. Intelligence suggested he was at the apartment complex for reconnaissance getting firsthand knowledge of the city, learning its rhythms. Based on his past movements, analysts were confident he'd vanish by sunrise.

Protocol dictated waiting for the Ukrainian special forces team to conduct the assault, but the nearest team was at least two hours away. By the time they arrived, Lebedev would be gone.

The right call was to hold and observe.

Matt looked out the van toward the east. The surrounding mountains formed a dark silhouette, just barely visible against the early light. A red-orange glow crept over the peaks. Within minutes, the streets and sidewalks would swell with vehicles and pedestrians. Too many civilians. Too much risk.

He had a window. It was small and risky, but it was there.

His team was professional, each operator bearing a deep history of direct-action missions. "We're going in," Matt said.

St. Bernard turned and looked at him. "We aren't supposed to—"

Matt cut off St. Bernard. "We're going in fast and quiet."

He laid out the details briefly and efficiently. Each team member nodded silently as he spoke. No further discussion was necessary. They all knew their roles. They were ready.

With the new plan, the Ukrainian special forces team would become a quick response force, although they didn't know that yet.

The van made a right turn onto northbound Cooperative Street, with the apartment building's entrance on the right side. Matt noticed two men standing outside the front door. They were dressed in nondescript clothing, typical of the residents, but the AK-47s they had at their side showed otherwise. The street was empty of pedestrians. A few cars moved up and down the streets. After last night's incident with the informant's father, the residents were avoiding the area.

As the van approached the corner in front of the apartment complex, all humor evaporated. It was showtime.

Matt climbed into the backseat. St Bernard slowed the van and veered right, as if preparing to turn. The team started their tap-up sequence. St. Bernard, who was usually second in the stack, was driving. He would catch up with the team after he parked the van.

One-Shot slid open the side door. The team bolted out before the van stopped. With their second step yet to be taken, Skip fired his MP5, killing the left-hand guard with a single round to the back of the head, and Matt took down the guard to the right of the door before the first guard hit the ground.

As Skip and Matt swept the area outside the front door for other threats, St. Bernard parked the van, jumped out, and slid in behind Skip. The team moved forward with Matt in the number three position and One-Shot taking up the number four position at the rear. Skip saw a guard just inside the front door. As the guard raised a radio to his mouth, Skip double-tapped him on the chest, the subsonic rounds from his MP5 barely audible.

Talking was unnecessary. The team had worked together for four years and could read each other's minds, especially during tactical situations. Dressed in black tactical gear, Matt and One-Shot raced down the hallway to the east stairwell. The plan called for them to reach the top floor within 120 seconds.

They burst into the stairwell. Several lights were broken, making it hard to see clearly. Matt resisted turning on his light, concerned about revealing their position to anyone above. They climbed swiftly yet carefully, weapons ready, their rubber tactical soles scraping softly against the concrete steps. At each landing, they paused for five seconds, listening carefully for any sounds of movement above them. Within two minutes, they reached the top floor. Matt grabbed his radio microphone and double-clicked it twice, signaling their position. He took several deep breaths, slowing his heart rate and preparing for what came next.

Matt knew that back on the ground floor, St. Bernard would have pressed elevator buttons for four floors, including the top one, before slipping quietly into the hallway. Once the elevator doors closed, he'd run swiftly to join Skip, who waited just inside the west stairwell. St. Bernard would tap Skip on the back, signaling readiness, and Skip would double-click his microphone, indicating the start of their ascent to the tenth floor.

After hearing Skip's double clicks, Matt silently counted to fifteen. His hand hovered near the stairwell door. Slowly, carefully, he eased the door open inch by inch, just enough to peer down the hallway. One guard stood near the elevator, perfectly still, his gaze fixed on the closed doors.

One-Shot's single tap on Matt's shoulder signaled his readiness.

The radio crackled in Matt's ear. A triple click. St. Bernard and Skip were at the west stairwell door. Matt clicked his mic three times in reply. Fifteen seconds. The countdown began: fifteen... fourteen... thirteen...

Matt's eyes locked on the guard just as he raised his weapon towards the elevator door. Even under the dim light, Matt could see the serious expression on the guard's face.

Go time. Matt nudged the door open enough to slip through and One-Shot grabbed the edge and held it steady.

Matt slid into the hallway, weapon raised, each step deliberate and smooth. He hugged the right wall. The faint hum of the elevator filled the silence, the sound teasing his nerves as he approached the guard. Around the corner, he trusted St. Bernard and Skip to handle anything that moved.

When Matt was halfway down the hallway, he heard the elevator chime, indicating it had arrived on the tenth floor. He fired two rounds, dropping the guard who was looking at the elevator. Within a second, he heard another body hit the ground.

The four-man team stood outside the entrance of the command post, stacked against the wall. St. Bernard placed a shaped charge on the door. Matt signaled the breach, then averted his gaze from the door to shield his eyes from the explosion. Just before he closed his eyes, he saw a small camera lens mounted above the elevator door, pointing towards the front door of the command post.

The deafening explosion of the door marked the beginning of the assault. Adrenaline surged through Matt's veins. He charged into the room, tucking his MP5 tight against his shoulder, moving to his right, stepping over a broken chair, and sweeping the room for targets in his area of responsibility. Sweat and smoke emanated throughout the room, mingled with the faint odor of scorched fabric from the breaching charge.

He swept right towards the rear bedroom, seeing a guard firing from the doorway. Matt shot him six times before he dropped to the ground. As he was moving towards the rear of the room, Matt saw a man moving towards the bedroom. The man stopped and locked eyes with Matt.

Lebedev. Matt recognized him from the pictures he'd been studying for a year.

Lebedev raised his AK-47 towards Matt and Matt squeezed the trigger of his own firearm just as a guard jumped up between them. Matt's rounds impacted the guard in the chest, but he didn't go down. *Vest*, Matt thought.

Matt aimed at the guard's legs and pelvis and fired. This time, the guard dropped to the floor. Matt put a round in his head. As the guard fell, the bolt on Matt's MP5 locked to the rear. Matt kneeled to reload as One-Shot stood to fire over Matt, but Lebedev fired back. Just as Matt finished his reload, his left shoulder and right leg exploded in pain. He fell backwards, hearing two rounds whistle over his head. He wiggled his left fingers and shifted his left arm. Pain radiated through his shoulder. He willed himself to move as he saw Lebedev disappear into a bedroom.

Matt hobbled to his feet, sweeping the room in front of him for more threats. He heard gunfire to his left but ignored it. St. Bernard and Skip could take care of business on their side of the room.

Matt's right leg felt weak, but he pushed through it, moving towards the bedroom door, where he paused. Lebedev had nowhere to go. Matt waited for One-Shot to come up behind him and tap him on the shoulder. But after a few seconds passed without a tap, Matt looked back and saw One-Shot lying on the floor.

Matt pulled a flash-bang from his vest, kicked open the door, and tossed it into the room. Three seconds later, the flash-bang erupted. He felt the familiar concussion rock him, then charged into the room. He swept to his right and then left, expecting to see Lebedev.

But nothing. The room was empty.

Matt moved to the bathroom.

Also empty.

He came out of the bathroom and looked around the empty bedroom, noticing a rope tied to the post of a wooden bed frame, leading out of the window.

Matt ran over to the window and saw Lebedev running down the street. Matt raised his weapon and pointed it at the fleeing man. But just as he was squeezing the trigger, a woman appeared in his sights. He jerked his weapon to the side and looked out the window.

Lebedev was holding the woman in front of his body, blocking Matt's shot. Lebedev pulled the woman around the corner and out of sight.

Then he heard a single shot. The woman's body fell from behind the corner and sprawled on the sidewalk. A small child ran over to the woman.

"Dammit. Bastard," Matt murmured.

"All clear," someone yelled from the other room.

Matt walked back into the main room.

St. Bernard looked at Matt. "Hey Matt, sit down, man, you're hit."

Matt's gaze fixed on Jimmy "One-Shot" Dugan, sprawled on the floor, cradling his MP5 in his right hand. Blood pooling under his head.

"Son of a bitch..." Matt whispered. Then louder. "Radio HQ. Lebedev is westbound on University."

"Sit down, Matt," St. Bernard insisted, placing a hand on his shoulder and guiding him to the ground.

As Matt sat on the floor, he barely registered Skip treating his bullet wounds, patching up his left arm, splinting his leg, and administering a combination of antibiotics and fentanyl. The dose eased his physical pain but did nothing for the anguish gripping him as he stared at One-Shot lying motionless, blood pooling beneath his head.

*You've just read the opening of Bear in the Dragon's Shadow.*

*Matt Scales's story continues — and One-Shot's death is only the beginning.*

## **Bear in the Dragon's Shadow**

*Available now on Amazon*

[Bear in the Dragon's Shadow Amazon link](#)

*Controlled Drift — coming August 2026*

*facebook.com/MattScalesThrillers*