

RATS

RATS twists from the shadows of a war long past to front-page headlines hiding Washington secrets behind corporate incompetence when two warriors face off. Both skilled at violence. And deception. Both accustomed to winning.

Praise for RATS

“In Klingler’s debut thriller, a female sniper tracks down a bomber who targets U.S. military interests. The theme of children suffering the worst during wartime—and long after—propels...the plot into suitably daring territory. A nuanced techno-thriller with both brains and brawn.”

—**Kirkus Reviews**

“The military operations, too—especially the various scenes where characters ride motorcycles and other vehicles—are dramatic, vivid, evocative, and perfectly detailed.”

—**San Francisco Book Review (4 of 5 stars)**

“One quality of the book that stands out is the juxtaposition of the Alaskan wilderness and the jungles of Vietnam. This gives the book a well-rounded feel as the intensity ratchets up.”

—**Clarion Foreword Reviews (4 of 5 stars****)**

“RATS is a masterpiece of entertainment. Klingler is an incredibly skilled author...the story is gripping, thrilling, and addictive.”

—**R.L. Drembic (Book Adventure Blog)**

“[RATS]...makes you sit back and examine your values. Klingler’s stories are original...his characters are memorable. If you like fiction that touches on human relationships with technology and relation to nature, [Klingler] is the one to read. Not once does it lose any of that kinetic energy so artfully harnessed in the first chapter.”

—**Literature Typeface**

ALSO BY JOE KLINGLER

Mash Up
Missing Mona

For previews of upcoming books by Joe Klingler and more
information about the author, please visit his website at
www.joeklingler.com.

**J O E
KLINGLER**

RATS

A NOVEL

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to events, locales or actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and not intended by the author.

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dedicated to
Ruth Marie Sabin
ten was a good number

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Chapter 1

HE WOKE WITHOUT A SOUND, his bones knowing it was time. Both eyes scraped open, followed a crack across gray ceiling, seeing a lonely road through wilderness. His bare back registered a rumpled sheet below the left shoulder blade. Gold light glowed behind a green curtain; darkness was finally arriving in Alaska.

He had been awake less than ten seconds when his mind began projecting images of roadway slipping under a motorcycle wheel. Like an athlete visualizing ideal form he saw gravel for eight kilometers, asphalt for the next fifteen, mud for three...on and on south to the river. The road held many ways to fail.

He rolled and stood. Walked barefoot to the window anticipating what blogs would call Black Monday. He pushed the curtain aside with two fingers. Dusk lolled opposite the streaked pane. Clear air, black sapphire sky, road disappearing into land pockmarked with hundreds of small lakes as if a typhoon had followed a B-52 bombing run. Not frozen in July. Nothing moved. He heard only his own breathing.

He turned, passing his eyes swiftly over oil lamp, bed, clumps of mud. They came to rest on a large motorcycle standing in the room, its curvaceous blackness shimmering in the fading light of the Alaskan summer. A huge piston protruded from each side. He liked it near him in the one-room cabin, and away from prying eyes that might want to know what was in the bags.

He wished for more darkness.

He crossed the room to the bike, scanning for the unusual: a spider in hiding, a rat chewed hose. He knelt. Pressure in the big-knobbed race tires was correct. He flipped up the side case lids and counted the payload: two rows of ten on each side. The parts had arrived on schedule through seven separate channels. He had worried about the CH-4B, a controlled substance that might be traced. But a seal fisherman with an ocean kayak and an old woman on a bicycle had traversed the last crucial miles at modest cost.

He touched an upturned rod. Its yellow LED gleamed. He tapped thirty-nine more, covered and locked the right case.

JOE KLINGLER

His chronometer chirped. Colored crystal showed 12:07 am—sunset at 70 degrees North latitude. He imagined the Arctic Circle running beneath his bare toes. Poetic license, he was too far north, wouldn't cross the Circle for hours.

He stepped past the bathroom door to stand over rust-streaked porcelain. His eyes roamed the tiny room for links to the name he had registered: Arthur Tresuniak. He turned to the sink, leaned forward and tossed icy water from the faucet onto his face. As he rose, a mirror that had been punched into a hundred fragments reflected nothing recognizable. He searched for his deep gray eyes—*like your father's* his mother had said. In the reflected chaos her features mixed with his despite a three-day growth on wind-buffed skin. He thought of the scientist who suggested the Mona Lisa was a Da Vinci self-portrait: Leonardo in drag.

He studied the reflected expression. Oddly quiet, as if she knew there was work that needed to be done, but wished he wouldn't do it. He reached across his body and outlined a tattoo with two fingers.

"Don't delay," he said to no one.

He reached for the cell phone lying beside a used bar of tan soap. When his fingers touched the anodized case his body tensed. He squeezed his eyes shut as his mind saw a bright white flash, felt her soft hand releasing his as they were thrown sideways. Weight on his back like a bag of sand. Falling sleet crackling to the ground. Time passing as he breathed hot air that smelled of earth.

He forced his eyes open and saw her in the mirror. He lowered his face. His hands were gripping the sides of the small pink sink, knuckles ice white, phone on the floor. With effort he unclenched his fingers, bent over, picked up the phone and touched the screen.

It rang once.

"It's okay, Mom. I'm prepared," he said.

He listened, watching his lips in the silvered glass. He shifted a tiny jagged piece of mirror with a fingertip.

"Has to be now," he said.

He took a deep breath.

"The last? Yes, I'll think about it."

He pressed the phone off and returned to the bedroom. He twisted the iron handle on an armoire carved with figures of bear hunts and seal killings, bones inlaid gracefully into dark wood. The smell of leather wafted at him. With one hand he lifted a dark black suit padded with government-

RATS

approved armor from a brass hook and slipped the phone into the pocket.

He stepped naked into soft lining and pulled the jacket-pants combo closed with the front zipper. He bent forward for stiff boots: leather, carbon, titanium. Zipped them shut and closed the sides with the crunch of Velcro.

He moved to the bike. Touched the screen at the center of the handlebars. Blue and orange lights flickered as the machine self-checked its brain, then displayed a big zero for speed beside coordinates of its current location: 70° 12' N 148° 31' W. Global Positioning Satellites made his life easier. He was glad the U.S. government had put them up. He almost wanted to thank them.

He shoved a black nylon bag under a web of bungee between the all-important side cases. A heave on the bars tripped the bike off its stand with a swish of hydraulic shocks onto the worn carpet and through the doorway. His shadow flickered from the neon Caribou Motel sign overhead. He returned to the room, took a long slow look around and flipped his room key onto the unmade bed.

Outside, straddling the stationary motorcycle in cool gathering darkness, he felt exposed from all sides. Motion was preferable.

He inserted earplugs, slipped into a black helmet, and activated the heads-up display. A frozen image floated twenty meters down the road and three meters above the dirt. He laced the strap of the helmet through the double-D ring buckle and pulled it tight.

He felt protected in a helmet. As if he were more alone.

Key, kill switch, starter. The big engine leapt to life, barely whispering through the custom exhaust on its left side that did for it what a silencer does for a handgun.

He closed his eyes and focused on relaxed breathing while sliding into armored gloves. His left hand squeezed the clutch. He studied the GPS computer:

Delivery distance: 302 mi

Next target: 23.6 mi

Time Remaining: 3 hrs 15 min

Average speed: 92.9 mph

He thought about moving 90 mph in darkness on a surface of asphalt, loose gravel, meatball rocks and wet dirt. He would have to be very fast on the good sections to stay on schedule. Few would believe it possible. As intended.

JOE KLINGLER

His wrist urged the bike south out of Deadhorse, permanent population zero. Ahead lay Pump Station #2 and hundreds of miles of the famous North Slope Haul Road that served the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System. Aka Alaska Route 11: The James W. Dalton Highway.

The pipeline.

Billions of dollars slurping along at eight miles-per-hour.

Twin driving lights cut swaths of whiteness through the air as his speedometer climbed to triple digits. The bike slithered and hammered, filling him with the adrenaline of the starting gun—months of planning converted to action.

Speed transformed the road surface to a study in blurred browns. His left thumb touched a button and a full-color image of roadway came alive in the display. Now he had two roads: the one he was riding, and a GPS referenced recording made when he had ridden the same road in the sunshine as a tourist. Four times.

Tonight was the fifth. There would be no sixth.

He guided the whispering bike toward the side of the road and back to center. The two roads in his vision aligned like a snake in front of a mirror. Better data—improved probability of success.

Earlier, the weather girl on the satellite feed couldn't make up her mind: maybe rain, maybe fog, maybe not. But she had been clear on one thing, water would freeze at the higher elevations. He checked the setting of his electric suit—brain function required warmth.

Even at 100 mph his biggest concern wasn't the road, but the unpredictable: falling rock, migrating caribou, a slow bird. He flicked the switch beside his left knee. A dull green edged the road video as sensors scanned for radiating heat on the permafrost. Engine vibration mixed with the anticipation in his body as he glanced to the rear.

Alone.

The computer told him he was now twenty-two miles from the Caribou Motel. Handgrips told him he was moving fast on gravel smaller than the skipping stones he had tossed as a kid on a beach six thousand miles away. The sway of the bike indicated a developing crosswind. Dakar desert racers could ride a motorcycle fast in such conditions for fifteen days in a row.

He only needed three hours.

He had been running south at 102 mph for fourteen minutes, the flat road cutting straight through open space in all directions, when the synthetic woman in the GPS awakened inside his helmet.

RATS

“Target arrival in thirty seconds.”

He slowed to 80, stretched back with his left arm, wrapped his fist around the front outermost handle, and lifted. The device came up feeling like a small dumbbell. He held it low to his side and flicked his eyes between the road and the heads-up display of the road. Small blue spots on the video pointed to the right. Beside them numerals indicated the horizontal distance in meters from his bike seat to the drop point.

Her voice counted like a shuttle launch.

“Release in ten seconds...five seconds...four...”

He focused on the leverage needed for sixteen meters, his right hand steady on the throttle. As she spoke the “z” in zero he swung his arm up in a wide arc, knowing the GPS computer had compensated for the bike’s speed. Practice runs had shown he could obtain acceptable results 92% of the time in winds below 25 mph.

He wanted to hear it land on the hard dirt and come to life, but he was moving too fast.

She said, “Target number one receding.”

“Thank you, Angel,” he said, and sang *Thirty-nine bottles of beer on the wall, thirty-nine bottles...* the words lost to the rushing wind.

He returned his empty left hand to the bars and rolled on power to 120 mph.

“Six minutes to target number two,” she said.

The bike floated on the magic black wings of Metzeler rubber, stabilized by the physics of frame geometry, gyroscopes and speed. He watched the road, waiting for the pipeline to arrive from the darkening night.

Nine tosses later he slowed to sixty to pass five buildings and the single runway at Sagwon airport. The first row had been delivered. Not linearly, but in clusters near pumping stations, and places where the pipeline poked above ground like a giant worm.

The highway rose into the Philip Smith Mountains of the Brooks Range that formed the Continental Divide in Alaska. Here, oddly, the divide ran east to west, shedding water north to the Arctic Ocean or south to the Bering Sea, directly across his line of travel.

Only one road through it: Atigun Pass, highest pass in the range.

Elevation rise induced fog. Fog diffracted his Flamethrower driving lights into a wall of gray, as if he were slowly losing his eyesight.

The road surface firmed to sno-cone slush.

He slowed to 80, the knobbed tires holding firm.

JOE KLINGLER

By the time he reached the pass he had delivered nineteen of the twenty units in the left case. He tossed the last sixty seconds later, slowed to a stop in the middle of the road, kicked the side-stand down and swung off the bike in one practiced motion.

Luminescent green numerals continued to count up along the top row of his GPS.

02:03:15

Two of three hours gone.

Only half done.

Chapter 2

THE AIR THUMPED WITH THE WAIL of a massive sea creature trapped in a fisherman's net.

Claire was running.

Her breathing accelerated with each footfall against the mud trail as it climbed and climbed toward tree line. The rain-coated weapon in her hands slipped as it leached warmth from bare fingers. Her shoulders ached from the weight. She ducked, felt a slap. A low branch tore her cheek as she spun behind the trunk, eyes darting across the night, searching for the black body.

The thumping was low.

She lifted her rifle. Breathed in.

The giant puppet machine hung in the sky.

Her weapon spit twice.

The machine's white eyes turned slowly to face her.

She twisted to run. Her foot slipped and slipped and sli—

Corporal Claire Ferreti cracked one eye open. She was panting. Her damp body lay entangled in a cotton blanket with blue stripes.

She really should drink less. In alcohol-fueled dreams, she always missed.

The television was on, flickering satellite pictures of the morning weather. She didn't have a television in her bedroom. Her brain fog lifted slightly. She saw hot, humid, scroll past. For a fleeting moment she thought about being a meteorologist. Then she could miss and still keep her job. No one liked a sniper who missed.

She sighed, wishing for a better word: sharpshooter, marksman, rifleman, rifle-person.

Uck.

The fog lifted more. She realized this wasn't her apartment. She was at Billy's place.

No sound. He must have muted it for her. She liked that about her General, whose Cornell lecture on the future of national security had inspired her to drop out of college to enlist. And specialize. One of only two men under thirty-five with a star, he wouldn't rest until he had two—though she teased that he only had one of something else, and that was plenty.

JOE KLINGLER

But could he be out jogging after a party? Too fanatic.

With effort she rotated her open eye. Blurry blue numbers glowed 6:28. Her lid dropped shut. She shifted. Her stomach gurgled. An ache blossomed in her shoulder from the last weapons test.

Fun party. Well, not at first. Billy had departed with a serious-looking going-bald guy from the President's office. That left her unguarded, subject to attack by a pudgy man wearing thick glasses and an expensive gray suit with a hint of herringbone camouflaged into the fabric. His pickup line was unique: *Was that General Williams you came in with? I represent an Israeli armor manufacturer. There's a rumor the General has procurement needs. Would you introduce us?*

She told Mr. Procurement the General was looking at suppliers for next generation tanks. She figured someone was always working on a new tank. She hadn't introduced them though, messing in Billy's affairs was a relationship no-no.

After Billy returned they shared good food and close dancing, and she drank triple her limit: six smooth Kamikaze specials, whose secret ingredient the bartender refused to reveal. Then Billy had driven home with one hand on the wheel, the other under her dress.

She smiled and rolled onto her back, dragging the arm that had been dangling to the floor up until it covered her bare breasts. She took a deep breath, longing to return to the land of deep slumber, but fluid was demanding an exit.

She opened both eyes. The room wobbled before coming to rest.

In slow motion she pushed back the thin blanket that protected her from District of Columbia air conditioning, rotated, and aimed both feet at the floor until achieving a seated position on the edge of the king bed. With one finger she tapped the remote lying beside the blue numbers. The television told her about a new green car.

"I prefer red," she said.

Automobiles flying across desert sand attracted her eyes. She took another deep breath and raised herself to a standing position. Barefoot and pink-pantied she moved her left foot toward the bathroom.

Chapter 3

THE MAN REGISTERED AS ARTHUR Tresuniak gazed out at slabs of dark gray rock under starlight. For a moment he thought of photographs by Ansel Adams. He lowered his eyes and stomped the heel of his boot into black gravel.

Surface ice.

He chewed an energy bar, rotated the cap from a water bottle, swallowed, crushed the empty and returned it to his pack. As he relieved himself, his eyes roamed the jagged ridgeline on either side of the pass, beauty in every direction, untouched by human hands.

Except for the pipeline.

It crawled across the land like a scar from a knife fight Alaska lost.

Moving swiftly, he opened the right case and relocated all twenty units to the left side. He unhooked the spider cord holding his gear and stuffed fifty-two liters of food and survival equipment into the now empty right case.

He remounted and accelerated south towards Wiseman, Population 30, seventy-five miles north of the Arctic Circle. Seven minutes later he twisted his body to reach into the left case for number 21. He tossed it as he crossed the Continental Divide, followed by nine more. Fourteen miles north of Wiseman, while holding unit 31 and listening to the countdown descend from nine seconds, Angel's voice changed.

"Infrared alert, infrared alert," she repeated, like a needle skipping on a vinyl record.

He glanced at the green overlay. An oblong object grew large.

He dropped 31 to the ground and braked. The rear of the bike hopped. He eased his fingers to find friction. The green object on the display became a brown wall in the road. He opened the throttle to force a power slide to the left.

The bike slithered, shot forward, and he wrestled it to a stop. Breathing hard, he looked back. His heart thumped at the sheer size of the beast staring at him. He blinked. The animal's 30-inch antlers were low, moving toward his taillight and about to end the mission.

His right hand twisted. The rear tire dug a trench. His mirror showed a

JOE KLINGLER

brown blur approaching as the speedometer touched 40 mph. The sound of hooves pounding frosted gravel reached his ears over the rising whine of the silenced exhaust. He squeezed the gas tank with both knees and realized he was holding his breath. He exhaled, counted to three, and looked over his shoulder. The animal was standing upright in the road, motionless.

It watched him for two full minutes before strolling away, crushing mountain scrub with each step.

He waited for a hundred-yard gap to form between them before riding carefully back to look for number 31. He found it lying in a four-toe hoof print in the mud.

Elapsed time of 2:47:20 pulsed red on his display.

Now his computer was betting against him.

Chapter 4

BILLY NORTON WANTED TO BE a teenager like the Mutant Ninja Turtles, but his mom said to be patient, he was growing up fast enough; and yes, he had to stay in his room. This time since noon, and the wings on his Batman clock said it was now way past midnight. She had let him come down to take the garbage out, and have supper, and help with the dishes, and even watch an hour of TV. And he didn't mind being in his room, but he needed to get out of his private bat cave and roam the world to look for evil to fight.

And it wasn't his fault. Anyone who thought it was cool to have a little sister poke at you while you were reading Dynamic Duo comics was stupid in his bat book. He'd like to hang Hattie upside down from those boots Batman used, and tickle-torture her.

Mom would ground him for that.

He swung his feet to the floor, slid into his Batmobile slippers, and shuffled to the window. Dark. He didn't get to play outside in the dark much this time of year. His teacher said Alaska was close to the North Pole so it got a lot of light in July because the Earth was tilted. Billy didn't understand how the Earth could be tilted, but he didn't understand lots of what Miss Griffin said. He just wished there was more spooky darkness in the summer. Bats like him needed darkness, even if he did live north of Nolan.

He could see the outline of the trees that were supposed to hide the big pipe. They looked more like tall weeds to him, and they didn't hide much. The huge tube slithered across the icy ground like an alien snake looking for houses to eat. But it never moved so it wasn't much fun. Except to climb on. For that it was a mini Denali. He started unbuttoning his black pajamas with one hand and dragged his secret duffel of bat clothes from under the bed with the other.

Carefully he turned the rotating latch that locked the top wooden storm window. If he turned it super slow, it wouldn't caw and wake Mom. That was the easy part. Then he lifted. He had to push four tabs to remove the outer screen before he could lower himself from the windowsill onto the little roof over the front door.

JOE KLINGLER

His sneakers loosened gravel from the shingles sending tiny grains tumbling in a miniature rockslide that tick ticked into the gutter. He froze. It was hard getting down from the roof without a ladder, but he had worked out a system back in the third grade. Lying on his belly he swung both feet toward the front of the house until he could feel the curve of the downspout with his toe. From there he must place his right hand on the roof, left hand to the gutter, right hand to the spout, and he could shinny toward the ground. He dropped the last few feet to soft dirt in a spot his Mom couldn't see from her bedroom.

The pipeline pulled him like a magnet as he ran easily across the frozen grasses of the tundra. Soon he was climbing the giant brace that held it above the earth, scrambling toward his favorite lookout spot. Standing atop the big curve of pipe, bigger in diameter than his outstretched arms, he became the world Defender of Right, like his hero Batman. He puffed the cool night air and wondered why the moon was just a tiny curve. Miss Griffin had explained that too, but he didn't believe her.

He saw something move—something shiny in the grass between him and what the adults called a highway, even though it was just a big dirt path covered with stones.

It moved again.

He squatted on the cold steel of the pipe with his arms around his knees and kept very still. He wanted to see it up close, maybe even catch it. It dashed through the grass and stopped. Then shot forward, glistening. Maybe it was a snake. He watched it move. With each burst of motion it got closer and closer to the pipe.

He made himself stay still, like a bat hanging upside down.

It emerged from the grass directly under him then disappeared in a flash. He scuffed his jean-clad bottom along the pipe, flattened himself onto his belly, and slid down the curved surface feet first. He knew if he held his breath and counted to three the scary part where he felt like he was falling would pass and his feet would land on the big brace.

His left toe thudded against steel. He let out a long breath.

He took two steps along the brace and looked under the belly of the pipe. It was dark and grassy near the stanchion. He pretended his eyes were Batman's infrared goggles and scanned the ground. There.

His mouth opened wide. It was a machine.

Get ready. One...two...on three he jumped like a paratrooper, landed and rolled up to the thing, grabbing it with both hands. It whirred and its tail

RATS

blinked red and yellow as he squeezed it tight with both hands.

He strapped it to his back with his belt and his pants almost fell down climbing up the downspout, but now he sat in his room staring at it. It wasn't much heavier than his Louisville Slugger bat, the wood one like Mickey Mantle used back in the old days before his Mom was even born. But it was lots smaller, about the size of his remote-control Batmobile. It had a metal tail that glowed red in the back, and a head shaped like a can of soup turned sideways. But the best part was the rubber tread around the ends of the can, like tracks on an Army tank. He'd bet they made that whirring sound when it moved.

But it was quiet now. It had only whirred a couple of times and must have somehow realized it was caught. He put it carefully in bed while he took off his dirty clothes, and hid them in the green duffle he kept buried under toys in the corner of his closet where Mom wouldn't find them and ask where he'd been. Then he buttoned his pajamas, turned out the light, put one arm around his new metallic friend and drifted into a dreamland of fighting machines and heroes in black masks.

Chapter 5

“WHO AM I?”

“Arthur,” he reminded himself, slowing to 35 mph to pass through Wiseman, just a tourist traveling by night. He delivered three units before reaching Coldfoot twenty miles later, a place named for miners who turned back when faced with Alaska’s climate, gold or no gold, and stopped at the first place serving alcohol. The town was crowded with traffic by Alaskan standards—a single dusty red pickup heading north.

South of Coldfoot he hurried to beat sunrise, concerned an early bird might remember a fast motorcycle. So he made an executive decision and threw 37 and 38 together, and 39 and 40. This doubled his insurance at two locations, but placed nothing near the river.

Improvise.

He slowed to fifty as he passed a roadside carving of a blue Earth circumscribed with a white line at latitude 66°—the Arctic Circle. The fuel gauge showed three gallons in the oversized Iron-Butt tank, used by thousands of riders who rode even farther than he did. He descended into a valley on road narrower than the Dalton, snaking and twisting to hug the curves of the Yukon River like Lycra on a supermodel.

The finish line.

He stopped, dismounted and repeated the Continental Divide exercise, moving water and survival equipment into the empty left side case. Only a tent remained strapped on the rear fender. He took a deep breath, 363 successful miles, and no longer carrying anything illegal.

But still far from home.

He turned away from the bridge that crossed the Yukon to follow the bank of the river east toward Stevens Village where 61% of the population lived below the poverty line. Now he wanted to be seen, a crazy biker tourist making the most of the brief Alaskan summer—*moving away from his ultimate destination.*

Seventeen miles later he entered the village. A brown historic-site sign read: Founded by Athabascan Indian brothers 1902, Post Office and Air Service 1939. He headed for the waterfront, passing shacks of unpainted

RATS

aging wood, streaked dark from high winds.

Idling up a street main in function if not name, he saw a wide hull resting on the un-rippled waters of the Yukon, as if frozen on a picture postcard. He brought the bike to a stop under hand-painted red letters for Juke Joint Johnny's Saloon.

The silence of pre-dawn felt like weight on his shoulders after floating so long in the wind. He saw no one, though Johnny's and a building on the corner were lit inside. To his left the ferry's black steel hull supported a white structure that created a tunnel with room for bumper-to-bumper autos. Above it a long cabin for customers was capped by the pilot's house.

He removed his helmet and fished for aviator glasses, even though the sun had yet to rise. He ran his hand across his head, smoothing out what he knew would be unruly curls of helmet hair as he walked the length of the boat. Layers of meaty green at the waterline swam on the dark surface of the river. His eyes traveled up past a black NZ 4152 AK, and over red crust where rust had burrowed through white paint below the passenger windows. They stopped at rectangular smudges in the wheelhouse. Salty gray hair moved behind them.

He stepped close and tapped the steel hull with the titanium toe of his boot, sounding like a fork trying to empty a huge tuna can. Eyes and a stubby index finger appeared behind the glass. He couldn't wait long; it was almost sunrise. And the RATS were ready.

The pilot's window screeched open.

"That be you a-bangin?"

"Are you the Captain of this fine vessel?" he asked cheerfully.

The gray-bearded face shook with wheezing laughter. "Captain Plano at your service. And who might you be, my friend?"

He ceased being Arthur Tresuniak, the man who had registered at the Caribou motel. People remembered names.

"Jonathon Katow," he said, knowing the ferry was scheduled to depart shortly, and when it would arrive in Galena hundreds of miles downriver. "Need passage west."

"You've come to the right place, Jonathon. Me and the lady are sailing in...fourteen minutes."

Katow lifted his thumb. "Should I load my ride?"

A shiny head stuck out the window and rotated toward the stern. "That mud pile of a motor-sicle yours?"

"Every pound."

JOE KLINGLER

“We need us a ramp. Darn monster truck bent my good one.” He pointed, “The stern.”

“Thanks, Captain.” He smiled, understanding now why there were no cars on board, and masking concern that the ramp he had intended to use wasn’t available. “Save me a seat.”

More wheezing accompanied the screech of the closing window.

In minutes a pair of ten-inch planks skirted the opening between the shore and the steel deck, hovering a dozen feet above the edge of the river. He walked to the middle and bobbed slowly up and down. They would never hold.

“Let’s get her aboard, sonny,” the Captain said.

He looked into the water and thought about forty waiting RATS. He needed to be on this ferry.

“Try them on edge?” he suggested.

He heard the voice of Yoda: *Do or do not, there is no try.*

“Suit yourself, Jonathon. Suit yourself.”

He retrieved rubber straps from his bike and lashed the planks tightly together, rotated them 90 degrees, beat a trench in the shore with his boot, and stomped the planks in. He walked the length like an Olympic gymnast warming up on the balance beam.

Rock solid. No flex. Four inches wide.

The Captain stepped away. Jonathon strapped on his helmet. He couldn’t see his face, but he was sure the guy would have a wheezing fit if the bike ended up in the Yukon. He rode thirty yards up the road and spun around, pointing straight back at the ferry. *Just don’t move*, he petitioned the planks.

He rolled. As the front wheel shot onto the makeshift bridge he accelerated, eyes straight ahead. He landed on the grey deck moving fast, braked and hop-skidded across steel damp with dew, stopping halfway inside the tunnel.

He heard the Captain’s laugh approach from behind.

“Nice riding young fella. Haven’t had so much fun since the rodeo in Wyoming. Leaving in six minutes, get your ticket, get your ticket.”

“From you, Captain?”

A stubby thumb jerked toward the saloon. “See Johnny.”

At precisely 5:00 am, one minute after official sunrise, Captain Plano and his little ship threw off dock lines. Rays of first light touched the river. The truck rumble of a diesel reached through the oil-resistant soles of his riding

RATS

boots as the boat slid smoothly across a slimy green pool table. He rocked the bike, decided it was stable, grabbed the GPS computer from the bar mount, and made his way up spiral stairs to the passenger cabin.

He would refuel downriver.

The water looked black thirty feet below as he leaned against a rusty railing. He placed a silver cylinder into his left ear canal while thumbing the control of the GPS unit to activate its satellite phone.

His call was answered after the third ring, as expected.

“Hello, Maxx,” he said.

Audio identification software took two seconds to do its job.

A calm voice replied, “Greetings, Firesnake.”

“Please make those calls we discussed over dinner at the yacht club.”

“Call sequence beginning now. More?”

“Change in market valuation?”

“Less than 0.1% movement in after hours trading on portfolio.”

“Thanks, Maxx. Call on ignition.”

“Affirmative. Goodbye.”

“Nice phone,” a male voice said from behind him as he slipped the flat device into the napoleon pocket of his riding suit.

He turned to see an elderly man with a striking long white beard draped over all black clothing. He looked like a preacher. Or a hit man. How long had he been standing there?

“I had me a phone that would work out here. But didn’t really have anyone to call so I got rid of it. It was a whole lot bigger than yours though.”

The man’s eyes dropped to Katow’s jacket pocket.

“Sure looked like a nice phone.”

Calculation. Show the phone and hope he forgets it. Or don’t show the phone and hope he forgets the man who wouldn’t show him a phone.

“Would you like to see it?”

The guy smiled. “Sure, I’ve been away from hi-tech for years, make my living consulting now. Funny how it’s called consulting when all you do is tell people what they want to hear.”

“What sort of business?” he asked, unzipping his pocket.

“Timber. There’s good money to be made once folks figure out how to move the stuff cheaper. Alaska is big, you know. I’ve done a little oil too, but there’s not much work. Once the pipeline went in, folks just watch her pump. There’s more to be had up north, though, much more.”

Katow flicked the device on in GPS mode. “Timber and oil. Strange

bedfellows don't you think?"

"Both hide in the wilderness waiting to be taken by the right kind of men."

"What kind might that be?"

"The kind who aren't afraid of change...and risk. That's a right pretty machine you have there. Looks awfully complicated for a phone."

He held the device flat and rotated it until the internal digital compass showed north as up, pointing across the dark river toward a sky still losing its midnight blackness.

"It's also a GPS unit. Determines its location by talking to satellites. Take a look, that little dot on the map is this ferry."

"Nice to know where you are out here in the wilderness, ain't it?" His eyes followed the north arrow across the water up to the horizon. The old man squinted like he was trying to read a paper without his glasses. He stared for a long time.

"That's odd," he finally said.

Katow's eyes followed the man's gaze. He knew what to look for, and it was there: blood-golden color along the horizon.

"Are you sure that thing is pointing north?"

He looked down at the device knowing full well the indicated north was correct. He tapped it on the side with one finger as if to loosen a stuck needle. "Maybe not, I haven't calibrated it in a long time. That's an Alaska sunrise, eh?"

The man continued squinting. "Well, if that's a sunrise, it's the damned strangest one I've ever seen. But we'll know when the big ball shows up. Either way, it's telling me high time for breakfast. Do they have a kitchen on this tub?"

With that apparently rhetorical question the black clad figure turned and stomped down the steel steps one clang at a time.

Katow leaned on the rail and watched a sliver of orange below a dark formation, like a heavy cloud along a mountain ridge carrying rain. There would be no ball rising from the icy horizon in that direction.

The GPS blinked to 5:12 am, a little after nine in New York City.

The ferry chugged west through the still of the Yukon creating a breeze against his cheek. He felt the calm of the dark water, its peacefulness in stark contrast to what he knew was happening along the Dalton Highway: black oil and metal RATS.

The GPS vibrated. He pressed a button, listened.

RATS

“Yes, Virginia O’Hanlon, there is a Santa Claus,” he said.

A map of the Dalton arrived with glowing digits: 1 through 19 in red: Detonated. The others were green: Ready. Except for number 31—it was yellow.

He was aware 39 represented 97.5% success.

He frowned. And 2.5% failure.

He slid his thumb along the side until number 31 selected. It was intact, but waiting.

20. 21. 22. Now red.

The GPS vibrated again, the screen indicating the caller.

“Hello, Maxx.”

He took slow breaths and listened carefully, his eyes focused on a black cloud rising chimney straight. Not much wind now.

“Initiate phase two, all websites and blogs,” Katow said, “before the New York Exchange opens at 9:30 Eastern.”

He glanced down.

“You have fourteen minutes.”

He sniffed the air, trying to smell the fire. It was too far away.

“Trade at will,” he added.