

NY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



BOOB MAYER

Z: THE FINAL COUNTDOWN

THE GREEN BERETS

Z: The Final Countdown

book VI of the Green Beret Series



by
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Author's Note

This series started with my very first book, *Eyes of the Hammer*. However, that wasn't the first book in the series. Book 13 was. I originally set that story in Russia, but with the end of the Cold War, had to reconsider it. I

I based some of these characters on people I served with in the Special Forces. Also, some of the members of the Team to be most elite and flexible fighting unit in the world.

Chasing the Ghost introduced Horace Chase, one of my favorite characters, albeit with deep flaws.

Nothing but good times ahead!

Thanks for reading.

Prologue

Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado

21 May

Eight hundred feet underground, the monotony of watching computer screens was broken by one of the six men on duty calling out to the shift commander: "Sir, we've got a break in orbit on a known."

The Warning Center watch officer, Major Sinclair, looked up from his computer chess game. "Whose is it?"

"Code is RG-fourteen," the screen watcher replied.

The code told Sinclair several things: The R meant it was Russian. The G represented the year the object went into space, and since it was the seventh letter in the alphabet that meant it had been launched this year. The 14 indicated it was the fourteenth object launched into space by the Russians since January 1. "That's very current," Sinclair commented. "What's the break? New orbit?"

"No, sir. It's a decay. She's coming down."

"Damn," Sinclair muttered. "How long before she reenters?" he asked as he figured out who to call and how soon he would have to call. He hoped they would have a couple of days before reentry so he could just log it and let the center's operations officer take care of the situation during normal duty hours.

The screen watcher hit the keys on his computer, then whistled. "Twelve minutes."

Sinclair almost spilled his coffee. "What?"

"Twelve minutes, give or take twenty percent. It's decaying rapidly," the man added in a bit of an understatement.

"Put it on the big screen," Sinclair ordered. The large screen in front of the room displayed a Mercator conformal map of the entire world's surface. With a few commands, the data that was being downloaded from Defense Support Program (DSP) could be selectively displayed on the screen. A glowing dot appeared on the screen moving from left to right across the South Atlantic.

The U.S. Space Command's Missile Warning Center is located deep inside Cheyenne Mountain on the outskirts of Colorado Springs. The Space Command, part of the air force, is responsible for the DSP satellite system.

DSP satellites blanket the entire surface of the earth from an altitude of over twenty thousand miles up in geosynchronous orbits. The system had originally been developed to detect ICBM launches during the Cold War. During the Gulf War, it had picked up every SCUD missile launch and proved so effective that the military had further streamlined the system to give real-time warnings to local commanders at the tactical level.

Every three seconds the DSP system downloads an infrared map of the earth's surface and surrounding airspace. Most of the data is stored on tape in the Warning Center, unless, of course, the computer detects a missile launch, or something different happens to one of the objects already in space that the Warning Center was tracking.

The staff at Space Command delineates four categories of objects in space. The first is a known object in stable orbit, such as a satellite or some of the debris from previous space missions. Each of those has a special code assigned to it, and its data is stored in the computer at Cheyenne Mountain. There are presently over eight thousand five hundred catalogued items orbiting the planet.

The second category is a known object whose orbit has changed, such as when a country or corporation decides to reposition one of its satellites. The third is a known object whose orbit

decaying. When that happens Space Command puts the tracking and impact prediction (TIP) team on the job to figure out where it will come down. TIP teams were instituted as a result of the publicity after Skylab came down years ago. The fourth category is an object that has just been launched and has yet to be assigned a code.

The man who had first picked up the discrepancy explained the movement. "She's running roughly east-west along about ten degrees south latitude."

"Do you have an impact point?"

"Computer's working on it, sir."

Hell, Sinclair thought, by the time the computer figured it out, the thing would be down. He got out of his chess game and entered the code for the object. The entry on his screen was very short.

RG14: Proton final stage booster.

Orbit: Free, plotted, and logged.

Launch: 18 May 1997

Launch Site: Kazakhstan

Comments: Final stage booster for Proton launch of communications satellite contracted out to SINCOS, European

Communications. Payload is listed as EG36.

The dot was simply the last stage of a Russian Proton booster rocket, which was some relief to Sinclair. At least it wasn't a nuclear power source, of which he knew the Soviets had several in space, giving juice to their space lab and some of their satellites. If one of those started coming down, there'd be hell to pay. The fact that a Russian rocket had put a European satellite into orbit was not strange at all. The Russians were so strapped for cash that they had begun putting their space program up for hire several years previously. The booster itself was garbage and of no concern, unless of course it landed on someone's roof.

"Why's it deteriorating so fast?" Sinclair asked out loud.

The man who had first spotted the decay was just as confused. "I don't know, sir. It shouldn't be deteriorating at all. Those Proton final stage boosters usually stay up there for quite a while before they go down the gravity well."

"Could the Russians be bringing it down?" Sinclair asked.

"No, sir. According to our data on the Proton booster, it's dead weight. No thrusters."

"Dead weight doesn't decay its own orbit and defy the law of gravity," Sinclair remarked. "Maybe they're trying to recover it to use it again."

"They wouldn't be bringing it down at that latitude," the man said. "And they've never brought one down before."

They continued to watch as the small dot moved across the ocean.

"She's coming down somewhere in Africa," the man said as his computer finally yielded its projection. "Maybe Zaire."

The dot touched the western shore of Africa. It started across Angola, then suddenly disappeared just short of the border between that state and its neighbor Zaire.

"She's down."

"Put a lock on the tape," Sinclair ordered. The center recorded everything that the GPS satellite picked up. The lock would ensure that the tape with this particular action would not be reused. Due to budget cuts, they were starting to reuse old tapes that had nothing of significance on them.

"At least it didn't strike a city," the screen watcher joked. "Maybe some farmer just saw what he thinks is a meteorite."

“It probably just hit jungle,” Sinclair said, noting the location where the dot had disappeared: on the edge of the Congo basin. The heart of darkness in the title of Conrad’s novel. Better Africa than North America, Sinclair thought.

As things settled back down, Sinclair stared at the screen at the front of the room and the traces of the political borders in Central Africa that were on it. Something wasn’t right about this. Like he had said, the booster should not have come down that fast, if at all. A normal gravitational decay usually occurred over the course of several weeks to months to years, depending on the height of the orbit and the object’s velocity, yet this thing had come down less than fifteen minutes from the first change in orbit being noticed. Maybe the booster had hit something, Sinclair reasoned. There certainly wasn’t enough debris floating around in orbit. But that didn’t sit right either.

Sinclair shrugged and entered one line in his duty log concerning the event. He noted the date and time group for the computer tape of the incident. Then he turned his computer game back on.

Chapter 1

Angola 9 June

“What do you think?” the corporal driving the truck asked Sergeant Ku. The patrol was deep inside rebel territory and the men were very nervous. Ku knew Lieutenant Monoko, out front in the jeep, didn’t want to admit that he didn’t know how deep inside rebel territory they were.

They’d traveled for six hours over unpaved roads and trails since leaving the paved main road between the border post at Luau and Luena, the next major town on the road. Sergeant Ku had watched the sun the entire time, troubled about the direction it told him they were traveling.

“I think the lieutenant does not know where we are,” Ku said. He was in the cab of the half-ton diesel truck with the corporal driving. The rest of the patrol—twelve men—was in the back. Ku was an old veteran of the civil war in Angola, having fought the Portuguese at the start, then beside the Cubans many years back. The allies and enemies had changed over the years but never the fighting. Ku’s dark scalp was covered with gray hair and his slight frame was tense, ready for action.

They could see Lieutenant Monoko ahead in the jeep, looking at his map and scratching his head. The fact that the lieutenant’s vehicle was out in front told the sergeant more than he wished to know about his new officer. Only a fool would want to be in the lead to trip whatever mines the UNITA rebels might have planted on the road. Of course, Ku’s sense of self-preservation made him very grateful that in this specific area the lieutenant was ignorant. If Monoko had done as he should have and made the truck lead, the sergeant would not be sitting in this cab—he’d be in the backseat of the jeep with the lieutenant.

Ku climbed out of the truck and walked forward. This was their first chance in several hours to stop and he indicated for the soldiers to take a break. Some were already urinating off the side of the truck. Ku snapped a salute, startling Monoko. “Sir, may I be of assistance?” The lieutenant was a very large and fat man, used to the easy life of the city. Ku wondered what circumstances had forced him into uniform and out to the bush.

Ku watched with detached amusement at the emotions that played across the broad black plain on his officer’s face. Pride versus the reality of the situation. The amusement disappeared quickly, though, because the look on Monoko’s face also confirmed what Ku had been fearing. They were indeed lost.

“I believe we are near Cangamba,” Monoko said, vaguely stabbing his finger at the map.

Years of working with incompetence allowed Ku to keep his face expressionless. “Sir, we have been heading to the northwest all afternoon. We cannot be close to Cangamba.”

“We have been traveling southwest,” Monoko disagreed. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a compass, flipping open the plastic cover proudly.

There was no amusement left at all in Ku. “Sir, we never stopped to take compass bearings. How could we?”

“I was checking all along,” Monoko interrupted. “I can read a compass on the move. I do not need to stop.”

Ku held out his hand. Monoko paused, then gave him the compass. “Sir, if you note, the compass now says north is that way”—he pointed to the right side of the road. Ku turned and walked several paces from the jeep. Monoko reluctantly got out of the jeep and followed. “If you would please not do that, sir, the compass now says north is that way.” Ku pointed to the left.

Monoko blinked. "But how can that be? It is not supposed to do that!"

Ku bit the inside of his mouth to restrain himself. "Sir, the metal of the jeep affects the magnet of the needle. That is why we must stop to get compass readings away from the jeep or navigate off the direction the sun speaks." Ku pointed up.

Ku felt sick with himself for having allowed the officer to proceed in ignorance for so long. But it was Monoko's fault also, Ku reminded himself. Not only did the lieutenant not know how to use a compass properly, he had never told Ku what their orders were or where they were headed. Ku had assumed that they were going in the right direction, even if it was in the direction of the enemy. After all, they occasionally did have to go out and fight. Who knew what the idiots in charge in Luanda had thought up? Ku had been hearing rumors for weeks now that something big was getting ready to happen, and he had assumed this strange direction was tied to those rumors.

Monoko looked about at the undulating grasslands that surrounded them. He turned back to his platoon sergeant. "What do we do?"

"Let me see your map, sir." Ku took the sheet and stared at it. He found the last point where he had positively known where they were, then estimated. They'd been traveling for over five hours since then, mostly north and west. He placed an aged finger on the paper and traced a forty-kilometer circle just south of a town named Saurimo. "We are somewhere here. We must head due west as quickly as possible to get out of rebel territory before nightfall. I know for certain that there are many rebels near Saurimo."

The last thing Ku wanted was to spend the night in this province with a green officer and a platoon full of new recruits. They were on the edge of Lunda Sul, a diamond-rich area that made up northeastern Angola and was completely in rebel hands. There was a government garrison at Cacolo, about one hundred kilometers away. With a little luck and good roads, they might make it before dark.

Monoko pulled himself together. "Yes. We must head west. Tell the men we must be moving."

Ku yelled out the appropriate orders, then made a difficult personal decision. "Sir, might I join you in your vehicle?"

A half hour later, they turned a corner in the road and the driver hit the brakes. Ku reacted instinctively to the tangle of fallen trees that blocked the road ahead. He rolled out of the backseat and took cover behind the jeep, pointing his weapon ahead, searching for the ambush he expected to explode out of the foliage all around as he screamed for the men in the truck to deploy.

The men reacted slowly, but eventually all were on the ground in the semblance of a perimeter. Lieutenant Monoko was at his side, peering ahead. "What do you think?" the officer whispered.

If there were any rebels about, there was no doubt in Ku's mind that the patrol's presence had been detected and whispering was not needed, but he played along. "I do not know, sir." He peered at the trees. They'd been hacked down and pulled across the road. Beyond he could see some smoke, maybe from cooking fires. There was a small patch of thatched roof visible above the fallen trees. "There is a village there." It was a logical location for a village: they were in low terrain and a river ran to the left.

"A rebel village?" Lieutenant Monoko asked.

This was rebel territory, but most of the villages Ku had encountered over the years were on neither side in this bloody civil war. The inhabitants probably wanted to just be left alone. But Ku needed to get through the village to continue on to the west. There was most likely a crossing site for the river on the far side of the village. "I will look, sir."

He stood and signaled for a couple of men to accompany him. He walked up to the roadblock and checked it for booby traps. Nothing. He went around the tangled limbs and looked. A small village of about ten or twelve huts was in a clearing on the gentle bank that led down to the river. There was no one moving about. A pile of smoldering logs on the right side of the village was the source of the

smoke. There were also the remains of several huts that had been burned to the ground.

Ku frowned. ~~The road was blocked on the far side also, and beyond it he could see a ford across the small river. What had the villagers wanted to stop? And where were they? Who had destroyed the huts?~~

He ordered his men to stay put and went forward. Then he caught a scent in the air and stopped midstep. He recognized the horrible smell from past battles: burning flesh. Ku turned and looked more closely at the pile of logs and now saw that they weren't wood. They were bodies, tightly wrapped in soiled sheets, piled four deep.

"Remove the roadblocks!" he yelled at his men. "Quickly!"

Ku went to the first hut and used the muzzle of his AK-47 to push aside the cloth that hung in the doorway. The stench that greeted his nostrils was even worse than the burning flesh. The walls were splattered with blood. There was something that might have once been human lying on the floor, but the body had been destroyed by some terrible force.

Ku had seen many bodies in his service, but this one did not look like it had been killed by an explosion. However, that was the only thing he could think of that would cause the mangled flesh and the amount of blood splattered all around the interior.

Ku moved to the next hut, but paused as he heard Lieutenant Monoko's voice. "What is going on, Sergeant?"

"I do not know, sir. I have ordered the men to clear the roadblocks. We can proceed across the river when that is done."

Monoko wrinkled his nose. "What is that stink?"

Ku pointed. "Bodies. Burning."

The lieutenant's eyes widened. "What has happened here?"

Ku felt fear now, an icy trickle running down his spine and curling into his stomach. He pulled aside the curtain to the next hut with the steel of his rifle barrel.

Monoko cried out and turned away. Ku heard his officer vomiting as he stared at the sight that had greeted both of them. A woman was on a dilapidated mattress, her legs spread wide. Between her legs was an aborted fetus. At least that's what Ku hoped it was. All he could see was a pile of dark black blood and putrid flesh. The mother was dead also. Ku forced himself to stare and take note. Blood had poured out of the woman. Not just from between her legs but from her eyeballs, her nostrils, her ears, her mouth, every opening. The rags she had wrapped herself in were soaked with red as if she had even sweated blood. Skin that wasn't covered in blood had angry red welts crisscrossing it.

Ku finally turned away. Monoko was on his knees, still retching. Ku grabbed his arm. "We must go, sir! Now!"

Ku looked about. The men had figured out what the burned pile was. That was evident from the amount of effort they were putting into clearing away the trees. The first roadblock was clear and the second halfway done.

"We must look for survivors," Monoko whispered.

Ku shook his head. "There are none, sir."

"We must check all the huts."

Ku frowned. "All right. I will do it. Move the jeep and truck forward. We must leave as soon as the trees are clear."

Ku quickly ran to the next hut. It was empty. The next four held bodies, or what had once been bodies, but were now just masses of rotting flesh and blood. In the next-to-last hut, there was a person lying on the floor. A young woman. She turned her head as Ku opened the curtain. Her eyes were wide and red, a trickle of blood rolling like tears down her cheeks. Her skin was covered with red welts.

"Please!" she rasped. "Help me."

Ku stepped in, every nerve in his body screaming for him to run away. He knelt next to the woman. ~~Her face was swollen and her breathing was coming in labored gasps. From the smell, there was no doubt she was lying in her own feces.~~

Suddenly the woman's hands darted forward and she grabbed the collar of Ku's fatigue jacket. With amazing strength she half-pulled herself off the fouled mat, toward Ku's face. Her mouth opened as if she were going to speak, but a tide of black-red matter exploded out of her mouth into Ku's face and chest. He screamed and slammed his arms up, but couldn't break her grip. Struggling to his feet, he moved backward to the door, but the woman was still attached to him.

He jammed the muzzle of his AK-47 into her stomach and pulled the trigger. The steel-jacketed rounds literally tore the woman in half, but even in death her hands held on. Ku threw his gun out the door, then pulled his bloodied shirt up and over his head and left it there, clutched in her dead fingers.

He staggered out into the clearing as soldiers ran over, weapons at the ready. "We go!" Ku screamed at them as he wiped at the blood and vomit on his face. "We go!"

Chapter 2

Aragon Island

9 June

The helicopter was barely twenty feet above the tops of the trees, moving at over a hundred miles an hour. Inside, soldiers with camouflage paint on their faces and the double-A patch of the 82d Airborne Division on their left shoulders pulled back the charging handles on their M-16s and put a round in the chamber, ready for action.

In one of the center seats facing to the rear, Dave Riley's hands twitched, missing the feel of a weapon in them. It was instinctual, and as he caught himself doing it, he smiled and forced his muscles to relax. He glanced to his left at Conner Young. She wore the same armband he did over the loose-fitting khaki, indicating she was with the press. On Riley's right, their military escort, a young captain from the Pentagon named Kanalo, was watching the actions of the paratroopers with wide eyes. From the shield insignia on the left collar of Kanalo's battledress uniform, Riley knew that the closest the officer had ever come to a situation like this was probably in his basic officer-training course. The shield with stars on it indicated Kanalo was in the adjutant general's corps, and the rest of the army had a saying about that branch of service: Twinkle, twinkle, little shield, keep me from the battlefield.

The battlefield was not a place that Riley had been kept from in his eighteen years of active duty. In his time in the Special Forces, he had been on covert combat missions into Colombia and mainland China; even live operations in the United States itself that had involved death and destruction. After leaving the army two years ago, after the death of the woman he loved—a Chicago police officer he met on his last mission under the streets of Chicago—Riley had worked for an international security firm and gone down to the wastelands of Antarctica, where he'd run into commandos from North Korea trying to appropriate atomic weapons.

His official job now was to watch over Conner Young and keep the reporter safe. Hard to do with no weapon, he reflected, as he noticed the crew chief indicate one minute out to the lieutenant in charge of the soldiers. The landing zone was supposed to be clear, but from the intelligence reports Riley had looked at, over the course of the past week—ever since this unit of the 82d had deployed here to bring peace—the rebel forces had had a strange habit of showing up, at just the worst time, in places that had been “secured.”

Riley was shorter than most of the men in the helicopter at five and a half feet. He was dark-skinned, an inheritance from his mother's Puerto Rican side. His muscles were like rubber stretched over his bones. His body emanated barely restrained tension as the helicopter began slowing, but his dark eyes reflected the patience he'd learned over the past thirty-seven years—from the streets of the South Bronx through all his years of service.

The lieutenant reached over and tapped Conner on the knee, ignoring Riley and Kanalo. “We're one minute out!” he yelled to be heard above the sound of the engines and rotor blades.

Riley understood the reason he was being ignored. He knew the effect Conner had—any man would. She was a beautiful woman, with dark eyes, a thin nose, and a wide mouth. Her skin was the most alluring aspect of her face: soft and white, it highlighted her features to maximum advantage. She had not applied the camouflage stick that Riley had given her earlier this morning and he understood his reasoning behind that, but it was something he noted for future reference. Tucked under the bush behind her that Riley had given her was Conner's trademark—thick black hair, cut short and framing her face.

Riley knew that Conner knew the effect she had, and he also understood that was partly the reason she wasn't wearing camouflage paint on her face. And he respected her for that self-knowledge, and for the fact that, while she did use it to her advantage in her job, she didn't complain about the time when it worked against her and people treated her like she was just a pretty mouthpiece for the network. Even in the midst of all this, Conner's charm was working on the lieutenant, who should have been thinking about other things.

They cleared a tree line and the Black Hawk swooped down into an open field on the edge of a small hamlet. As soon as the wheels touched, the soldiers scrambled off, weapons at the ready, forming a loose perimeter as a second bird came in. Within a minute an entire platoon, over thirty infantrymen was on the ground. Riley crouched with Conner on the inside of the hasty perimeter. The hamlet consisted of eight cinder block buildings with tin roofs. A dirt road ran through the center.

"Let's move in," the lieutenant called out, and the men stood.

Two black men dressed in cutoff shorts and T-shirts appeared on the edge of the village. They had AK-47s in their hands.

"Put down the weapons!" the lieutenant yelled to the men.

"This is our village," one of the men yelled back. "You put down your weapons." Despite the rhetoric, the two men were not holding their rifles in a threatening manner. The paratroopers came to a halt, forming a line less than forty feet from the edge of the village.

An old black woman came out of one of the buildings. "Let me talk to your leader," she said, her accent similar to that heard in the hills of Jamaica. According to intelligence, this area was sealed by the descendants of runaway slaves from that island, and they valued their independence fiercely. Unfortunately, this village was in the buffer zone being established by the United Nations peacemakers between the government and a dissident rebel group.

Riley could see that the lieutenant had not expected this type of challenge. "I'm in command," he said.

"I lead this village," the woman replied. "What do you want?"

"We're here to protect you," he said.

The woman held up her own rifle. "Ourselves, we protect. Help, we don't need. You will only bring the infiltrators here."

The lieutenant was sticking to what he'd been taught and ordered. "We can help you defend yourselves."

"Ourselves, we have done that quite well. Your help, we don't need."

"We can add our strength to yours," the lieutenant said.

"For now," the woman agreed. "Maybe. But what about when you leave?"

"We—" the officer began, but he was cut off.

The woman spit. "Somalia, you left. Vietnam, you left. A long history you Americans have of offering to protect people, getting them to join you, then abandoning them and leaving them worse than they were before you came with your fine help."

If the lieutenant's face had not been painted green, Riley would not have been surprised to see it go red. "We are here to enforce the United Nations resolution regarding the peace between—" he tried, but again the woman interceded.

"What do we care for the United Nations, eh? Over a hundred years we have lived here. Our land is this is and we want no outsiders here. Leave us alone."

"I can't do that," the lieutenant said. "My orders are to secure this village. A demilitarized zone is being—"

"This village is secure!" the woman yelled. Several other villagers had joined her so that there was now a small crowd of ten, eight adults and two children. All the adults were armed. The lieutenant

shifted his feet nervously. This was not at all going the way he had hoped, and they hadn't covered this type of scenario in his Infantry Officers' Basic Course at Fort Benning and most certainly not at Ranger School.

The woman looked at the soldiers for several moments. "How do I know we can trust you?"

The lieutenant was taken aback. "We're Americans. We're here at the bequest of your government and under United Nations charter to—"

"Our government," the woman's voice was full of scorn. "What does our government care about us? They'd rather see us dead out here in the swamp. Tell me, American man, why should we trust you?"

The lieutenant glanced at his platoon sergeant, searching for advice, but the woman beat him to it. "Lay down your weapons and I will believe you. I will let you into our village and we can talk."

"I can't do that," the lieutenant said.

"Then leave. We will never allow you in our village with your weapons." The woman turned away.

"Wait!" the officer cried out. The woman paused.

Riley knew the lieutenant was seeing his career go down the tubes with the failure of this mission.

"I will put down my rifle and join you. We can talk."

"And leave thirty armed men waiting to attack my people?" the woman replied.

Conner leaned close to Riley. "What do you think?" she whispered.

"I think we're going to see a fuckup," Riley quietly replied. He was looking about, checking out the buildings, the wood line. He had a very bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. The paratroopers were strung out in the open, waiting for their leader to make a decision. The lieutenant had become so preoccupied with the confrontation with the woman, he had lapsed in control of his platoon and the overall tactical situation.

The woman smiled and took the magazine out of her AK-47. She tucked it into her waistband and ejected the round still in the chamber. "There. See?" She gestured and the other men did the same. "We are willing to compromise. Unload your weapons and join us in the village."

The lieutenant stood a bit taller. He turned to his platoon sergeant. "Have the men unload."

The veteran NCO stared at his officer. "But, sir—"

"Now!" the lieutenant ordered.

"Yes, sir," the sergeant said reluctantly.

"Magazines out of weapons, chamber empty."

In the tradition of the 82d, the men did as they were ordered. Satisfied, the woman turned toward the first building. "Come, join us." She disappeared into a doorway. The platoon had started moving forward, when the rooftops suddenly erupted in a cacophony of small arms fire. Riley dragged Conner down to the ground as firing also roared out of the tree line to their left.

The paratroopers dived for what scant cover there was in the open field, tearing magazines out of their ammo pouches and desperately jamming them back into their weapons.

"Fuck, I'm hit!" one young soldier called out.

A loud beeping noise chirped off of Conner's web gear. "What is that?" she asked above the sound of weapons firing.

"You've been shot," Riley said. He reached into her combat vest and pulled out a small envelope, tearing it open. It had been placed there at the beginning of this exercise and now he read it. "At least you're not dead. According to this you've suffered a wound to your stomach. You need to call for medic."

"Great game you men play," Conner muttered.

"I don't hear you crying out in pain," Riley noted. "Wounds to the stomach tend to hurt."

"Screw you, Dave," Conner said. "Keep it up and I'll show you hurt."

Most of the MILES harnesses on the men in the platoon were already activated, indicating that the

had been hit by laser beams from the ambushing force. It was over quickly. A surviving squad leader rallied the remnants of the platoon and retreated to the far tree line, calling on the radio for reinforcements. Riley's MILES vest was silent, but he simply rolled on his back and stared up into the blue Louisiana sky.

"How do you shut this damn thing off?" Conner asked.

"The controllers will sort this out in a few minutes," Riley said. "Give the squad leader a chance to finish his radio calls for help." He looked around. The lieutenant took a key out of his rifle laser-making the emitter inactive—and placed it in his MILES harness, turning off the beeper. Not a happy camper, Riley thought, but unloading weapons—that was stupid, and the whole purpose of the exercise was to have people like the lieutenant do stupid things here where the price paid was a little humiliation rather than blood and guts.

A man wearing an OC—observer-controller—armband walked over. "What have we here?" he asked, stooping over Conner. "A dead reporter?" He looked at the card. "Ah, just wounded. Still, very bad for publicity," he said loudly enough for the lieutenant to hear. He took his controller key and turned her MILES gear off. He looked at Riley. "How come you didn't run with the others? You're still alive."

"I'm signed for her," Riley said.

The OC laughed. "Well, welcome to peacekeeping 101. As you can see, the natives aren't too friendly."

Chapter 3

Cacolo, Angola

11 June

Sergeant Ku buttoned his fatigue pants and threw several bills on the ground. The whore scooped them up and they disappeared into the robe she wore. She hadn't even bothered to take it off for their brief coupling, simply hitching it up at her waist. Prostitution was not exactly an art form in the Third World but rather a matter of everyday life.

Ku walked out of the "house" made of cast-off cardboard from relief packages and squinted up at the sun. There was the sound of a helicopter, and he watched as the aircraft banked across the sky and headed to the west. It was a pretty thing to watch. The Americans certainly had better equipment than the Cubans had had.

"There you are!" A soldier who had been in the patrol the previous day sauntered up. "The major wants to see you."

Ku frowned. "What for?"

"How should I know?" The soldier pointed at the hut with a knowing smile. "How is she?" He didn't wait for an answer, disappearing into the black hole of the doorway, already tugging at his pants.

Ku walked toward the garrison headquarters, wondering why the major in charge of the garrison here would want him. There was more going on in Cacolo than had happened in years. The Americans were coming and everyone was excited. After the patrol's arrival late yesterday evening, the officer in charge of the Cacolo garrison had absorbed Lieutenant Monoko's men into his own force regardless of Monoko's original orders. Not an uncommon occurrence in Angola, where communication over long distances was slow and erratic at best.

A guard lounging in the shade didn't even acknowledge Ku's approach. He knocked once, then entered. "Sergeant Ku reporting, sir."

Major Gungue, the garrison commander, looked up from some papers on his desk. There was another man in the room, a white man dressed in camouflage fatigues.

"Sergeant Ku. Welcome, welcome!" Major Gungue smiled. "This is Major Lindsay, the commander of the Americans who will be helping us."

Ku stood a little straighter "Sir!"

The American returned his salute.

"I am assigning my most experienced men," Gungue said in Portuguese, the official language of the country and military, "to work with the American soldiers who will be coming here. You," he said looking at Ku, "will work with one of the units that will be stationed here at Cacolo."

The American spoke for the first time, also in Portuguese, which surprised Ku but explained the fulsome way Gungue had just spoken about him. "Sergeant Ku, you will be working with Operation Detachment three one four."

"Yes, sir," Ku said, for lack of anything else to say. He had no idea what an operational detachment was, or what the numbers represented. He also wondered why he was being sent to the Americans. Gungue didn't have a clue whether Ku was experienced or not. Obviously the major didn't want to spare any of his own men.

"You will be the unit's interpreter and guide," Major Gungue said.

"Guide?" Ku asked.

Gungue smiled and now that smile made Ku nervous. He'd seen that look before on officers' faces and it usually spelled trouble. The major walked over to the map pinned to the wall. "The Americans are going to clear this area of rebels. You must show them around." Gungue's hand swept across the northeast part of the country on the map. Ku knew next to nothing about the area. How could he? It was rebel territory. He felt trapped, knowing there was no way out of this assignment.

Then Ku thought about the heavily armed helicopter he had just seen flying away, the American helicopter. They had hundreds of those, from what he heard. Maybe this was not going to be as bad as it looked.

"The team will be here on Saturday," the American major said. "Do you have any questions?"

Ku had hundreds of questions, but he could tell by the look that Major Gungue gave him that it was best to keep his mouth shut. He found it strange that the American would ask such a question. Officers usually did not answer questions of sergeants in the Angolan army. Maybe the Americans were different, Ku thought. He eyed the combat vest the white man was wearing: top-notch equipment. All the soldiers coming had such gear... Ku's head swam with the possibilities, not in terms of combat potential but in terms of the black market.

"No, sir. I have no questions."

Fort Bragg, North Carolina 11 June

"We are very pleased to have you here, Ms. Young, and to have you work with us." The 3d Special Forces Group commander, Colonel Burrows, walked around his desk and extended a hand.

"I'm pleased to be here," Conner Young replied, taking the hand.

To her left, the large young man in uniform snapped to attention. "I'm Captain Kanalo, sir. I'm Ms. Young's escort from the Department of the Army public affairs."

Burrows acknowledged the captain's presence with a hearty handshake, but his attention was focused on the lone woman in the room. To Conner's right, Dave Riley went unnoticed as Colonel Burrows introduced the other members of his primary staff to her. The Conner effect was in full force, Riley thought.

"This is Mr. Riley, my assistant," Conner said, breaking up the group in front of Colonel Burrows' large desk.

Burrows nodded. "Mr. Riley."

Riley forced himself not to snap to attention and salute. He simply nodded back. "Colonel." He felt uncomfortable. His years in the service had instilled in him many habits that the past couple as a civilian had not quite erased. It felt strange to be around men in starched camouflage fatigues who were wearing khaki pants and an open-collar, short-sleeve shirt.

Riley could read the cloth markings sewn on the men's fatigues: Combat Infantry Badges (CIBs), jump wings, Ranger and Special Forces tabs, scuba badges, and others. From his own personal history, he knew what was needed to earn each of those, and thus he knew a little about each of the men in the room.

He wondered what they knew about him. He had never served with any of the officers present and for that, in a way, he was grateful. He preferred not to have anyone take interest in him. Of course, for this job, that wasn't so hard. One thing he had learned in the past six months while working with Conner was that he could be wearing a clown's costume and doing backflips and most men would not notice him if he was in the same room with her.

"You had no trouble finding us?" Burrows asked.

The 3d Group headquarters was away from the hustle and bustle of the main post at Fort Bragg.

was set in the midst of a grove of pine trees off Yadkin Road on the edge of the reservation. Special Forces had been started on Smoke Bomb Hill on the main reservation, but as the years had gone by and the forces modernized, both the 3d and 7th Special Forces Groups along with the brand new Army Special Operations Command had moved over to this area of the post. In his last assignment, Riley had worked with the Special Forces Training Group just down the road and had seen the construction begun on these buildings, so it had not been a problem to find them.

The facility consisted of a group headquarters, three battalion headquarters, barracks for the unmarried soldiers, an isolation facility for mission preparation, and space for team rooms. It was a long cry from the old World War II “temporary” barracks that had housed Special Forces at Fort Bragg for forty years.

Riley didn't like the new buildings. They seemed too impersonal. The old white-sided buildings on Smoke Bomb Hill had history hanging over them like a fog. One could almost imagine one of the first members of Special Forces walking about and working there. These glass-and-brick pieces of architecture seemed more fit for the MTV generation. Riley smiled at that thought. He still thought of himself as a twenty-something soldier, and he had to remember that he was much closer to the forty-something, nearing-retirement age he had thought was so old when he'd first come on active duty.

Conner shook her head. “No, none at all. My cameraman is taking some background shots outside. The compound here is most impressive. Captain Kanalo told me that would be no problem.”

“No, that's not a problem.” Burrows gestured toward the door. “Well, let's go down to the conference room and we'll get you up to speed on what's going on.”

They moved down the carpeted hallway to a large room with a wood table as a centerpiece. The Special Forces crest was carved into the middle of the table, and the walls of the room were crowded with various plaques and photographs from the military elite of other countries around the world—places 3d Group teams had visited or hosted visits from.

Riley noticed that they had reserved one seat for Conner next to the group commander, one farthel down the table for Captain Kanalo, and none for him at the main table as the staff filled in the rest of the leather chairs. He took a hard plastic chair along the back wall along with a few captains and a couple of NCOs.

Colonel Burrows didn't sit down right away. “As you know, Third Group has been tasked to support Operation Restore Life. An essential part, if I might say so. I will let my operations officer, Lieutenant Colonel Waller, brief you on the details of our tasking.” With that, Burrows settled down in his seat and a gray-haired officer took his place.

The lights dimmed and Waller began speaking, remote in his hand. A slide came on the screen built into the wall. “On the twenty-third of May, 1997, this headquarters received a Special Operations Command mission letter. The Third Special Forces Group was ordered in this letter to support Operation Restore Life in Angola. Our specific mission guidance has two phases.” Waller used a laser pointer on the wire diagram as he spoke.

MISSION GUIDANCE: OPERATION RESTORE LIFE PHASE I: ESTABLISH ONE SFOB AT LUANDA PHASE II: ESTABLISH AS MANY AOBs TO SUPPORT MISSION IN COUNTRY AS MISSION PLANNING DETERMINES.

“What these two phases mean is that we must deploy our group headquarters to establish a Special Forces forward operating base, SFOB, at the capital city of Luanda. That FOB must be prepared to send out our company headquarters, augmented, to establish advance operating bases, AOBs, at sites to be determined by the SFOB commander, Colonel Burrows, to support assigned missions.”

“Excuse me a second,” Burrows interrupted. He turned to Conner. “I hope all these terms aren't

bit overwhelming. Are they?"

"Not at all," Conner said. Riley could see the flash of white teeth as she graced the commander with a smile. If only Burrows knew what she knew, Riley thought. He wondered how long she was going to wait before bursting Burrows's bubble.

"Go ahead," Burrows indicated.

A new slide came up. Waller was indeed keeping it at a base level as he continued. "The Third Special Forces Group consists of a group headquarters, a headquarters and headquarters company, a support company and three Special Forces battalions.

"For this mission," Waller said, "we have formed a task force out of the group assets to conduct this mission: Task Force Angel."

Riley winced. He wondered who made up these names. He could well imagine the reaction of the actual men on the teams to being part of a task force with such a name.

"Angel consists of the Group headquarters augmented by the First Battalion staff at the SFOB. The three AOBs, the three line company headquarters from First Battalion, are augmented by personnel from C Company, Second Battalion. And fifteen operational detachment alphas, or ODAs, commonly called A-teams, will be doing the on-the-ground work.

"The SFOB will be established in the capital city of Angola, adjacent to the Joint Task Force headquarters. Each of the AOB titles tells you the town where they will be established."

Waller paused. "Would you like me to give the background information on the situation in Angola and the strategic-level concept of operations?"

"I understand most of what is happening," Conner replied in a quiet voice. "Perhaps a brief summary from your perspective would be helpful, though."

Waller nodded. "I'm sure you know that this is to be a humanitarian mission into Angola with the dual goals of ending the decades-long civil war there and relieving the chronic famine that the country has experienced. Basically you might call it an attempt at nation building.

"This attempt, though, is to be different from previous similar attempts, such as the failed one in Somalia several years back. Although the United Nations is sponsoring the mission, command of the forces on the ground is to remain with participating countries. Because of that, Angola has been cut in half in operational terms."

A map of Angola came up on the screen. A red line ran across the middle of the country, splitting it into two almost equal portions, north and south.

"The United States Joint Task Force—JTF—area of operations is the northern half of the country. The southern half—and another difference in this operation—belongs to a Pan-African force spearheaded by the South African Defense Forces. The UN has issued the mandate. It is up to us and the Pan-African forces to enforce the mandate in the manner we see as best accomplishing that."

A new slide came up. "In support of United States missions in the northern half of the country, Third Group has three initial operational tasks: (a) conduct reconnaissance and targeting in advance of regular forces; (b) provide liaison with Angolan army forces; (c) conduct special operations as dictated by Joint Task Force commander.

"We have already deployed advance elements of our SFOB to Luanda, and they are in place and operational. The rest of the Group Staff, and you with us, will deploy on Friday. Two of the three AOBs are also in place, and the third is currently en route. Our first operational detachments deploy later this week to conduct reconnaissance missions and initial coordination with the Angolan armed forces."

Riley rubbed his chin in the back of the room. There was a lot that wasn't being said. Tasking C left a lot of possibilities open. One mission that Riley knew the group had to have under the broad title "Special Operations" was E & E—escape and evasion for downed pilots. The aircraft carrier Abraham

Lincoln was off the coast of Angola and air force units were at a Namibian airfield to the south of the country, all prepared to carry out a “no-fly” order in support of Operation Restore Life. Some of the teams of 3d Group were going to be out there in the hinterland prepared to pick up any downed pilot. The rebel forces did have access to ground-to-air missile systems and a fledgling air force, so they were bound to be some shoot-downs.

There was also the possibility that 3d Group had some classified “special operations” tasked to do that they couldn’t show Conner. The one that came immediately to Riley’s mind, based on his study of the situation, was the capture or possible assassination of rebel leader Jonas Savimbi. That action would go a long way toward ending the civil war with one fell swoop. After the way the warlord Aidioun had embarrassed U.S. forces in Somalia, Riley had no doubt that the people in the Pentagon wanted to be better prepared this time around. While assassination as a tool of foreign policy was technically illegal, Riley was certain no tears would be shed if “someone” took out Savimbi at long range with a sniper rifle, so long as that “someone” was never identified.

The history of the civil war in Angola was long and convoluted, and Riley had spent many hours studying it to grasp the changes that had led to the present situation. For most of the civil war, the United States had actually supported Savimbi and his rebel forces, both in the international political arena and with hundreds of millions of dollars of military equipment. The CIA was reported to have even supplied training for some of Savimbi’s troops. As was not unusual in the modern world, the United States was going up against a force it had once helped train and arm.

It had taken Riley a little while to get the various groups straight in his mind. Savimbi led UNITA, the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola. The government party of President José Eduardo dos Santos was the MPLA, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola. As the names of both factions indicate, they had originally been formed in the sixties and fought against the Portuguese colonial government. In early 1975, after a military overthrow of the government in Lisbon, Angola was granted independence from Portugal.

As usual, after independence is granted in a country, there was a battle between competing guerrilla forces to fill the power vacuum left by the withdrawal of the occupying power. In the struggle between the MPLA and UNITA for control of the country, the Cold War came to Angola. The Soviet Union supported the communist MPLA and the United States began sending money to UNITA. Not because it was a democratic movement (in fact, it was modeled along Red Chinese lines), but more because it opposed the communist MPLA. Riley knew that flawed logic well: the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

Because the Soviets acted more quickly and with more money, advisers, and weapons, the MPLA took over the capital city of Luanda and announced the establishment of the People’s Republic of Angola on 11 November 1975.

By January of the following year, with the aid of ten thousand Cuban troops and over \$250 million in Soviet military aid, the MPLA emerged as the dominant military power.

The U.S. supported UNITA with overt aid for a while, but the recent memory of the debacle in Vietnam caused a large outcry against any possibility of being drawn into another such conflict, which was what the war in Angola seemed about to turn into. As a result, the Clark Amendment was passed by the United States Congress, which ended all overt aid to UNITA. The MPLA was finally recognized by the OAU, the UN, Portugal, and over seventy other nations.

UNITA and Jonas Savimbi did not disappear, however. They simply found another supporter close to home who did not like the idea of a communist government in power in Luanda. With South African backing, Savimbi slowly began a guerrilla campaign against the government. The MPLA was experiencing much factional infighting throughout this process, which further contributed to the confusion. In 1979 President dos Santos of the MPLA came to power in Luanda and another faction

came to play in the Angolan story—Namibia, a province of South Africa to the south.

~~The South Africans in Namibia supported UNITA. The Cubans in Angola supported the MPLA.~~ Both sides wanted the other to back off. Naturally, the South Africa government wasn't too keen on this idea and in 1981 launched assaults over a hundred kilometers deep into Angola against MPLA bases that were said to be supporting Namibian guerrillas. A decade of war followed between UNITA and the MPLA, with hundreds of thousands of casualties on both sides.

Eventually, as the Cold War wound down and changes occurred in South Africa, the external powers backed off, with the Cubans going home and the South Africans pulling back. But the Angolans themselves continued at each other's throats, as they were already home and had no place to go. And there was still considerable covert foreign interest in Angola due to the natural resources the country possessed—primarily oil and diamonds.

The story got even stranger, Riley knew. The international community, along with the UN, finally managed to get both sides to agree to a country-wide election in 1992. UNITA received 34 percent of the vote, while the MPLA took over 53 percent. Instead of standing by the results as he had promised, Savimbi took to the bush and continued his fight to militarily seize what had just been denied him by popular vote.

The last U.S. administration had finally seen the light and reversed decades-long support for Savimbi and recognized the rightfully elected government in Luanda: the MPLA. Times had changed and the red threat was no longer an issue.

Still, the fight had continued until late 1995, when Nelson Mandela had helped negotiate another cease-fire and apparent compromise between Savimbi and the ruling MPLA. Savimbi was given the second slot in the government in exchange for peace. The solution had worked for a while, but the last year, Savimbi had attempted a coup that had just barely failed. He had succeeded, however, in seizing half the country, including the critical diamond-mining region.

Riley's analysis of the military situation in the country was the same as most other military men's: without outside influence, neither side was likely to win and the war was going to drag on, with the majority of casualties coming from disease and starvation among the civilian population. It was a disastrous recipe that the United Nations wanted to abort but had always lacked the willpower and firepower to do so, especially after what had happened in Somalia. It was only after South Africa and the Organization of African States, the OAS, had proposed this joint plan, with U.S. support pledged, that action had been agreed upon.

Thus it had been decided that the U.S. and South Africa, along with other African nations, were going to go into Angola and defeat the man whose forces the U.S. and South African governments had supported for so many years. Typical, Riley had thought, reading the Angolan country study in preparation for this assignment.

Riley kicked back in his chair as Waller continued, giving Conner information Riley knew she already had in her laptop computer. He had to admit it felt good to be back around other Special Forces types after the past several years in the civilian world.

Riley perked up as Waller started outlining the schedule they'd prepared for Conner. There were numerous briefings for her with various elements of the SFOB staff and visits to the various AOF planned. Riley watched as she raised a hand, interrupting the S-3.

"Yes?" Waller paused.

"I'd like to work with an ODA."

"Excuse me?" Waller's gaze shifted to his commander.

Colonel Burrows turned in his seat. "We have a complete schedule worked out for you, Ms. Young. You'll get a much better idea of what's going on at the SFOB and—"

"I'd like to accompany an ODA on their mission," Conner repeated.

Riley leaned forward in his seat. He'd coached Conner on this part and he was interested to see how it played out. They'd already set the ground work at the Pentagon the previous week. One thing Riley had learned the past year—Conner represented SNN, the Satellite News Network, and as such she was a very powerful person. The media was going to be an essential part of this mission as the administration tried to keep the voting populace behind the plan. Persons of power in Washington and around the Beltway understood that. He hoped Burrows would also.

“Going out with a team would be too dangerous,” Burrows said. “This is a live combat zone and our rules of conduct—”

“That’s the story I was sent to do,” Conner interrupted. “There will be other people from my organization in Luanda to cover whatever happens at the SFOB. I’m here now,” Conner continued. “for the purpose of getting down on the ground and showing the American people what is really going on.”

“I’m afraid I can’t take the risk of allowing you—”

Conner cut in again, probably the only time the group commander had been interrupted in his own conference room. “I’m afraid, Colonel, that this really isn’t a matter that is open for debate. I appreciate your concerns, but I’ve already discussed this matter at length with quite a few people in your command—what do you call it—your chain of command?” She graced Burrows with a bright smile as he nodded.

“Anyway, your chain of command thinks it’s an excellent idea. General Long was most enthusiastic.”

That was a bit of an overstatement, Riley knew. He’d been there in Long’s office with Conner when the phone call from the secretary of defense had come in, ordering Long—commander of U.S. Special Operations—to allow Conner Young of SNN free rein on this assignment. The Department of Defense had a long history of being burned by the media, and many of the wounds were self-inflicted. Obviously, the new administration wanted to change history. Long had grimaced and accepted that as inevitable, as Burrows was going to have to do. If you can’t beat them, join them, seemed to be the unhappy new assessment of the Pentagon regarding the media.

Burrows turned to Captain Kanalo. “Is this correct?”

Kanalo was not a happy man, to be looking down the double barrel of a full colonel’s glare. “Yes, sir. She has complete authorization from the Pentagon, sir.”

“But, Ms. Young, you don’t seem to understand,” Burrows said, trying to change his tactics. “These teams will be going out into the bush. They’ll be going in fast and hard and—”

“Mr. Riley,” Conner cut in again, turning her head toward the rear of the room, “has fully briefed me on the type of operations that will be conducted. He has had fifteen years of active duty service in the Special Forces.”

Riley sat up a bit straighter in his chair as every eye in the room fixed on him, as if he were to blame for this unexpected change of events. Now he was glad he wasn’t wearing a uniform.

“Mr. Riley and I spent the last three days down at the Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk getting familiarized with peacekeeping operations and media-military interface,” Conner continued. “Everything has been arranged, Colonel.”

“But—” Burrows sputtered.

Conner kept the initiative. “I understand the teams are in isolation and will be briefing back this week. I would like to get linked up with one of your teams and sit in on their briefback.”

“The briefback?” Burrows said, surprised at her use of Special Forces terminology.

Conner smiled. “Yes. The briefback.”

“I have to reiterate,” Burrows said, “that the teams will be going into very dangerous areas. We can’t be held responsible for your safety.”

“You will not be responsible,” Conner sweetly replied. “This has already been cleared by SNN legal people with the judge advocate general’s office. Also, to help ensure my safety, Mr. Riley is with

me.”

Burrows looked at Riley. “What was your MOS?”

“I was a one-eight-C before I went warrant,” Riley replied, indicating that he’d been a Special Forces engineer while an enlisted man, then had received a warrant officer commission.

“What units have you served with?”

“First, Fifth, and Seventh groups. Ranging in duties from junior demo sergeant through team leader. My last tour was with the Special Warfare Center assigned to the officer committee of the Q-course.”

Burrows frowned. “Your name sounds familiar. Have we served together?”

“Not to my knowledge, sir.”

Burrows took a deep breath. “Well, as long as you understand that we can’t be held responsible for your safety and it’s been cleared.” He turned to Waller. “Which team’s briefing back soon?”

Waller grabbed a file folder and flipped it open. “We’ve got—” He paused as he scanned the page. “Uh, I would suggest ODA three one four, sir. You’re taking their briefback at eighteen hundred hours today.”

Conner stood. “I won’t take up any more of your time, then, Colonel. I’ll see you at the isolation facility at eighteen hundred hours. Please make sure to put myself and Mr. Riley on the team’s access roster.”

She shook hands with Colonel Burrows and walked out the door, Riley on her heels. They left the group headquarters. Mike Seeger, Conner’s cameraman, was waiting outside, his rig lightly tucked under one arm. He was a huge man, well over six and a half feet tall with a bushy gray beard. He appeared to be the classic Harley biker, which was misleading because outside of his job he was a minister in his local church outside Atlanta and one of the gentlest men Riley had ever met.

“Are we in?” Seeger asked.

“We’re in,” Conner said as she led the way to their van.

“Burrows will call General Long,” Riley warned.

“And Long will tell him that we’re to go with the team,” Conner said. “I called Long’s bluff and won. I played his little war game in Louisiana for three days,” she added. “Now he has to back up his end of the deal.”

“I know that,” Riley said. He paused and lightly touched Conner’s arm. “I know you had to do this to get in with the team, but remember something. Burrows runs the SFOB and when we go in on the ground with the team, the SFOB is heaven and Burrows is god. He controls the most important thing to every team.” Riley could tell that Seeger was annoyed with his religious analogy.

“What’s that?” Conner asked.

“Exfiltration,” Riley said. “We go in with a one-way ticket and Burrows and the SFOB control the ticket out, so don’t get too far on his bad side.”

“I’ll remember that,” Conner said.

“This colonel is just a man,” Seeger said, putting his camera into the rear of the van. “I put my trust in no man. My trust is in God.” He walked around to the other side to get in the driver’s door.

“I don’t know if God spends too much time on the ground in Angola,” Riley muttered.

“What was that?” Conner asked.

“Nothing.”

Vicinity Luia, Angola

11 June

“I can’t see a fucking thing in this jungle,” a man with an Australian accent whispered in the dark.

Quinn tapped his top kick, Trent, who scooted back and edged down the line of prone men.

searching for the whisperer. Through night vision goggles, Quinn continued to scan the forty-foot section of trail that was directly in front of his position.

A grunt and a few hisses told Quinn that his senior noncommissioned officer had found the source of the errant whisper and there would be no more violations of noise-and-light discipline. His men didn't need to see a damn thing; he had the goggles and he could do all the seeing necessary. He knew the exact placement of every one of his eighteen men and their weapons. All they had to do was fire between the left and right limits of the aiming stakes they'd carefully pounded into the ground during daylight and the kill zone would become just that to anyone unfortunate to wander into it.

Quinn had chosen this spot because it was where the trail ran straight for a while, with a steep slope on the far side. Anyone on the trail would be caught between the weapons of Quinn's men and the slope, which was carefully laced with some of Trent's "specials," as Quinn liked to call them.

Trent and Quinn had served together for four years now. A very long time in the life of a mercenary, in fact well past the effective life expectancy of those who stayed in the job. There were four or five men in the group that Quinn felt comfortable working with. The rest, well, they were what one got on the international market. Men searching for quick money and life on the edge. The problem was that most of the men wanted the first and weren't too keen on the second. Nine of the sixteen men were brand new to Quinn, picked up just before they'd crossed the border from Zaire into Angola two weeks ago.

They were here because the money was here, Quinn knew. He himself had earned enough here in Angola over the past three years to easily retire in comfortable style. It was such a perfect scam that even Quinn, hardened as he was by combat in half a dozen spots around the world, had to wonder sometimes.

He got paid by the Angolan government to kill rebels, and then he got paid again by a private party to collect what those he killed carried. It all added up to quite a bit of change.

But the money didn't matter much to Quinn. Even if he wanted to retire, he wasn't sure where he could go. Not many countries hung out welcome mats for mercenaries. He'd always planned on South Africa, but that was out now with the recent changes. Maybe somewhere in South America if one could stay away from the cocaine cowboys. Namibia was a possibility if rumors he had heard about the future of that country came to fruition.

There was no way he could ever go back to Canada. Dear sweet Canada, where the fucks in the fancy uniforms had been so readily done with him after what had happened in Somalia. He'd served and served well, in the best that mother Canada had to offer: the Canadian Airborne Regiment. The reward for being the best was a paltry check and a kick out the door. He'd heard that they'd finally done away with the Regiment itself because of the Somalia scandal, and that was the last straw. He'd never go back there. Not that he would be allowed back in.

Quinn interrupted his train of thought when he heard someone moving behind him. He assumed it was Trent, and that was confirmed when the NCO tapped him on the shoulder. "Andrews has a message on the SATCOM. He's copying it down."

Quinn twisted his head and looked over his shoulder into the thick jungle. Andrews was back there with satellite radio, their lifeline out of this hellhole. What did those nitwits want now?

No time for it, Quinn realized as he heard noise coming from down the trail. He returned his attention to the matter at hand. There was the sound of loose equipment jangling on men as they walked; even some conversations were carried through the night air.

Bastards must think they're damn safe, Quinn thought. And they should be. This location was over two hundred kilometers inside rebel territory. And you could be sure the Angolan government forces, the MPLA, wouldn't be out here in the daytime, never mind the dark.

The point man came into view. Jesus, Quinn swore to himself, the fool was using a flashlight to see

the trail. And not even one with a red lens! It looked like a spotlight in the goggles. They must be in real hurry, he thought. Quinn adjusted the control and looked for the rear of the column.

There were thirteen men and two women in this group. There were more shovels than weapons scattered among them. They were also carrying two of their number on makeshift litters—ponchos tied between two poles. They were excited about the closeness of the border with Zaire and getting on with their load of contraband, and they must be in a rush because of the two wounded, Quinn thought.

Quinn pulled off the goggles, letting them dangle around his neck on a cord. He fitted the stock of the Sterling submachine gun into his shoulder. His finger slid over the trigger. With his other hand he picked up a plastic clacker.

The man with the flashlight was just opposite when Quinn pushed down on the handle of the clacker. A claymore mine seared the night sky, sending thousands of steel ball bearings into the marching party at waist level.

As the screams of those not killed by the initial blast rang out, Quinn fired, his 9mm bullets joining those of his men. The rest of the marchers melted under the barrage. A few survivors followed the instincts instead of their training and ran away from the roar of the bullets, scrambling up the far slope, tearing their fingernails in the dirt in desperation.

“Now,” Quinn said.

It wasn't necessary. Trent knew his job. In the strobe-like flashes from the muzzles of the weapons the people fleeing were visible. Trent pressed the button on a small radio control he held in his hand and the hillside spouted flames. A series of claymore mines Trent had woven into the far slope at just the right angle to kill those fleeing and not hit the ambushers on the far side of the kill zone wiped out the few survivors.

“Let's police this up!” Quinn called as he stood. He stepped among the bodies and pulled off his bush hat, placing it, top down, on one of the few parts of the trail that wasn't covered with blood and viscera. “All the rocks in the hat.”

He pulled up his night vision goggles and watched. Trent took up position at the other end of the kill zone. Quinn's mercenaries descended like ghouls upon the bodies, hands searching. A shot rang out and one of the bodies turned out to be not quite dead.

Quinn pulled a Polaroid camera out of his butt-pack and popped up the flash. He took several long range pictures of the bodies. Then he took close-ups of faces and made sure he had each body accounted for, stowing the pictures in his breast pocket as the men continued their search. In the bright light of the flash, various black faces appeared, frozen in the moment of their death. Some of the faces were no longer recognizable as human, the mines and bullets having done their job. Quinn was satisfied with getting an upper torso and head shot of those.

As he got to the one of the bodies that had been carried, he saw a female's face caught in the viewfinder, the eyes staring straight up, the lips half parted. He could tell she had been beautiful, but she was covered in blood now and there was a rash across her face—broad red welts. Quinn walked over to the other makeshift stretcher. The body in there was in even worse shape. There was much more blood than the round through the forehead would have brought forth. The same red welts across the face. Quinn reached down and ripped open the man's shirt. His body was covered with them. Quinn snapped a picture, then slowly put the final picture in his pocket.

“Let's get a move on!” Quinn yelled out, moving back to his hat. After five minutes, the men began to file by, dropping their find into Quinn's hat until it bulged with raw, uncut diamonds.

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