

CHAPTER THREE

There was a moment of hesitation, a brief and furious inner struggle, and then Andre's better judgment overruled his raging emotions. With a snarl of frustration, he slammed his fist against the steering wheel. He knew that he couldn't give chase. Out at the street, one of the officers had been thrown right up onto the sidewalk where he lay motionless. The second policeman was struggling along on hands and knees, trying to reach his fallen partner. Andre grabbed the radio and called dispatch.

"This is Inspector Fiset. I have a 10-33; two officers down. Four suspects leaving east on Hillview Drive in a metallic blue Jetta; four-door, tinted windows, chrome hubcaps. Plate number unknown."

"Copy that, Inspector," dispatch replied. "What's your 20?"

"I'm at the Hillview Mall, across the street from the recreational complex. My vehicle has been heavily damaged. I'm unable to initiate pursuit. I also have an injured man with me needing medical attention. If you find these guys be careful. They have some sort of a grenade launcher."

"Say again, Inspector."

"They're not just firing bullets! Suspects armed and very dangerous!"

"10-4, Inspector. Backup and medical on the way."

Andre turned off his car as a precaution. No telling what might have been damaged when he went through that fence. He tried to look over his shoulder into the back seat and let out a gasp of pain. His right hand reached instinctively to his left side and came away bloody. He had been shot! Then he remembered the sharp sting as he was running for his car. With the adrenalin wearing off, he was beginning to feel a heavy throbbing above his left hip. He opened the car door and got out carefully. Lifting his punctured jacket, he frowned at his torn and blood-stained shirt. Pretty messy, but the injury couldn't be too bad, he decided. Must have just grazed him. The other men were in much worse shape. If he could walk, then he could help.

The police officer who had been crawling along the pavement finally reached his partner. Inspector Fiset wanted to check on the security guard before going out to the street to assist them. Opening the back door of his cruiser, he looked down in shock. The young man had rolled off the seat and was lying in a heap on the floor. There was blood everywhere.

"No!" Andre exclaimed in despair. He hurried around his car and opened the other back door. Grabbing the guard under the shoulders, he carefully slid him out and laid him on the ground. It was evident that he had been hit by two or three bullets. In the distance, Andre could hear the faint sound of sirens. Help would be here soon. He knelt beside the young guard and gingerly pulled the tape from his mouth. Then he began to unwrap his wrists.

"Hey, is it safe now?"

Inspector Fiset was startled and looked around. A couple of teenagers were hiding behind a van that was parked in the lot. One of them had asked the question.

“Yes, you’ll be fine,” Andre responded. With a bitter glance toward the street, he added, “Those guys won’t be coming back here again tonight.”

The teens stood up and tucked their skateboards under their arms. “What about him?” one of them asked, pointing to the security guard. “Is he going to be alright?”

The Inspector’s face was grim. “I don’t know, fellas, I don’t know.”

As he finished pulling off the duct tape, two units with lights flashing and sirens blaring came racing down the street. Standing to his feet, Andre realized that a small crowd was being drawn to the scene. He turned to the teens. “You’d better move back now and give us some room to work.”

The first police car turned off its siren and stopped out on the street to help the injured officers. The second unit drove in the Mall entrance and rushed over to Andre’s vehicle. The siren was off, but the red and blue lights continued flashing. One officer immediately began dealing with crowd control, while the second came over to Andre.

“Constable Frank Brutesco,” he announced. “What’s going on here, Inspector? Dispatch said something about a grenade launcher.”

Andre shook his head as he spoke. “I don’t know what I walked into, Frank. I was checking out a situation at the sports complex and found this security guard unconscious on the floor. When I tried to get him out, a couple of guys started shooting at me. I was carrying him over my shoulder. If it hadn’t been for that, well... He took those bullets for me.”

“And then they blasted the other unit?” questioned the officer.

“Yes,” Andre responded, almost in disbelief. “They took two shots with something. The first round must have touched the fence, but the second was a direct hit on the patrol car. Those guys sure didn’t want to get caught.”

Constable Brutesco stared toward the vehicle that was still in flames on the street. The smell of burning rubber was strong in the air. “So what do you want to do?”

“As soon as everything is under control here, I want to go back into that Complex and have a look around. Those thugs knew that I was with the RCMP, and they had no hesitation about trying to kill me. Whatever they’re involved in is big, really big!”

“Okay, I’ll call dispatch and make arrangements so that... Hey! Wait a minute! You’re bleeding too! You’d better get that checked out!”

Shaking his head, Inspector Fiset gave a weak smile. “No, I’ll be alright. They only nicked me, thanks to this young man.”

The wound hurt more than Andre admitted. Clenching his teeth, he grimaced with pain as the constable returned to his cruiser. The Inspector contemplated the security guard, feeling an odd mixture of anger and humiliation. It really bothered him that, in trying to help the

young man, he had only made matters worse. Now, instead of a bump on the head, the guard had multiple gunshot wounds. Would he live? Andre sighed and rubbed his forehead.

It took only a few minutes before a number of medical teams arrived. The young guard was carefully tended to, then loaded onto a stretcher and placed in an ambulance. One of the emergency personnel came over to take a look at the Inspector. It was the same paramedic he had met earlier in the day at the Mall. Even though the man tried to be lighthearted, Andre could see the deep concern in his eyes.

“So, Inspector,” he said with a sour face, “I see you’ve been stirring things up again. And here I thought it was going to be a nice quiet evening.”

“Yes, well, it’s not really my fault.”

“Right, that’s what they all say.” The paramedic peered at Andre’s hip and gently poked around at the wound. “Hmm, not too bad. The bullet went through without touching the bone. I’d say that you have some slight muscle damage, and you’re certainly going to need stitches.” He straightened up and nodded toward the ambulance. “You might as well come along for the ride. They may want to cut you open a bit at the hospital.”

Andre laughed. “No, I’m not leaving yet, not for this little scratch. I’ve taken a lot worse than this over the years.”

The paramedic put his hands on his hips and grinned. “A real tough guy, eh? Okay, it’s your call. But I need to put some disinfectant on that and at least get a gauze pad taped on.”

By the time Andre was patched up, several more squad cars and a fire truck had reached the Mall. A large crowd of spectators now ringed the scene, their curious faces lit by flashing red and blue lights. Inspector Fiset put one of the arriving officers in charge and then walked over to Constable Brutesco.

“How are the other men doing?”

Frank shook his head. “Bad, real bad, Inspector. That must have been quite an explosion.”

They looked at each other in grim silence. Andre could feel a cold anger building inside.

“I want to go back and check out that Complex. As soon as you can, get your car and drive on over. I’ll go ahead and start looking around. I’m sure all the suspects are gone by now.”

While the constable left to resume his duties, Andre returned to his own vehicle. Pulling out a large black flashlight, he set it on the roof of his car. Then he drew his pistol from its holster and put in a fresh clip of bullets. When everything was ready, he cut across the Mall parking lot toward the construction site. To the right of the main entrance, a fire crew had begun to spray suppressant foam on the smoldering police cruiser. The section of fence behind it was a tangle of twisted mesh. Inspector Fiset reflected on the file he had read earlier that evening. The victim in the washroom was thought to have links to the international arms trade,

and whatever had been used to destroy the squad car was definitely a military weapon. It didn't take much thought to realize that there had to be a connection between the two events.

When the Inspector was about to cross the street, he heard the quiet rumble of approaching skateboards. Turning around, he saw the two teenagers rolling across the Mall parking lot toward him. One of the teens waved his hand and called out, "Hey, wait a minute!"

Andre went back to meet them at the edge of the pavement. "What is it, fellas?" he asked, when they arrived. "What's on your mind?"

"We saw that car before," a red-haired youth explained, as he picked up his skateboard. "I mean the one that came out of the construction site."

"Yeah," his blond friend joined in. "That Jetta was parked here earlier. And then a guy jumped out and hopped that fence across the street."

Inspector Fiset was all attention now. "Okay boys, start at the beginning and tell me what you saw."

"We usually come here at night, when the parking lot is empty, so that we can work on our tricks," the red-haired teen began. "We were grinding curbs on the other side of the Mall entrance, down by the sidewalk. That car was just sitting there with two men in it. One of them was black and the other guy was white."

"How do you know it was the same car?" asked Andre.

"We took a real good look at it because of those chrome rims," the other youth explained. "Wheels like that must cost a fortune! When we skated past it a few times, one of the men rolled down his window and told us to get lost."

The red-haired skateboarder took over. "After they told us to leave, we went up near the Mall and did some riding around there. About... I don't know... maybe fifteen minutes later I was looking over when the black guy jumps out of the Jetta, runs like mad for the fence and hops right over it!"

"Hops?" questioned Andre.

"Well, he sort of swung himself over... but it was so fast! And then he kept running full-blast for the building!"

Inspector Fiset considered the unexpected information. "What about the two men you saw?" he prodded. "Was there anything special about them?"

"No, not really," the blond-haired teen responded. "But the black guy looked pretty tough, like real trouble. And he was dressed all in black too."

That would be the angry one by the pool, Inspector Fiset thought to himself, the one with the shaggy hair. "So what happened to the Jetta? How did it get into the site?"

The red-haired youth shrugged. "We don't know. We went around by the bank for a while and were just getting ready to leave when all the shooting started. We hid by the van and saw everything."

Pulling out a small notebook, Inspector Fiset wrote down a few details. Then he took the names and phone numbers of the teens so that he could get in touch with them later. After thanking them, he continued on toward the gate of the construction site. As he stepped off the curb to cross the street, he had to stifle a gasp of pain. His left side was really starting to hurt now. But he was determined to do some searching around the pool, so he gritted his teeth and kept going.

When he arrived at the site office, Andre tried the handle on the door. It was unlocked. He paused, then drew out his pistol. Better safe than sorry. Standing to one side, he reached over, turned the handle and gently pushed the door open with his foot. After a moment he stepped inside and turned on the lights. As expected, the office was empty. Andre didn't waste any time looking around for clues. He would let the crime scene unit do that. What he really wanted was to get back into the Complex and check out the pool area. Closing the door, he started along the gravel driveway.

Flashing lights from numerous emergency vehicles probed the darkness before him. With stones crunching beneath his feet, he made the hundred yard trek to the building. He began to feel a chill from the cool October air, and realized that he was soaked in sweat from the tension of his narrow escape. He stopped to zip up his fall jacket, and then carried on. Reaching the location where the Jetta had stopped, he swept the ground with his flashlight. He thought he might find some sort of a shell casing, but there was nothing. A little farther ahead he could see two tracks where the tires of his vehicle had dug into the gravel. It has been close. If not for that young security guard...

Inspector Fiset looked up the concrete steps at the entrance doors. A faint light from the lobby shone through them into the darkness outside. Two of the glass panels had been shot right out, and several others had bullet holes in them. How many men had left in the Jetta? He assumed that it had been all four of them. But was he really sure? He thought back to the scramble he had witnessed from a distance. Andre pulled out his pistol again and started up the stairs. Reaching one of the shattered doors, he opened it and stepped into the dimly lit foyer. He decided to leave his flashlight off for now. No use advertising. Turning to his right, he walked with slow, quiet steps along the concrete passageway. Arriving at the entrance to the pool, he stopped and listened, but there was only an empty silence. They must all be gone.

Switching on his flashlight, the first thing Andre saw was blood on the floor next to the metal door frames. He paused to consider this. If his suspicions were correct, that must be where the guard was attacked. So, either he was just doing his rounds, or else some noise from the pool area had attracted him. But what could possibly be going on at a new construction site? And why would the criminals risk killing not just one, but several police officers. It didn't make any sense. They could have escaped on foot through the north end of the property. Unless... unless there was something in their car they couldn't leave behind. Weapons? Money? Shaking his head, Andre exhaled into the silence.

There was a metallic clang as one of the entrance doors was opened. "Inspector!" a voice called.

"Over here, Frank!" Andre shone his flashlight down the corridor as Constable Brutesco approached.

"I talked to the Sergeant. He'll have a full investigation team here in half an hour. Backup has arrived and is sealing off the area."

"Okay, that's good." Now that the other officer had arrived, Andre put his pistol away. "I want to have a quick look around, just to satisfy my own curiosity. When people start shooting at me, I'd like to know the reason why."

"So what are we looking for?"

Andre shrugged. "I don't have a clue." He swung the beam of his flashlight into the far corner of the pool deck. "But something was going on over there. Why don't you walk around to the left and I'll go to the right. Take your time. Let's see what we can find."

Frank nodded, switched on his flashlight and started off around the deck. The route Inspector Fiset had chosen was congested with scaffolding and stacks of materials. He had to climb and duck and weave his way around the pool. When he finally reached the corner, he found a metal stand with a large halogen light. Turning it on, he stood back to survey the scene. This area of the deck was relatively uncluttered. There were some scattered chunks of concrete rubble and a few big piles of assorted debris, but other than that, Andre could see nothing. The two large boxes he had noticed earlier were gone.

He stood waiting in pensive silence as Frank's flashlight pierced the darkness on the far side of the pool. Andre was restless, and the growing pain in his side was making him irritable. What the heck was going on? Those two black men were definitely up to something! Had he walked in on an arms deal? But why meet at a construction site? Spotting a metal door in the wall to the right of the corner, he walked over and pushed it open with his forearm. They might be able to get some prints off that. The door was an emergency exit, and opened directly outside at the front of the Complex. The Inspector found himself looking across the construction site toward the Mall, where a multitude of red and blue lights were flashing on the street. He stepped back inside, and the metal door closed behind him. Well, he thought, that explains how they got to their car so quickly.

Constable Brutesco was approaching much more rapidly now since the far side of the diving pool was completely unobstructed. Making a final inspection of the area, Andre caught sight of the brass plaques. They were fastened on the wall to the left of the corner. Stepping back a few paces, he shone his flashlight on them. There were five in total, each of them about two feet square. He scanned the names and dates, but they meant nothing to him. He continued reading the information until Frank arrived. The constable shrugged his shoulders. "I didn't find anything, Inspector."

Staring at the floor, Andre gave a resigned sigh. "Alright, let's go. We'll have to wait and see what the investigation team can dig up. You'd better take me over to the hospital so I can get checked out properly. My side is killing me."

Tom's body lay still in the quiet ward room, but with the drug wearing off, his mind became active. Thoughts came to him from far away, as in a dream. He tried to understand what could have gone wrong. How could anyone possibly know? It had been on another continent, over six months ago. But now, here in Canada, who could have learned the truth? Even this slight mental effort brought a drug-induced fatigue. Tom tried to fight himself awake, but his thoughts began to slip back into the darkness. Somebody had known. Even in Africa somebody must have known. It was the only explanation. As his mind drifted along the borders of consciousness, the past merged with the present; memory became reality.

The constable on duty at the hospital lowered a Sports Illustrated magazine he had been reading. The lights in the hallway had just been dimmed for the night and it was too dark to read. Setting the magazine on the floor beside his wooden chair, he stood up and stretched. A glance at his watch showed that it was 10:05 p.m. Two more hours. He was considering going for a short walk when he heard a muffled shout from the ward room. Hurrying through the door, he found Tom thrashing around and mumbling. As he approached the bed, Tom tried to sit up. "Francois," he said distinctly.

"Hey, easy fella," the officer soothed. "Just relax; everything is fine."

Putting a hand on Tom's shoulder, he gave him a gentle push onto the mattress. Instantly Tom grabbed his wrist with a grip of steel! When he tried to pull away, he was jerked back hard against the bed frame. Tom's fingers were digging into his arm with unbelievable pressure. The pain was terrible! He tried to use his other hand to break the grip, but it was impossible. Then Tom's left hand shot out, grabbed him by the shirt collar, and dragged him down toward the bed. The constable could see that Tom was only semi-conscious. His eyes were not focusing and his head kept drooping, but his power was relentless! Then, for one split-second, it seemed that Tom's vision cleared and he glared directly at him. It was a look that shocked the officer and drove him into a terrified panic. In Tom's eyes, he saw death.

The engine of the jeep droned noisily as Tom descended the lazy, winding road. Dust floated up behind him into the humid air, then drifted off to coat the jungle foliage with another layer of grime. In less than three months the dirt would be a clinging quagmire of muck when the rainy season began. He was glad the target date had been chosen for early March. Get in, get out, go home; that was the plan.

It was only about a ten minute drive from the construction site to the base camp, and Tom was soon pulling into a large fenced compound. The soldiers at the gate merely nodded as he drove past. His sun-bleached hair and deeply tanned face made him easy to recognize. The

jeep stopped in front of a low, concrete-block building. A white sign with green lettering announced it as the Miller Construction Administrative Office. Climbing out of his vehicle onto the hard-packed dirt, Tom walked past a series of large windows to the main door. When he entered the building it was just as stifling inside as outside. No air-conditioning here. A large black woman, who did double duty as a receptionist, looked up from her desk.

“Well now, Monsieur Karland,” she said in Gambalian French, “what might you be doing here?”

“Business Colette, always business,” Tom responded, also in French. Very few people at the hydroelectric project spoke English. Almost all the conversation on site was either in French or Maliki. Tom was fluent in both.

Colette’s eyes twinkled. She wasn’t fooled for a second. “Ah yes, but what kind of business?” she asked. Then, with a wave of her hand and a knowing grin, added, “She’s in the back, using the fax machine.”

Tom walked down the hall to the last office. The door was open and he stood outside for a minute, gazing in. He decided that Joelle couldn’t help but look beautiful. At the moment she was wearing a knee-length dress with a vibrant red and green floral pattern. Her dark brown hair was now maintained slightly below the shoulders. Sensing that someone was behind her, she turned toward the door. At once her brown eyes lit up and a warm smile radiated from her tanned face. She set down the small pile of papers she had been holding and stepped toward him.

“I was hoping you would come back,” she confided.

Smiling in response, Tom reached out to take her hand. “Let’s go for a walk,” he suggested.

The Miller Construction property had been cut out of the heart of dense rainforest. Surrounded by a wall of towering trees, the direct sunlight and humidity made it feel like being in a sauna. Once outside, Tom and Joelle ambled around the dusty compound. They were serenaded on their walk by the humming and buzzing of thousands of vociferous insects. Fortunately, at this time of day the mosquitoes were not too bad. While engaged in the casual ebb and flow of conversation, they made their way to a picnic table that sat in the shade provided by a large wooden canopy.

They settled in across from each other, and Tom reached out to take both of Joelle’s hands in his. He marveled at the gentle elegance of her fingers, knowing that in fact they possessed great physical strength. She had given him a couple of really good whacks during their training sessions. He smiled to himself. It was just like the rest of her attractive, athletic figure. She was beautiful, but she was also very dangerous. He looked up to find Joelle staring at him with a quizzical gaze. Her cheeks were flushed, but not from the heat. Their eyes locked in a deep communion of understanding. After a few moments, Tom had to turn away, finding

himself moved by an unexpected flood of emotion. Once again he realized and admitted to himself how much Joelle meant to him.

They continued to sit under the canopy, enjoying each other's presence in a comfortable silence until Tom finally turned to the business at hand. "I got the timers to Francois at noon," he said. "They should be in the storage box around 4:30. He'll drop them off when he does another survey farther up the canyon. That should have us ready to go by 5:00."

Joelle nodded, but said nothing. She could tell that something was troubling Tom. He studied the table for a minute, then looked up into her eyes with concern.

"Francois thinks that somebody may be on to us. Not that they would know anything about our mission," he clarified, "but that they have become suspicious of who we are."

Joelle continued to wait, her active mind very alert.

"He's noticed a few people watching him from a distance. They've even followed him along the trail toward the storage box a few times. They always stay near the jungle, but they never stay hidden."

"So they want to be seen, but not get caught?" Joelle questioned.

"Yes, exactly. There's no doubt that they are rebels... which, in itself, is not surprising. We know they are in the hills all around this hydro project. But Francois thinks that they are deliberately baiting him, wanting to see his reaction. Obviously a real surveyor would be afraid of being targeted by the rebels, so Francois has asked to have a soldier accompany him." Pausing, Tom took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. "This morning he spotted some movement in the trees across the valley. He got a good look through his binoculars before the fellow disappeared. There's no question who he saw. It was the Viper."

Joelle's eyes narrowed as she processed this information. "Are you sure?"

Raising open hands, Tom shrugged. "We can't be one hundred percent certain until somebody gets a picture of this guy. But his appearance fits the best description that we have. The man had shaggy hair and was wearing the Viper's signature clothing... you know... sunglasses, black beret, black shirt... the usual. It was a pretty positive I.D."

"But what would the Viper be doing here? All the Intel we have shows that he's leading rebel activity along the coast near the capital."

"Any answer I can give would only be speculation. But certainly the knowledge that he's around will put a lot of fear into the construction workers. With his reputation for brutality, people are terrified of him."

Closing her eyes, Joelle began massaging her forehead as she tried to fit this new piece of information into the Intelligence puzzle. During the short period of time they had been in Gambala, their team had identified two divergent streams of rebel activity. One was fairly broad, involving widespread guerilla attacks that were designed to destabilize the country. But there was a second group, a smaller one, with a more narrow focus. It was centered around the capital and was led by a vicious killer known only as "the Viper". He was a shadowy figure,

who remained in the background, directing his forces with a blood-covered iron fist. The fact that he would suddenly appear in a remote corner of the country was unsettling news.

Opening her eyes, Joelle stared at the picnic table and frowned. "I guess I agree with Francois. For some reason, the rebels have become suspicious of who we are, but they don't know why we are here. If they had any accurate information about our operation, the Viper wouldn't waste time playing games in the jungle; we'd all be dead by now."

Tom gave a weary sigh. "So what's tipped them off?"

"Well..." Joelle shrugged. "Francois has spent a lot of time poking around, asking questions. Anybody who talked with him could also talk to the rebels. It's possible that he's stirred things up. Somebody might be wondering why a surveyor from Canada is so curious."

Wiping the sweat from his forehead, Tom dried his fingers on his pants. He looked past Joelle to the steaming jungle, agitation showing in his face. Their mission would soon be over. Four more days and the other two could go home.

Joelle was not finished. "There is another option, Tom," she said, in a subdued voice, "a rather unpleasant one, which puts us all at risk. Somebody close to the President could be leaking information. Think about it," she continued. "Canadians have been working on aid and relief projects for years in Gambala. The fact that the three of us are here isn't unusual. Without some sort of inside information, nobody would have any reason to get suspicious."

Rapping his knuckles on the table, Tom scowled as he considered this possibility. It would make sense. There was nothing around them but rainforest and the hydro project. What else would drag the Viper away from the capital? Besides, he was an experienced soldier. Stepping out of the jungle in full view of Francois was deliberate. He wanted to be seen; he wanted the Canadians to know that he was here. So... he was probably trying to intimidate them, trying to trigger some sort of an unguarded reaction that would give them away.

Having reached this conclusion, Tom sat in brooding silence while he worked through the implications. As team leader, he was responsible for the safety of all the members. He had been convinced that their cover identities were secure. He was no longer so confident.

Joelle had been watching him closely. Reaching across the picnic table, she took his hands in hers, gave them a firm squeeze and smiled. "We'll get through this, Tom. You just concentrate on your job. I'll take care of things at this end."

He stood up, and Joelle followed him out of the shade into the sweltering afternoon sun. His mind was still preoccupied and he said little as they approached the office. Was it because of Francois, or was there an informant? Well, right now it didn't matter which scenario was correct. Both of them were bad news. When they reached the jeep, Tom placed his hands on his hips. He gazed deep into Joelle's eyes before he spoke.

"Okay, from now on we'd better assume that we're targets. I have to get ready to join Francois. You need to send this information to Williams right away. And you also need to be careful while we're gone. As a matter of fact you should probably stay in the compound. There

are enough soldiers around here to discourage any rebel activity. I wouldn't want... I mean, there's no reason to take chances."

Joelle smiled, her dark brown eyes warm with understanding. Leaning forward, she kissed him gently on the cheek. "I'll be fine. I'll see you when you get back." Giving his arm a squeeze, she turned and walked away to the office.

After loading his jeep with some more equipment, Tom left the compound and made the routine drive up to the construction site. He had been in Africa for over two months already, doing reconnaissance and coordinating their operation. He knew every curve and bump in the dusty, winding road by now. Ten minutes later he pulled into the huge clearing that served as a storage area. It was larger than a football field, and was crowded with metal cargo containers and battered trailers, roughly organized in two long rows.

The container used by the Canadian team had been deliberately placed at the end of one of the rows, nearest to the jungle. This allowed Tom easy access to disappear into the forest when necessary. His official role, however, was as an explosives expert, and he maintained a constant presence at the hydro site. Driving down the dirt track between the trailers, Tom turned left at the end of the lane. He parked beside his container and hopped out of the jeep. The jungle had been cleared away to allow a thirty-foot perimeter for vehicle traffic and security. During the day, soldiers were constantly monitoring the site in order to discourage any rebel attempts to steal materials or equipment. At night, the storage area was treated like a combat zone, with a very heavy military presence.

The dark green Miller Construction container was battered and dusty on the outside. About halfway down its forty foot length there was a small entrance door that faced the jungle. Tom walked over and undid a heavy combination lock. After a casual surveillance of the area, he opened the rusty exterior door to reveal a second one, made of polished steel. He punched in a code on a key pad and slid the thick metal door effortlessly back into the wall. Stepping inside, he flicked on a light switch, then closed and locked the doors behind him. The front half of the container was used for storage of tools and equipment related to construction work. But the back half was a double-walled secure site that had been specially outfitted for their mission in Gambala.

Entering a small storage room, Tom dropped his pack of gear on the smooth metal floor and checked the shelves. The timers and detonators were gone. Francois would have them in the storage box by now. Since it was almost five o'clock, he thought it would be best to go out and be seen around the site. He could meet Francois by the dam, at the trail that ran along the canyon. As he prepared to leave, Tom turned on the screen for the security camera. The camera was hidden in a dark yellow light bulb over the entrance door. Its convex lens gave a full 180 degree view of the exterior. After a careful study of the screen, he turned off the switch. There was nobody in sight.

Stepping outside, he slid the steel security door shut. As he was closing the battered exterior door, a man walked around the far corner of the container to his right. Tom turned to look, gave the stranger a friendly smile, and then swung his head back to focus on the lock. Outwardly, he appeared completely nonchalant, but inwardly he was fully alert and tense.

“Wrong!” his training was shouting. “Everything is wrong!”

In that brief visual scan, Tom had made instantaneous observations and evaluations. The man’s black-skinned face looked nervous, and he had quickly averted his eyes. He was wearing a stained, olive-green shirt stretched tight over a muscular chest. His military pants were dirty, and his black boots were worn, with scuffed toes. He didn’t fit the profile for either a soldier or a construction worker. As soon as this conclusion leapt into his mind, Tom removed the combination lock and pretended to be fumbling with it. With his eyes looking down at his hands, he had a better field of peripheral vision. It was this slight advantage that allowed him to detect the attack.

The man had been sauntering past, following the perimeter road, close to the trees. But when he was almost directly behind Tom, he turned and took a quick step forward. Tom’s response was immediate: he whirled and charged. The rebel soldier had been reaching behind his back for the pistol he had tucked in his belt. Caught off guard by Tom’s reaction, he jumped to the side in panic. The weapon got caught in his belt, and as Tom slammed into him, it slipped from his grasp and dropped to the ground.

Though the stranger was shorter than Tom, he was wide and solid. The two men rolled in the dust of the road, fighting for advantage. The rebel had been told to capture Tom alive. Those orders vanished with the intensity of the struggle. His only option now was to kill the Canadian and escape. Battling with all his strength, Tom tried to get a choke-hold on his assailant. But the soldier squirmed out of his grasp, and pushed himself free with his powerful arms. Instantly he drew a large combat knife from a sheath on his left side and took a wicked slash through the air. Tom dodged and rolled out of the way. Before he could get to his feet, the rebel lunged and swung hard with the point of the blade. Using his left forearm, Tom attempted to block this attack, but the knife deflected and cut across the top of his head.

The instant he felt the sharp sting of the blade, thoughts flashed into his mind with startling clarity. The rebels know who they are! Francois will be targeted! Joelle is in danger! It was this final realization that unleashed Tom’s fury. Up to that point, he had been defending only himself. Now he was fighting in order to protect Joelle.

With a snarl of rage, Tom shot out his right hand and grabbed the rebel’s wrist. As the two of them struggled and wrestled, he dug his fingers deep into the flesh. The soldier let out a cry of pain and dropped his knife. Using his free hand he gave a vicious chop at Tom’s arm, trying to break the hold, but his effort was useless. Suddenly Tom’s left hand grabbed the man’s throat in a fierce, unrelenting grip. As his fingers closed with crushing force, Tom locked eyes with his opponent. Terrified by what he saw, the rebel began a desperate battle for his

life. He twisted his right arm free, swung a brutal hook to Tom's face, and managed to break the hold on his neck. Rolling quickly out of reach, he pawed and scrambled his way through the dust toward his pistol.

Realizing that he would never stop the soldier in time, Tom dove for the knife. He grabbed the handle and came up on one knee, already throwing. With his life in the balance, the combat seemed to move in a slow-motion choreography, where Tom participated as an observer. The rebel spun toward him with his pistol in hand, only to be met by the knife flashing through the air. In an involuntary reaction, the soldier closed his eyes, flinched and fired. There was a loud crack as the shot echoed off the trees. Tom heard the hiss of the bullet whipping past his head. But all his attention was focused on the rebel as he watched the heavy hilt of the knife strike the man a hammer blow under his eye.

While his dazed and bleeding assailant struggled to find a target, Tom staggered to his feet. The pistol was swinging toward him! He tried to dodge to his right. There was a heavy burst of automatic gunfire as Tom stumbled and fell in the dust. But the bullets were not meant for him. One of the Gambalian soldiers on patrol had seen the tail end of the fight and run up just in time. Tom pushed himself to his knees where he laboured to regain his breath. Blood was flowing down the side of his face from the deep gash on his head. The soldier checked on the rebel, then hurried over and knelt beside Tom.

"Monsieur Karland," he said with anxiety, "let me help you! We must get you to the doctor!"

Tom turned toward him and shook his head. He was covered in sweat and grime. His chest was heaving as he fought for oxygen. "Francois," he gasped. "Where is Francois?"

In the dim light of the ward room, the terrified policeman struggled furiously to break free. He managed to shake loose from the grip on his collar and gave Tom a hard shove back onto the bed. With his free hand he grabbed the call button and pressed it repeatedly. Tom began to lapse into unconsciousness again, and as his grip weakened, the officer yanked his arm away. He jumped across the room and threw open the door. Seeing the nurse coming down the hallway, he shouted, "Quick! In here!" Startled, the woman rushed down the corridor and into the room.

"What is it? What's the matter?" she asked, her eyes wide with fright.

The officer now felt embarrassed and tried to regain his composure. But it was impossible to hide the agitation in his voice. "He tried to get up, and when I came over he grabbed me. I could hardly get away from him!"

The nurse looked across at Tom, who was once again thrashing and mumbling. "The drug must be wearing off. I think I'd better sedate him until it completely clears his system or he'll rip his IV out." She hurried to prepare a syringe, then discharged its contents into the IV line. "The doctor won't be here until 6:00 a.m. so our patient will be with us all night anyway.

That will calm him down until I can get a proper drip set up. I'll take care of that later. What about you? You look a little shaken yourself."

The officer exhaled a loud agreement. "Yeah, he really caught me off guard. But I'll be fine." He rubbed his wrist for a moment. "Is there somewhere I can get a coffee?"

"Sure. We have a machine in our pantry down the hall. Come on, I'll show you."

Tom lay quietly in his bed after the two of them left the darkened room. His breathing became slow and regulated. His body was still, but his mind remained active, racing ahead through the tragic series of events he had endured in that far distant country. Gradually the sedative took over, and his memories began to fade. But release from his ordeal did not come soon enough. He saw her again in the African moonlight, lying face down in the sand, unmoving. Her legs still trailed in the black water of the river. With a despairing sigh, that was only a breath, he whispered the single word, "Joelle."