

## Prologue

Surveyor Buck Walters had no idea why he had been sent here to recheck Mason and Dixon's work. On this day, standing among weeds, smelling mud, swatting mosquitoes, and shooing the occasional black snake with his boot, Buck knew this was more than another no-questions-asked job. When he had gotten word of the assignment, he checked around—there was nothing to indicate a legitimate need for such a survey. As far as he could tell, nobody was planning to erect a shopping mall, army base, or highway cloverleaf.

This was consecrated ground. Here, neighbor had killed neighbor over a disputed property line. Blood was spilled. This line was iconic, the most famous boundary line in American history. Why was it being remeasured?

His walkie-talkie cracked the silence. "Buck, it's hot. The bugs are in overdrive, and I have a life I want to get to."

The irritated voice was Buck's partner, Vincent Chapman, fifteen years his junior. The two traveled together in remote areas for weeks at a time, their most welcome diversions being small-town bars with the requisite pool tables, fried food, and cheap beer. Vince always tried his luck with the local ladies, but Buck had

never strayed from his wife in twenty years of marriage, making him the worst wingman ever. Still, the two got along, developing a smooth-as-silk choreography over the years that allowed them to work as efficiently as possible.

Buck peered through the sight and focused on the crosshairs. He breathed in the sweetness of honeysuckle as he motioned with palms up for Vincent to raise the marker. A minute later, Buck signaled “all clear,” which was Vincent’s cue to move to another spot, where the procedure would be repeated until they’d collected enough data points to call it a day.

Buck’s suspicions continued to grow. He had been specifically ordered to rent a car instead of signing out a government fleet vehicle. He had been instructed to pay cash and use his personal surveying equipment. Why?

Grasping for clues, Buck again rolled around in his mind what he knew about the Mason–Dixon Line. It was not a line of demarcation between north and south to determine slave and free states, although this was the notion accepted by the majority of Americans. It was simply a way to settle bloody skirmishes between the Calverts and Penns. Its significance today was a curiosity to most, as most of the stones were gone, used to build houses and fences, or unceremoniously tossed aside to clear land for farming.

Vincent relocated himself about twenty yards to his right, effected a bored stance, and held the stick vertically, as he had done thousands of times before.

As he peered into the eyepiece, Buck saw a helicopter drone with a three-foot span come into frame. It hovered behind Vincent’s head, swinging side to side like a giant dragonfly. Buck knew the survey purchased these consumer flyers, and outfitted them for aerial survey work, but had never seen one in action. Was this all an elaborate practical joke from one of his colleagues at headquarters?

Buck watched through the lens as the drone lingered just above Vincent, who seemed oblivious to its presence. Buck stepped back from the lens to refocus, and Vincent and the pogo stick were gone. He was staring at an empty field.

He legged up on a nearby boulder, and could just make out his partner lying in the grass, pole cast to his side. As Buck jumped off and ran to Vincent, the drone continued to float in front of him. Before he could reach his prostrate partner, it hit him—the drone was not a surveyor, but a military quadcopter outfitted with weapons. That's when he heard a pop.

A bullet hit Buck square in his forehead, and the drone drifted away.

Two minutes later, two men dressed in black uniforms and balaclavas padded their way out of the forest into the clearing. They scoured the pockets of the felled surveyors. One retrieved Buck's notebook and signaled for the other to follow; then they left as quickly and silently as they had entered.