



# ALLIED IN IRONS

A NOVEL

J. RYAN FENZEL

"In the best style of W.E.B. Griffin and David Baldacci, Fenzel's skill with action pulls the reader into the thick of the fray. A great read!"

– Nancy Schneider, Great Lakes Historical Society

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Ironcroft Publishing

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In memory of my mother  
Carol Ruth Bliss

“Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.”

– Sir Winston Churchill

## PROLOGUE

From the cabin of an MH-60 Seahawk, Rear Admiral Abner Wilson surveyed the distressed salvage vessel *Aeneas* floating in the Atlantic five hundred feet below. The ship looked dead to him. She wasn't making way or cutting through the waves on any sort of heading. She was drifting. And she was silent. The admiral cursed under his breath.

A marine dressed in fatigues with lieutenant's rank sat next to the admiral, listening to a report through his radio earpiece. "Admiral," he said. "The ship is secure."

Admiral Wilson raised an eyebrow. "Sheridan?"

The lieutenant shook his head. "We don't know yet."

"Get me down there," the admiral said. "Now."

The helicopter descended through a stiff crosswind and thumped down on the salvage vessel's cargo deck. The lieutenant and two PFCs hopped from the cabin with rifles in hand and spread out beyond the wind from the rotor spinning overhead. Admiral Wilson followed on their heels and scanned the deserted deck. Two bodies lie sprawled near the stern. They were dressed in black garb, light body armor, and combat boots. Not quite the standard uniform of the Neptune's Reach crew. They had obviously been part of the mercenary team that had seized the vessel two days before. Admiral Wilson called to the lieutenant over the winding down helicopter engines and nodded toward the bodies. "SEAL kills?"

"No, sir, the SEALs didn't fire a shot. Those two were already dead when we got here."

Admiral Wilson turned from the bodies. "Where is the crew?"

"Below deck."

"Take me there."

"Yes, sir." The lieutenant led Admiral Wilson into the vessel through a hatchway amidships. They entered a corridor that appeared to the admiral to be the crew quarter deck. Cabin doors hung half open on their hinges. Some looked to have been kicked in. Belongings and gear were strewn about, but nobody was there. The deck was empty. The desolate stillness got the admiral feeling like he was walking a ghost ship.

The lieutenant led them two decks deeper into the vessel and into another corridor, this one along the central axis of the ship above the keel. Admiral Wilson felt the atmosphere change. He was not aboard a ghost ship any longer. He was on a battlefield.

Bodies littered the deck, nearly a dozen from the admiral's count, all lying in the frozen grip of death. More men dressed in black combat garb, but bodies wearing shirts emblazoned with the Neptune's Reach logo were among them too. Spent shell casings scattered beneath the admiral's boot. Pock marks and chipped paint scarred the corridor walls, apparently imprints from errant bullets in the violent gun battle that had taken the lives of the dead men the admiral now walked among. He could smell gun smoke in the air.

At the end of the corridor, a crude barricade of overturned workshop tables and scrap metal plates barred entrance to a hatchway. A narrow path had been cleared through the barricade and Admiral Wilson saw activity in the compartment beyond. "I assume the survivors are in there."

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant said. "They barricaded themselves in the engine room." He glanced about the corridor. "Looks like it was a hell of a fight."

Admiral Wilson squeezed through the path into the engine room behind the lieutenant. The ragtag remnants of the *Aeneas* crew sat exhausted and beaten amid the stench of diesel fumes in the vessel's engine compartment. Marine medics worked among the fifteen survivors, tending to their bullet wounds and burns. Admiral Wilson searched their faces. He found the man he sought seated on a starboard stairwell, leaning forward on his knees with a Colt semi-automatic pistol locked in his hand and tired eyes focused on the crew.

Admiral Wilson approached him. "You can stop watching the flock, Jack, the marines are here."

Jack Sheridan looked up and offered a weary smile. "I'm a lousy shepherd."

The admiral shook his head. "I'm sure these crewmen feel otherwise."

Jack did not reply.

"Seriously," Admiral Wilson said, "it's good to see you alive. I thought we lost you."

"Me too."

"Is Connor okay?"

Jack nodded. "He and Markus are showing the SEAL team our makeshift brig in the forward hold. Got a couple of guys in there."

The admiral appraised the wounded crew. “How close did it come?”

Jack glanced at the barricade. “This was our last stand.” He ejected the magazine from his pistol and showed the admiral it was empty. “My last round is in the chamber. If they had kept pressing we wouldn’t be talking right now.”

“The important thing is we are talking,” Admiral Wilson said. “And you stopped Rafferty.”

Jack shook his head. “He never should have gotten this far. I should have seen through him.”

“Don’t beat yourself up. He was a pro.” Admiral Wilson offered his hand.

Jack took it and pulled himself up. “Was?”

“Yes. Two F-18s from the Theodore Roosevelt battle group caught up with Rafferty’s ship a hundred miles east of here and put a pair of Harpoon missiles into her broadside. She went down in ten minutes, and she took the Doppelganger prototype with her.”

Jack lifted his chin. “Do you have confirmation that Rafferty went down with the ship?”

“They’re still sorting through the casualties. No sign of him yet.”

“I really hope they got him,” Jack said holstering the Colt. “Because this thing won’t be over until they do.”

“Why do you say that? The *Aeneas* is secure. Our prototype radar defense system is not up for bid on the black market. And you and I are still around to throw back a few beers together. It’s over, Mr. Sheridan, and thanks to God for that.”

“He won’t let it be over,” Jack said quietly. “For all the reasons you just listed, he won’t let it end here. Not as long as he’s alive.”

Admiral Wilson scoffed. “He’s fish food. And if he did somehow find a way to escape those F-18s, he’s heading for the hills with his tail between his legs, never to tangle with Jack Sheridan again.”

“That’s not how it’s going to go down,” Jack said. “I got to know him pretty well these past few days. He put a lot of effort into this plot to steal Doppelganger, and I just pissed in his Cheerios. He’s not going to forgive and forget.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because he told me.” Jack looked the admiral in the eye. “The last thing Rafferty said to me before he left was that he wasn’t finished with me. If he isn’t dead, he’s going to come back...and I’ve got to be ready when he does.”



BOOK I:  
DOMINOES

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Two Years Later

Jack Sheridan swept pieces of gravel off the cover plate of his new driveway barrier like an umpire cleans sand off home plate in a baseball diamond.

Connor Sheridan watched from the shade of a maple near the road. "Really, Dad?"

Jack stood and admired the device. "What?"

"That thing is going to be covered by gravel every day. What's with the hand broom?"

"Ever hear of taking pride in your work?" Jack gestured to a box sitting in the grass next to his son. "Toss me the remote."

Connor threw him a small remote control unit from the box of parts. Jack hit a button on the remote, and the narrow cover plate that spanned the driveway rose up on four hydraulically driven steel bollards and stopped at the height of headlights on a standard SUV. Jack approved.

"So tell me," Connor said. "How much of the money from the Coates coins are you going to spend on security measures?"

"As much as it takes for me to relax."

Connor laughed. "You don't have that much money."

Jack lifted his boot and kicked his heel against the steel barrier. It didn't budge.

"You know," Connor said, "most people just install a gate to secure their driveway, not a barrier capable of stopping a tank."

"Most people don't have a professional mercenary stalking them." Jack slapped his hands against his dusty jeans and surveyed his property line. "Those old maples form a nice picket line along the road. A vehicle can't get through them." He creased his eyes in a squint against the sun. "The new iron fence supplements the trees. Anyone less than seven feet is going to have a hard time getting over the spires, and if they try they'll get a surprise." He faced Connor. "Speaking of money, I don't see you driving a new car or living in a big house with your cut. What toys are you buying?"

Connor frowned and lifted the box of parts. "Not going there."

“Going where?”

Connor started up the sloping drive toward the house.

Jack gave his new toy one more admiring look and started after him. “Why are you still doing contract work for CCG?”

“I like it. It keeps me busy.”

“Yeah? How did you like working on smiling Lloyd’s retrofit over the winter?”

Connor did not reply.

Jack caught up with him. “Connor, come on, you’re young and wealthy. Why don’t you relax and enjoy it for a little while? Not everyone gets an opportunity like this.”

“Money doesn’t relieve stress.” Connor glanced at the new barrier. “You’re proof of that.”

Jack frowned. “Touché.”

Connor walked a little farther in silence. “In case you didn’t notice, I did not end up with the girl after the big treasure hunt.”

“That’s a good thing,” Jack chuckled. “Alyson *is* your sister.”

“The point is I’m single, and now that I have some cash I’m afraid of jumping into a relationship only to find out later that my woman is really dating my bank account. I guess I’m a little paranoid. I’m sure you know the feeling.”

“Funny. Keep jabbing at me, boy.”

They reached the porch that wrapped around the brick ranch house and picked up glasses of ice water they had left there on the steps. “You need work on your self-esteem,” Jack said. “I thought we farmed that territory pretty well when you were growing up.”

Connor took a swig of water. “That’s what you get for thinking.”

The sound of tires crunching over gravel arose from beyond the maple trees along the dirt road. Jack listened a moment, judged the car to be slowing down. Yes, he expected company, but he reached for the shoulder holster lying behind the toolbox near the porch steps just the same. He threaded his arms through the holster and positioned the Kimber semi-automatic comfortably against his side as a navy blue Ford Explorer turned into the driveway. Jack’s German shepherd Ike bounded around the corner of the house on a barking tirade. The dog made for the vehicle at the bottom of the drive, but Jack shouted a command. “Ike, stand down. It’s a friend.”

Ike stopped barking immediately.

The Explorer rolled to a stop in front of the steel barrier and the driver’s window scrolled down. A man in his mid-fifties with a white crew cut and a bulldog nose looked up the driveway at Jack Sheridan through dark sunglasses. He considered the barrier blocking his SUV

and the pistol in Jack's shoulder holster. "You did invite me here, didn't you?"

Jack smiled and approached the Explorer. "Abner, it's good to see you."

"Hey," Abner said. "You shaved your moustache. Are you trying to look younger or something?"

Jack smiled. "I was shooting for a decade. How'd I do?"

"Missed it by a couple of years."

Ike hopped the barrier and trotted around the SUV. He got up on his hind quarters and put his front paws on the driver's door. Abner scratched behind the dog's ears. "Bet your master's working you overtime. Don't hold it against him."

Jack hit the button on the remote again. The barrier lowered to the driveway. "Head up to the house," he said to Abner. "I'll meet you on the porch."

Abner pulled the Explorer forward. Jack rejoined Connor near the porch steps. "You didn't tell me Admiral Wilson was coming over," Connor said.

"I wanted it to be a surprise."

"Why?"

Jack didn't reply. Abner parked the Explorer near the house and stepped out of the vehicle. He stretched his large frame and studied the wrought iron fence on the property line. "Judas priest, Jack, has Rafferty got you spooked?"

Jack shrugged. "Good fences make good neighbors."

"You don't have any neighbors."

"Back in November I thought up some home improvement projects." Jack surveyed the new fence line. "Had to wait for the ground to thaw to sink the posts." He climbed the porch steps. "I haven't heard from Rafferty since Labor Day."

"And while waiting for another call you're beefing up security with these *improvements*."

"More or less. I'm having bullet-resistant glass installed in the Jeep next week too."

Abner regarded his friend a long while. "Sometimes you worry me, Jack. But I've got something for you to ponder besides paranoid thoughts. Interested?"

"That's why you're here."

Connor gave his dad an inquisitive look. They all gathered on the cedar porch around a circular patio table. The screen door behind them creaked opened, and Lauren Sheridan stepped from the house.

She smiled at Abner and a warm breeze blew her auburn hair into her eyes. She brushed it back and hugged him. "How long has it been, Abner, a year?"

"I think you're right," Abner said. "Has Jack been keeping you on the edge of your seat?"

"As always."

Jack frowned. "You want a beer, Abner?"

"Affirmative. It's a beautiful spring weekend, and I'm officially off duty." He sat in a chair. "We'll have to talk shop unofficially."

"I'll get the beer," Lauren offered. Jack caught her before she went into the house and gave her hand a squeeze. She kissed him and disappeared inside.

Connor took a chair next to Abner's. "What kind of shop are we talking about?"

"My kind of shop," Jack said. "Abner's got a new job and thinks I might be useful to him."

"In a nutshell that's right," Abner said. "A year ago the government decided it needed an office to deal with special interest projects on U.S. waters, projects involving historical, commercial, or national security concerns. They dubbed it the Maritime Affairs Office and tapped me to be the director. I'm here to talk your dad into helping me out on our first project."

"This sounds interesting," Connor said. "I might want in too."

"Two Sheridans with one pitch? This could be my lucky day." Abner leaned forward as if crowding around a campfire to tell a ghost story. "This project involves history, unexplained events, and the potential to save thousands of lives. It starts with a tragedy seven decades old."

Jack rolled his eyes. "He's already hooked, Abner. Just get on with it."

Admiral Wilson cast an annoyed glance at him and settled back. "On the eve of June 23rd, 1950, Northwest Orient Flight 2501 took off from LaGuardia Airport bound for Seattle. She was a DC-4 carrying fifty-five passengers and a crew of three. The flight plan had her touching down at her first stopover in Minneapolis at 10:00 p.m. but she never made it."

"What happened?" Connor asked.

"She crashed into Lake Michigan."

"Any survivors?"

Abner shook his head. "No, and because the wreckage was never found, the cause of the crash remains a mystery."

“The leading theory points to weather conditions on the night of the crash.” Jack gave Abner a knowing smile. “I did a little research on my own.”

“Right,” Abner said. “Weather is the prime suspect. Thunderstorms were moving through the Midwest that night, and the captain of Flight 2501 requested permission to descend to twenty-five hundred feet to avoid severe lightning and gusting winds. The Civil Aeronautic Authority denied his request due to dense air traffic at the lower altitude. Soon after the denial Flight 2501 flew into a squall line over Lake Michigan and disappeared from radar.”

“What kind of search took place?” Connor asked.

“The best search that the coast guard and the naval reserve could muster at the time. They made an educated guess as to the point of impact, which they theorized was off the West Michigan coast between South Haven and St. Joseph, and hit the area with their old sonar equipment. They even dredged the bottom of the lake with trawlers. Nothing turned up. All they ever found was light debris floating on the surface of the lake.”

Lauren returned from the house and set down a bottle of beer in front of each of them. “Keep talking, Abner,” she said. “I can tell Jack is almost sold.”

Jack’s eyebrow twitched. “You used to get upset when I’d take off on a salvage project.”

“That was different. Those projects were half a world away. They kept you from home for months at a time while Connor was growing up. This one is practically in our own backyard, and it seems like Connor might go with you. Anyway, I don’t see it taking six months to find a plane wreck in Lake Michigan.”

“You’d be surprised how long these things can take,” Jack informed her.

“Well, you need something to keep you focused. Without it...” Lauren glanced at the new fence and driveway barrier.

Jack made eye contact with her and smiled, and then turned his gaze on Abner. “So why is the government interested in finding this plane after so many years?”

“Cholera,” Abner said. “One of the passengers on the flight was a microbiologist who had brought with him a bio case containing vials of a unique cholera vaccine that was to be studied and developed at Washington University’s bio research department. Some smart guys who wear lab coats believe that if we retrieve the material remaining in those vials, they can reproduce the vaccine today.”

Connor took a swig of beer. “Hold on a minute. We have effective cholera vaccines already. Why go through all the trouble to retrieve this one?”

“Like I said, the vaccine on this plane is unique. They used it to treat a strange mutated form of cholera that was spreading through the Philippines at the time. Unfortunately this same form of cholera has shown up in Haiti in recent months, and modern day vaccines are not terribly effective against it.”

“Doesn’t the government have documentation on this special vaccine?” Connor said. “Doesn’t anyone have a sample of it on hand to develop a new batch?”

“It’s been over sixty years since we’ve seen this form of cholera,” Abner said. “Lab equipment and practices weren’t too high tech back then, and any samples we had were lost or destroyed decades ago. The microbiologist on the plane had with him critical documentation that did not exist anywhere else. Remember, in 1950 computer memory and flash drives were still pipe dreams.”

Jack ran a finger over some condensation on his beer bottle. “Abner, you want me to do what the coast guard and naval reserve couldn’t accomplish with all their resources.”

“Yes,” Abner said flatly. “Sonar and search technology has advanced a lot over the last seventy years, and your knowledge and experience in finding things that are lost is unsurpassed.” He gave Jack a puckish smirk. “Don’t get a big head.”

“I learned a few other things in my research,” Jack said. “A lot of people have tried to find Flight 2501 over the years. They all failed. A Michigan shipwreck organization mounts an annual search. No joy for them either, and they’re funded by Clive Cussler for crying out loud.”

“Clive who?” Abner said.

“Come on, Dad,” Connor said. “This sounds like a very cool opportunity.”

“Yes, cool and challenging. Just what you need,” Lauren added.

Jack rocked his chair back. He and Lauren stared at one another for a long while. Her smile is all he needed. He felt a little rush and brought the chair down on all four legs. “Okay, Abner, you got me. What’s the timetable?”

“The sooner the better.”

“I’ll need to secure a vessel rigged for salvage from Neptune’s Reach. Lloyd might be a problem.”

Abner smiled and lifted his beer from the table. “If Lloyd Faulkner kicks up a fuss, you let me know. In the meantime, welcome into the service of the Maritime Affairs Office.”

They tapped their beer bottles together and drank to success. The clink of the glass seemed to snap Jack into search and salvage mode. It surprised him how quickly it came back. He began listing and prioritizing tasks in his head. Details of the crash had to be researched; logistics for the salvage effort needed to be calculated. He had to assemble his team. Jack took another swig of beer. His mind jumped into the search for Flight 2501, but like a shadow the thought of Rafferty fell over him, and his eyes drifted to the security fence encircling his home.

The long-range directional microphone planted sixty yards east of the perimeter fence picked up Jack Sheridan's voice and transmitted it through the air. A digital processing console amplified the signal, filtered background noise, equalized the tones, and fed the clean signal to a set of output speakers in the rear of a Buick Enclave parked a mile away. The vehicle's darkened windows blocked the afternoon sun and enhanced the effect of the LEDs on the audio surveillance equipment inside the car, as well as the flame from the stainless steel cigarette lighter in Donovan Rafferty's hand.

Rafferty lit the cigarette between his lips and listened to the end of Sheridan's conversation with Admiral Wilson. Their voices sounded as clear as if they were seated five feet away from him at an outdoor café. It intrigued him, not just the content of their discussion but the visceral emotion he felt hearing Sheridan's voice so clearly again. Two years had passed since their conflict aboard the *Aeneas*, a Neptune's Reach salvage ship he had taken control of in his attempt to steal a prototype radar defense system named Doppelganger. Jack Sheridan had gone from a benign salvage project manager to the leader of a crew rebellion that eventually bested Rafferty's hand-picked team of mercenaries and prevented them from attaining Doppelganger. Rafferty had spent eighteen months planning that operation and exhausted millions of dollars in resources to execute it, but in the end it was all thwarted by Sheridan. Rafferty had not been able to reconcile the fact that his divine charter to humble the U.S. government was brought down by a maritime garbage man.

He had wanted Jack Sheridan dead, and indeed at one point literally had the man in the crosshairs of a high-powered rifle. Why he had not squeezed the trigger is something Rafferty did not understand at the time. He rationalized that the simplicity of a single bullet would not have satisfied the vengeance due him. But in some deep recess of Rafferty's mind Sheridan deserved more. After all, the man proved himself under fire and claimed victory that day on the Atlantic. In the end it was Donovan Rafferty and not the U.S. government that learned a lesson in humility. That made Jack Sheridan special. It afforded him a

measure of respect. And it persuaded Rafferty to stay his hand until a more fitting opportunity arose to balance the scale.

It took a year, but the opportunity that presented itself was well worth the wait. A series of encounters set Rafferty on an unexpected path. One event tumbled into the next like a string of dominoes winding their way back to Sheridan. Rafferty understood now why he had not taken that rifle shot. As the song goes, to everything there is a season: a time for war, a time for peace, and a time for tormenting Jack Sheridan in a manner befitting his worst nightmare. True, Rafferty would have chosen a different path to get there, but he saw the divine design in it and seized the opportunity with vigor. He now understood. A single bullet a year ago would have tasted bitter in comparison to the delicious irony about to unfold.

Rafferty blew a stream of smoke from his lungs and allowed himself a brief smile. “Mr. Ferguson,” he said to the man seated next to him in the back of the Enclave, “did I hear Admiral Wilson mention cholera in Haiti?”

Ferguson checked sound levels on a digital recorder. “I believe that’s what he said.”

Rafferty thought about that a while. “Jack needs some new friends, wouldn’t you say?”

“I don’t care who his friends are,” Ferguson said with dark inflection. “My knee aches every time it rains because of him. If I had my way, I’d be over that fence in five minutes and I’d put a slug—”

“That’s not an option,” Rafferty warned. “We execute the plan as I’ve laid it out. You will not stray to the left or to the right. Do you understand?”

Ferguson remained silent one second too long.

Rafferty glared through cold, grey eyes. “Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Ferguson said, acquiescing his stance. “It’s just that Sheridan deserves some payback.”

“I know what he deserves,” Rafferty said sharply. “Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord.” He leaned forward just a touch. “And I’m the Lord’s sub-contractor. You’ll do well not to forget that.”

Ferguson nodded.

Rafferty put his attention back on Jack and Abner’s closing conversation coming through the speakers. “They’re moving quickly on the crash site. We have to move quickly too.” He checked the time on his watch with the night glow button. “Naughton should have Simon secured by now.” He grabbed his satellite phone and speed dialed a number.

A man's voice answered, crisp and assertive. "Yes, Colonel."

"Mr. Naughton, events are accelerating. I need Simon up here in one day. We move in two."

"That won't be a problem."

"Wexler will transport the lab equipment. You escort Simon. No delays. No complications."

"Understood."

"Contact me when you cross the state line."

"Yes, sir."

Rafferty disconnected. He puffed on his cigarette and took a moment to consider the habit. Sheridan had once warned him about the dangers of smoking. He had found the comment amusing at the time given the volatile environment surrounding them, but months later he had actually thought about quitting. Sitting there in the darkened SUV, contemplating the falling dominoes, the idea seemed a pointless effort. Rafferty stifled a laugh. To everything there is a season.

"Mr. Ferguson, shut down your hardware. We're leaving."

"Yes, sir."

Rafferty made his way toward the driver's seat. He paused midway and glanced back. "By the way, that impulse you had to breach Sheridan's fence would not have worked out for you. Sensors would have detected you climbing over, and the iron would have been immediately electrified. You would have woken up stunned on the ground in time for his guard dog to tear your throat out, or perhaps to face the business end of a .45 caliber semi-automatic."

Ferguson did not reply.

"Jack Sheridan is creative. He has a tactical mind and abundant financial resources. You continue to underestimate him. That's a mistake I refuse to repeat." Rafferty continued forward and settled behind the steering wheel. "On the contrary, I'm counting on his abilities to make my whole plan succeed."

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