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in Big Sky Country and a hero to root for in Matthew Redd."

— **C. J. BOX** —

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF SHADOWS REEL

RYAN STECK FIELDS OF FIRE

A MATTHEW REDD THRILLER



Praise for Ryan Steck

“Ryan Steck’s *Fields of Fire* busts out of the chute with nonstop action and it never lets up until the final page. A magnificent debut with a terrific sense of place in Big Sky Country and a hero to root for in Matthew Redd.”

C. J. BOX, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Shadows Reel*

“Ryan Steck hits it out of the park with his debut, *Fields of Fire*. Part military thriller, part spy novel, part good old-fashioned Western—Matthew Redd has cemented himself as the go-to man in a bad situation. It starts off with a literal bang and never lets up, with an ending that will leave readers scrambling for more.”

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“The stakes—and tension—don’t stop building until they explode into a denouement readers will never forget. The debut thriller of the year.”

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“You know Ryan Steck as the Real Book Spy. Now get to know him as the author of *Fields of Fire*, his debut thriller featuring Marine Raider Matthew Redd in a battle that will leave you speechless and begging for more. Lock and load!”

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“The Real Book Spy becomes the real spy. Action! Suspense! And the introduction of former Marine Raider Matthew Redd, a formidable new hero who doesn’t like being told no. Ryan Steck’s *Fields of Fire* kicks off an exciting new series. Check it out.”

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“Ryan Steck’s *Fields of Fire* breathes fresh life into the thriller genre with his hero Matty Redd, a hard man forced to fight for those he loves in the harsh wilderness of Montana. A compelling premise strongly executed. Fans of C. J. Box and Vince Flynn will anxiously await the follow-up to *Fields of Fire*.”

MARK GREANEY, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Sierra Six*

“Ryan Steck has gone from writing about thrillers to writing a first-rate thriller himself. All you have to do is start reading about his new hero named Matthew Redd to understand. This is a book that does exactly what books like it are supposed to do: keeps you turning the pages to find out what happens next. And spoiler alert? Every time you think you know, you don’t.”

MIKE LUPICA, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Robert B. Parker’s Payback* and *Robert B. Parker’s Stone’s Throw*

“A flawless story with a stellar cast of memorable characters—Ryan Steck’s stunning debut, *Fields of Fire*, is a twisty, electrifying thriller reminiscent of the very best of Brad Thor that will keep readers flipping pages well into the night.”

SIMON GERVAIS, former RCMP counterterrorism officer and bestselling author of *The Last Protector*

“Thriller fans, debuts don’t get better than this. Explosive from page one and rarely letting up, *Fields of Fire* heralds the arrival of hard-charging, even harder-hitting Marine Raider Matthew Redd to the genre’s pantheon of mesmerizing franchise heroes. First-time author Ryan Steck writes with the expertise of a seasoned pro and delivers 1,000 percent. Get your hands on this book!”

CHRIS HAUTY, nationally bestselling author

“*Fields of Fire*, Ryan Steck’s long-awaited debut novel, is loaded with action, emotion, and plenty of authentic details. I could not put it down!”

NICK PETRIE, author of *The Runaway*

FIELDS OF FIRE



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*To my best friend, father, and hero, James Steck, who always
believed this book would be written . . . even when I didn't.*

“I am in love with Montana. For other states I have admiration, respect, recognition, even some affection, but with Montana it is love, and it’s difficult to analyze love when you’re in it.”

JOHN STEINBECK, TRAVELS WITH CHARLEY

“Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.”

ROBERT FROST, “THE DEATH OF THE HIRED MAN”



Prologue

Matthew Redd wasn't afraid to die, but first he had some killing to do.

Listening to the rhythm of the incoming fire, he read the shooter's intentions with each passing round.

Pop, pop . . . Pause . . . Two, three, four . . . Pop, pop . . . Pause . . .

The rounds split the air above him with an audible crack, then smacked into the back wall of the log cabin. Each impact raised a puff of woodsmoke.

He's shooting high, Redd told himself. Suppressive fire. Keeping us pinned down so that his buddies can move in close.

In his mind's eye he could visualize their approach—at least a ten-man element, with a sniper providing overwatch and suppressive fire. They would sweep wide in a flanking maneuver . . . No, a better approach would be to use the trucks for cover.

That was how he would have done it.

Not gonna let that happen, Redd thought, gripping the Winchester.

The cycle repeated again. *Pop, pop . . . Pause.*

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Redd made his move, combat rolling through the door and out into the night, where he immediately pivoted to the right so that he wouldn't be silhouetted in the doorway. He knew the sniper would be counting off the seconds and that it would take the man a moment to realize what Redd was attempting.

Not varying the shot interval had been the sniper's first mistake. And even if the shooter spotted him, it would take a fraction of a second for him to lower his aim and find Redd in his crosshairs.

Putting his shots in the same exact place had been the sniper's second mistake.

It would also be his last.

Redd came out of the roll and duckwalked across open ground to take cover behind the old pickup. Despite his size, he moved quickly, reaching his destination before the sniper could let loose with another shot.

As he moved, he passed the headless corpse of the sniper's first victim. That man's blood was on Redd's hands, literally if not figuratively, but Redd didn't allow his thoughts to go there yet. He had other priorities.

He scuttled along the passenger side of the truck, halting at the front end to slowly peek around the corner. As he edged out, he saw the protruding muzzle of a carbine—an M4, if he wasn't mistaken—barely visible in the moonlight. Redd immediately drew back.

The Winchester was good for long-distance engagements but unwieldy for close-quarter battle. Redd enumerated his options, which didn't take long, and made a decision that flew in the face of conventional wisdom.

He was going to literally bring a knife to a gunfight.

Gripping the old Case folder in his right fist, he edged forward again. The carbine muzzle was much closer now. The shooter had advanced several steps and was about to turn the corner . . .

Redd launched himself from a crouch, rising up inside the assaulter's reach, close enough that the man's weapon would be of no use to him. He rammed the blade up into the soft flesh under the man's jaw and slashed sideways. The razor-sharp edge sliced through muscle, tendon, arteries, and anything else in its way.

Redd punched his free hand into the mortally wounded assaulter's sternum, feeling the solid SAPI plate inside the man's tactical rig against his knuckles. The blow sent the man staggering backward, both hands futilely trying to stanch the flow of blood pulsing from his neck.

Redd ducked back behind the truck as incoming rounds began to pepper the opposite side of the vehicle. He stayed behind the wheel, knowing that it would provide the best protection, and took up the Winchester once more.

Off to his left, he spied two more assaulters moving out of the tree line and approaching the cabin from the opposite side. They appeared to be singly focused on reaching their objective, unaware of his position.

Tunnel vision when they ought to have three-sixty awareness, Redd noted. Big mistake.

He sighted the rifle on the point man, center mass, then remembered that the men were wearing body armor. Elevating his sight picture for the head shot, Redd squeezed the trigger.

Crack! The rifle bucked hard in his hands and the man went down.

Redd worked the lever quickly and snapped off another shot, but the second man had already dropped to a prone position to return fire.

Redd dropped flat as well, then squirmed back around the front end of the truck. Rounds continued to smack into the front fender of the vehicle, but he was able to pinpoint the location of another hostile from the bright-yellow muzzle flashes that accompanied each shot. The shot groupings were coming from the same location, indicating that the assaulter was holding his position when he ought to have been shooting and moving, hopping and popping.

Amateur.

Redd drew a bead on the shooter and let lead fly. He didn't wait around to verify the kill, instead rolling immediately back behind the truck's wheel.

Bullets were now sizzling through the air mere inches above him. This time, the rounds were coming in from the woods at the side of the cabin, where the surviving member of the flanking pair was trying to pin him down. A few shots fell short, kicking up dirt that sprayed over Redd.

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Whoever was firing clearly had an idea of where he was but was having trouble dialing in the shot.

Spraying and praying. No discipline.

Staying calm, Redd put the Winchester's iron sights on the muzzle flash, inhaled, and then slowly let his breath out as he began taking the slack out of the trigger.

The weapon barked once, and the incoming fire ceased.

Another one down, Redd told himself. One to go.

For a few seconds, the only thing Redd could hear was the ringing in his own ears. The shooting had stopped, but he was certain that the last hostile was lurking nearby—the sniper who had been providing covering fire for the assault team. The man had evidently learned from the mistakes of his fallen comrades and was now content to play a waiting game.

One-on-one.

Under any other circumstances, Redd would have liked his odds. He was a trained killer himself and had spent most of the last decade honing his skills on the battlefield. But the old Winchester only had one round left, and he didn't think the sniper would let him get close enough for blade work.

Only one way to tilt the balance back in his favor.

Redd squirmed under the front end of the pickup and began low crawling toward the motionless body of the assaulter he had knifed. One booted foot rested about eighteen inches from the front right corner of the vehicle. To reach the man, Redd would have to risk exposure, but he reasoned that if the sniper knew where he was, he would have already taken the shot.

Moving slowly to avoid attracting notice, he slid out just far enough to get a firm grip on the boot and then, with equal patience, wriggled back under cover, dragging the smaller dead man along with him. The expected shot never came.

Redd reeled in the body like a prize trout, then groped his way up the dead man's torso until he felt the nylon web sling attached to the assaulter's M4. He ran his hands over the weapon, inspecting it. Even in the near-total darkness, he could have fieldstripped it and reassembled it in a minute flat,

but there was no need. The barrel was cold and smelled of Break Free. The man hadn't gotten off a single shot.

Just to be sure, Redd buttoned out the thirty-round magazine and weighed it in his hands. It was heavy.

Fully loaded.

He reseated the magazine, then probed the dead man's plate carrier until he found a pouch with two more magazines. He took one and jammed it into the back pocket of his jeans. If he couldn't end this fight with sixty rounds, he might as well give up now.

He wriggled back to his original position behind the right front tire and took a moment to mentally review the battle space. He recalled approximately where he'd seen the sniper's muzzle flash earlier, but until the man took another shot, Redd could only guess at his exact position.

Not a problem.

He rose to his haunches, then rolled forward out into the open, where he sprang to his feet and sprinted for the tree line.

I'm up, he sees me, I'm down.

The words, drilled into his head back in boot camp, were a way of measuring the three to five seconds that it would theoretically take for an enemy to spot, aim, and fire. On the last beat, he threw himself flat, rolled twice in the direction of the cabin, and then bounded up to do it all over again. He was exposed, but because he was constantly moving, and never in a straight line, he would be a hard target to hit.

The sniper held his fire. Redd continued zigzagging, varying the length of time he spent up or down, daring his opponent to take a shot and betray his location, but the man did not oblige.

Then, just as he was about to make a final dash for the wood line, there was a bright flash behind him, like a distant bolt of lightning, followed by a tremendous concussion. It was not just a sound but a palpable force that passed through every cell of his body like the deep thrum of a bass subwoofer.

He knew that sound, and his heart sank.

Grenade.

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Redd spun around to face the cabin entrance. All was dark within, but smoke and dust billowed out from the open doorway.

“No!” he gasped and then was running toward it, heedless of the fact that he was now fully exposed to the sniper.

He had not gone a step when a shadowy figure darted out from behind the truck and headed straight for the cabin door. As the last man in the kill team, the sniper had left his place of concealment and chosen to assault the objective himself, using a frag grenade to kill those Redd had left inside and then moving to capture the sturdy old cabin in order to make his last stand there.

Redd tried to bring the M4 to bear, but the man was moving too fast, plunging headlong into the gloomy interior.

The smoke flashed twice as the man fired his own weapon.

Redd reached the door a heartbeat later, carbine at the high ready, fire selector switch set to burst. He did not look around the destroyed interior of the cabin. His eyes were laser focused on the man standing just a few feet away, and as the shooter started to turn, somehow sensing Redd’s presence, Redd dropped his aim a few degrees and pulled the trigger.

The weapon bucked as three rounds in rapid succession tore into the man’s unprotected groin. Redd let the weapon rise, triggering another burst that stitched the man’s abdomen and then a third that drilled the SAPI plate covering his heart. The man jerked backward with each burst but somehow stayed on his feet until the last one caught him in the face. He went down like a marionette whose strings had just been slashed.

Redd kept the smoking weapon trained on the man a moment longer, just in case, then finally lowered it and began to survey the devastation inside the cabin.

He was just about to breathe a sigh of relief when he heard a voice behind him.

“You’re a hard man to kill, Matty Redd.”

Despite the ringing in his ears, the voice was clear as day. Redd immediately recognized the speaker—the last person in the world he expected to hear—and felt adrenaline dump into his bloodstream.

How? he wondered, knowing that he had just made a fatal mistake of his own. His mind raced. He had only one play left.

“Any last words?”

“I wish I would have killed you when I had the chance,” he said, looking down at the carbine in his hands. Redd knew he didn’t have time to turn and level his weapon, but trying to get a shot off beat the alternative. Giving up wasn’t in his DNA, and he’d been through too much in the last two weeks to get shot in the back.

He refused to go out that way.

Without warning, Redd spun on his heel, bringing the carbine up. He saw the indistinct figure in the doorway, limned in moonlight, the dull black pistol aimed at his chest.

A second later, a single shot filled the night’s air.

ONE

CAMP PENDLETON, CALIFORNIA TWO WEEKS EARLIER

Matthew Redd swung the eight-pound Fiskars maul like a Viking berserker, splintering the heavy wooden door at the hinges and blasting it open.

“Go! Go! Go!” Redd shouted. As the first member of the fire team passed through the opening, Redd slung the maul over one shoulder and filled his massive hands with an M4 carbine, equipped with an Aimpoint M68 close-combat optic sight and a PAQ 4 infrared targeting laser. A second shooter went through, and then it was Redd’s turn.

But as he charged through the doorway, the blaring of alarms drowned out the staccato pop of rifle fire. Overhead lights flashed on. On both sides of the door, the fourteen members of the Marine special operations team stopped in their tracks and immediately lowered their weapons.

The alarm went silent a moment later, replaced by an electronically

amplified voice. “Cease fire, cease fire, cease fire. Safe and secure your weapons.” There was the briefest pause, and then, “Redd! You broke my shoot house!”

Redd glanced up at the catwalk above. The range safety officer, Sergeant Baker, a grizzled-looking staff sergeant, face partially eclipsed by the bullhorn clenched in his right hand, glared down at him. The team commander, Captain Perez, stood next to the RSO, along with the team chief, Master Sergeant Miller.

When all the weapons were cleared, Miller’s voice boomed out. “Sergeant Redd, why do you have a ten-pound sledgehammer in your kit? Don’t you have enough weight to carry?”

Redd gripped the thirty-six-inch-long fiberglass shaft in his oversize fists and held the tool up as if for inspection. He was six foot three, two hundred forty pounds of muscle, and it looked like a child’s twirling baton in his hands. “It’s not a sledge, Top. It’s a splitting maul.” He rotated the tool, showing the heavy steel head, one side of which tapered into a wedge-shaped blade. “And it only weighs eight pounds.”

Perez coughed to cover a chuckle, then leaned out over the rail of the catwalk. “All right, Sergeant Redd. Why do you have an *eight*-pound splitting maul in your kit? And why use it to breach that door instead of a shaped charge? We put those in your loadout for a reason.”

“Our orders are to take Willow alive, sir. You just put him in that room. Enough demo to blast the door might be enough to kill him. That’s why I carry a maul in my kit, sir.”

“Sergeant Redd?”

“Sir?”

“You nailed it. Outstanding.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Perez liked Redd. Though he’d only been with the team a little over a year, the kid had shown exceptional initiative. While his impressive physique led people to think of him as a typical hard-charging jarhead—all brawn, no brains—the truth of the matter was that he had brains aplenty. The stunt with the sledgehammer—*splitting maul*, he corrected

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himself—was proof of that. At first glance, it had seemed like a demonstration of macho excess, but the reasoning behind it had been solid.

Redd would go places in the corps. He was a natural leader—the kind who inspired men to follow him and would lead from the front. If he had a failing, it was his tendency to come across as aloof. He got along well with his teammates but rarely socialized with them when off duty, which probably kept him out of a lot of trouble. Where most Marines lived for raising hell, pounding suds, and chasing tail, Redd preferred to spend his free time working out or learning some obscure martial art, looking for a new challenge. None of that would keep him from putting rockers under his chevrons. In fact, Redd was already eligible to advance to E-6, but doing so would mean finding an open slot somewhere, probably in another unit, and Redd had expressed a distinct aversion to the idea of giving up his slot on the team.

“Do you want to run the exercise again, sir?” Miller asked.

Perez gazed down at his Marines, all of whom were still breathing hard and streaked with perspiration. He shook his head. “We’ve been pushing them pretty hard. Maybe we should save something for game day.”

Pretty hard was an understatement. Although they didn’t look it, the men were bone-tired. Even the indomitable Redd. They’d been running training scenarios fourteen hours a day for the last three weeks prepping for the mission, running contingency scenarios ranging from HALO jumping onto the objective to making a covert approach over land. For the last nine days, they had run endless drills in the 41 Area shoot house, which had been hastily remodeled to approximate the building they would soon be assaulting.

“Game day keeps getting pushed back,” the team chief countered. “This is the only way to keep our edge.”

“You can only sharpen a blade so much before there’s no steel left.” Perez leaned on the railing and projected his voice down into the pit. “Listen up, Marines. You’ve done good work. Now I know you’re all sick of being in a holding pattern. Believe me, I’m right there with you. But until we get the green light, that’s where we’re going to stay. We’re only going to get one shot at this.”

There were a few nods of acknowledgment from the men, but no cheers of “Oorah!” or anything else. These men had advanced beyond the need for the kind of cheerleading and chest-thumping that the grunts used to stay fired up. They were Marine Raiders. The Army had the Green Berets, the Navy had the SEALs, and the Chair Force . . . well, who knows what they had . . . but the corps had outdone them all with the Raiders.

But even Raiders needed a break once in a while.

“Get your stuff stowed,” he went on. “Once you’re squared away, I’m authorizing a thirty-six-hour liberty. Go home. Get some rack time. Hug your kids and kiss their mamas . . . if they’ll let you. Just keep your phones with you and on at all times. If you get the call, I want you back here and ready to rock in thirty minutes.”

This was a departure from SOP. Tier one units were, as a matter of operational security, kept on lockdown for a minimum of forty-eight hours before a mission, and since the go order might come at any time, letting the team wander off the reservation, even if it was only for a few hours and electronically tethered, was not without risk.

This time, the men did give a raucous cheer, which was abruptly truncated by a barked order from Miller. “As you were, Marines.”

Instant silence.

Miller leaned over the rail and singled out one of the Raiders with his gaze. “No liberty for you, Redd. I’ve got a special assignment for you.”

Redd looked back at him, uncomprehending. “Top?”

“Once you’re squared away, you need to get in that fancy truck of yours and head out to the nearest Home Depot. You owe Sergeant Baker here a new door.”