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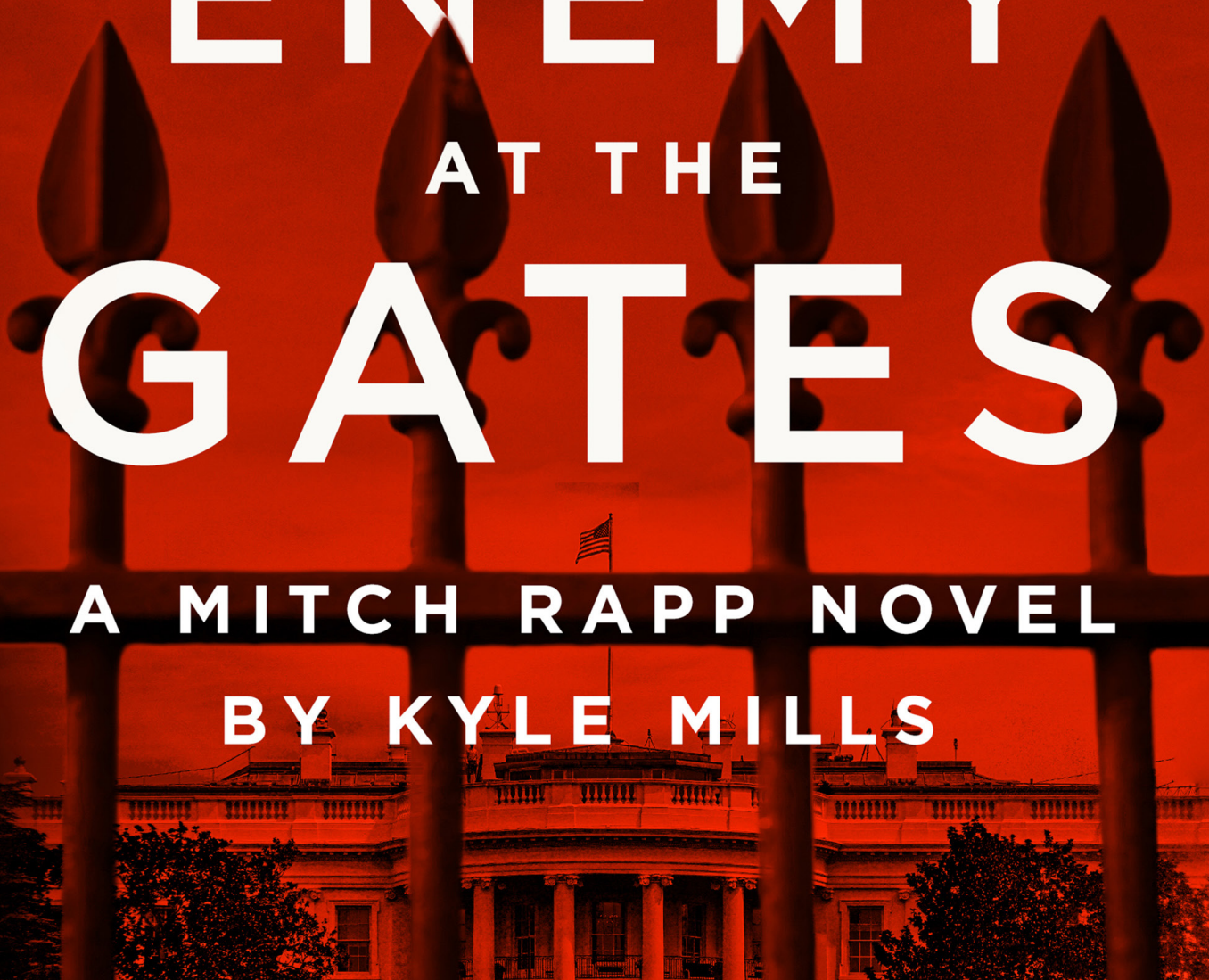
ENEMY

AT THE

GATES

A MITCH RAPP NOVEL

BY KYLE MILLS



# PROLOGUE

## SOUTHWESTERN UGANDA

**L**UCKY.

Many years ago, Dr. David Chism had pledged to never take his good fortune for granted. That at least once per day, he would give thanks to whatever cosmic force had taken him under its wing.

He rolled down the window of his embarrassingly luxurious Toyota Land Cruiser, stuck his hand out into the seventy-three-degree air, and gave the world a thumbs-up. There was no reaction from the emerald mountains, terraced farmland, or red dirt road, but they knew. They knew that he understood the gifts he'd been given.

Based on his bland suburban upbringing, the fact that he was even in this place was a minor miracle. His parents were both accountants and had absolutely loved everything about that profession and lifestyle. The interminable columns of numbers and teetering tax forms. The complex machinations of the upper middle class. Their elaborate strategies for not only keeping up with the Joneses, but one day *becoming* the Joneses.

Despite all that, they'd been—and still were—solid, conventional

parents. If only he'd been a solid, conventional child, everything would have gone smoothly.

It wasn't for lack of trying on his part. Chism had still been in grade school when he first noticed how their brows furrowed when he brought up his fascination with science. It had started with evolutionary biology and endless hours speculating about the creatures natural selection would give rise to on other planets. Then it was physics and the mysteries of gravity. And, finally, it was everything. *Why does this rock look different than that rock, Mom? Hey, Dad. What makes my Frisbee stay in the air? Ms. Davidson—if Superman can fly at almost the speed of light and hold his breath for one minute, could he make it to the sun?*

By the time he entered junior high, he'd learned to hide those interests. To feign enthusiasm for bank entries and for joining the family business after graduating from an economical local university. From there it would be a McMansion, two point five children, and a country club membership. All the things sane people aspired to.

In secret, though, he'd continued to pursue his passion. Increasingly advanced books borrowed from the library were hidden under a bunch of comics in his closet. Subscriptions to scientific journals were paid for from his allowance and addressed to the house of a friend. Eventually, his obsession with virology had relegated all other fields to little more than passing interests. It was that discipline he dove into every night after doing a calculatedly unspectacular job on his homework.

Some of the things he read, though, he disagreed with. Most of the problems weren't with a lack of accuracy per se, but more with a lack of imagination. Finally, a particularly glaring omission relating to how viruses defend themselves drove him crazy enough to write a lengthy complaint to a journal he'd subscribed to.

To his great surprise, it was published. Then it started getting a lot of attention. Finally, a reporter managed to see through the carelessly created pseudonym he'd used and tracked him down.

Chism grinned and shook his head in the confines of the car. In retrospect, using Elmer Fudd and putting his real return address on the envelope was the smartest move he'd ever made.

After that, everything had been a whirlwind: explaining to his stunned parents why there was someone at the door wanting to talk to their fourteen-year-old son about immunology. Entry into Stanford a few months later. Medical degree. PhD. The immediate appointment as the head of a research project that demanded political and fundraising skills that were well beyond him. A scientific community full of geriatric bastards who pushed back against his revolutionary ideas. Finally, burnout at twenty-three and the beginning of his less than productive drugs, booze, and women phase.

After his second overdose, he'd awoken in the hospital determined to get his life together. It hadn't been difficult to find an NGO that would take a scientist of his reputation who was willing to go to whatever shithole or hot spot they could dream up. And that had ushered in his somewhat more productive infectious disease, war, and poverty phase. It had been a huge rush and he'd loved the remote locations, the chaos, the danger. Most of all, though, he'd loved the feeling of moving away from pure theory and helping flesh-and-blood people.

It was likely he'd still be out there somewhere if it hadn't been for a chance meeting with the infamous Nicholas Ward. Or maybe it hadn't been chance. He'd never gotten a reliable bead on that.

Chism slowed as he crested the mountaintop, looking out across the stunning valley below. The intensity of the forest against the sky. The geometric blocks denoting agriculture. The craggy cliffs and clouds building on the horizon. What really captured his imagination, though, was a distant cluster of buildings to the east. They were another example of the ridiculous serendipity that tended to cling to him even when he was screwing up.

The facility was state of the art in the truest sense—benefiting from unlimited funds provided by one of the few people in the world smarter than he was. It served as a regular hospital to the rural communities

around it, but also as a research facility developing a new approach to fighting viral infections. The potential contribution to mankind was incredible, with the possibility that a single vaccine could wipe out the entire coronavirus category. If he could make it work, COVID, SARS, YARS, and even the common cold would become a thing of the past.

The location was a little more remote and unstable than he would have liked, but there were no workable alternatives. In its early stages, the vaccine had potential side effects that the local population was immune to. No one was sure why—probably a coronavirus epidemic that predated recorded history—but it didn't really matter. Relocating to Uganda and recruiting volunteers here had pushed his research forward a good five years.

Chism navigated down the mountain while scanning the dense trees that lined the road. Despite numerous expeditions into the back-country, he'd never managed to spot a gorilla. Duikers, a potentially new species of butterfly, and endless red-tailed monkeys, yes. But still not so much as a glimpse of the crown jewel of Uganda's wildlife.

Not that he was worried. One day, they'd make an appearance at the edge of the forest, all lined up and in perfect morning light. Just like one day he'd find a supermodel with a thing for geeky scientists broken down by the side of the road. That was just the way his life went.

When Chism pulled up to the front of the facility's research wing, Mukisa Odongo was waiting for him out front. The former Ugandan army doctor was a rock in every way. At fifty, his six-foot-five frame was still intimidatingly solid, and his eyes had a way of ferreting out any employee not giving one hundred percent. Despite the fact that the man was yet another gift from God, Chism was a little afraid of him. In theory, this was his operation, but everybody knew Odongo ran it. Probably to the benefit of all those involved, frankly.

"What's up, Muki?" Chism said as he climbed out of the Land Cruiser. "It's a gorgeous day, our last trials went even better than

expected, and the birds are singing. Why do you always look so unhappy?”

“We’re hearing rumors of guerrilla activity in the area.”

“Finally! I’ve got my backpack in the car. Let’s give ourselves a couple days off and go check ’em out.”

“Not *gorilla* activity, David. *Guerrilla* activity. Terrorists.”

Chism froze. “Auma? No way. He never comes this far east.”

“Gideon comes and goes as he pleases.”

Gideon Auma was a psychopath who had a category all to himself. He’d spent years building his clandestine army from a small, twisted cult into a force capable of wreaking havoc on the local population. He burned villages, kidnapped children, and generally raped, tortured, and mutilated his way across the region.

Terrorist activity had been a consideration in the placement of this hospital, prompting them to locate it as far east as the terrain would allow. Auma preferred to stick close to the dense forests around the Congolese border, crossing back and forth in a conscious effort to use the animosity between the DRC and Uganda to prevent any kind of coordinated action.

“Are we talking credible rumors or just the normal gossip?”

“That’s what I’m trying to determine,” Odongo said. “Right now, we’re doing an additional backup of the computer systems and categorizing all critical research items for potential emergency removal. We’ll have trucks here on standby tomorrow.”

“You think that’s necessary?”

“Probably not. The truth is that we’ve treated a number of Auma’s people in the time we’ve been here. Combat wounds, disease, drug overdoses . . . Our continued operations benefit him more than an attack on us.”

“We treat his people? Why didn’t I know that?”

“It’s not your business, David. You don’t understand my country. In Uganda, peace is a delicate balancing act. Taking sides isn’t wise.”

“Even against the devil?”

The African ran a hand thoughtfully across his cleanly shaven head. “Yes, my friend. Even against the devil.”

The stark white hallway was empty, as were most of the rooms it serviced. Apparently, everyone who could walk under their own power had decided to bug out back to their villages.

Worrying. When he’d used the word *gossip* with Odongo, it hadn’t been meant in an entirely pejorative way. In Africa, you ignored the local chitchat at your own risk.

When Chism entered the main lab, it felt almost abandoned. Precaution was starting to look a lot like evacuation. How serious was this? You could never tell with Odongo. He’d face a nuclear war with the same disapproving frown as he aimed at the mold taking hold on the cafeteria ceiling.

“Seems quiet,” he said as he came through the glass door.

Jing Liu spun, nearly dropping the box she was holding. “You’re here! Have you heard? Gideon Auma is close.”

At thirty-three, she was one year his senior but looked much younger. He’d raided her from a research facility in Wuhan and she’d proven to be worth her weight in gold. If only he could decipher her accent.

“What?”

“Gideon Auma! He’s here.”

“My understanding is that there are some rumors about him being in the area. That’s all. We’re just being careful.”

A man appeared from a door at the back dragging a handcart. “It’s about time you got here. Did you stop on top of the mountain again?”

Matteo Ricci was a brilliant virologist from Milan who had been coaxed out of retirement by ridiculous amounts of money. In contrast to Liu’s, whose appearance could be described as slightly startled minimalism, Ricci had a great tan, amazing hair, and could still genuinely rock the ass-hugging slacks he favored. Today, a cigarette hung from his lips, putting a finishing touch on his aging-pop-star vibe. Appar-

ently, he'd decided that the proximity of Gideon Auma trumped any rules against smoking in the lab.

"What are we doing?" Chism said, ignoring the comment about his tardiness.

"Odongo gave us a list," Ricci responded in his lightly accented, grammatically rigid English. "Procedures for what needs to go and when. They've prioritized getting noncritical personnel and stable patients out of here, but it sounds like we're going to be moving equipment and live samples tomorrow when the trucks arrive."

Chism laced his fingers thoughtfully atop his head. Were they overreacting here? The reasonably healthy patients and nonessential employees, sure. No point in taking chances. But a lot of the other stuff wasn't all that easy to transport and there's no reason someone like Auma would want it. It wasn't like there was a big market in the jungle for incubators and test tubes.

Having said that, if Mukisa Odongo had spoken that was it. The momentum of his edicts was irresistible. Like a hurricane, they just swept you along whether you liked it or not.

Odongo stood well back from the window, staring into the dimly lit parking area. The rain was coming down even harder now, creating a haze of heavy droplets and swirling fog.

The helicopters should have been there hours ago, but one of the bureaucratic glitches so common in Kampala had caused a delay. And now it was too late. All aircraft was grounded due to the weather and forecasts suggested that they would stay that way until just before dawn.

Chism and his team should have been long gone, but instead they were going through the mundane exercise of packing and categorizing research materials in preparation for them to be moved to a more secure location. It was an effort that would likely prove pointless beyond keeping them occupied.

Odongo's grandfather had taught him that the darkness hid evil



spirits intent on making the living suffer. And those superstitions, so easy to laugh off as his education had advanced, now manifested themselves. His informants in the surrounding villages were reporting the appearance of people who could only have been sent by Gideon Auma. They were sticking to the forest for now but taking positions along the main road that led there. Cutting off escape and isolating the facility from anyone who could offer assistance.

This was his mistake. His fault. He should have ordered an evacuation the moment the rumors started. But he'd prioritized the continuity of Chism's work, concerned about the setbacks an evacuation could cause.

A flash of light became visible through the window, likely a few hundred meters distant. The strobe effect was accompanied by the unmistakable sound of automatic rifle fire.

It had begun.

Odongo used the laptop on his desk to activate the facility's alarms and strode purposefully from his office. The few staff members remaining were volunteers and all understood their roles perfectly. He felt great pride in seeing them work—removing IVs, stabilizing wounds, moving critical patients from beds to more maneuverable stretchers. They would carry them into the rain and scatter, trying to keep them alive as they were transferred to nearby villages that he prayed Auma would ignore.

Everything seemed to come into a sharp focus. The traditional pattern of the floor tiles. The scent of the rain filtered through the building. The efficient movements of the people who had been courageous enough to stay. It was incredible that a world with so much darkness could also have so much light.

He spotted Chism rushing up the corridor, having abandoned the busywork he'd been assigned in the lab.

"What's going on, Mukisa? What's the alarm mean?"

"Auma's here."

The fear on the young scientist's face was clearly visible but didn't

rise to the level of panic. He wasn't as pampered as the others. The boy had lived through hard times. Some self-inflicted, but hard nonetheless. While he'd never experienced anything like Gideon Auma's army, it wouldn't be completely unimaginable to him. The other two, though, would have no context for what was coming. He prayed they would be spared.

"We need to get the rest of the patients out of here, Mukisa. They—"

"It's all taken care of, David. What's important now is that we make sure you're safe to carry on your work."

He put a hand on Chism's shoulder, leading him back down the hallway toward the lab.

Matteo Ricci and Jing Liu were standing by the boxes they'd packed, looking a little stunned. Odongo motioned through the glass for them to follow and they obeyed. Their questions were rendered unintelligible by their accents mixing with the wail of the alarm, prompting Odongo to put a finger to his lips. They fell silent and allowed themselves to be led to the eastern side of the facility.

Chism finally spoke up when they entered a small room filled with cleaning supplies. "I don't mean to question you, Mukisa, but what are we doing here? There's no way out. Not even a window."

By way of answer, Odongo moved a bucket and mop from the back of the space, feeling around for a hidden handle and opening a hatch.

"What's this?" Chism said.

"Get in."

"What?"

"No one but me knows about this place and Auma's people won't be able to find it. Wait overnight. The weather's scheduled to clear in the morning and help will come. Auma won't risk a confrontation. He'll leave before they arrive."

"What about you?" Chism said, looking down at the shadowy hole.

"I have other things to attend to."

"What are you talking about? There's plenty of room. I'm not going down there if you—"

“You are going down there,” Odongo corrected. “Like I said earlier. This isn’t your country, David. You take care of your business and I’ll take care of mine.”

They locked eyes for a moment, but then Chism looked away. The other two were already descending the ladder.

“Will we see each other again?” Chism asked.

“Of course. But I hope not too soon.”

Odongo was shoved from behind but didn’t stumble. The two guerrillas ushering him toward the front of the building were both in their early teens and lacked the weight to move him. What they did possess, though, was the thoughtless sadism that was unique to child soldiers.

The facility’s main doors loomed ahead, and he passed through them into the rain. The group waiting was as ragtag as he expected—clothed in everything from surplus combat gear to jeans and sandals. All, of course, carried the cheap AK-47s favored by terrorists the world over. A few also wielded machetes.

He counted twenty-five people in total. Nineteen of Auma’s guerrillas, four captured hospital workers, and two unconscious patients lying in stretchers that were slowly sinking into the mud. Everyone was soaked to the bone and most were starting to shiver.

It was a good sign. When Auma sent his troops on one of his infamous genocidal raids, they were generally high on a drug locally known as ajali. Under its influence, they felt no fear, no pain, no doubt, and certainly no cold. The dull messianic glow around Auma became blinding and they would do anything for him: Run until their hearts exploded. Kill their own families. Fight until well beyond the time their brains should have told them they were dead.

Not tonight, though. Tonight’s raid wasn’t about wanton violence, theft, or the acquisition of new disciples. Auma wanted something else.

The crowd in front of him parted and the man himself appeared. His form was hidden by a hooded rain poncho, but his eyes shone in the security lights.

“Gideon,” Odongo said by way of greeting.

“Mukisa.”

Odongo never spoke of the fact that he’d known Auma at university. Before the man’s psychoses had reached such a pitched level. Before he’d left to pursue his career as God’s avenging angel.

Auma looked over at his six hostages, absorbing the terror and despair in the faces of the ones capable of understanding what was happening.

“I was going to torture them in front of the director of this hospital. But now that I know it’s you, there’s no point, is there? What would you care? Your heart has always been empty. You live only by your calculations.”

Auma motioned toward the hostages and a few of his men fired on full automatic. They threw their arms instinctively in front of their faces as they were mowed down. The screams that were their last act in this world went unheard—drowned out by the guns and rain.

“See?” Auma said, pointing at Odongo. “Not even a flinch. You’ve already forgotten them, haven’t you? You’ve already sifted through how their deaths affect your position. Scenarios. Strategies. Tactics. You can’t comprehend anything beyond that, can you? The smell of their fear. The warmth of their blood on the ground. The sorrow of their families.”

“I’m not one of your disciples, Gideon. Your oratory bores me as much now as it did when we were children. What do you want?”

The cult leader’s expression was still in shadow, but his eyes sharpened. “David Chism.”

“He’s gone.”

“Do you remember me as being stupid?”

“No. I remember you as being insane.”

Auma’s followers continued to look at him with the expected awe but, in a few of them, that awe was marred by confusion. It was unlikely that they’d ever heard anyone speak to their messiah as an equal. As a human being like the other seven billion on the planet.

Well, perhaps not like the other seven billion. But also, not a celestial creature in danger of sprouting wings and ascending into heaven.

“Give him to me and I’ll make this easy on you, Mukisa. You have my word as God’s representative on earth.”

Odongo just smiled at that. He remembered the school-age Auma in terms somewhat less grand.

But in one thing he was right. Quick would be better.

Odongo reached for the knife hidden down the back of his pants. The one that Auma’s children had sloppily missed.

He charged and, as expected, the sound of gunfire erupted from behind. The impacts of the rounds in his back produced no pain but had the unintended consequence of propelling him forward. Auma jerked unnaturally and Odongo would have laughed if he’d had the time. The man’s untrained troops had panicked and shot him.

His blade penetrated the rain hood, getting tangled in the material before it could reach Auma’s throat. More gunfire, more disorienting flashes. More impacts.

Odongo’s body had gone numb by the time it landed unceremoniously in the mud. He could no longer breathe, but he wasn’t sure if it was because his mouth had sunk into the wet earth or because his lungs had been destroyed by the gunfire.

Not that it mattered anymore. He’d done what he could.

Gideon Auma scooted away from the knife in Mukisa Odongo’s lifeless fingers. He looked down at his own arm and saw the blood streaming from where a bullet had grazed him. The pain was sharp—that of a trivial wound and not the deep ache of a mortal one.

Someone lifted him to his feet and he found himself able to stand without difficulty. A further examination of the wound would have to wait. Concern over the flesh-and-blood shell that contained his spirit would be unseemly under the adoring gaze of his disciples.

“Bullets can’t harm me,” he shouted through the beat of the rain and wail of the alarm reverberating through the hospital doors.

His men broke from their stunned silence and cheered as he took a machete from one of them, wielding it with his uninjured arm. Auma didn't recognize the boy who had shot him, but he recognized the panic in his eyes. He recognized the power of it and how it turned the rest against him. They shouted demands for the blood of the boy who only moments ago had been their comrade.

He swung the blade into the boy's arm in roughly the same place he himself had been wounded.

"Pick him up!" he shouted when his victim's knees buckled.

Two men obeyed and Auma continued his work with the machete. It was poorly maintained, making the effort greater than it should have been. Eventually, though, he was rewarded with a severed arm lying in the mud.

"An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. And an arm for an arm."

This time he spoke quietly enough that only those closest to him would hear. But his words would be repeated to the others. And not only the ones who had accompanied him on this raid. To ones who had been left at the encampment. It would become part of his legend. Part of his canon.

"Find the white man!"

Auma's fighters averted their eyes as he strode through the hallway. They'd found nothing, but there was no way that Chism had escaped. The facility was surrounded. Every road and path was being watched. Every village where he could take refuge had been infiltrated. He was there. Of that, Auma was certain. God had whispered it in his ear.

But time was running out. Dawn was bearing down on them and the rain was starting to abate. With the sunrise would come the Ugandan authorities.

"Burn it," he told his second-in-command—a nineteen-year-old who had proved eminently loyal in the seven years since Auma had captured him. "Start at the back. We'll drive him to us like an animal."

and die of old age. They were looking to inflict some pain before they finally met Allah.

Rapp coughed into his hand and checked it for blood. There hadn't been any for months, but it was a habit that was proving hard to break. He'd managed to prevent Halabi from smuggling a deadly pathogen across the Mexican border, but had contracted the disease in the process. The docs still seemed surprised that he was alive. And, in truth, so was he. He'd spent longer than he cared to remember with machines breathing for him and, at its worst, death would have been preferable. As far as he was concerned, the next time a bioterror threat raised its ugly head, the fucking FBI could handle it.

The wheels touched down, but Rapp stayed in his seat as the other passengers prepared to disembark. He turned his phone back on and scrolled through the texts, searching for anything that suggested his impending operation had run into a snag. Nothing. As of that moment, it was still a go. His plans for a shower, steak, and some shut-eye before the briefing, though, definitely weren't.

Once the plane was more or less empty, he slung a small pack over his shoulder and started up the aisle. The crew near the door gave him a quizzical look as he approached and he reflexively turned his face away, mumbling the expected thanks.

Rapp had spent most of his adult life seeking anonymity and his current state wasn't helping that quest. His dark hair hadn't completely regrown and was in the uncontrollable stage between short enough to behave and long enough for gravity to take control. Thankfully, his beard had come back more quickly, effectively obscuring his lower face and leaving only his sunburned nose visible below mirrored sunglasses.

What really made him stand out, though, was the dust. It was still clinging to every part of him from his trip across Yemen and Saudi Arabia. The loaded Range Rover he'd been promised had been on fire when he found it and there hadn't been a lot of other options. So, instead of making the trip cradled in leather and caressed by air-

The door leading into the cafeteria was open a couple of inches—left that way by the brief search they'd heard earlier. He peered out at the lines of empty tables. Smoke was just barely visible, creating a haze that hung beneath a sprinkler system that must have been disabled.

Not ideal.

Chism stood and returned to the hatch, pulling it fully open. "Come up. We've got to get out of here."

By the time they slipped into the cafeteria, the main lights were out and the smoke was thick enough to burn his eyes. From now on, they'd be navigating by the red glow of emergency illumination.

A quick peek into the hallway confirmed that it was empty and that the fire was at the back of the facility.

"What?" Ricci said. "What do you see?"

"Too much," Chism responded.

"What does that mean?"

He pulled back and pressed himself against the wall, looking into the tearing eyes of his two companions.

"There's no reason for Auma to come all this way to attack a hospital. And he set the back on fire. The front looks clear."

"What are you saying?"

"That the only thing of value in this place is us. He makes his money stealing, drug dealing, and kidnapping locals. I figure he's going for the big score."

"What are we going to do?"

"There aren't many choices," Chism admitted. "I figure he set the fire to try to flush us into the parking lot."

"Where he's waiting," Ricci said.

"Yeah."

"Maybe we should go," Liu said. "He will ask for money. Mr. Ward will pay and he will let us go."

"No," Matteo Ricci said with surprising firmness. "You're the only thing here that's valuable, David. I will die a horrible death. And, as a woman, Jing's will be . . . unimaginable."



“Agreed,” Chism said. “So that leaves only one option. We go through the fire and out the back. They won’t expect it and they won’t be waiting for us there.”

“We’ll be burned to death,” Liu said.

“Nah. We’ll be fine.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because I’m super lucky.”

# 1

THE WHITE HOUSE  
WASHINGTON, DC  
USA

**C**IA director Irene Kennedy stepped into the president's outer office and paused to take in her surroundings. The changes had continued in earnest since the last time she was there. The décor and artwork were even more modern and now the carpet had been replaced with a wood floor that bounced sound around the room.

The desk of the president's secretary—a barely controlled disaster over the last two administrations—was now the picture of minimalist, high-tech efficiency. As was the woman sitting behind it.

The fact that so much effort was being put into something as trivial as redecorating suggested a return to what passed for normalcy in Washington. Six months ago, a terrorist group had managed to take down the entire US power grid and keep it down for more than a month. The consequences had been dire, with hundreds of thousands of Americans dead of cold, violence, and lack of medical care. Countless devastating fires caused by exploding electrical substations,

sagging power lines, and desperate people trying to stay warm had raged throughout the country. And, finally, the world's economy had collapsed in reaction to its most powerful engine being taken off-line.

The effects would reverberate for years, but the worst was over. Power had been restored to all but a few rural outposts in the Northwest, critical manufacturing and agriculture were fully back online, and areas wiped out by fires were being rebuilt. After months of world governments being too focused on the crises in front of them to create new ones, moves were once again being made on the geopolitical chessboard. Moves that it was her job to neutralize.

"Dr. Kennedy?" the president's secretary said, glancing up from her monitor. "You can go in. He's expecting you."

She entered an Oval Office that was all but unrecognizable. The wallpaper was gone, as were the traditional pleated curtains. Furniture had been updated to something that leaned toward midcentury modern, and artwork had slipped into the abstract. Only the Resolute Desk and flags remained.

The man walking toward her seemed to fit perfectly with the environment he'd created. At forty-four, Anthony Cook was one of the youngest presidents in US history. He'd managed to rise from the turmoil created by the suicide of his party's front-runner, crushing the more conventional replacement candidates endorsed by the establishment. The American people had been fed up with business as usual for a long time and that, combined with the hardship brought about by the electrical grid failure, had sent them on a search for someone different.

Anthony Cook, for better or worse, was it.

"Irene," he said, taking her hand. "It's good to see you."

She wasn't sure that was entirely true. Her relationship with his predecessor had been one of mutual respect and occasionally even warmth. Cook seemed to be incapable of either. He was a ruthless man, though one with an admittedly impressive grasp of history and America's challenges going forward. A born politician who had spent

his life immersed in that world but who still managed to portray himself as an outsider. A common man who had infiltrated the political elite and was now positioned to transform it.

None of this was necessarily bad. Politics was theater and a fair amount of melodrama was necessary to get people to the polls. But what was behind the persona Cook had created? Where was he going? What did he want? Due to his understandable focus since he took office on putting America back on track, they hadn't interacted enough for Kennedy to get a true measure of the man.

He pointed her toward a conversation area, and she made note of his broad shoulders, narrow waist, and full head of hair. In his years as a political strategist, he'd been very different—a scrawny intellectual with fiery charisma, a gift for picking winners, and an icy, realpolitik view of the average American.

By the time he'd thrown his own hat into the ring, though, he'd reinvented himself. *President* Cook was good looking, physically imposing, and impeccably dressed. He oozed concern for every one of the three hundred and thirty million people under his care. He was the man with the answers. The man who would lead America into a future so bright it was blinding.

"I'm not sure you know our guest, Irene."

From behind, the man sitting on one of the sofas looked very much like everyone else in Washington—blue suit, nice posture, expensive haircut with a little gray at the temples. But when he put down his coffee cup and stood, he proved to be much more than one of the political operatives that infested the beltway.

As the world's first trillionaire, Nicholas Ward needed little introduction. He was a genius in every sense of the word who had stepped back from controlling his business empire to run a massive foundation that he'd charged with nothing less ambitious than solving the problems of humanity. Health care, renewable energy, employment, violence, poverty—if something had plagued society since the dawn of time, Ward figured he could fix it in the next twenty years.

A bit optimistic in her estimation, but he was a hard man to dismiss. Impossible, really.

“You look good, Nick. Africa seems to agree with you.”

“Don’t be fooled. It’s all biting insects and sunburn.”

She leaned in and he kissed her on the cheek.

“I take it you *do* know each other,” the president said, failing to hide a hint of irritation that Kennedy found a bit worrying. She hadn’t been told what this meeting was about or that the most powerful private citizen in the world would be in attendance. Had it been an attempt at a subtle power play that had now backfired?

Not yet sure how to navigate the environment that Cook had created, she was grateful when Ward answered.

“Irene and I are in the same business—we both want to keep people safe and healthy. That’s landed us at a few of the same conferences and participating on the same panels.” He flashed the everyman smile that he was known for. “I figure the fact that she hasn’t had me killed yet makes us friends.”

Fairly close friends, in fact. Their relationship had been cemented by a recent bioterrorism event that she’d had no choice but to bring him in on. The long days, long nights, and logistical nightmares they’d faced had given her a healthy respect and personal affection for the man. He was one of the most impressive people she had ever met and seemed to honestly have the good of mankind at heart. The fact that some of his views were a bit naïve was more than overcome by his enthusiasm and almost supernatural competence.

“I heard what happened in Uganda, but the details that have reached my desk are still sketchy. We have limited resources in that area and I’m not sure the local government’s fully on top of things.”

“I can guarantee you they’re not. That’s why I’m here.”

“Why don’t you give us the rundown on what you know,” the president said, reasserting his dominance by pointing everyone to a seat and then taking one himself.

“Our facility was attacked by Gideon Auma’s forces. The hospital

director managed to evacuate most of the people before it happened, but the ones who stayed—including him—were killed. The exception may be David Chism and his two research assistants. They were there at the outset of the attack, but now they've disappeared."

"My understanding is that the facility burned," Kennedy said. "It seems likely that they were inside."

"That was our assumption, but our people are going through the rubble and haven't found any bodies."

"Are you sure that Auma doesn't have them?" Kennedy said. "I wouldn't be surprised if you got a call pretty soon asking for ransom. In fact, it seems to be the most likely reason he'd attack a facility that has nothing he needs and that's well outside his normal operating theater."

"It's possible," Ward admitted. "But we have people on the ground telling us that there's significant guerrilla activity in the forest to the east of the facility. As though they're searching for something."

"Irene?" the president prompted.

She leaned back and instinctively reached for a cup of tea that wasn't there. Another reminder that the Alexander administration was gone.

"I understand the importance of David Chism, Nick. Believe me I do. But the chances that he's still alive seem low to me. More likely he was hiding in the building when it started to burn. Maybe even in a safe room designed specifically for this kind of event. My guess is that a more thorough search of the ruins will turn up his body and the bodies of his team."

"But are you sure?"

"No," she admitted.

"What if they escaped into the jungle?"

"That's a big 'what if,'" the president said.

"But with what's on the line, it seems like one worth pursuing."

The two men locked eyes for a moment, but it was hard to know exactly what passed between them. The fact that they had crossed swords years ago when Cook was the governor of California was well known.

“When you say this is worth pursuing, I assume you mean by me?” Cook said a bit coldly.

“The Ugandan government has some rescue workers on-site, but they’re already starting to pull out. And they say they don’t want to bring in troops to search for my people because they’re concerned that the Congolese will see it as a provocation. In truth, though, it’s more likely that they’re not prepared to engage Auma right now for political reasons.”

“And they’re making the assumption that Chism’s dead,” Cook said, standing. “Which is almost certainly correct.” He offered his hand. “Thanks for bringing this to our attention, Nicholas. Irene and I will talk about it and let you know what we come up with.”

To his credit, the wealthiest man in history took being dismissed gracefully, shaking hands with the president, and nodding in Kennedy’s direction before leaving the Oval Office.

“Thoughts?” Cook said, taking a seat again.

“Setting David Chism aside for a moment, Gideon Auma is the leader of a terrorist organization that’s allied with Islamic extrem—”

“But he’s a regional threat,” Cook interrupted, once again displaying his grasp of international issues. “And he’s only a Muslim when it’s convenient to him. He uses Christianity, animism, and anything else he can come up with just as easily. The truth is that he’s a messianic cult leader who’s never going to stir up any trouble outside of Uganda and the DRC.”

*Stir up any trouble* was a disturbingly trivial assessment of the situation on the ground. The level of brutality Gideon Auma had unleashed on that part of Africa would shock even a hardened ISIS operative. The human suffering was hard to ignore, though Cook had a gift for that when the cameras weren’t on him.

“Regional threats have a way of expanding in unpredictable ways, Mr. President. It’s a lesson we’ve learned over and over.”

He frowned and folded his arms across his chest. “I’m not convinced. And as far as Chism goes, you and I both know he’s dead. Sci-

entists don't just run through flaming buildings and then turn into Rambo in the African jungle."

"But if he's not? Based on what I know about his work, it would be hard to overstate his importance—both to America and to mankind in general. Another concern I have is that if he *is* alive and Auma captures him, Nick will pay whatever it takes to get him back. With a few hundred million dollars in his pocket, Auma could expand his influence."

"Next steps?"

"Send Mitch Rapp to Uganda. Let him make a recommendation from the ground."

"No. Not Rapp."

"Why not?"

"He's too valuable an asset and we both know this is a waste of time." He stood again and this time it was Kennedy's turn to be dismissed. "Keep my people posted of any developments and in the meantime, I'll give this some thought. Until you hear from me, though, we're staying out of it."

"Yes, sir."

He started back to his desk as she crossed the office toward the door. Her hand had barely touched the knob when he spoke again.

"And on the subject of Mitch Rapp. I'd like to meet him."

"I'll let him know, sir."

"But what are the chances that Chism is alive? Ten percent? Less?"

Anthony Cook's wife, Catherine, saw everything in terms of numbers. It was a bias that had served her well during her time as one of the world's most successful hedge fund managers. And it had been even more helpful during his rise through the political swamp. Simply put, he wouldn't be sitting in the White House residence without her icy calculations.

"Can't be much more than that," Cook agreed.

She took a seat on a sofa across from him and looked up, staring at a blank white section of the ceiling to collect her thoughts. She was



still extremely attractive at forty-two, with long dark hair pulled back, an athletic build maintained with the same diligence as his own, and a pale, unlined face. Their union had produced two sons—one with significant potential and one completely useless—but the bond between them had never really been sexual. In fact, he wouldn't bet his life on the fact that she was even attracted to men. It didn't matter, though. Their goals were perfectly aligned, and neither was interested in anything that didn't relate to the achievement of those goals.

"I've quietly sold all our stock relating to Nick's health care companies and reinvested the money in competitors who'll benefit from Chism's death. Valuations are already starting to move based on the rumors coming out of Uganda. We've made millions since the markets opened and stand to make tens of millions more. And so do a lot of other people. I don't think a lot of tears will be shed around the world if Nicholas Ward takes a hit."

What she said was an understatement of truly grand proportions. Ward was looking to transform health care worldwide, and Chism's vaccine research was one of the cornerstones of that effort. Combined with Ward's work in medical artificial intelligence and his ideas about decentralizing and democratizing the medical industry, they had the status quo under serious threat. Further, wealth creation seemed to be becoming an increasingly zero-sum game. Every time Ward won, there was some billionaire or corporation that lost. Virtually no one could keep up with him and the few who could, he hired.

"But all that hinges on him really being dead," Cook pointed out.

She nodded. "There's opportunity here for us. The question is do we want to exploit it. So far, we've been fairly conservative in our actions. But we're only three and a half years from the next election. At some point, we're going to have to move forward."

"Explain."

"First, there's no question that we need to send a team to Uganda to try to find Chism. We know how Ward feels about us but to date he hasn't gotten too deeply involved in politics. We don't need him re-

thinking that and staking out a position against your administration. I think we both agree there's no chance of turning him into an ally, but if we do him this favor, we might be able to neutralize him as an enemy."

"So, we try to get Chism back?" the president said.

"I didn't say that."

He thought for a moment. "So, we just put on a show."

"It's a bit of a tightrope walk but I imagine a doable one. Make enough of an effort to impress Ward but not so much that we have any chance of succeeding. And make sure that the right people know they owe us for that failure."

"So, we send in an inadequate force with the excuse that we prioritized stealth and didn't want to create an incident with the Ugandan government. Maybe we even lose a few of them. That'd make our commitment look even greater. Ward would have a hard time complaining about the failure of a rescue mission that ended up with American soldiers in body bags."

"Agreed," Catherine said.

"What about Kennedy? She'll see through it."

"She'll object to not being in the loop and privately criticize the details of the operation, but that's all. She doesn't believe Chism is alive any more than we do, and she knows her job is hanging on by a thread."

"Maybe it's time to cut that thread. Keeping her on has played well up to this point, but she's dangerous. You'd have to be an idiot to think she didn't have something to do with Christine Barnett's suicide. And if she'd do it to her, she'll do it to me."

Christine Barnett had been his party's leader before her sudden and very unexpected death. While he owed his presidency to the fact that she was now rotting away in her mausoleum, the path she'd taken there was well beyond suspicious.

"There's no evidence of that at all, Tony."

"Come on. There's no way that arrogant bitch offed herself. She thought she was the second coming of Jesus. Kennedy found the skeletons in her closet and quietly did away with her before she could get

her hands on the Oval Office. The problem is that we've got a few skeletons, too, and in order to keep hold of the White House we're going to be collecting more. I don't want to spend my life looking over my shoulder for Irene Kennedy."

"I agree that she was probably involved in Christine's death and that she has to go. But I don't see this as a pressing issue. Kennedy still has a lot of support on both sides of the aisle and the longer she stays, the less political it will look when we put her out to pasture."

"What about Mitch Rapp?"

"Obviously, he has the potential to be a powerful tool. And he's a simpler creature than Kennedy. He wears his motivations on his sleeve—love of country, loyalty to his comrades. He still sees America as a shining tower on a hill. Those kinds of delusions are easily manipulated."

"You're underestimating him, Cathy."

"Not at all. I'm just thinking out loud. In any event, I'm anxious to be introduced. If nothing else, it'll be interesting to look into the eyes of a man like him."

## 2

SOUTHWESTERN VIRGINIA  
USA

“**B**EYOND the laser, the system uses downrange drones to measure wind, humidity, temperature variations, and such. They do all the work and then signal the rifle. We kept the trigger, though. For you old-school guys.”

Mitch Rapp frowned and glanced at the man in his peripheral vision. A soldier on loan to DARPA, he looked impossibly young. The kind of kid who would just stare blankly if anyone mentioned a fax machine or that phones were once attached to walls. The world seemed to be transforming into a place where anyone over eighteen had one foot in the nursing home.

“Just pull it and put the crosshairs on the target, sir.”

Rapp did as he was told. The sniper rifle’s trigger had a game controller feel to it, moving no more than a millimeter before offering a click that he supposed some people considered satisfying. But that was all. No crack of a round leaving the barrel. No recoil or stench of gunpowder. The weapon just sat there.

“I’d be better if I could actually shoot something,” Rapp said as he maintained the crosshairs on a target three thousand meters to the north. The only movement was the slight jiggle every time his heart beat.

“The system’s waiting for the moment when your aim comes together with all the environmental factors, sir. It’s about patience.”

Not Rapp’s long suit, but it was something he’d been working on. The last six months had been about catching up with a life that had gotten out of control. He’d hired a physical therapist who’d taken one look at his X-rays and saw her kids’ college tuition paid for. Which turned out to be money well spent because in less than half a year, she had his aches and pains down to a dull roar. Even better, he now had some data to assess his physical condition and create a realistic strategy for improving it. He’d never perform like he had when he was thirty, but with the right training plan, he wouldn’t be that far off.

And so here he was, familiarizing himself with new technologies that he’d managed to ignore over the last few years. To what end, he wasn’t entirely sure. He’d never met the new president, and the rest of Washington was fully focused on deflecting blame for the grid attack. It was something that Rapp would never understand. At some point, wouldn’t it be easier to just do a competent job than to spend all your time covering your ass?

The kick came from nowhere, accompanied by the muted crack of the round leaving the rifle’s silencer. The baby-faced sergeant peered through his spotting scope and smiled smugly. “Hit.”

Rapp stood and dusted himself off, scanning the men standing around him. Scott Coleman, Joe Maslick, and Bruno McGraw first, but then letting his gaze fall on Charlie Wicker. The incredibly gifted sniper had been part of his core team for years.

“Wick, you’re fired.”

“Shiiiiit,” the diminutive Wyoming native said, drawing out the word for a full two seconds. “What happens if there’s sand blowing around? Or it’s raining? Or if someone shoots down one of those fancy

drones? Hell, what happens if the target's moving? They do that sometimes, you know."

Rapp turned his attention to the man guiding them through all this technology.

"It's not perfect," he admitted. "But in the right conditions, it can turn an average sniper into . . . Well, into Charlie Wicker."

"All right," Rapp conceded. "You're rehired. But you're on notice."

Wick grinned and raised his middle finger.

"What's next?" Coleman said. "Are there jet packs?"

"Jet packs? Um, no."

"You guys have been promising me a jet pack since I got into this business. When are you going to deliver?"

"We can get them in the air, but the range is crap, sir. The more fuel you put in them, the heavier they get. It's physics, you know?"

"What about those night vision eye drops?" Bruno McGraw said. "You've been saying they're six months out for years now."

"Those actually work," the sergeant said. "But they make everything green and kind of hazy. So, you can see at night but only about ten feet before you can't tell a human from a signpost. It's coming, though."

"Let me guess. Six months?"

"You said it, not me. Until then, let me show you something else you might be interested in."

They trailed him up a dirt track toward an old cabin on a ridge. The sun was starting to get low on the horizon, bringing temperatures back down into the seventies and signaling the winding down of a day that had started before dawn. An interesting day, though. The march of technology had turned into a sprint and Rapp knew that sticking his head in the sand wasn't an option. In a world where some dumbass who'd never picked up a rifle could take you out from three thousand yards, it was evolve or die.

The wood and asphalt-shingle structure looked like it was in the process of collapse, with no glass in the windows and no door in the

frame. It contained a single room with a table in the middle and seven high-tech mannequins sitting or standing around it.

“I think you’re going to like this,” the DARPA man said, tapping what looked like an aerosol paint can centered on the table. “It’s basically a Taser grenade. Let’s say you want to clear a room with an unknown number of combatants. What do you do? Not many options. Probably your best bet is to throw in a flashbang and roll through the door hoping the enemy is sufficiently disoriented.”

“How does it work?” Rapp asked.

“Push the red button and in three seconds, twelve heat-seeking cables shoot out.” He snapped his fingers. “Everyone goes down just like that.”

“Bullshit,” Coleman said. “You’ve got enough power in that little can to take down twelve full-grown men?”

“We’ve refined the waveform. Less energy, more impact. But you don’t have to take my word for it. These dummies are heated to body temperature and have sensors in them that’ll give us electrical discharge numbers.”

“I’m not an engineer,” Rapp said. “I’m not going to bet my life and the lives of my team on a computer printout.”

“Sir, we—”

“So, this is a fully functional prototype?”

“Yes, sir. It’s—”

Rapp reached over and pushed the button. After a pause of less than half a second, the young sergeant sprinted through the empty door frame. His guys all just looked around, silently daring each other to move.

“I still can’t feel my lips,” Joe Maslick said, bringing a beer to them. “Do you think that’s permanent?”

Everyone just shrugged.

Rapp finished off his own beer and then glanced around the crowded bar for their waitress.

“So, what now?” Coleman said. “Power’s on and the world’s getting back to its normal fucked-up self. We’re tan, rested, and tech savvy. The calls for contracts are rolling in again.”

“You should take them,” Rapp said.

“That’s it? That’s your advice? ‘You should take them?’”

“Look, I have no relationship with the new president and I might never have one. Hell, I’m not even sure I want to.”

“What’s Dr. Kennedy think about him?” McGraw asked.

“Last I talked to her, she didn’t know what to make of him yet.”

“So, what’s *your* plan?” Coleman asked.

“I’m headed to South Africa. Claudia and Anna are already there.”

“I mean on a more philosophical level. Do you find yourself surfing for country clubs?”

“Not yet.”

“Then join us. Full time. SEAL Demolition and Salvage’s newest recruit.”

“I don’t remember that working out so well last time.”

“No more celebrity protection, I promise. None of us are starving and that gives us the luxury to pick and choose. And we recently went to a fully democratic model. Everyone votes on whether to take a contract and it has to be unanimous. So, only interesting stuff that pays obscene amounts of money.”

Rapp shook his head, still searching for their waitress. “Look, I’ll always back you guys up if you need it. You know that. But right now, I’ve got a chance to back away for a while. And I’m going to take it.” He stood. “Anyone else need another drink?”

A couple of hands went up and he headed for the bar. The people behind it were just as overworked as his waitress, so he found a stool and settled in. For the first time in years, he had time to wait.

ISIS and al-Qaeda were on the ropes and increasingly turning inward. The Russians were still up to no good but had chosen Facebook as their primary battlefield. The Chinese were a significant threat, but despite a little naval posturing, that threat was largely economic.



Finally, the world was moving away from oil, causing the Middle East to slowly lose its strategic importance.

And America? It was being taken over by corrupt politicians, a mainstream media bent on whipping up divisions, and an Internet full of crazies.

And while all those threats were very real and as dangerous as anything he'd ever faced, they weren't the kind he was equipped to resolve.

His phone rang and he looked down at the caller information—or more precisely, lack thereof. Irene Kennedy. Impeccable timing as usual. Sometimes he wondered if she had the ability to read his mind.

“Yeah,” he said, picking up.

“How's the training going?”

“Good.”

“Find any interesting new toys?”

“Maybe. Or maybe it'd be better to leave them for the next generation.”

“You sound a bit dejected.”

Rapp caught the bartender's eye, tapping his empty beer bottle before holding up three fingers.

“Dejected? Maybe. Or maybe relieved. It's been a long road and now I may have reached the end of it. Alive.”

“It's a brave new world. There's no question of that. But you've always kept step.”

“This time I'm not sure I want to.”

“In that case, I have some bad news.”

“What?”

“President Cook wants to meet you.”

“Why?”

“I don't know. It's possible that it has something to do with what happened in Uganda. Have you been following that?”

“No.”

“That's okay. More likely he just wants to size you up. See if you're someone his administration can use.”

“Use,” Rapp repeated, knowing that Kennedy always chose her words carefully. “Can I take it that he hasn’t grown on you?”

“I never said that.”

“Word is that you’re letting Mike handle him.”

Mike Nash was a former operator who had become Kennedy’s right-hand man. A good-looking, endlessly likable Marine, he had a gift for dealing with the assholes on Capitol Hill. Rapp and he had been friends for years and, in fact, lived only a few houses from each other in a private subdivision west of DC.

“Like you, I’m trying to regain a little of my life. The lull we’re coming to the end of has reminded me how much I’ve given up.”

He was a bit jealous. The truth was that he’d never really had much of a life. Getting one back had to be easier than acquiring one for the first time.

“Fine. I’ll be back tomorrow. Then I have a couple days before I leave for Cape Town. If he can fit a meeting into that window, I’ll make it work. If not, he’ll have to wait until I get back.”

“Which will be when?”

“I don’t know,” he said as the bartender returned with his beers. “Maybe never.”

# 3

## SOUTHWESTERN UGANDA

**G**REEN.

It was the word that had overtaken *lucky* to describe David Chism's world.

He knew that his takeaway from all this should be terror. Or despair. Or rage. But it wasn't. It was the color that surrounded him, pressed against him, closed in around him.

He crouched among the ferns and mossy vines, listening intently for a few moments. Nothing. Just the rustle of leaves and the calls of a few birds. Visibility was no more than ten feet and all he could smell was jungle rot and a hint of smoke from what he assumed were the smoldering remains of his life's work.

Nature's sensory deprivation chamber.

Finding no reason not to continue downslope, he stood and did so carefully. He'd never traveled through anything this dense before, but it wasn't completely foreign. Mukisa Odongo had taught him a great deal about the terrain on their expeditions to find novel insect species and those still-elusive mountain gorillas. And now Odongo was dead.

For some reason Chism was absolutely certain of that. He could feel his absence.

What the hell was going on in this world? His friend Vicky Schaefer had recently been murdered in Yemen, where she was trying to control a deadly new coronavirus. And her team—a mirror of his own—hadn't fared any better. All any of them wanted to do was help people.

Now his research facility was a pile of ashes. His people and patients were either scattered or dead. His active experiments were destroyed.

How the fuck could this be happening? It was like a big green nightmare he couldn't wake up from.

Chism arrived at the stream he was looking for and lay down next to it, using his filthy shirt to filter water into a plastic bottle he'd found. The night of their escape had been hard as hell, but with the rain, drinking water hadn't been an issue. Cold and the terrain had been their biggest enemies. Last night—their second in the forest—hadn't been so uncomfortable, but now thirst and hunger were starting to become an issue.

“Doctor Cheesmee!”

He froze at the sound of the shout, trying to pinpoint its direction and distance.

“Daveed Cheesmee! We help you! We Ugandan army!”

He seriously doubted it. There had been no aircraft in the area and based on his lengthy political conversations with Odongo, the Ugandan government was wary of sending troops to this region. Much more likely, the shout was a siren song from one of Gideon Auma's men.

Chism had tried to convince himself that Auma's goal was to steal everything that wasn't nailed down and exchange it for narcotics, weapons, and whatever else it was that kept his death cult operating. Now, though, it was impossible to deny that his men were in search of something bigger. If Chism let himself fall into their hands, they could ransom him back to Nick Ward. And that'd be real money.

When the voice called out again it sounded more distant, so Chism began working his way back up the slope. It took well over an hour, but he finally reached a wall of dirt and rock near the top of one of the mountains that stretched endlessly in every direction. To the west he could see what was left of the hospital—a black smear at the edge of the red dirt road that passed in front of it.

He eased along the steep slope, entering a bank of morning fog that significantly reduced visibility. The ground turned slick, and he tested every foot placement before committing. Just because he could no longer see what was to his left didn't mean it wasn't there. One misstep and he'd find himself cartwheeling hundreds of feet before getting hung up in the trees below.

Calling his destination a cave would be an exaggeration. It was more a deep impression covered with woven branches to camouflage the entrance. He rustled them in the coded rhythm that Jing Liu had insisted on and then passed into the gloom.

The space was tight—maybe ten feet square. The sloping dirt walls were still clinging to the moisture from two nights ago, creating a misty humidity that tasted like mold and earth. Fortunately, the heat wasn't bad. Uganda's weather could be counted on to hover somewhere between the high seventies during the day and mid-sixties at night.

Liu was sitting near the south wall, knees pulled to her chest, staring through the thick air at nothing. She didn't seem to notice him crossing her field of vision and kneeling next to Matteo Ricci. While Chism's luck had held during their unlikely escape from the hospital, the Italian had been less fortunate. His right pants leg had caught fire and had melted to his thigh. The wound was painful, but not as painful as being forced to acknowledge how much polyester had been present in his stylish slacks. The inevitable infection, though, was going to be a serious problem.

"Were you able to call for help?" Ricci said, sounding even weaker than when Chism had left a few hours before.

"I wasn't able to get signal. But maybe a little later."

It was a lie, of course. The cell tower that serviced the area had been part of the facility Auma's people had burned.

"Water?"

"That I managed to get. But you're going to have to hang on for a few more hours. It's got to sit in the sun for a while to disinfect. I have no idea what's in that stream. Maybe—"

"We have to get out of here," Liu blurted. "We cannot sleep another night in a hole."

Chism let out a long breath and turned toward her.

"We've talked about this, Jing. There are people out there trying to capture us."

"But they say they from the Ugandan army. They trying to help us."

"No, they're not," Chism said firmly. "They're Auma's men. And wherever they want to take us, I guarantee it's going to be a hell of a lot worse than where we are now."

"Then what?" Ricci said, pushing himself to his elbows in the thatch he was lying on. "We can't stay here forever."

"Look, there are things we can eat in the forest. We have access to water. The weather forecast was for clear skies after the storm we had the night of the attack. We're okay here for a while. And Nick will send people to help us."

"He thinks we dead," Liu said. "No one coming."

"That's not true. When Auma doesn't contact him for ransom and our bodies don't turn up, Nick will have to start working under the assumption we're alive. He didn't make a trillion dollars by just giving up when things turn ugly."

# 4

WEST OF MANASSAS  
VIRGINIA  
USA

**R**APP walked through his gate and used a remote control to close it behind him. The structure inside was designed to be half house, half bunker but was starting to feel mostly like the latter with Claudia and Anna gone. Surprisingly, a couple of weeks of freezer food and silence was all it had taken to make the concrete walls start to close in.

It was only 10 a.m., but temperatures were already pushing into the mid-eighties as he started up a road scattered with houses and empty lots. He knew the owners of each one—all old friends who could handle a weapon. Some a little long in the tooth, but still loyal and better than nothing if the shit ever hit the fan.

Creating a neighborhood full of shooters had been his brother's idea and it was he who had provided the incentive—buying up the entire subdivision and selling off the lots for a dollar to the right people.

The plan had been to create an oasis where Rapp could let his guard drop a bit. And it had worked. At least for a while.

Rapp was unaccustomed to wearing a suit and was already starting to sweat through it when he approached a barn on the right. It had originally been designated as a shooting range and gym but had been commandeered by the burgeoning agricultural operation dreamed up by Scott Coleman and his seven-year-old accomplice, Anna Gould. A sizable plot had been fenced off that spring and was now alive with various experimental crops. A group of sheep, led by the formidable Snowball, was testing the barrier for weakness and eyeing up the new grazing potential.

Rapp had resisted the shift to farming but was now glad he'd lost that particular battle. Coleman was at his happiest when he was screwing with plants and livestock. Except maybe for when he was perched on top of the tractor he'd had airbrushed with ghost flames and skulls.

Even better, it gave some of Rapp's retired neighbors a reason to get out of bed in the morning—particularly when Coleman was out on an op. And, selfishly, it made the subdivision even more self-sufficient. Something that would have come in handy if he hadn't been able to get America's lights back on.

Rapp finally turned into a yard strewn with toys and sports equipment. Mike Nash appeared in the front door of the house a moment later holding a couple of go-cups and a file folder.

"That's an upgrade!" he said, nodding in Rapp's direction. "Claudia finally shit-canned that suit you got at Kmart, huh?"

It hadn't actually been Kmart, but there was no point in splitting hairs. And that was exactly what she'd done—with an appropriate ceremony and exaggerated expression of disgust. He tended to own precisely two suits: one winter, one summer. And while that number hadn't changed, the quality of the merchandise definitely had.

"Maggie told me we have to take the kidmobile," Nash said, offering Rapp one of the cups before heading toward a minivan parked in



front of the garage. Rapp climbed in the other side, sweeping a baseball mitt from the seat before settling in.

“You ready for this, Mitch?”

Rapp looked out the window, catching his reflection in it. His beard had grown back in and his shoulder-length hair was neatly combed for the occasion. Most striking, though, was the strange pallor to his skin. The lack of Middle Eastern operations over the last six months had kept him out of the desert sun and Claudia was quite the sunscreen Nazi. She’d become convinced that it wouldn’t be a bullet that killed him. It’d be skin cancer.

“I guess.”

“Don’t sound so excited. How are Claudia and Anna doing in Cape Town?”

“Good.”

“Are you going to go see them?”

“Yeah. Tonight.”

“Gonna stay for a while?”

“Don’t know.” A lie, but for now a convenient one.

“Man. You are a riveting conversationalist this morning.”

Rapp leaned back in the seat and glanced over at his old friend. “Tell me about him.”

“The president? Not that much to say that hasn’t been said before. He’s smart and focused as hell. After six months in office, though, he’s frustrated with the process. As a former governor who had a lot of support from local government, he’s finding it hard to wrap his arms around Washington. He wants to get things done but you know how it is. Ten roadblocks for every three feet of asphalt.”

“What about his wife?”

“Ah, you’re not as out of the loop as you pretend to be,” Nash said. “Excellent question. She’s even smarter than he is but doesn’t have his touch with the common man. Her element is more a private jet full of Harvard PhDs. It’s a weakness she’s conscious of and working on,

though. We'll see how it goes. What I can tell you is that she's a full fifty percent of that team. To the point that it's a mistake to think of the president as one person. It's more like Anthony Cook is the right brain and Catherine's the left."

Rapp nodded but didn't otherwise respond.

"Irene doesn't like them. Did she tell you that? She thinks they come off as a little ambitious," Nash said.

"Ambitious with their agenda for the country or with accumulating power?"

"That's a hard question to answer. You know better than I do that there's a fair amount of overlap between those two things."

"Try."

"This I can tell you: Anthony Cook feels like he's the first president of the new era. He understands the shifts in the geopolitical landscape, in technology, and in culture. And while he's informed by history, he tends not to look back too much. His eyes are locked on what's next. He wants to knock two hundred and fifty years of dust off the country and put us firmly back into a leadership position."

"They all do at first," Rapp said. "But he'll end up like the rest. Flailing around, putting out fires, and collecting donations. Then he'll be gone."

"Always the cynic. But yeah. Probably. I hope not, though. The way I see it, this country's in worse shape than it's been in since the Civil War. We're bankrupting ourselves. We're turning on each other. We're choosing leaders who are only interested in staying in office and don't even pretend to govern anymore. We're losing our focus on terrorism while Islamic radicals still have the ability to bloody us. The Chinese are on their way to dominating us economically and the Russians are getting way further than they should trolling us on the Internet . . ." His voice faded for a moment. "Take it from a guy who spends half his life inside the beltway, man. We need some real leadership in this country. And we need it now."

“Mitch!” Anthony Cook said, striding across the disorientingly modern Oval Office. “It’s a real honor to meet you.”

His overbearing grip caused his biceps to strain against a shirt that seemed to have been tailored for that exact purpose. Every time Rapp saw a picture of Cook, he seemed to have swollen a little more. Unlike the previous president, though, he wasn’t a former athlete. If Rapp had to guess, his impressive physique came as much from a syringe as from a gym.

“You’ve always put yourself at the center of the storm for this country,” he said, releasing Rapp’s hand and slapping Nash on the shoulder. “You both have. Now, grab a seat.”

They took opposite sides of a sofa and the president dropped into the chair across from them. “I have a lot of faults, but ingratitude isn’t one of them. So, let me start by thanking you for my job, Mitch. If you hadn’t gotten the power back on, I’d be governing four million square miles of dead bodies and scavengers. The reason this country still exists is because of you. Period.”

Rapp nodded respectfully, trying to hide his discomfort. He’d spent his life pursuing anonymity and being gushed over by the president of the United States was pretty much the opposite. If it had been up to him, he’d have given the FBI credit for saving the grid and faded comfortably back into the woodwork.

“Sorry,” Cook said, demonstrating his famous ability to read people. “I’m embarrassing you. I know. But it had to be said and now I’m done. I promise.”

“Yes, sir,” Rapp said simply. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Nash grinning at his discomfort.

“Obviously, we’re still mopping up the mess,” Cook continued. “But I think we as Americans—including me—learned a lot about ourselves during that crisis. And not all of it was positive. What do you think?”

“I’m not sure I’m qualified to offer an opinion, sir. My area of expertise is pretty narrow.”

Cook laughed out loud at that. “Beautifully put. But still, you must have an opinion. If not as an expert, as a citizen.”

Rapp let out a long breath. “I think your analysis is fair. A terrorist attack like that should have pulled the country together but it seemed like it pushed us further apart. Obviously, you had to expect that it would *eventually* turn into an every-man-for-himself scenario. That’s just the way survival goes. What surprised me was that people started turning on each other before their freezers even melted. And it wasn’t even about anything real. Political differences and conspiracy theories, mostly.”

Cook nodded. “It was a Pearl Harbor moment and we showed that we’re a very different country than we were in 1941. I suppose some of that’s inevitable but still we need to get some of that magic back before it’s too late.”

“Yes, sir.”

Rapp could see why Kennedy was unsure about the man. Like all politicians, he was slick, but unlike his predecessor, Cook didn’t let that façade slip in private meetings. He was every bit as much the politician in the Oval Office as he was on the campaign trail. And while the imagery of lost magic played well on TV, it wouldn’t impress a woman who preferred to work in specifics.

“Unfortunately, that’s easier said than done,” Cook continued, examining Rapp from across the coffee table. “And that’s one of the reasons I wanted to meet you. You’re an anomaly in the government. A person who actually seems to be able to get things done. That makes you worth your weight in gold. To me. To the country. Even to the world.”

Now he was laying it on a bit thick. What Rapp had said earlier about having a narrow skill set was true. It was something he himself had recognized a long time ago but that still tricked others. In a way, killing terrorists was easy. The problem was about as straightforward as problems got and the solution was simple and permanent. The search for America’s mojo, on the other hand, wasn’t necessarily improved by a guy with a Glock.

“So, the question is this,” the president continued. “Are you still in? I know that transitions in administrations aren’t easy for someone in your position, but can I count on you like President Alexander did?”

It was a question that Rapp had been unsuccessfully working on for a while.

“If you have a problem and I’m the right man for the job, sir.”

A hedge for sure, but not one that was too obvious.

“That’s what I wanted to hear,” Cook said before turning toward Nash. “And now I know that Mike’s anxious to get on with my intelligence briefing. Do you want to sit in?”

“Thank you, sir, but I’m getting on a plane tonight and I haven’t even started packing.”

“I understand.” The president stood and held a hand out. “I’ll look forward to the next time. Enjoy your trip.”

Rapp started down the hallway thinking that his meeting had gone pretty well. No specific demands, loyalty pledges, or over-the-top power plays. Maybe Cook really had just wanted to meet and thank him for getting the lights back on.

“Mr. Rapp! Can I buy you a cup of coffee?”

The voice behind him was immediately recognizable from television and he turned reluctantly toward Catherine Cook. A warm smile was framed by hair worn a little looser than it had been during her stint as the First Lady of California. Her tailor had the same form-fitting aesthetic as her husband’s and the effect was to highlight what an attractive woman she was. No one disputed her brains and determination, but good looks could open doors, too.

“Sure,” he said, knowing he had no other option. “Thank you, ma’am.”

She led him back to her office and offered him a seat in front of her desk. “Black?”

“That’d be fine.”

She handed him a steaming cup and then scooted a chair into a

position that put them face-to-face. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I hope Tony didn’t make you blush. He’s a bit of a fanboy.”

“No, ma’am.”

She flashed that smile again and Rapp remembered what Nash had told him earlier about how she was trying to improve her interpersonal skills. It seemed to be working.

“It must be strange to be the guy every man wants to be. The secret agent who saves the world from the forces of evil. Gun in one hand, beautiful woman in the other.”

Rapp laughed. “I don’t remember the beautiful women. I do remember eating bugs, bullet wounds, and a couple bouts of malaria.”

“Once you put a romantic image in someone’s head, it’s hard to get it out.”

“I suppose.”

“I assume he asked you if you were on board to help us like you did Josh?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And what was your answer?”

“That I’d do what I can.”

Her smile was a little more subdued this time. “So vague and mysterious. Maybe politics was your true calling?”

“I don’t think so.”

She warmed her hands with her coffee cup in a way that reminded him of Irene Kennedy. The clarity of her eyes and the wheels spinning behind them wasn’t too far off, either.

“You know how dangerous the world is, Mitch. And I’m guessing you’ve noticed that those dangers are becoming more complicated. Closer to home.”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” he said, though he was pretty sure he did.

“Take the Russian power grid, for instance. You used it against them to get President Utkin to give up the name of their agent here.”

In truth, it had been Kennedy, not him. The United States had good penetration into the Russian system, and she'd put Moscow in the dark before threatening to take down the rest of the country if Utkin didn't give her what she wanted.

"Irene did."

"And thank God it worked, right? But it won't work again. They've already completely overhauled their cybersecurity and hardened their physical infrastructure. On the other hand, do you know what Tony's managed to accomplish by way of securing our own grid? Basically nothing. He's run headlong into a maze of bureaucracy, local politics, and congresspeople who won't lift a finger unless we offer them political favors."

"Doesn't surprise me."

"No, I suppose you've been around long enough that it wouldn't." She took a sip of her coffee. "And the Chinese are no different. Even with their huge population, they can turn on a dime if they have to. Then you have the multinational corporations who don't answer to anyone but their boards. And the growing number of billionaires who are all but above the law."

Rapp nodded, thinking that this was just another example of what he had been thinking about—problems that he couldn't solve and wanted nothing to do with.

"The world used to be pretty much the same century after century, Mitch. And despite the fact that the earth is constantly moving beneath our feet, we need to figure out how to pull this country together. To put it back on top and position it to stay there."

"I don't envy you," Rapp said honestly. "But this is all way above my pay grade. I deal with external physical threats. That's it."

"What if that's not where the danger's coming from? What if it's coming from inside?"

"I don't know."

She nodded thoughtfully. "Good answer. Because it's not an easy

question. Could you do me a favor, though, and put it in the back of your mind? Where do you think this country needs to go? How are we going to get there? And what role would you like to have in that? Because in Tony's administration your pay grade can be whatever you want it to be."



# 5

## SOUTHWESTERN UGANDA

**L**IEUTENANT Jeremiah Grant wasn't sure if his current situation was best described as a shit show or a clusterfuck. But it was one of those for sure. In fact, he'd never been so sure of anything in his life.

It had all started out so well. He could still feel his initial elation at being put in command of this operation. *Naïve* wasn't a word he'd generally use to describe himself but, like *clusterfuck*, it fit perfectly. Of that, he was also dead certain.

*Dead.* Another word that would likely come in handy soon.

In his defense, being told that the president of the United States had personally requested his involvement in a critical mission was something he'd fantasized about since his G.I. Joe days. Virtually overnight, he found himself transferred to the big leagues. The leader of the free world had entrusted him with protecting God, country, and apple pie. One day, he might even find himself getting a medal hung around his neck in the Oval Office. He could almost picture the adoring faces of his friends and family as they watched.

The delusions of grandeur had faded quickly, though, leaving him with nothing but hard, ugly reality. While he had distinguished himself to some extent in both Iraq and Afghanistan, why would the new commander in chief have any idea who he was? And why would anyone pick an infantryman who had spent his combat career in the desert for this operation?

The pickup that Grant was riding in hit a particularly deep rut, nearly bouncing him from its rusty bed. Once stabilized, he went back to scanning the deep green of the surrounding mountains. There were probably more trees over one hundred square yards in Uganda than in the entire country of Afghanistan. He had virtually no experience fighting in this kind of terrain. He didn't even have experience living in it. Arizona born and bred.

Grant turned his attention to the men sitting around him and wondered if they shared his background. Because he honestly didn't know. He'd never fought with any of them and questions were very much discouraged. This wasn't the Middle East. This was secret agent shit.

One thing was obvious: they were all around the same age and outfitted in a mix of eco-touristy, off-the-shelf outdoor gear that would briefly—very briefly in his estimation—fool a local into thinking they were there to snap photos. What wasn't obvious is that all had M17 pistols hidden beneath their shirts and HK MP7s in their packs. In case things got ugly. Which he'd bet his meager life savings was exactly what was going to happen.

In the end, the situation was crazy and stupid, but not overly complicated. Four days ago, some egghead scientists may or may not have fled into the jungle when they'd been attacked by a psycho who thought he was God. The psycho in question had men—and children, apparently—searching for them, likely in hopes of securing a fat ransom. The Ugandan government didn't want to get involved because they were afraid of psycho-guy as well as not wanting to piss off the Congolese. And the Americans couldn't roll in a force of a few hundred

men from Africa Command for political reasons that he didn't fully understand.

Like the situation, the mission was also equal parts crazy, stupid, and straightforward. Starting from a burned-out hospital, he would lead his eight men into the jungle, dodge an unknown number of armed cult members, and find these scientists who, after four days, were almost sure to be dead. Further, he was to do this with no outside support and intel that could be summed up as "it's two white guys and a Chinese chick. You can't miss them."

Piece of cake.

As he scanned the faces of his men, Grant felt his cynicism grow. He'd given money to the president's campaign and his wife had actually volunteered to help get the vote out. Did that have something to do with him being there? Did the men around him have similar stories? Because this was clearly the purview of a SEAL team or Delta or some of those crazy recon Marines. Men who had trained together, who specialized in these kinds of ops, and who had experience in this kind of terrain.

Did the White House figure he was so blinded by the radiance of Anthony Cook that he wanted to get his ass shot off? If so, they needed to think again. He'd supported Cook because the entire US political system needed an enema and he was the best bet at making that happen. The man wasn't the second coming, though. Just a politician who was maybe a little more competent and less sleazy than the others.

Or maybe not.

The vehicle began to slow, and Grant looked over the cab at the remains of something that only a few days ago had been a research facility funded by none other than Nicholas Ward. It wasn't much more than a burned-out ruin now, but the forest behind it was barely even singed. Based on the information he had, the fire had been set in a rainstorm that kept it from spreading. It seemed likely that Chism

had been inside at the time and, as far as Grant was concerned, his barbecued corpse probably still was.

They stopped in what appeared to have been the parking lot and everyone climbed out.

“This is the place,” their local guide said, raising his index finger toward the jungle to the east. “They would have had to escape to the—”

“Don’t point,” Grant said, assuming they were being watched. “Now get your gear together. I want to be out of here in ten minutes.”

He looked around him at basically nothing. There was no reason for any of the facility’s employees to return. There was nothing left that would interest looters. And the Ugandan responders had pronounced the debris free of bodies days ago. Gideon Auma’s men were still in the area, though, taking the long-shot bet that the scientists were alive and out there somewhere.

His men had donned their packs and were similarly examining the tangled forest that they were about to wade into. Grant motioned them to the other side of the lot, away from their guide.

“Are we good?” he said when they formed around him.

All looked at each other, waiting for someone to say something. Finally, a man to Grant’s right spoke up.

“What the hell are we doing here?”

“I don’t think I understand the question . . .” He almost said “soldier” but managed to catch himself. This clandestine bullshit wasn’t his thing.

The man—his man—pointed to the tree line. “There could be a battleship twenty feet away in there and we’d walk right by it. Do you have some kind of intel that we don’t know about? Because, if so, I’d like to hear it. I’d like to hear that our plan isn’t to wander around a hundred square miles of jungle hoping to bump into three scientists everyone knows are dead.”

“We’ve all received the same briefing,” Grant said.

“Then we are officially the most expendable sons of bitches on the planet.”

“Were you ordered to take this mission?” Grant said.

“No. I—”

“Then stow it.”

They fell silent for a few seconds, likely all lost in the same thoughts. Finally, another of his men nodded toward their guide. “What do we know about him?”

This one wasn’t as fiery as the other. His tone was calm, and he had eyes that seemed to take in everything they passed over. Grant had a good intuition for men, and this was one who could be counted on. He’d remember that if—when—this thing blew up in their faces.

“Not much.”

“He looks like he’d slit his own mother’s throat for eight bucks.”

Grant had come to roughly the same conclusion. He assumed that the intelligence side of this op—if that was indeed the correct word to use—had discovered that reputable tour companies tended not to operate in the same areas that Gideon Auma did. And that had left them scraping the bottom of the barrel for an asshole who probably spent more time guiding poaching expeditions than photographic ones.

“We’ll let him take point,” Grant said. “That way we can keep an eye on him.”

That didn’t seem to make anyone feel better.

“I have something else to say,” his thoughtful man said. “Permission to speak freely?”

“Go ahead.”

“Being expendable doesn’t bother me. I knew I was expendable the day I walked into the recruiting office. But this is different. I feel like we’ve been set up to fail and now we’re being led to slaughter. Nicholas Ward got his panties wadded up about losing his people and he promised some politician a bunch of campaign donations if he sent a rescue mission. And that politician said ‘Sure, why not? We’ll send a few dumbasses to Africa to put on a show. And when they’re all dead, you can send over a check.’”

“Your point?” Grant said.

His man thought about the question for a moment, either not registering that it was rhetorical or choosing to ignore the fact.

“If I’m gonna die out here, I don’t want to die a chump. When I go down, I at least want you assholes to know I did it with my eyes open.”

The rest of the men grumbled in agreement. Grant remained silent for a long time, finally speaking at a level that wasn’t much more than a whisper.

“What I say next doesn’t ever get repeated. Does everyone understand? This goes to your grave.”

Nods all around.

“We’re going to wander around in the woods for a few days. We’ve got no choice in that. But I’m refocusing the primary objective of our mission.”

“To what?” one of them asked.

“To us surviving. And if in the process we trip over David Chism alive, then great.”

“And if we don’t?” someone asked.

“Then fuck him.”