

Fly by Night

ALSO BY WARD LARSEN

The Perfect Assassin

Stealing Trinity

Fly by Wire

Thrillers: 100 Must-Reads

(contributing essayist)

Fly by Night

A Novel



Ward Larsen

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To Mom

Fly by Night



PROLOGUE

BURCO, SOMALIA
HORN OF AFRICA

The young boy trudged up yet another dune and was breathing hard when he reached the crest. Squinting against the fading light, he scanned the next wadi for his wayward beast. Nothing. His grandfather's words came to him. *Never give yourself completely to either hope or despair. A wise man lives between the two.*

It was a regular thing for lambs to wander off at this time of day, but finding them was usually easier. The boy had been searching for a full twenty minutes, and if he didn't find the lamb soon he would be forced by the new moon to wait until morning. When he considered that the rest of his flock was roaming untended, the boy picked up his pace. With darkness gathering, the jackals would soon begin their rounds.

He kept moving, angling for the highest ground on the next rise. As he walked, his sandals kicked up tiny clouds of dust with each step, fine powder from the Sahara that had migrated a thousand miles east. It hadn't always been this way. The boy was only twelve years old, but even he could remember when the Golis Mountains had been awash with vegetation, before the soil had begun to dry up and blow away. Now he was forced to go farther each month, deeper into the plains of Togdheer to find sustenance for his flock. The other young boys did the same, trekking great distances to keep their families' tenuous prospects afloat until things got better. Things had to get better.

The next dune was unusually steep, and the boy felt sweat beading on his forehead, mocking the cool evening air. On reaching the top, he paused, and that was when he saw it. His spirits fell. The wretched creature was twenty paces ahead, clearly dead, its hooves sticking up at awkward angles, the head bent unnaturally to one side. As he moved closer, the boy's first thought was for himself—his father was going to give him a terrible lashing. His second thought was for his younger sisters, who would see their prospects of a prosperous marriage dim that much further. His family's wealth had been decimated in recent years, and here was another setback. Small, to be sure, but the most recent of a thousand cuts. The drought had taken their cattle and two goats, the warlords their modest home. The sheep were all they had left.

The boy stopped next to the carcass of his wayward lamb, and in the fading light he was struck by two curious things. First was the lack of blood. When the jackals worked there was always blood, staining the sand and trailing off into the desert as flesh was torn from bone and dragged away. And that was the second problem. No flesh was missing. None at all. He saw only a broken, misshapen corpse, like the poor creature had been hit by a truck. Yet there were no trucks here. The boy reached down with his hand and felt the body. Still warm. He stood straight and looked around cautiously. Whatever had happened, it had nothing to do with jackals.

It was then that he noticed the trench. Fifty feet away, a deep groove plowed through the sand, disappeared, then carried on again all the way to the top of the next rise. It reminded the boy of a vehicle track, although much deeper. And what kind of vehicle left only a single rut? A motorcycle? No, he decided. No motorcycle would ever cleave a path a full meter in depth.

The boy went to the trench, and as he closed in he began to see other marks in the sand, smaller and intermittent, but parallel to the first. It was definitely something man-made. He searched the area guardedly, listened for any sound. In this part of the world, anything having to do with man was trouble. Smugglers, soldiers, bandits. That was the norm. The few remaining nomad families led an increasingly

anxious existence. The desert here was a lawless place, and the boy knew the wicked truth of this new desert order—a few sheep and a half loaf of bread weren't much of a prize. *He*, on the other hand, was of great value. Another reluctant conscript for someone's wandering army.

The boy hesitated, knowing he should just go back. Knowing that nothing good could come from whatever was beyond the next ridge. He stood still for a very long time, until his curiosity got the better of him. He began to climb carefully, quietly. At the top of the dune he peered over and saw—something. The boy tried to make sense of the dim image. It was very big, the size of a truck. But the shape was unearthly, a great wedge of angled metal, the color as dull and dark as a starless night sky. He looked around carefully, yet saw no one. He was still alone. The boy edged closer, not pausing until he was an arm's length away. There were wisps of smoke at the back of the wedge, wafting up slowly, almost delicately in the cool evening air. This made him abandon any thought of touching the thing. It seemed almost alien, like something from another world. Then he recognized the emblem on one side, an image that made the object seem very worldly indeed. The boy was not educated, could neither read nor write, but he had heard enough stories, seen enough Hollywood movies. He might not know how it had made its way here, but he knew what it was.

He tried to subdue his excitement. Carefully, just as his grandfather had taught him, he took his bearings using the stars. Then the boy ran. He bypassed the carcass of his lamb, and five minutes later went right past his flock. Twenty minutes on, he was completely out of breath when he reached his father's tent.



CHAPTER ONE

EIGHT MONTHS LATER
FREDERICKSBURG, VIRGINIA

Jammer Davis was running hard. So were the other twenty-nine players on the pitch.

The deluge that had begun at halftime had slackened to a cold drizzle, but plots of standing water held fast on the rutted pitch. Not that anyone cared—this was, after all, the championship game of the Virginia Rugby Union Fall Classic. Over-30 Division.

Deep into the second half, the score was tied at twenty. Both sides chased the oblong white ball as it careened haphazardly over a mud-strewn field. Grass ripped out by the roots and players went sprawling into ankle-deep muck, all amid a muffled chorus of grunts and slapping skin.

The moment of truth came out of nowhere. It often did. A squat back from Davis' side scooped up the ball and, in the instant before he was flattened, slung a lateral to a teammate. The receiver was immediately corralled, but not before off-loading a long square pass that Davis caught in dead stride. He was the biggest man on his team, a prop forward with the traditional number eight on his back. And Davis was quick for his size. He beat the first tackler with a stiff arm. The second got hold of his thick legs, but couldn't hold on. Free of that challenge, Davis made a hard diagonal cut that left two defenders grasping air. When he picked up his eyes, he saw open field. Lots of it.

He had a head of steam now, legs pumping and arms churning. His left ankle hurt like hell. With twenty yards to go for the try, Davis had

one man to beat. It was the biggest guy on the other team, an off-duty cop who had to go six-six and was as big in the shoulders as Davis. He was the cop you wanted to see walk through the door when there was a bar fight to be broken up. Not the prop forward you wanted to beat at the goal line with the game in the balance.

The guy took a good angle and made the cutoff, set his feet square, and waited. Davis had plenty of room. He could go left or right. The big cop knew it and waited for the move. Ten yards from victory, Davis stuttered a half step and saw what he wanted. The cop lightened on his feet for an instant, ready to react to Davis' change of direction. There wasn't one. In that critical moment, Jammer Davis dropped his shoulder and went full steam ahead.

Half a lifetime ago, in an even more miserable plot of mud, a drill instructor had taught Marine recruit Frank Davis an important lesson—size meant little without balance. Now that lesson was replayed. The impact lifted the cop off his feet and propelled him over the goal line. He landed flat on his back. Davis fell right beside him, bounced once on the ball, and came to rest in a heap.

“God dammit, Jammer!” The cop rolled up to a sitting position and put an exploratory finger in his mouth. It came out bloody. “That’s the same tooth I had fixed last month. My wife’s gonna be pissed.”

“You cops have good insurance,” Davis said. “And besides, your wife is a dentist. That’s money in your pocket, Tom.”

The cop spit out a mouthful of blood, then smiled big enough for Davis to see not one, but two misaligned teeth.

The referee blew the final whistle and muted cheers came from the sidelines. The teams began to mingle like two colonies of insects, one red with black stripes, the other royal blue on white. There wasn't much in the way of either celebration or agony. Just tired handshakes with hands on hips, a few predictions on how things would or wouldn't be different next year. Everyone gravitated to the sidelines where energy drinks in plastic bottles were snapped open. Damp towels stained with mud, sweat, and blood got draped over shoulders.

The captain of the opposing team came over. He was limping and holding a hand to his back in a way that would put dollar signs in a

chiropractor's eyes. He handed Davis a beer, and said, "I guess the first round's on us, Jammer."

"Thanks, Mike." Davis took the bottle and tipped it back for a long draw. When the bottle came down, he froze.

It was a strange thing, trouble. Strange how you knew it was coming. Davis had always wondered if there really was a sixth sense, some aura or electrical impulse that shot out bolts of bad vibes. Or maybe it was based on smell, a hormonal aerosol that rode on the wind. But then, he'd never been good at biology or chemistry. All Jammer Davis knew was that his old boss, Larry Green, was standing on the far side of the field staring at him.

And he wasn't here to watch bad rugby.

Green met him halfway, his brisk runner's stride countering Davis' limping gate—his ankle still hurt like hell. They merged at the far sideline.

"Hello, Jammer."

"Larry."

"You look like a kid who just came in off the playground," Green said. "Well, times four, maybe."

Green looked like he always did. He wore dark pants and a sober gray sweater under an unbuttoned raincoat. Green was small and compact, with a lean, angular face. The haircut was strict regulation, high and tight, unlike Davis' own ragged mess. He'd been needing a trim for weeks, which somehow made him oddly uncomfortable in front of his old commander. Davis had worked for Green twice, first in the Air Force, and later with the National Transportation Safety Board. Their transition to civilian life had been concurrent, Green retiring from a two-star pentagon billet to take a high-level job at the NTSB. He was the kind of guy who always rose to the top. The cream. Davis had retired as a major with a résumé that was a lot shakier. More curdled.

"Did you catch the match?" Davis asked.

"A little at the end. You looked pretty good out there. Not that I would know. Rugby was never my sport—don't have the size."

“You’d be surprised. Some of those little guys can hit hard.”

“Thanks, but I’ll stick to my marathons.” He pointed to Davis’ ankle, and said, “That’s going to be sore tomorrow. You know, Jammer, there are certain sports you can play forever. Golf, tennis, swimming. Rugby’s not one of them.”

“I’ll give it up one day.”

“Yeah. I’ve got a friend who says that all the time. He’s an alcoholic.”

Davis said nothing.

“So how is Jen?” Green asked. “Is that semester in Norway working out?”

Davis’ eyes narrowed. He hadn’t seen Larry in months, and couldn’t remember if he’d mentioned the exchange program. “I talked to her yesterday. She’s doing great. When she comes back in two months I’m sure she’ll be all European. You know, converting prices to euros, putting bars through her handwritten zeds.”

Green said, “I’m surprised you let her go, Jammer. You’ve always been a little heavy-handed with Jen. Especially since Diane died.”

Davis’ wife had been killed in a car crash, the kind of tragedy that strikes out of the blue. The kind of tragedy that only strikes other people. A friend of a friend, a distant relative. When it happened to Jammer Davis and his daughter it was like a hurricane, and ever since he’d made it his job to act as Jen’s foundation, to hold things together. It didn’t help that she was at that maddening age when kids start to separate anyway, start loosening their genetic tethers.

“She was getting restless,” Davis said. “That’s how teenagers are supposed to be, or so everyone tells me. I thought it was time to give her a little freedom.”

“Norway is a long way from home.”

“I know. But she’s with Nordo and his family.”

Davis saw instant understanding in Green’s expression. Nordo was Sven Nordstrom, a Norwegian F-16 pilot who’d done an exchange tour with the squadron back when Larry was in charge. Nordo was a great guy with a terrific family, and he was the only reason Davis had let his teenage daughter fly off to Scandinavia for three months.

“So what’s this all about, Larry?”

“That’s what I like about you, Jammer. You think like I run—no wasted effort.”

They began strolling the sideline.

“I’ve got a job for you,” Green said.

“The kind where I fly an airplane or the kind where I pick up the pieces?”

“A crash.”

“Where?”

“Sudan.”

“Sudan? Africa?” Davis shook his head. “Don’t airplanes ever crash in Tahiti?”

“Not lately. But if it happens, I’ll take care of that one myself.”

Davis still had his beer. He took a long pull.

“You know, that’s not a good way to hydrate,” Green admonished.

“Want one?”

“Honestly, it looks pretty darn good. But how about I buy you a cup of coffee instead?”

“That’s not a good way to hydrate either.”

Green waited impassively.

“You’re serious.”

No reply.

Davis sighed. “All right, coffee it is.”



CHAPTER TWO

They found a coffeehouse two blocks south. It was a toney place, the very air inside seemingly brewed in rich aromas taken from exotic mountains—Sumatra or Colombia or Java—and flown halfway around the world. There was furniture the color of well-steeped tea on dark wood floors. The coffee was four bucks for a *venti*, which was Italian for big. Even at that price they had to stand in line, so Davis figured it had to be good stuff. He watched the lady in front of them pay eight bucks for what looked like a milkshake. When it was their turn he ordered a large coffee, plain and black. Green got a bottle of water along with the tab.

Davis was still wearing cleats with his warm-up gear, so when he followed Green across the room to a table his steps clacked over the hardwood floor. The shoes made him an inch taller than he already was, and the bulky clothing made him wider. He was limping on a sore ankle, and his wet hair was matted with sweat and grass, and probably traces of blood. In what had to be some sort of statement on contemporary society, nobody gave him a second look.

Green led to a pair of wide chairs in one corner that were covered in a supple, leathery material. Dark and smooth. Just like the coffee. Davis settled in and took a long sip from his cup. It really was good.

Green began his pitch. “What do you know about unmanned aerial vehicles, Jammer?”

“UAVs? They’ve become big business. As an ex-fighter pilot it breaks my heart, but the reality is that thirty years from now the Air Force won’t have pilots flying tactical missions. It’ll all be drones.”

“I fear you may be right, that’s where things are going. And I’m

sure you know it's not just the military flying them. The CIA operates a big fleet. Intelligence, surveillance, even strike missions. Most of the airframes they use are common to Air Force versions, but the CIA has also undertaken a handful of black projects. One of the most recent is a vehicle known as Blackstar."

"Never heard of it," Davis said.

"That's good, because it's classified. They've been operating a handful of these airframes for about a year, based out of airfields in Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan."

"Okay. Good for them. Why are we talking about it?"

Green looked around the room. Davis noticed that the seats Green had chosen were as far as possible from the rest of the quietly chattering patrons. It broke a lot of rules to talk about classified information in a public place, and Larry Green was typically a by-the-book guy. But with a little discretion and a dash of common sense—it happened every day.

"I got a call from Darlene Graham yesterday."

This got Davis' attention. Darlene Graham was the director of national intelligence, a sharp woman who'd taken over a post that had been little more than symbolic for many years, and turned it into a powerful overseer of the old-school intelligence agencies. And while the NTSB didn't typically overlap with the D.C. intelligence community, a year earlier Davis had blurred the lines between the two when a crash investigation he'd been working on had blossomed into a full-blown global crisis. Working with Graham and the CIA, Davis had averted a disaster. Since then, he'd been on leave of absence to concentrate on his daughter.

Green continued, "The CIA had a Blackstar go Magellan on them last winter, just wandered off and started exploring after the uplinks and data feed stopped. Eventually, they lost it."

"Serves them right for not having a pilot on board."

Green smiled.

Davis asked, "Could it have been shot down?"

"Doubtful. The operators would have seen something. A fighter in the area, radar activity from a surface-to-air missile site. And it was fly-

ing too high to be hit by small arms fire. Since Blackstar is a brand-new design, the odds are it was just a technical glitch.”

“But what does that have to do with us?” Davis asked. “We’ve never been in the UAV business. Those are exclusively military toys, including collecting the smithereens when one hits the dirt. If the CIA needs help investigating this crash, they should talk to the Air Force.”

“It’s not that simple. Blackstar was operating in the Horn of Africa, right on the border of Somalia and Ethiopia. After contact was lost, there was an intense search. Every imaging device we have scoured the area, but couldn’t find a thing. In the end, the CIA decided it must have gone ballistic, ended up in the Red Sea or maybe the Indian Ocean.”

“That sounds a little hopeful.”

“You and I see it that way. We investigate stuff like this. But the CIA is just getting their feet wet when it comes to aircraft. They decided to write the whole thing off—that is, until last week.”

“What? Did some fisherman pull up a piece of Blackstar in his net?”

“Worse. The CIA got an intel report that an advanced UAV of some kind was squirreled away in a hangar at the new airport outside Khartoum.”

“But you said it went down east of there, in Somalia.”

“Khartoum isn’t that far away from the crash box. Certainly plausible. And when you consider the number of places you could stash aircraft wreckage in that part of the world—well, you get the idea.”

“What was the source of this information?”

“Darlene Graham would only tell me that it was a reliable human source.”

“Reliable,” Davis repeated.

Green shrugged.

“So is this a government-owned hangar?” Davis asked.

“That’s the funny thing. It’s owned by a private party, an outfit called FBN Aviation.”

“What do they do?”

“On paper they fly cargo, but in reality it looks like your standard

shell company. It was set up in the Bahamas by a law firm that does that kind of work exclusively—Franklin, Banks, and Noble.”

“FBN,” Davis said.

Green nodded. “The company directors are three lawyers who probably couldn’t tell a DC-3 from a salad shooter.”

“DC-3s? People still fly those?”

“Apparently this company does. They work about a half dozen airplanes around Africa and the Middle East.”

Davis had seen companies like it before. The corporate office in a place with loose regulatory oversight, the operations end set up in a dark corner of the world. From a distance, FBN Aviation would look a lot like UPS, a company designed to move air cargo. But up close it would look very different. There would be legitimate shipments, but mixed in you’d find arms and drugs and diamonds. You’d find record-keeping that looked like it was done in a mirror.

Green said, “The guy in charge is named Rafiq Khoury. He’s some kind of cleric. Other than that, we don’t know much about him.”

“A cleric needs a cargo airline?”

“I didn’t like the sound of that either.”

Davis heaved a sigh. “Okay. So Darlene Graham lost one of her toys. And it might be sitting in a hangar owned by some kind of arms merchant. That doesn’t explain why a cheapskate like you just bought me a cup of coffee. You said you had work for me, Larry, a crash. Are we talking about something besides this drone?”

“We are,” Green said. “A DC-3 went down two weeks ago off the coast of Sudan, in the Red Sea. The exact location is a little fuzzy, but the crash site is clearly inside their territorial waters. Sudan has jurisdiction.”

“Let me guess—FBN Aviation.”

Green nodded.

“Doesn’t Sudan have people who can run an investigation?”

“There’s a Sudanese Civil Aviation Authority, and on paper they have a guy in charge of flight safety. But he’s just somebody’s cousin, no formal training. Remember, we’re talking about a country where over seventy percent of the national budget goes to the military.”

“But if Sudan needed outside help, we’d be the last ones they’d ask. We were bombing them back in the nineties.”

“True, but Sudan is in a tight spot right now. As you know, air carriers aren’t allowed to fly international routes without ICAO’s seal of approval.”

Davis did know this. The International Civil Aviation Organization was the U.N. agency tasked to set worldwide standards for aviation. For developing countries, the bar wasn’t set particularly high, but they had to go through the motions. Otherwise, they risked losing their certification and could find themselves without air service.

Green continued, “Sudan is in the middle of an ICAO safety audit. It’s an inspection that comes around every five years or so. Teams go in and check out airline operations, air traffic control, safety programs.”

“And suddenly they have a hull loss right in the middle of their paperwork party.”

“Exactly. Sudan has to play this by the book, and the book says that when a nation doesn’t have the expertise for full-up crash investigation, it has to bring in help.”

“And the NTSB is their helper of record?”

“No, they actually use France. But the French are a little short-handed right now, and they suggested we might be able to help.”

“How convenient,” Davis said.

“Yeah, I thought so too.”

“You think Director Graham had a hand in that?”

“Probably,” said Green.

Davis surmised, “She thinks the crash of this jalopy DC-3 will give her a ticket to look inside that hangar. Or should I say, gives *me* a ticket.”

Green nodded.

It was all starting to make sense. But Davis still wasn’t satisfied.

“Larry, you have a lot of investigators. How did I draw the short straw?”

Green paused for a hit on his water bottle. He said, “You’re the best guy for the job, Jammer. This is going to be a solo effort. No tech help from contractors or lab teams. Nobody in my office is as good on their

own as you are. Sudan will make a show of going through the paces, but the truth is, they probably don't give a damn why this DC-3 went down. They might even not want to know—it could be that one of their air traffic controllers was at fault, or maybe their maintenance oversight is lacking. For the Sudanese, nothing good can come from any findings. They'll want an investigator who will come in, ask a few easy questions, then shrug their shoulders and go home."

"And you think that's what I'll do?"

The general smiled. "It's only important that the Sudanese think that's what you'll do. All we want is one look at that hangar."

And there was the endgame, Davis thought. A game he didn't like for one big reason. "So nobody really cares why this airplane went down."

"I never thought I'd say it, but in this case the cause of the crash is not an overriding concern."

"Unless you were the one who happened to be out flying that night."

Green grimaced. "Yeah—I had that coming. Tell you what, Jammer. Figure out why this sixty-year-old airplane went down, and next time I'll buy you a beer."

Davis reached for his coffee, took a long sip. He was nearing the bottom of his cup, which meant it was time for a decision.

"Larry, I appreciate your confidence in me, but there are a dozen people in your section who could handle this."

"Not like you would," Green argued.

Davis straightened up in his chair and stood. "Well, anyway, thanks for the offer. And the coffee."

Davis started to walk away.

Green said, "Bob Schmitt."

It hit Davis like an anvil.



CHAPTER THREE

Davis stopped in his tracks. Turned around and stared.

Green didn't say a word. He pulled a handful of papers from his pocket. They were folded in a military manner, neat hard creases that made them the size of a long envelope. Davis took a cautious step back and slowly held out his hand.

"Last page," Green said.

Davis began to unfold the pages, took his time and rifled through one by one. He was looking at a hastily thrown together briefing package, and definitely not the kind of thing the NTSB would assemble. It had to have come from Darlene Graham's office. He saw satellite photos of the hangar and airfield. A request for technical assistance from ICAO. And on the last page, amid the corporate profile of FBN Aviation, one name highlighted in yellow. Davis hadn't heard it in years. In truth, he'd never expected to hear it again. Bob Schmitt.

Davis settled back into the plush chair. "Was he one of the pilots in the crash?" he asked.

"No. There's not that much justice in the world."

Davis nodded, and the sorry Air Force career of Bob Schmitt came back like brown water over a failed levee.

The training process for military aviators is brutally efficient. Even so, a handful of misfits slip through, people who earn their wings yet have no place in the profession. Bob Schmitt was one of them. Technically, he was proficient enough. In truth, he'd been one of the best sticks in the squadron, always at the top of the bombing competitions, always a challenge in the air-to-air tangles. But what he lacked was

far more critical. Integrity and trustworthiness. With Schmitt on your wing, you never knew what to expect. He regularly flew too low or too loose. Worst of all, he didn't see any problem with that. Davis had endured his share of terse debriefings with Bob Schmitt. After two tumultuous years, Schmitt had been transferred to a unit in South Carolina. Soon after, there was a crash, a midair collision. Schmitt was involved but ejected safely. His flight lead, Walt Deemer, hadn't been so lucky. Davis had known Deemer from the Academy. He was a good shit, which, in the parlance of the squadron, was the best you ever said about anybody.

Davis had seen his chance. He'd lobbied hard to be put on the investigation team and got his wish. The inquiry was short and quick, the evidence clear. Schmitt went to a Flying Evaluation Board and lost his wings. He was out of the Air Force a month later, lucky to have not ended up doing time in Leavenworth. That had been ten years ago; Davis hadn't heard the name since. Not until today.

"So Schmitthead is flying in Sudan."

"With a stain like he's got on his record—you can only fly the darker corners of the world. But it gets worse. Schmitt's not just a line pilot. He's the boss, FBN's chief pilot."

"You gotta be yankin' me. Bob Schmitt runs this circus?" Davis shook his head in disbelief.

"Jammer, when Walt went down . . ." Green hesitated, "I know you wanted to make sure Schmitt never flew again."

"And he didn't. At least not in the Air Force. That final report was rock solid. I nailed his ass to the wall, got everything I wanted except ten minutes in the alley behind the officer's club."

"So," Green said, "here's your ten minutes."

Davis eyed his old boss for a long moment, then turned his attention to the scene outside. Rain was falling again from a hard gray sky, and the coffeeshop window was peppered with mirror-like silver dots. People on the sidewalk were moving briskly against the foul weather, the typical leisurely pace of a Sunday accelerated by the elements. It was a day that should have kindled thoughts of fireplaces and cups of hot chocolate. But Davis had another picture in mind—Walt Deemer

sitting in the living room of his military base house. They'd all gotten together for a Super Bowl or some equally vital event. It was funny how you remembered people when they were gone. No matter how vivid their personality, how encompassing the relationship, it all ended up as one or two snapshot visions. The exception for Davis was his wife, but he knew why—he had Jen, a living vestige, full of Diane's DNA-inspired mannerisms and features. But a buddy like Walt, he was forever a guy on a Barcalounger with a Budweiser, fist in the air as he cheered on his Packers. A good picture to remember.

Green read him perfectly. "Walt was my friend, too, Jammer. One of my guys, way back when."

"So you want me to take a look at FBN Aviation—as a pretext to see what's in the hangar?"

"Something like that. And if Bob Schmitt gets caught in your crossfire—"

Jammer Davis nodded, completing that thought on his own.

"So are you in?" Green asked.

Davis sank lower in his chair. He twirled what was left in his cup, the dregs thick and silty and brown. He found himself wondering if they drank coffee in Sudan. Davis tried to divine a way out of it, some practical impediment. He couldn't think of one. Jen wouldn't be home until the end of the semester. He didn't have any other job right now. There wasn't even rugby practice for the next three weeks. No way out. But what really stuck in his mind was Bob Schmitt. The man had landed on his feet, even if it was in an African backwater. And now people's lives rested on his decisions. That was what clinched it.

"You know, Larry, you're a real piece of work."

"Coming from you, Jammer, I take that as a compliment."

"So whose payroll will I be on? NTSB or CIA?"

"Does it matter?"

"The way I see it, one makes me a consultant, the other a mercenary."

"I'll let you pick your job title. Meet me in my office tomorrow morning. I'll brief you on everything we've got. Then you can go to TMD and make your arrangements."

Davis was about to ask, *What the hell is TMD?* when it hit him. “Traffic Management Desk?”

“Yep. That’s what they call the travel office now.”

“Jesus, Larry. I’m beginning to think like the government.”

Green chuckled. “Don’t take it too hard. I’ll see you in the morning.” The general got up and walked off briskly, like he always did, and soon disappeared into the heavy gloom outside.

Davis tipped his cup and drained it. It might be his last good cuppa for some time. Which seemed like a really good excuse to go back to the counter and order a refill.

Davis woke early the next morning and started his day by scalding a cup of “Colombia’s Best” in his three-cup maker. Soon after that he was standing over an open suitcase.

In the military they called it mobilization. The United States armed forces are a global fighting force, which means that any soldier can be ordered on a moment’s notice to deploy anywhere in the world. The orders might be for a week, or they might be for a year, so the military has a hard-and-fast process to make sure everyone is prepared. You stand in line in a warehouse to be issued the necessities of your new life. Mobilization is not a happy process to begin with because you know you’re heading far from home. Then you see what they’re handing out. Gas masks, ammunition, Arctic sleeping bags, nerve agent antidotes, immunizations against rare infectious diseases. The JAG is there to make sure your will is up to date. The chaplain is there just in case you needed to talk. Davis had been mobilized many times, and he’d always thought it seemed like some large-scale, institutionalized omen. Bad things to come. Now that he was a civilian, the process was different. Davis was standing in his bedroom throwing clean socks into an old Samsonite roller bag with a broken wheel. He could have been going on a cruise. Even so, he was shadowed by that same ill feeling.

As he stood next to his bed wondering what he’d forgotten to pack, Davis picked up the cordless phone and dialed Jen’s number for the third time this morning. He cradled the receiver between his ear

and shoulder as he stuffed shaving gear into a pouch. On the fifth ring Jen's message came.

"Hey, it's Jen. You know the deal." A beep.

"It's Dad. I'm heading to Africa for an investigation. Call me."

He hung up and tossed the phone on the bed. That had been happening a lot lately, even before she'd gone off to Europe. He had two years left with his daughter, a tiny window that was shrinking every day. *And then what the hell will I do?* Davis grabbed a pair of work boots and threw them into the suitcase.

Probably what I'm doing right now.

Only after she'd gone had Davis realized how closely he was moored to his daughter. Jen had been away five weeks, and he was already starting to drift. He'd been lifting more iron at the gym, swimming a thousand laps in the pool, hitting harder in the rugby matches. But none of that was enough. When Larry Green had come calling yesterday, Davis hadn't been looking for crash work. He hadn't been looking for any kind of work. But here he was, throwing shirts in a suitcase, getting ready to fly off to one of the least developed countries in the world to look for a lost drone. Larry Green might say he was going because he had unfinished business with Bob Schmitt. But deep down, Davis knew the real reason he'd taken the job.

He'd realized it last year, in France, when an assassin had tried to gun him down. He needed the adrenaline rush, the thing that used to get satisfied when he flew an F-16 on the deck at six hundred miles an hour. Maybe Larry Green knew it. Maybe he had tried to make the job sound challenging, even impossible, just to lure Davis into it. A smart guy, the general.

Davis stood looking at the open suitcase, wondering if there was anything he'd forgotten. That, too, was something you learned in the military. No matter how well you prepared, there was always something missing, and you wouldn't realize what it was until you stepped off an airplane and into some godforsaken hellhole halfway around the world. But then, that was part of the challenge.

Davis zipped up his bag. Mobilization complete.