

A JOHN MOORE MYSTERY

Legacy of Lies

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LEGACY OF LIES

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This book is dedicated to those who served their country in war with honorable duty, keeping their moral compass pointed in the correct direction—particularly to those soldiers I served with and commanded in the 25th Infantry Division and the 101st Airborne Division in the Vietnam War.

1

Nairobi, July 14, 2003

OUR VAN SMASHED OVER THE high-speed bump and rose into the Kenyan night sky, embracing the heavy rain. The ancient shock absorbers and axle springs thudded the undercarriage, bouncing us. With no seat belts, our heads banged the roof. The front plummeted, the rear vaulted: a roller coaster swinging my body, tightening my stomach. My heart thumped as memories rushed from another time, of a war long ago, where I lost my innocence serving as a young infantry army captain in the jungles of Vietnam.

* * *

The RPG round soared at us, trailing smoke until it exploded in the treetop below the cockpit. Metal fragments showered the fuselage and the windscreen. A banshee-like alarm screamed throughout the helicopter's cabin. The engine shuddered. Its rotor blades grasped at the humid air, but the airframe continued to plummet. The LZ (Landing Zone) appeared several hundred feet ahead. I could only look and hope.

Holding on to whatever interior fixtures I could, I ricocheted with my soldiers in the struggling aircraft. Our UH-1 revolved, dying, its rotors losing. My stomach churned, and bitter bile flooded my throat as my six men, with their rucksacks and M-16 rifles, stared at me, waiting, frozen.

"Captain, I'm going to autorotate to the LZ. It'll be a crash landing. Jump when we are several feet from the ground," the warrant officer's tense voice pushed through my headset. "My co-pilot is hit . . ."

"Roger," I said, turning to my grunts, motioning for them to face out the open cabin doors. "Hold on and hop out at my command."

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I had little hope of surviving. Crashing through the jungle canopy in a Huey gave us few options, especially if the helicopter banked to one side or flipped over.

My one newbie soldier turned pale and vomited through the door opening. I checked my other men, seasoned from many months of combat. One caught my nod and reached out to the new guy, talking to him while checking his gear.

The copter, shuddering and swaying, pulled at us as the pilot fought the controls; we continued to drop, gravity sucking us to the ground.

* * *

Michael Aho's shrill Swahili drew me back to the present. His nephew, the driver, rammed the brake pedal hard, scowling at his uncle. The wet discs screeched, protesting, as the vehicle slid to a halt. Unrestrained, Michael and I propelled forward, jamming against the backs of the front seats.

"Where did your mind disappear?" he asked, staring at me.

"Ah . . . the Vietnam War. A flashback," I said and turned to look at the resort entrance.

"Was bad?" Michael asked.

"My helicopter was shot down. I survived, but one of my men didn't." My eyes made him pause.

"I am sorry"

Shadows emerged from the night gloom: the body-armored soldiers stepped toward us; their Uzis ready. They looked nervous. I reached for my backpack, but Michael, on my left, rested his hand on my forearm.

"They are Kenyan troops on security. Some bombings this month," he said. "We are not in danger."

Easing back in my seat, I ignored my knapsack with the Sig Sauer P229 and the extra .40-caliber ammo. The old windshield wipers raced against the heavy downpour, squeaking and scratching. The men encircled us. Ahead, the brightly lit entrance to the Nairobi

Serena Hotel beckoned, but the steel gate topped with layers of barbed concertina wire remained closed.

Two personnel broke off from the cluster of soldiers and approached our vehicle. Holding metal rods with mirrors, they scanned under the van. Nearby, a guard dog appeared, straining his handler's leash. The handsome German Shepherd paced, sniffing our parked vehicle while pulling his human companion around the van.

"Bombs?" I asked.

Michael, my CIA colleague, nodded. His yellow-stained pupils contrasted with his glistening ebony skin. His thick neck blended with his large head. The muscular body with gigantic hands and feet completed him. He looked at me again; sweat drops reflected on his upper lip and forehead. In a dangerous situation, I knew I could count on him.

Michael met me at the Nairobi airport earlier this evening, beaming his disarming smile. Unlike the typical Type A personality CIA agent, he was a refreshing change.

He turned from me to talk to the army lieutenant through the driver's window. I watched the back of our chauffeur's head; his dreadlocks flipped in a steady arc as he looked back and forth between the officer and Michael.

"You American?" the Kenyan Army official asked, staring at me while pointing his Uzi at our stiffened young driver.

The sliding door slammed open, and the German Shepard leaped inside. His handler waited outside with his unhooked leash. Ignoring me, the dog moved to the back of the van, exploring for explosives.

"Yes," I said, returning to the lieutenant and his automatic weapon.

"Identification," he commanded. "You stay at the hotel?"

Michael and I nodded and handed our CIA passports to him. Our nervous driver shoved his ID card at the officer. I frowned. Michael shouldn't be using his nephew to drive for us, but I could only blame myself as I wanted nondescript transportation to avoid attention.

The dog nudged me. Startled, I smiled at the police canine staring at me. Its dark eyes bore into me as the smell of wet fur permeated

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the interior. The guilt pangs of leaving Sheba, my Siberian Husky, in Washington, D.C., with my friend Jim Schaeffer surfaced. Maybe this animal understood. My underarms grew damp—nerves and the humid heat. Then the Shepard jumped outside and stood by his master, looking at me.

“You, Mr. John Moore?” the army officer asked as he handed the document back.

“Yes, I am.” I pocketed the passport.

“The photograph looks different.”

I grinned, understanding the political game of confronting foreigners.

The lieutenant shrugged and began quizzing Michael in Swahili, ignoring our worried young driver. Then he stepped away and yelled a command. The gate squealed and swung open. The officer barked another order, and the van’s sliding door slammed shut, blocking my view of the police dog. The vehicle crept forward as I thought of Sheba again, wondering how she would have reacted to the German Shepard prodding and sniffing me. She was protective, saving my life in the Arctic about two months ago. A sadness came over me, knowing I had left her behind because of this mission, haunted by her eyes as I hugged her and said goodbye.

“I will release my nephew. But he will be on call when we need him. The soldiers do not want more vehicles in the hotel compound,” Aho explained.

I shrugged. My CIA boss, James Woodruff, had a knack for placing me in difficult and dangerous situations because of my military combat experience. But then, what does that say about me. After completing my military obligation as an infantry captain in the US Army, I became a psychologist to focus on helping vets deal with their war memories. I couldn’t explain what drove me to work for the CIA.

I could quit, yet I didn’t, seemingly drawn to the murky life of intrigue with the Agency. Maybe I was using the job to deflect from my war angst.

The grinding brakes stopped the van by the hotel doors as a bellman greeted us and loaded our luggage onto a cart. Michael’s

nephew didn't hesitate. He turned the vehicle around, accelerating toward the gate, fleeing the stare of the soldiers.

Michael dealt with the bellman and checked us in. Complying with CIA procedures to avoid first-floor rooms, we made our way to the second floor. The bellman stopped at the door to Michael's room.

"Michael, meet me in the lounge in thirty minutes," I said.

He nodded, took his luggage, and entered his room as I followed the bellman to the adjacent room. I looked at my watch; it was 9:30 p.m. I wanted to brief him quickly and get some sleep. The international jet lag from D.C. to Amsterdam to Kenya clouded my head.

* * *

Liquor glasses clinked from the bar as we eased into an isolated booth. The lounge held only two other customers. By their accents, they were Brits and the only other Caucasians in the room. They sat at the bar describing their safari into the Masai Mara to the bartender.

"I say, we saw the black rhino. A rare animal, old chap," one said, sneaking a stare at us.

The Kenyan bartender nodded, glancing toward Michael with raised eyes. The two British gents had locked onto us.

Michael waited until the lone waitress set our drinks down and walked away. He leaned toward me. "I think it is safe to talk."

"You know Woodruff. He gives little input and expects success." I twisted to him, watching the bar.

He nodded. Cradling his whiskey in his mammoth fists, he sipped while returning the stare of the two Brits at the bar.

"Something wrong with those two?" I asked, following Michael's gaze.

"They oversaw security for the Royal East Coffee & Tea Company, based near Kericho, west of Nairobi. When I was twelve, these two ignored the danger to the tea workers, such as my mom and dad, who worked in the hilly fields. They were raped and killed by the Kalenjins, supposedly because the Kisii candidate won."

"That's terrible. I assume you're Kisii?"

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He nodded as I absorbed this gut-wrenching news. I understood his pain and wondered how he escaped.

“My mother hid me in a crawl space,” Michael said. “Then I fled to Nairobi where I began a new life with my uncle. It is an emotion I deal with every day. After University, the CIA recruited me as the in-country agent.”

“Hey mates, join us for a nightcap?” One of the Englishmen swayed behind Aho, spilling his drink. He placed his hand on Michael’s shoulder.

“Look, we’re in a business discussion here. Do you mind?” I asked, worried by Michael’s glare.

“I say, not good enough to have one drink.” He staggered back a step or two, catching his balance.

Michael stood; his face contorted in anger. I grabbed his arm and pulled him to me as I rose. Throwing a twenty-dollar bill onto the table, I escorted him to the exit.

“It’s not worth it,” I said. “We’ll finish the discussion in my room.”

Michael followed silently. I glanced toward the bar area, catching the two Englishmen staring, whispering something. My gut tightened. Their presence was no coincidence.

2

Nairobi Serena Hotel, July 14

MICHAEL SIPPED THE SCOTCH HE found in my room's minibar. I switched to bottled water, hoping to hydrate. Anxious over the recent confrontation in the bar, I stared at Aho.

"Is there anything you need to tell me—about those Brits in the lounge?" I asked, eyeing him.

"Perhaps. My uncle, a lawyer, represents the tea plantation rape and massacre survivors in a criminal and civil lawsuit. I am a witness."

"Shit. Does our boss know this?" I asked, not hiding my anger. "Those two guys were trying to intimidate you. It's not a coincidence that they were in the bar with us. Do you get that?"

"John, I promise our mission will not be endangered. But for my parents, I must seek recourse. There must be some justice."

I felt a weight on my chest, sensing that the two Brits could compromise my mission. Shaking my head, I realized I had no other choice.

"Assistant Director Woodruff wants me to meet with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam president when he arrives in Nairobi in the next few days," I informed, awaiting his reaction.

Raising his eyebrows, he said, "My sources in the Kenyan government gave me the info about the trip, which I passed on to Mr. Woodruff. I assumed that he sent you here for that reason. The trip by the Vietnamese is very sudden. Raises questions." Aho sat up.

"Woodruff wants me to leverage my two contacts in the Vietnamese government to determine if the trip ties to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative—the BRI."

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“You may already know this, but the Kenyan government has signed an intent with the Chinese to explore a joint venture with the BRI. Building a major port on the coast with a network of railways, energy pipelines, and roads is very tempting to President Kibaki. But he seems to be ignoring the high debt that the Chinese will force on Kenya to implement the program. Others in the parliament are raising these concerns. And Kenya is rife with corruption,” Michael said, looking at me.

“Then why the Socialist Republic of Vietnam’s visit?” I asked.

“I believe it is to give Kenya a negotiating chip with the Chinese.” Michael took another sip of scotch. “It seems no one trusts anyone.”

“Kenya is smart to use the Vietnamese who have a tenuous but cordial relationship with China. Vietnam will never forget the Chinese invasion of their northern border in 1979. The Sino-Vietnamese War which lasted about four weeks was a failure for China. It could never dissuade Vietnam from ousting the ruthless Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge regime out of Cambodia. The Vietnamese won. I feel humanity owes the Vietnamese some thanks for ending the Pol Pot genocide of two million Cambodians.”

“There is continued animosity between China and Vietnam?” Aho asked.

“One could say that. The two have been at each other for 2,000 years. Although they both endorse an official friendship as trading partners, the Vietnamese don’t trust the Chinese.” I swallowed the last of my water and rubbed my forehead.

“What do you wish me to do?” He faced me.

“Find out the itinerary for the Vietnamese president and his entourage. I don’t want to meet with them at their embassy. We need to plan the meeting somewhere else. Away from the press or knowledge by the Chinese.”

“The Vietnamese delegation plans on touring Kenya, to include the Masai Mara game reserve,” Michael said, smiling. “I can arrange a flight there, and we could be waiting for their arrival. It would look like a coincidence that you are there, no? But how do you think you can gain access to the delegation with all the security?”

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“Leave that to me. I know the Vietnamese head who directs the president’s protection. You just get us to the Masai Mara.”

Michael picked up his cell phone and dialed. Soon he was rattling in Swahili to his night duty officer. He placed the switched-off telephone in front of us.

“The Vietnamese president and his staff arrive tomorrow and will be hosted at the Kenyan presidential residence the following day. They will travel to Masai Mara on July 16 to have private and secluded meetings with the Kenyan president and have some excursions in the game reserve.”

“Can you arrange for us to get to the Masai Mara tomorrow? And we need to stay somewhere near the group but out of sight.”

“It seems you and I are going on a safari. I will arrange everything.” Michael flashed his bright teeth.

* * *

I crept into my bed. International travel was wearing, and my body screamed for sleep. As I closed my eyes, I wondered how my dear friend, Hieu, head of the Vietnamese security for the president, would react to seeing me in the Kenyan wilderness. She was too intelligent to accept my being there by chance.

I hoped our friendship would give me access to her and her president. I had wanted to contact her beforehand, but Woodruff nixed the idea. He was confident that too many Chinese eyes and ears were spying on the Vietnamese. Woodruff insisted on me surprising the Vietnamese delegation in Kenya. He felt we would learn more about the intent of Kenya and Vietnam in an unplanned meeting.

As I drifted into sleep, I knew he was correct.

3

Nairobi Wilson Airport, July 15

MICHAEL AND I CHECKED OUR gear. It included a small tent for three, sleeping bags and air mattresses, mosquito netting, bug spray, dehydrated meals, several cases of bottled water, and extra clothes. We were working in the back of the van when Aho's nephew turned up the volume on his boom box. Queen, singing "We Are The Champions," reverberated from the front dash through the vehicle. And us!

The nephew was a tall, slim young man, early twenties. His dreadlocks were elaborate, decorated with colored beads and tiny white seashells. His head bobbed with the music, staring out the windshield, ignoring us. At six feet four, he fit the image of a long-distance runner in the tradition of Kenyan marathoners. His skin tone was lighter than Aho's dark ebony, and he had more delicate features. I had no doubt girls flocked to him.

Turning away, I looked past the small terminal building of Nairobi Wilson Airport toward the tarmac, where a Cessna Caravan 208B parked, its turboprop waiting to slice through the humid air.

"John, did you know Queen's lead vocalist, Freddie Mercury, was born in Stone Town, Zanzibar? Only an hour and a half flight from Nairobi, over the Mozambique Channel of the Indian Ocean." Aho hummed in sync with the recording.

"No, I didn't," I said and grinned at the distraction.

"He was one of the greatest rock stars." Aho zipped the last of the two large duffle bags. "There, everything is equally divided between us. Our driver will meet us at the airstrip and provide the AK-47s with ammo. In case we need heavy weapons."

"What, no big game rifles?" I smiled, patting my multiple-pocketed tan safari shirt and pants.

After placing my knapsack on my back, I put on the tan baseball cap with the Queen rock band logo in purple—Aho's gift to me. Wearing my sunglasses, I completed the tourist look for the Masai Mara.

Aho, in a similar cap, nodded at me and said, "Once airborne, strap on your shoulder holster with your Sig P229. I will do the same. I have coordinated for us to stay in a Maasai village several kilometers from the Mara West tourist camp where the Vietnamese will be staying. At night the lions probe the wooden staked stockade perimeter of the village seeking the cattle in the compound. We must be always careful."

"I assume the Vietnamese contingency will occupy the entire Mara West resort with the Kenyan president and his staff," I said. "No one else allowed?"

"No one. The external security will be by Kenyan police." He hopped out of the rear of the van grabbing his duffel.

I jumped down and took my bag. I estimated each weighed over fifty pounds.

Aho shut the rear doors and waved as the van drove away. His nephew barely extended his hand from the driver's side window. The steering wheel is on the right in Kenya, like in England.

"Quiet kid," I said.

"Oh, he is a good lad. By using him, we attract less attention as you wanted. I like that he does not talk much. The young people here think adults are out of their minds anyway." Turning, he walked to the aircraft, chuckling.

With the heavy duffel, I walked to a Caucasian woman, wearing pressed khaki pants and a white uniform shirt with insignia epaulets, standing by the unfolded steps of the plane.

"Welcome to Safari Air. I am your pilot, Ana Smith. Please step carefully on board and sit in the middle rows. You are the only passengers. As soon as my ground crew stow your bags, we will begin our flight."

I nodded and copied Aho by leaving the duffel bags on the asphalt and followed him on board. The craft held 13 seats, six rows of

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doubles with a single at the rear next to a red cooler. On the back wall was a small door labeled *Toilet*. Based on the size of the craft, it would be a chemical toilet. So much for creature comfort. Bent over, we moved to the middle seats overlooking the wings. Aho sat to my left across the aisle; his big hulk overlapped into the adjacent window seat. I had just clicked my seat belt when the pilot startled me, standing in the aisle.

“The cooler at the rear has water, juice, soda, and some snacks. The toilet is behind that door.” She pointed to the back, and my eyes followed. “As soon as we are airborne, you may get up and get refreshments. We are rather informal.” Her British accent grabbed my attention. “The door you entered is also the emergency exit. Just follow the directions printed by the handle. Our flight time is fifty-four minutes to the Kichwa Tembo Airstrip, about five kilometers from the Mara West chalets.”

She walked to the cockpit, unhindered by a door. We would be able to watch her flying the craft. FAA would have required a co-pilot. But in Kenya, she flew solo.

“Not too comfortable these seats,” Michael said, squirming to find some padding on the vinyl-covered chair. “However, this is better than driving to the Masai Mara. It is five hours on bad roads, clay soil which turns into muck during rains on which even 4X4 vehicles struggle.”

“Well, that is a positive,” I said, then laughed. “I think this is barely better than the canvas webbing seats on US Air Force troop transports that moved us around in Vietnam.”

The seated pilot yelled back, “Check your seatbelts.”

She quickly completed the flight check and started the engine, the three bladed propellor spinning into a transparent circle as we taxied to the runway.

The Nairobi Wilson Airport is a small regional airport and probably lax on takeoff rules. We were soon ascending over Nairobi. I closed my eyes and leaned back, thinking how little I had planned to pull off a meeting with the Vietnamese. Staying at a Maasai village seemed

extreme, but we would be out of sight until an opportunity presented itself. In this case, I had to follow the lead of Michael: he knew his country and the natives.

I opened my eyes and looked out the starboard window at Nairobi spread out below, the midafternoon sun reflecting off tin roofs. We were leaving a city of over 3.2 million people for remote, rural Kenya.

Aho stretched toward me and said, “We should discuss tonight how we can orchestrate a meeting with your contact. Based on my cell phone text, the Vietnamese delegation should arrive late tomorrow afternoon. They will return to Nairobi after spending three nights at the resort.”

I nodded. Hieu will arrive with her president tomorrow, July 16, and per Michael’s info, they will depart on July 19, a Saturday. We had to make contact tomorrow night. Time worked against us. I reached into my backpack, retrieved the small bottle of Malarone tablets, and popped one pill. Déjà vu from the Vietnam War: taking one Malarone pill daily to fight Malaria. The mosquitoes in Africa presented the same danger.

4

Kichwa Tembo Airstrip, July 15

“THE CLIMATE OF KENYA VARIES from the tropical, coastal plain in the east to the more arid northwest. Nairobi is in the south-central highlands with an elevation of about 1680 meters and is normally pleasant temperature-wise. Sorry, that is 5,500 feet,” Michael said, leaning across the aisle.

I looked at the moving shadow of our airplane clinging to the terrain. During my Vietnam War days, I spent most of my tour in the jungles and forested highlands, different from the ground below.

“Is the Masai Mara lower in elevation?” I asked.

“The Mara lies in the so-called Great Rift Valley with African grasslands intermixed with riverine forests, hills, and towering escarpments. I would say that the elevation for the Mara is about 5,150 feet on average. Since we are arriving in July, we are fortunate to miss the two rainy seasons. The long rains occur from April to June, whereas the short rains come from October to December. We can expect pleasant temperatures around 73 degrees Fahrenheit or 23 degrees Celsius.”

“Good weather then for the next few days,” I said.

“Yes, and mostly clear blue skies,” Michael said. “And not as humid as your jungle in Vietnam.”

Looking out my window again, I saw scattered settlements and farmlands intermixed with the rolling grass interrupted by sparse acacia-filled woodlands. A herd of giraffes—adults with many little calves—appeared. They were gorgeous.

Michael noticed and said, “Yes, you will see many more animals once we reach the Masai Mara. For example, the wildebeests form large herds. And during their peak migration in October, over two

million wildebeests will travel 500 miles from the Serengeti, in Tanzania south of us, to the Masai Mara. It is a spectacle. Also, there are lions, elephants, cheetahs, impalas, hyenas, zebras, and leopards throughout the game reserve.”

I turned to him. “You sound like a safari guide.”

He grinned. “I am proud of my country and its game reserves. We all need to protect this wonderful heritage and avoid the extinction of such beautiful creatures.”

Michael’s soft spot showed, and for a CIA agent, that was unusual.

“What about the black rhinos that our rude Brits mentioned last night? And the white rhinos?” I asked.

“They are both labeled critically endangered but are found in the Masai Mara. The Mara has Africa’s Big Five.”

“Big Five?” I asked.

“The African elephant, the Cape Buffalo, the African leopard, the African lion, and the African black rhino. Drivers and guides strive to find these animals for their tourists.”

The aircraft slowed. The pilot yelled back that we were ten minutes out from landing.

She circled the aircraft to align the approach. I squinted at the ground below and found a single dirt airstrip surrounded by grass. Puddles confirmed a morning rain which rejuvenated the vegetation, bringing the eland, the African antelope, to the landing strip. They ignored our descending plane and continued to roam the airfield, munching the bordering grass.

We descended to five hundred feet when the turbo engine roared into full throttle, accelerated, and abruptly lifted the aircraft, shoving Michael and me into our seats. Our hands gripped the armrests. Looking down, I saw the large herd of eland scatter.

“Sorry,” our pilot shouted over the uproar of the engine. “The eland are the world’s largest antelope and some love to graze here. We’ll buzz them again before we attempt to land.”

Michael again leaned over and said, “When we arrive at the Maasai village, we will meet with the chief. I think we can use the village

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warriors hired by the Mara West resort. They escort guests in the evening to the dining room and lounge from the chalets. Mostly for show, but occasionally lions creep around the compound. Towering over six feet, the Maasai warriors, wrapped in red Shuka cloth, are imposing with their animal hide shields, spears, and beaded neck decorations. It adds to the African Safari experience. Plus, they can kill a lion with their spears.”

“That could work if we can send a message to Hieu through one of the warriors,” I confirmed, looking at Aho.

He grunted.

The Cessna Caravan dropped, and the racing high pitch engine pulled us toward the eland. They darted away to the right. We banked left and began the final approach. I continued to stare out the window; the animals had found better grazing about a hundred yards from the airstrip.

I waited for the familiar sound of the wheels deploying from the undercarriage. Nothing happened. The Caravan’s landing gear hadn’t descended and locked into position. The ground rose faster, and my body contorted inward as my hands gripped the wobbly armrests. I glanced at Aho.

He laughed, reading my mind. “The tricycle landing gear is fixed. No worries,” he said.

I shook my head and silently cursed Woodruff for continually placing me in strange situations.

The aircraft touched down smoothly and taxied to a wooden, open-air gazebo about ten feet in diameter next to a short, wood railing fence.

“I guess that is our terminal?”

“Only a shelter from the elements but the adjacent grassy field draws the animals as you can see,” Aho responded.

“No crowds or ticket counters,” I said, grinning at the site.

The Cessna jerked to a stop by a green Toyota Land Cruiser occupied by a black man wearing safari clothes like Aho and me. The pilot shut down the engine and came back to open the door.

“I trust you had a pleasant trip. Hope to see you again,” the pilot said.

Aho and I smiled and descended the unfolded staircase.

Michael returned the wave from the driver of the 4X4.

“That is the man that works for me in this part of Kenya. Come meet him while the pilot unloads the duffels.”

“Andrew, my man. How are you doing?” Michael vigorously grabbed the hand of a short, stocky man in his forties.

“John, please meet Andrew Njoroge. He is a friend and very trustworthy.”

In a second, Njoroge’s hand engulfed my right hand like a vise, squeezing, crushing. My eyes watered. And as quickly, he let go, smiling with yellowed teeth. I stared into his brown eyes, confused.

“Forgive me. I am much too eager to greet a friend of Michael,” he said.

His muscular body sidled closer to me. I stepped back, rubbing my hand. He was a bowling ball and could easily knock people down like pins.

“I’m glad you’re on our team,” I said.

Andrew and Michael laughed. Other than the woman pilot, I had not seen any other white people since we left Nairobi. I gazed at the Kenya wilds before I turned to my two companions. We were about to embark on a difficult mission.

Andrew’s skin was darker than Michael’s, and his brown eyes were unlike Michael’s yellow-tinged ones from extra melanin production. The shaved head, short neck, and the gap from a missing tooth completed his look.

The skin tones vary significantly in Africa, including Kenyans, who range from light to dark skin. The centuries of trade routes by the Arabs going through Africa contributed to the mixed skin tones. In addition, I mused that the man in front of me might have some Uganda blood.

Andrew turned and walked toward his Land Cruiser, motioning us to follow. I heard the Cessna’s revving engine and turned to see our duffle

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bags piled near the fence. The pilot waved as she taxied for takeoff. I waved back and turned to follow Michael and Andrew to the 4X4.

“Please get on. We will drive over and secure your bags,” Andrew said, easing into the right-side driver’s seat.

I climbed into the rear seat and dumped my backpack next to me; Michael claimed shotgun. Three AK-47s with inserted banana magazines lay at my feet. Staring at them, I wondered if they would be necessary. I checked my Sig Sauer P229 stowed in the shoulder holster. Michael had donned his holster as well. I hoped this would be a simple excursion: meet the Vietnamese, report back to James Woodruff, and return to my Siberian Husky. My last two missions were far from easy, which nagged at me. The relationship with Woodruff meant accepting volatile tasks; I had learned to be wary.

Andrew kicked the vehicle into gear, and we lurched forward toward our bags. I began to understand that conserving energy played a part in African survival.

After loading our luggage into the vehicle, we drove away. Turning, I saw that the eland herd were again grazing by the airfield, ignoring the Cessna Caravan ascending into the crystal-clear blue sky; its single turboprop droned, headed toward Nairobi.