

# Artificial Horizon

By

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## Chapter One

**F**rom the air, the trip from the coastline up the inlet to Leirim took no time at all, but he thought it might be about a fifteen to twenty-minute drive down the coastal road that hugged Penobscot Bay, the broad mouth of the Penobscot River. It was twenty-five miles across from Eagle's Head to Southwest Harbor, with breathtaking isles and inlets, wooded coastline, salt and brackish water where the river slipped into the North Atlantic, the fresh water riding up on over the denser seawater, mixing along a curved interface of deeper, colder saline and higher, warmer fresh water. Sea birds sailed indigo sky, spiraling higher on updrafts over the warm land before turning out and drifting for miles out across the cold sea.

He was cresting hills just fast enough now to feel the suspension expand under a fraction of a negative G. It triggered the feeling of bringing his aircraft home barely on the edge of control that night, more than a year ago. There was no moon, that night, he recalled, just a deep black star field. The sea below was as black as the sky above, forming a fathomless void around him. The instruments on the Mercedes gently rolled and turned as the GPS adjusted to his speed and heading, just as the flight computer had.

Until the target lock came.

“You are only needed to do what the Bolt cannot,” Teal had told him. “Find the target. Get a lock.”

*So,*

*get your fat thumbs and feet off the flight surfaces, son. You're just the set-up man.*

Babcock took his feet off the gas and braced them against the cockpit frame. He let go of the gear stick and slipped his thumbs under his seatbelt as he had then. As he had in the F-15 that night he felt the ride stiffen, the speed ease off as the car's auto-NAV system took over.

That night in the jet he felt the pitch steepen and the hard snap of a precise one-hundred-eighty-degree roll.

*“System engaged,” Steve Thayer called out from the rear seat, as they hung upside down in their harnesses.*

*Concentrate. Concentrate on the instruments and keep your hands off the stick and throttle.*

*The F-15 held to its prescribed fifty-five-degree climb, engines heaving maximum thrust, altimeter whirring past eighty thousand feet—fifteen miles high—the Pod lights flared brilliant magenta just as the cockpit dimmed and Babcock felt his head swim, as he looked out over the nose for some sort of visual confirmation. They said the Bolt would spear the night with a needle of blue-red light like St. Elmo's fire, but Babcock thought it seemed darker,*

*yes,*

*darker*

*and*

*The*

*Stars*

*seemed*

*close*

*enough*

*to*

*touch—*

*“Jesus,” Steve Thayer hollered from the rear seat. “Jesus, what a flare!”*

Babcock blinked and grabbed the car’s steering wheel in a lurch. He disengaged the autonomous drive system, easing his feet nearer the brake and gas pedal. The Bolt was supposed to use two discharges for a kill. The first to establish range and tracking. The next, a millisecond later to unload the weapon on its target until all the energy remaining in the pod is the rough equivalent of a cold firefly in October. The target became a one hundred-million-dollar mass of melted wire and wax whirling around in space until it deorbited. Tracking lost their fix on the satellite entirely, meaning it was either destroyed or was in so many small pieces that they couldn’t get a reliable signal off it. Like bug dust on a car windshield. *Poof!*

That night Michael Babcock had become the second pilot in history to shoot a satellite out of orbit from a fighter aircraft. Both from an F-15. *The first had done so with a missile.* He had done it with an energy weapon. A laser that could be recharged and go after any number of other targets so long as the jet’s engines had fuel.

But what might have been the greatest night of his life as a military pilot had also been the beginning of the end of his flight career. His post flight physical was a mess. Confused, trembling and disoriented, he had freaked out the flight physician and enraged the project manager. Doc wanted to get to the bottom of what was happening. Decker Teal couldn't pull him off the duty roster and ship him out fast enough. *Bastard*. He kicked around High Ground Technologies home office in California for a few months on desk assignments and eventually was re-certified for flight duty. *Dehydration and fatigue* was the official diagnosis. They floated the idea of a panic attack and alluded to possible underlying mental illness for a couple of weeks before settling on the lesser diagnosis. *They had made their point*. If he was *ever* again to fly anything more expensive than a hang glider, he would settle for "dehydration and fatigue." So be it. Only it was *total bull shit*.

The GPS held no clue to finding Leitrim, Maine. He had to guide in on Rockland and then find his way South from there on memory. He could see the shoreline ahead where Owl's Head jutted out into the Bay. He recalled an old joke about a tourist asking a Mainer how to get to a certain town. After a thoughtful pause, the local replied, "Well, ya' can't get they-ah from hee-ah." True enough if you try to find your way to Leitrim by GPS.

There was a Twilight Zone aura to the little coastal town, he thought. Nestled on Penobscot Bay, surrounded by rural Maine beauty, this should have been a summer vacation spot, as most of the surrounding coast was. Lobster shack restaurants, fishing boats for hire, camp grounds, and antique shops dot the roads north and south from here, but Leitrim was a splinter-dry sepia toned whistle stop sort of place. Battered old mill buildings close to the sea were long boarded up, their ancient nearby docks looking like they were about to topple in

the next good storm. There were a couple of old fishing piers that were still in operation of sorts, with a wholesale seafood business that looked like it had seen better days.

Locals came and went from Milligan's General Store near the middle of the one-stop-sign business district that had a hardware store, a marina and a feed and grain business that sold aluminum water troughs and chain-link fence and off-brand gasoline out front in their pot-holed parking lot. There was no 'Welcome to Leitrim' sign, no 'Rotary Club Meets Here' sign. There was barely a town. Babcock turned into the marina parking lot and up to the pumps. A young woman was just getting back in after gassing up. A little dog popped up from her back seat. She nodded his way as he got out and she pulled away. A handful of small cottages dotted the road up past fields of wildflowers and tall grass. At the top on the ridge line was the old mansion—it was still there.