

CONGO DAWN

BY JEANETTE WINDLE

PROLOGUE

ITURI RAINFOREST, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Paradise Lost.

That translated piece of literature written by a long-ago foreign poet had been a favorite of Jesuit monks who'd taught a Congolese orphan boy his letters and their language many years ago. Perhaps because they'd felt just so at their exile to his own country.

"Baba. Father. Have you not understood what I said? With these we can now make a paradise out of our home."

Father and son stood on a stony outcropping that thrust skyward over the rainforest canopy, one of dozens of the strange rock formations that rose like termite mounds above the treetops, their stony composition bearing no apparent relation to the sandy soil or red clay that made up the jungle floor. Burial mounds of the Ancient Ones, tribal legends avowed before pale-skinned foreigners arrived to teach terms like *igneous* and *volcanic anomaly*.

"Baba, do you not see what a miracle this is? As great a miracle as finding you alive again. The Almighty at last has chosen to shower favor upon us. This place, our people, will never be the same again."

The tall, ebony-skinned youth was dressed incongruously for this place in collared shirt, slacks, and such shiny black shoes as his feet had never known during their growing years. But anxious, dark eyes and beaming smile were the same, though he now held out a handful of gray pebbles rather than the schoolwork of his boyhood. In years past, his father could have responded with unstinted praise, but now he shifted his own bare feet to look down over the cliff edge.

The clearing below stretched to the banks of a wide, lazy river, its water the dark tannin shade of tea, a drink the Jesuit monks had taught the older man to enjoy. Several dozen thatched mud-brick huts occupied the highest ground, beyond the reach of wet-season flooding. Women wrapped in the colorful lengths of homespun cloth called *pagnes* stooped among cultivations of cassava, maize, beans, yams, and peanuts. Others moved along a path from the riverbank, their graceful sway balancing pottery water jars on top of their heads.

Children too young for work or school scampered among banana plants, playing some game of running and hiding. On the river itself, a pair of hand-hewn wooden pirogues drifted lazily toward a bend where the watercourse disappeared back into untamed rainforest. Several village men, naked except for the same loincloth that was the older man's sole dress, stood precariously on the canoe rims to cast fishing nets woven of thin, supple lianas. Drawing the nets from the water, they removed a few catfish and eel, then cast the nets again.

Paradise Lost.

There was a time when such had been the older man's own opinion of this remote jungle locality. When this place had seemed to him an unjust and cruel exile.

Young then, younger than his last-born offspring now standing beside him, he'd

been among his country's first high school graduates after their colonial masters at last packed up and left. By then a Congolese army officer named Mobutu had seized control in their place. Renaming his country Zaire, he'd promised that its vast natural wealth would no longer enrich foreigners but instead provide a grand new world of prosperity, justice, and peace for the Congolese people. The older man standing on the rock outcropping had been the first appointed administrator for the schoolhouse and health outpost their new government had pledged to build in every village.

Life here had not then been so isolated. There'd been a road. Just a dirt track carved through the rainforest but wide enough for motorized vehicles. The road's makers had not built it with any interest in the village. This region had none of the treasures its foreign masters had craved. No diamonds. No gold. No copper. Not even rich soil to be exploited for cotton, sugarcane, or other cash crops. It was simply a dot on the map. And though government tax collectors traveled the road, so did the army units who maintained a welcome stability.

Still, to a youth who'd known the amenities of a city, the taste of imported drink, the stimulation of books and travel, his appointment here had seemed more punishment than promotion. Unfortunately, he'd also been a kinless orphan without connections of blood or wealth to command better opportunities.

Why had he stayed? Especially since Mobutu's new name for an ancient land had proved to last far longer than his promises. Instead of schools and medical centers, Mobutu with his sycophants and endless greedy relatives had built for themselves palaces, parks, and places of entertainment. Betrayal in turn spawned revolt. Rebel militias of every stripe and tribal allegiance became as much a part of the Congolese landscape as crumbling bridges, abandoned rail stations, and beached riverboats.

Perhaps it was no more complicated than a village girl with the ebony roundness, graceful lift of head under her water jar, and strong limbs of true female beauty who'd by then caught his eye. Since the riverbank community was in essence a single intermarried tribal clan, he'd acquired along with a wife the extended family he'd never known in that Jesuit orphanage.

The older man standing now at the cliff edge had not left the Ituri Rainforest again. When the promised concrete school building never materialized, he'd used his own government salary to raise a mud-brick community center. There he'd taught classes and administered rudimentary health care until growing troubles outside the rainforest cut off even that meager stipend. As motorized vehicles stopped passing through, the road grew over with lianas and ferns. Market goods were reduced to what could be lashed to the frames of occasional bicycles that still wore a narrow track along the old roadbed. The community center's tin roofing gradually rusted away, to be replaced with the same thatch as the rest of the village.

By then the administrator had his own growing family. He'd kept them fed as other village families did by cultivating the soil, harvesting the abundance of rainforest and river. And he'd kept the school open, teaching each succeeding crop of boys and girls from the crumbling Swahili primers and Holy Scriptures that were the only books the village possessed. Though most considered squatting indoors over battered slates and mildewed pages a pointless exercise, there were a few with a hunger to learn who walked a full day down the overgrown road to where the foreign God-followers had healed the region's sick and offered a higher education to their children.

Including this youngest son standing before him.

The boy had not been gone long when news trickled into the village with the last of the bicycle merchants that the white foreigners had been driven from the rainforest, their hospital and secondary school burned to the ground by raiding rebels, the town's Congolese inhabitants massacred. To add terror were other rumors of villages wiped out by soldiers who were not rebels but wore the uniforms of government forces.

While war raged in the outside world, the village closed in upon itself. The bicycle trail was now a tangle of vegetation. Not in many seasons had their community received so much as a visitor from some other jungle village. For all they could know, they might be the only survivors left upon the planet.

Still, the schoolmaster, by now undisputedly acclaimed the village chief, continued to teach the children in faith that one day the road would open again to a wider world.

And the road had indeed opened to bring the return of a son he'd despaired still bore life. Leaning against a boulder down below was a small motorbike that had somehow pushed its way through the overgrown roadbed. The story his son told was not uncommon in the Congo. Among a few students evacuated with the white foreigners, he'd found himself in a refugee camp so far from home he could not have covered the distance in many days of walking. And other survivors had told him that every village in his Ituri district had been razed to the ground.

The boy's education soon secured him employment as a translator. Seeing potential in the young man, the foreign aid workers sponsored him for further education, eventually even outside the Congo itself. When he'd at last made his way back to this place, it hadn't been with any expectation of finding the village. But he'd been as delighted to discover his family still living as they were to receive him.

Not until he'd insisted his father climb this outcropping with him had he explained the real reason for his return. The older man shook his head now at the gray pebbles on his son's outstretched palm, not in negation, but perplexity.

"All know our country's very bones are filled with great treasure. But there have been foreigners here before to make their tests on these hills. Back when your oldest brother was still at his mother's breast. Graphite, they named this rock."

Plucking a chunk from his son's palm, he rubbed it across a nearby boulder. It left a dark streak. "See? These have proved useful enough to the children for forming their letters since we can no longer obtain pencils. But it is too common for the mining companies to come this far after it."

"Those who came before were wrong, *Baba*. This is what I have been studying since I left you. Geology. Remember this? The collection I made as a boy when you first taught us of the treasures a rock can hold?"

Yes, the older man recognized the small, lumpy bag crafted from sun-cured duiker hide. He remembered, too, the boy's disappointment that the glitter of a pyrite pebble was not in fact gold.

His son was still speaking. "Remember how angry I was that always it has been others—the foreigners, our own corrupt leaders—who reaped the benefit of such treasure and not the people under whose soil it was found? You taught me too not to hate or dwell on past injustices. To become a student and not a rebel. And as a student, I took my collection with me, even when I was running and in the refugee camp. I kept it because it was all I still had of this place. But when I found employment with a mining firm, I tested the rocks in their lab. And I found that those who came here long ago were

wrong. That is not graphite you hold in your hand, but a treasure infinitely more valuable. A treasure not even known to exist in your childhood. Valuable enough to bring to this place employment and restored roads and electricity. Better schools and a hospital. All the goods and opportunities I have seen in the outside world that our people have so long been denied.”

The youth trailed off, for the first time registering that his father did not reflect his own excitement. “Why are you not rejoicing, *Baba*? Is this not what you have prayed for? A better life for our people? For the children you have taught?”

The village administrator was too troubled now to hide it from his expression. Was it for this he’d sent his son from the rain forest to seek a higher education and better world? Such naïveté? Such foolishness?

Paradise Lost.

Strange that only now, as he contemplated its loss, did the village administrator recognize any similarities between this place to which he’d been so reluctantly exiled long decades ago and a Garden described in the Holy Scriptures. A Garden where the first man and woman had opened their eyes to the presence of a Creator God who walked with his children.

Had that first couple looked out as he did now over such endless, tossing, verdant waves? Had they marveled at orange, pink, and lilac flowering trees and rainbow-hued orchids spilling over branches and down tree trunks? Had they smiled or frowned at the chattering, chirping, croaking, cawing, and other noises that signaled the jungle’s richly varied animal life? Black-and-white colobus monkeys. Cockatoos and macaws. That rarest of rain forest mammals, the okapi, an odd if beautiful hybrid of zebra and giraffe. The more abundant duikers and bongo antelopes kept in check by leopards.

And human predators as well, indication that this was not after all the original Paradise. Down below, a group of village men were just now emerging from the rain forest into an orchard of mango, citrus, papaya, and coconut palms. Among limp shapes slung across shoulders, the administrator could pick out antelope, boar, and a vine-tied clutch of pangolin, that tasty rain forest resident with the shape of an opossum and the shelled armor of an armadillo. Added to the catch of those fishermen in the pirogues, the village would eat well tonight.

Yes, if life here was simple, isolated, precarious of existence, bowing always to the vagaries of nature that could in an instant send flood, forest fire, or pestilence to sweep away the timid hold its small band of human inhabitants had carved out on the riverbank, it was perhaps not so ill as the older man had often thought it.

In a gesture that surprised him with its violence, he slapped the gray rock chunks from his son’s hand. “As you said, Son, when have the people under whose soil such treasures have been found ever been permitted to profit from its wealth? Tell me now! Whom have you told of this treasure of yours?”

His son looked more bewildered and disappointed than angry at his father’s reaction. “I saw no reason to keep it secret. On the contrary, it took much persuading before my employers were convinced that I was not wasting their time.”

The younger man held up a small, plastic-shelled oblong. The administrator alone among the villagers would recognize its purpose. A cell phone.

“I have already let them know that I have confirmed a sufficient source to justify their interest. And why not? We will need help from the outside—much investment—to develop this treasure. The first step will be to open the old road.”

He'd lost his father's attention. This rocky knoll had always been a handy lookout for forest fires. But not for enemies slipping up on the village. The jungle canopy was too impenetrable for that. This time, though, the height of the stony outcropping had provided advance notice of invasion. The older man was already scrambling downward toward the village as quickly as the steep slope permitted. As soon as he was within earshot, he raised his voice in an ululating cry.

It was too late. The roar of two helicopters swooping in low over the jungle had roused more curiosity than alarm. The villagers were hurrying into the open to stare upwards as the helicopters hovered above a cassava field.

Shiny black shoes slipped and skidded on the rock behind the administrator as his son scrambled after him. "Baba, there is no need of fear. It is only our investors."

But the men jumping from the helicopters' open sides did not wear the suits or carry the briefcases of businessmen. These were predators. And not of animals, but of men. More ominously, neither did all have the dark skin or features of Congolese.

His son was now at the older man's side. "There has been some mistake. I will go speak to them."

But his father was shoving him into the cover of trees and lianas and brush with all the strength of rage and panic and despair. "No, I am chief here. I will speak for my people. You must escape. You must find help."

The screams had already begun. His youngest son had obeyed his orders and was no longer in view. As he strode into the open, the older man found himself in complete agreement on one point.

Life for his people, his village, this beautiful rain forest paradise, would never be the same.

CNN, Kinshasa, DRC—The Democratic Republic of the Congo made public today the latest discovery of this mineral-rich nation's exploitable natural resources in the northeastern province of Ituri. This vein of molybdenite, prime source of the rare metal molybdenum, already shows promise of surpassing the recent molybdenite finds in Mexico and Siberia combined.

Wall Street Journal, New York—Mining companies hoping to cash in on Ituri molybdenite were disappointed to learn that global consortium Earth Resources has already struck a deal with DRC's Ministry of Mines in Kinshasa for an exclusive mining concession in the aforementioned zone. Earth Resources CEO Trevor Mulrone and regional governor Jean Pierre Wamba in Ituri province's capital of Bunia jointly express their satisfaction that this project will bring badly needed economic stimulus and employment into this war-weary and poverty-stricken province.

Military Industry Today, London—News flash for the private defense industry. Prominent British entrepreneur Trevor Mulrone announces the recent acquisition by his consortium Earth Resources, Ltd, of a controlling interest in the private military corporation Ares Solutions. The original founder of Ares Solutions two decades ago, Mulrone expresses pleasure at this new alliance between Ares Solutions and Earth Resources along with expectations of continued rapid growth and profits for both entities and their shareholders.

Kinshasa Times, Bunia, DRC—Breaking an extended cease-fire, rebel forces are again threatening the peace of northeast Congo, using the cover of the Ituri Rainforest to strike villages and raid government installations. Daily reports of atrocities are pouring into UN peacekeeping headquarters in the Ituri capital of Bunia. Recent advancements in mineral development of the region have been threatened by attacks on the molybdenite mine and ore-transport convoys.

CHAPTER ONE

ITURI RAINFOREST

He could stop this with a word. A raised hand.

Instead he began the task for which he'd come as a band of armed men fanned out, kicking in bamboo doors, tossing torches onto thatched roofs, dragging residents still groggy with sleep into the open. A spattering of gunfire on the far side of the village signaled the first resistance.

He made no effort to interfere when the first woman was tossed down onto the red dirt of the clearing. Flames leaping high from burning huts now matched the red and orange streaks lightening a dawn sky above the jungle canopy. The gunfire had become a steady staccato. He closed his ears to its clatter. To the shouts, screams, moans. The terrified sobbing of a child.

But he could not so close his eyes. These images would never leave his mind.

By the time all fell silent, the rising sun had cleared the treetops. But its cheerful rays could not penetrate a black pall of smoke that drifted upward to cast its spreading shadow across the sky.

He turned his head as a hand touched his shoulder. His second-in-command stepped close to murmur urgently, "The searchers found nothing. Learned nothing. We must go before the smoke is spotted and others come."

But he shook off his subordinate's warning hand to stride out across the clearing. Stepping around prone shapes and viscous scarlet puddles, he peered through smoldering doorframes until the thunderous crash of a collapsing roof startled him into prudence. Only when he was satisfied nothing remained to be done did he lift a hand in signal. As he slipped noiselessly into the rain forest's camouflage of leaf and vine and root, a phalanx of phantoms melted into invisibility with him.

Behind them, all that remained of what had been a tranquil rain forest community were embers and dead bodies.

He did not permit himself to waste a heartbeat on pity.

After all, none had been granted him or his!

* * *

UGANDA-DRC BORDER

"The problem with these people, *bokkie*, isn't that they can't be bought. It's that they just won't *stay* bought!"

Robin Duncan had no illusion that the brawny, flaxen-blond South African mercenary was referencing their Congolese driver, who still sat unmoving behind the steering wheel of the ancient two-and-a-half-ton market truck, staring out a cracked windshield.

Nor a dozen equally brawny Caucasian males hunkered down on a pile of luggage in the truck bed.

Nor even the two border guards who'd wagged their heads and AK-47 assault rifles at the passports and stamped visa forms Robin offered through a rolled-down

window.

No, Pieter Krueger's latest disgusted pronouncement was directed at the same person or persons responsible for Robin's own sour attitude and sore posterior. Cracked vinyl upholstery over broken wire springs was hardly adequate protection against twenty kilometers of jolting through deep ruts, untrimmed brush, and dry streambeds. Especially when she'd been awake and on the move for over twenty-four hours.

Robin straightened her spine to ease stiffened back muscles as she stepped away from the truck cab. Just beyond the truck's rusted hood, a metal pole extended across the dirt track. A round hut squatted in the shade of several large mango trees, its conical thatched roof giving the appearance of a witch's hat.

Black letters staggered drunkenly across the whitewash of the hut. *Services de l'immigration République démocratique du Congo*.

A touch of officialdom drooped from a second metal pole, this one vertical. The sky-blue banner with a diagonal red stripe banded in yellow and a yellow star in the upper-left corner—the DRC's most recent version of a country flag. A scattering of cinder-block shacks completed the hamlet. Shops, apparently, from the boxes of cigarettes, aluminum cookware, grain sacks, and mounds of fruit and vegetables that were identifiable even under a coating of red dust.

But if this Congolese strip mall existed to capitalize on transnational traffic, business was poor. The market truck was the only vehicle pulled up to the roadblock. Behind it, the dirt track snaking back through the no-man's-land held only a few trudging pedestrians balancing loads on their heads along with a rapidly approaching dust cloud. A motorcycle, judging by the size of the cloud and the distinct rumble. Beyond the roadblock where the road disappeared again into a dense tangle of green, not a motorized vehicle nor even a bicycle was in sight.

Which might account for the swarm of vendors already mobbing the truck with dusty glass bottles of Coca-Cola and Primus, the region's ubiquitous local beer, as well as plastic baggies filled with a cloudy liquid that could be palm wine or coconut water. And the bored indolence with which the two guards ambled around the truck to peer through the wooden slats at its cargo of passengers and luggage.

"So just what's the holdup?" A hand dropped onto Robin's shoulder. "Why are they not letting us through?"

"They say there's a problem with our papers. You'll have to go inside and speak to the commander." Robin inched away as Pieter Krueger's large frame loomed uncomfortably close. She'd been working a UN fact-finding mission as team linguist in Haiti when the private security company that held her contract, Ares Solutions, had contacted her. Two of the language skills listed on her résumé—French (excellent) and Swahili (passable)—were urgently needed for a brand-new security contract in eastern DRC. The hazard pay bonus offered was generous enough to suggest caution if Robin didn't need the money so badly. She'd been issued a replacement for Haiti and an e-ticket to Kenya by the time her duffel bag was packed.

In the Nairobi airport, Robin had joined up with some two dozen other Ares Solutions operatives. From their introductions, the group constituted a fairly stereotypical representation of their chosen career in more ways than just the inevitable safari-style clothing, Kevlar vests, wraparound sunglasses, and muscled builds. Two German commandos. Several Australian and New Zealander former paratroopers. A scattering of East European elite troopers whose Cold War training offered few

employment opportunities at home these days but was a hot commodity in the private military market. Robin's only countrymen were a pair of Vietnam-era Green Berets, gray-haired and weather-beaten.

But by far the largest contingent were white Africans. South African commandos who'd gone freelance once their country fell under black rule. Rhodesians who'd fought as teenagers in Ian Smith's Bush War before that country became Zimbabwe. Angolan Portuguese. Three white Kenyans who'd served in the British Special Air Service. A pair of apartheid-era Afrikaner combat helicopter pilots.

All had that ineffable air—less arrogance than supreme self-confidence combined with somewhat-unkempt personal grooming—that suggested they'd knocked around the planet's sleazier underbelly long and successfully enough that they simply didn't care what any other human being might think of them. Dangerous men, definitely. For hire, perhaps. But still warriors and superlatively expert at their craft. English was the one language they'd all demonstrated in common. None spoke more than a few words of French or Swahili, not even the Kenyans, in whose country the latter was a primary language among its black majority population.

Well, that was why Robin was here.

The single other outlier on this mission was a third passenger now clambering down from the truck cab, pale-blue eyes blinking behind metal-rimmed glasses. His gaze shifted only fractionally from the reinforced screen of a tough-travel notebook computer to find his footing. Round-shouldered, brown hair untrimmed, Carl Jensen looked so much the image of Shaggy on *Scooby-Doo* that Robin had found herself instinctively glancing around for his canine companion.

"You mean *you'll* have to speak to this commander." White teeth flashed in chiseled, handsome features as Krueger stepped forward to reclaim the space Robin had inserted between them. "You did well enough in Arua. But border authorities in these parts are not so predictable, especially for a woman. Just stay close to me, speak only the words I give you, and you'll be safe enough."

An Afrikaner in his late thirties, Pieter Krueger had introduced himself in Nairobi as manager for Ares Solutions's African operations. He'd herded the group onto a C-130 four-engine military cargo plane chartered to ferry their team along with a full load of mission supplies from Nairobi to Bunia, in the DRC. But the pilot had announced midflight that their clearance into the Democratic Republic of the Congo had been inexplicably revoked.

They'd diverted instead to land in Arua, a Ugandan border town. While a handful of Ares Solutions operatives remained behind to mount guard over the plane's contents, Robin had used her halting Swahili to help Krueger negotiate ground transport just over the Congolese border, where arrangements had been made for an air pickup from Bunia.

"But we do not have much time. We still have a drive ahead to the airstrip, and our flight could be landing anytime now. You might as well learn now our new mutual employer has no patience for unpunctuality." Krueger's hand on Robin's shoulder slid down to the small of her back as though to steer her toward the border outpost. "I must say a female translator is still a surprise. I have served in the past with Trevor Mulrone, and he is not the sort to hire a woman for such a mission as this. Or at all. Not that I am complaining to have such a pretty young *bokkie* on the team."

Robin gritted her teeth at his appreciative leer and the warm pressure of his hand. Pieter Krueger had insisted Robin join him and Carl in the truck cab instead of

crouching down against a whirlwind of red dust in the open truck bed. To facilitate communication with the driver had been his stated rationale. The South African mercenary was admittedly a striking male specimen whose rugged, blond good looks could have graced a Nazi-era poster for Aryan perfection. And single, he'd been quick to let Robin know.

But after the past hour of running commentary on corrupt African governance, unruly native populations, Krueger's exploits fighting in Africa's many wars, and the general worthlessness of the entire continent north of Johannesburg, Robin wasn't so sure she'd brokered the better deal. And if his Afrikaner slang was the endearment she guessed, Robin was going to have to set some hard boundaries before this contract progressed much further.

Not for the first time in the testosterone-dominated profession she'd chosen.

"So, anything cold to drink around this place?" Carl Jensen slammed shut his laptop to glance around.

"Cold, no. Wet, yes. Just don't buy anything that isn't factory bottled if you don't want to pay for it later." Gesturing to where her teammates were already trading coins for drinks, Robin used the interruption to step discreetly away so Pieter Krueger had to drop his hand. The South African threw her a sharp glance, white teeth disappearing into a frown. But without further comment, he strode toward the whitewashed hut. Robin followed, deliberately lagging two paces behind.

Overhead, a fierce sun marked the hour as close to noon. Breaking out a hand wipe from the knapsack she carried over one shoulder, Robin swabbed perspiring cheeks as she walked. It came away sodden with red mud. A breeze whistling through the mango trees brought with its cooling touch a scent of dust and green mangoes, manure, and fermenting palm sap, tapped all over Africa as an alcoholic beverage.

Drifting from inside one of the shops, the syncopated beat of a carved-wood drum accompanied a man's voice crooning a Swahili folk ballad. In a cultivated field beyond, a pair of zebras, mother and foal, munched contentedly on whatever crop was planted there.

Zebras! How long had it been since Robin had glimpsed a zebra outside a zoo?

There'd been a time in Robin's far-distant childhood when the sights, sounds, and smells of an African countryside roused only delight, a magical real-life version of Disney's *The Lion King*. The vast green horizons and bright-red earth like nothing else she'd seen on the planet. Those peculiar flat-topped trees for which she knew no name, dotting open pastures like inverted brooms. Clusters of thatched huts, round and square. The chaos and bright colors of an open-air market. Grinning dark faces and the staccato of bare feet pounding in dance for the latest community excuse of celebration.

But today Robin saw instead the rheumy, sunken eyes of several small children peering from an alley between shops, their naked bellies swollen from parasites and malnutrition. The angry desperation of vendors battling for a rare sale. Piles of rotting garbage that competed with the fragrance of fresh-picked fruit. The casual, even bored brutality with which the two guards were now using the butts of their weapons to beat back a few peddlers who persisted in hassling the new arrivals.

I am so tired of war and hunger and poverty. Of places and jobs like this. Of human misery and sheer human meanness that never seems to reach its limit! All the more reason to get through this checkpoint and this contract as quickly as possible.

Which did not prove so simple a matter as Robin had hoped.

The interior of the border outpost was a single large room open to the thatched roof. A metal filing cabinet, scattered plastic chairs, and the rickety wooden table that served as the immigration counter constituted its sole furnishings. Geckos scurried up walls where whitewashed plaster had crumbled to reveal mud brick beneath. Something unseen rustled in the dried palm fronds directly above Robin's head. The only lighting filtered through a pair of small windows.

"So you understand, your papers are no good here." A short but powerfully built man, the outpost commander had barely glanced at the stack of signed, stamped immigration forms before waving them away. On the table in front of him, empty Primus bottles crowded a manual typewriter. A sickly-sweet aroma of marijuana smoke suggested the lethargy and reddened, dilated glares of two more guards who'd jumped to their feet as the group entered were not after all due to boredom or interrupted slumber. "This means you cannot enter my country."

"I don't understand. How can these visas be no good?" Robin asked with a patience she did not feel. Even as she spoke, she took note through the open door of the motorcycle she'd heard earlier pulling up outside. Bundles lashed to its frame were piled so high she caught only a glimpse of blue jeans as a passenger dismounted. Robin pushed the stack of paperwork across the table. "These visas are issued by your own government. We received them just this morning in Nairobi."

"Then that is the problem. You have not crossed into the DRC from Kenya, but from Uganda. So that requires a separate visa. You cannot proceed without it."

But you rejected our visas before you even knew we'd originated in Kenya! Robin didn't dare introduce logic audibly into this proceeding. Recent years had taught her only too well the lessons of dealing with Third World bureaucracy. Never argue injustice. Never look a uniform in the eye. Grovel humbly and smilingly. Above all, let small-minded, petty officials, especially those carrying automatic weapons, feel as big and powerful and important as necessary to get the job done!

Behind Robin, Pieter Krueger's body language radiated impatience while others of the team were now jostling through the open door. Though Ugandan border control had required them to leave their weapons with the C-130, such a sizable group of large, muscled expatriates was attracting unfriendly glares from the commander's two bodyguards. Robin didn't care for the restless twitchiness with which they were fingering their AK-47s.

In her most conciliatory French, she pleaded, "But we have a plane waiting to pick us up. We won't have time to return to Uganda and come back. Surely there must be something we can do. Someone we can talk to. We have come to your country by direct invitation of the Ituri governor, Jean Pierre Wamba. See, here is his letter of authorization."

The commander's glance of incomprehension at the typed French and scrawled signature under an official letterhead confirmed Robin's suspicions of the man's illiteracy. "And what good is this? How am I to know it is not a forgery? No, you must return to Uganda and purchase new visas."

He wasn't going to budge. Her shoulders slumping in defeat, Robin murmured unhappily to Pieter Krueger, "I'm sorry, but I've tried everything I can, and I'm afraid we're just out of luck. He insists we have to go back to Arua and get new visas before we can cross. Can you radio our pickup and let them know we've got another delay on our hands?"

“You’ve got to be kidding! Mulrone y swore he’d taken care of all the paperwork for this mission. Like I said, these people just won’t stay bought.”

It was as well Robin didn’t understand Krueger’s stream of low, furious Afrikaans. As the outpost commander’s unyielding expression dissolved into a scowl, she braced herself to break into the South African’s invective. But an amused voice, its accent unmistakably American, did it for her. “Hey, don’t give up so fast. You should know Commander Patrice isn’t really expecting you to go all the way back to Arua. Just to offer the proper incentive. As any half-baked briefing for travel in this region should have warned you. Here, maybe I can be of assistance.”

Robin’s peripheral vision identified a glimpse of blue denim as the motorcycle passenger. But it wasn’t the welcome offer of help that whirled Robin around. She could actually feel blood draining from her face as her eyes widened in shock. No, she hadn’t imagined she recognized that sardonic baritone. The motorcycle passenger appeared almost slight next to a huge Bulgarian mercenary who’d entered behind him until he strode forward enough to reveal he was several inches taller than Robin’s own five feet eight inches. He looked thinner than Robin remembered, though no less muscled under a T-shirt so red with dust its original hue was a matter of dispute.

And older, deep grooves traced the stern edges of his mouth from high-bridged nose to firm chin. Nor did those tawny-brown eyes, fringed in long, dark lashes, hold any of the smiling warmth Robin had once known there. They were instead guarded and somber as though with unforgotten pain or grief. An always-deep tan was now burned to coppery bronze only a shade lighter than his close-cropped curls. All but a single ridge of healed scar tissue that ran palely in a jagged line from below his left ear down his neck to disappear beneath the thin material of his T-shirt.

The sudden whitening of that scar, his change of expression to disbelief as Robin whirled around, made clear she, too, was amply recognizable despite the passage of years.

He’d approached so close now that she could make out her own wavery reflection in his stunned dark gaze. Tired oval features that never truly tanned, thanks to the same genetic makeup responsible for a red-gold mane currently tucked under a floppy brimmed hat. A straightforward blue-green gaze this man standing in front of her had once compared to the quiet beauty of the Himalayan mountain pool beside which they were bivouacked at the time.

His sharp inhalation of breath, the stiffening of his body in midstride, permitted Robin to release her words through unsteady lips first. “Michael Stewart! What—what are you doing here?”

He unfroze, finishing his stride so that he closed the gap between them. “What am I doing here? I at least belong here! What are you doing here? And with this bunch. You’re the last person I’d have thought would ever trade in fatigues to go freelance.”

Of course, Michael had grown up in sub-Saharan Africa, son of American medical missionaries, though Robin did not remember exactly where. Or her subconscious deliberately chose to forget. His stories of African rain forest life, as idyllic in their telling as Robin’s own childhood memories, had contributed to the bond that once existed between them.

He broke off, his firm, straight mouth twisting suddenly, his glance sliding away from Robin before he added quietly, “I never got a chance to say . . . I’ve been wanting to tell you for a long time . . . I am so sorry about your brother. My deepest condolences.”

After five years of waiting for those words, they were as unexpected, even unwelcome, as his appearance. Now it was Robin who froze. She was no longer in the muggy, dark confines of a Congo border outpost, but on a chill, high Himalayan mountain ridge. The dust in her nostrils no longer equatorial Africa's red soil, but the powdery, light dirt of Afghanistan. Dampness streaking her face no longer sweat, but tears. Explosions and the *rat-tat-tat* of automatic gunfire rang in her ears. Her bloodied hands frantically pressed back the crimson flood welling up through shattered body armor.

Then the roar of the evac helicopter hovered down, and this man's younger self was jumping out to push her aside. The last time she'd seen or heard from Michael Stewart, he'd been lifting Robin's groaning, semiconscious, but very much alive youngest sibling into the helicopter. Not just her sibling, but the incredible, talented, wonderful human being who'd been Robin's best friend in this world.

And this man's too.

Or so she'd believed.