

# 1.

**H**unger. Rage.

Fourteen-year-old Hussein felt little else as he rode in the back of a Nissan pickup truck along a dirt road south of Mogadishu. Five fellow al-Shabaab fighters traveled with him in the truck bed. One manned a Kord 12.7-millimeter machine gun bolted near the tailgate, and the rest brandished AK-47s. Hussein's entire worldly possessions consisted of his AK, his sandals, a dirty cotton shirt and trousers, and the machete hanging from a rope belt in a leather sheath.

For a promised piece of fruit every day, Hussein had become a soldier of God. The older men had yet to give him his daily tangerine; rewards would come later if he and his brothers in jihad performed this mission well. Along with the fruit, he hoped to get a bowl of onion and potato soup. Just like yesterday and the day before that.

His mouth still watered when he remembered that day last week when the men fed him fried goat meat. Such feasts came rarely for the young soldiers of God. Al-Shabaab, or "The Youth," faced many hardships inflicted by the infidels. These *gaalos*, the unbelieving foreigners, brought hunger, the death of parents and friends, and so-called medicine that only made diseases worse.

But today, the unbelievers would feel God's wrath.

The truck slowed and stopped at a crossroads. Dust kicked up by the Nissan's tires rolled in clouds and stung Hussein's eyes. Thorn scrub littered the dunes that stretched from the crossroads to the beach. Beyond the beach, the Indian Ocean sparkled blue to the horizon. Seagulls wheeled over the surf.

The new boss got out of the passenger side of the pickup. Hussein knew him only as “the Sheikh,” a man who spoke of many things Hussein did not understand. But the Sheikh led the struggle now, and God gave him his words just as the angels had bidden Mohammed to recite the holy book.

“Out of the truck, my pups,” the Sheikh said.

Hussein and four of his comrades scrambled over the tailgate and hopped to the ground. One stayed behind to man the machine gun. The driver got out of the truck and stood beside the Sheikh. Hussein knew the driver as Abdullahi. Abdullahi would beat you for laziness or for grabbing at food. He wore a black kerchief around his head and neck, which left only his eyes visible. The Sheikh wore plain clothes like Hussein, and mirrored sunglasses.

Another al-Shabaab truck arrived, carrying only the driver. The driver remained inside and kept the engine idling.

“A nest of vipers has installed itself in Mogadishu,” the Sheikh said. He gestured with his right hand, index finger extended, as he often did during his sermons. “They dare to call themselves a legitimate government, with their sham elections and unclean money from the Americans and the British and the United Nations. The only legitimate government is that of God, of the Islamic Emirate of Somalia.”

At the mention of the Islamic emirate, the fighters cheered. Hussein cheered with them, raised his weapon high into the air.

“At any moment,” the Sheikh continued, “a vehicle will come this way. It will probably be from Mogadishu. We will stop the vehicle and give the occupants a test. If they pass the test, they may proceed on their way. If they fail, you will administer God’s justice. We will stand firm here at this crossroads and test the fidelity of travelers for the rest of the day.”

Hussein did not know all of these words. He did not know *administer* or *occupant*. For that matter, he did not know what *emirate* meant. But he knew his duty, and he would carry it out with righteous conviction.

As the Sheikh predicted, in a few minutes a car approached. Two men rode in a Mazda with a dragging tailpipe and rusted-out fenders. As the Mazda neared the gun truck, the other truck pulled across the road behind the car and blocked escape back toward Mogadishu. The boy manning the machine gun fired a burst over the car. The three rapid-fire shots sounded like hammer blows, and the heavy brass casings clanged onto the truck bed as if someone had dropped three wrenches.

“Halt!” the Sheikh shouted, needlessly. The Mazda had already skidded to a stop. The driver and passenger sat frozen. Both looked like men in their thirties. Neither wore a beard.

“Out of the car,” the Sheikh ordered.

Slowly, the driver opened his door. Not fast enough for Abdullahi. Abdullahi tore open the car door, grabbed the driver by the shirt, and slammed him against the hood of the car. Another of the al-Shabaab fighters yanked out the passenger.

Hussein trembled with anticipation. These looked like *kafirs*, those who denied God’s truth. *Kafir* was a new word for Hussein, one the al-Shabaab men had taught him. *Kafirs* lurked all around, and they deserved no mercy. Hussein would show none.

He would not hesitate to carry out al-Shabaab’s bidding. In its ranks he had found belonging and importance. No longer rabble of the streets, now he was a man of weapons. God rewarded his ferocity with tangerines and plums.

Already the *kafirs* begged for their lives.

“Brothers, brothers, who are you?” the passenger asked. “We have done nothing to you.”

“We have only a little money,” the driver cried. “You can take it. Just let us go.”

Abdullahi slapped the driver.

“You came from the direction of Mogadishu,” the Sheikh said. “What were you doing there?”

Hussein had seen the Sheikh do this before—toy with his victims

the way a cat plays with a mouse. The question made both travelers look even more frightened. The driver glanced at his passenger, then turned to the Sheikh with pleading eyes.

“We are fishermen,” the driver said. “We have been repairing our boat.”

They didn’t look like fishermen. They wore the shirts and slacks of the *gaalos*, and leather shoes instead of sandals.

Abdullahi slapped the man again.

“You lie,” Abdullahi said. “You have repaired nothing in these clean clothes. You have worked in the offices of the infidel, stealing from the people.”

“No, no,” the driver said. “We are good Muslims, just like you, brother.”

“We shall see if you are faithful,” the Sheikh said. “Tell me of the Prophet’s Night Journey, exactly as the Quran tells it.”

“What, brother?” the driver asked. “I do not understand.”

“Because I am generous and kind,” the Sheikh said, “I will give you a hint. Recite for me Surah Seventeen.”

“Recite?” the passenger asked. “What?”

“Recite for us,” Abdullahi said through gritted teeth, “Surah Seventeen.”

“What is this madness?” the driver asked.

The travelers did not know the section of the Quran the Sheikh wanted to hear. Hussein did not know it, either, because he could not read. Nor could most of the al-Shabaab fighters. This did not trouble Hussein. Hunger left little space in his mind for irony.

“Then I will tell you,” the Sheikh said. He began to recite from memory.

*Glory to Allah, who did take His Servant*

*For a journey by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest*

*Mosque,*

*Whose precincts we did bless—*

*In order that we might show him some of our signs: for He is the One Who heareth and seeth all things.*

The two *kafirs* must have figured out what lay in store. The driver began to weep. The passenger blubbered, “We have always been good Muslims. I have even made the Hajj.”

“You dare to brag of your pilgrimage to Mecca?” Abdullahi said. “That makes your sins all the worse.”

The Sheikh stepped back from the men’s car. He raised one arm above his head and barked an order:

“Give them justice.”

Hussein slung his AK across his shoulder and unsheathed his machete.

# 2.

In the pilot's seat of an ancient twin-engine DC-3 cargo plane, Michael Parson felt the aircraft yaw. One of the engines had quit. Instinctively, he pressed the left rudder pedal to keep the nose on heading. With his left boot feeding in rudder pressure and his right boot flat on the floor, he knew the right engine was the one that had failed. Dead foot, dead engine. Parson swore under his breath, then called to his copilot.

"Damn it, Frenchie, we got a problem. Feather number two for me, will you?"

"*Merde*," the copilot said. "I'm on it."

Copilot Alain Chartier usually flew much newer and faster airplanes with the French Armée de l'Air. Parson, a U.S. Air Force colonel, had met Chartier a year ago during a joint counterterrorist operation in North Africa. French Mirage jets, along with American aircraft and U.S. Marines, had put a hurting on some very bad people who attacked civilians with chemical weapons.

Today, at eighty-five hundred feet over Somalia, Parson and Chartier flew as civilians. Both had taken leave from their military jobs to volunteer for a few weeks as pilots for World Relief Airlift. They wore military-style desert flight suits with WRA patches on their right sleeves. On Parson's left sleeve he wore a U.S. flag, while Chartier wore the *drapeau tricolore* of France. Parson had plunked down eighteen thousand dollars of his own money to get a DC-3 type rating—so he could fly a seventy-five-year-old unpressurized airplane over hellholes in the Horn of Africa. He'd done it because he loved to fly. And because he'd do anything for Sophia Gold.

“Can’t believe the things I do to spend time with Sophia,” Parson muttered.

Engine failure hardly came as a surprise in an airplane this old, and it didn’t frighten him. As an experienced military aviator, Parson had seen far worse. Even if the second engine failed, the DC-3 would just become a big glider, and Parson could dead-stick to a survivable touchdown on the flat plain below. Just hold her at the pitch angle to get maximum lift over drag and let her settle to the ground.

The airplane’s third crew member was a Somali American flight mechanic who looked as thin as the struts on a Piper Cub. He wore two flags on his left sleeve: the Stars and Stripes on top, and underneath, the banner of Somalia—a field of light blue with a single white star in the middle. His nametag read GEEDI MURSAL, FLT MECH, WORLD RELIEF AIRLIFT. He had just starting working full-time for WRA after spending six years as a jet engine mechanic in the U.S. Air Force. Parson had known Geedi for about a month and had flown with him three times: not enough to know him well, but enough to know he was dependable.

“I’ll go scan number two,” Geedi said.

“Thanks, Geedi,” Parson said.

Geedi unbuckled his jump seat harness. He kept on his headset; his interphone cord stretched long enough to keep in contact with the pilots as he disappeared into the cargo compartment.

Parson pushed the left prop lever to set a higher RPM, and he added power with the left throttle. Chartier placed his thumb and forefinger on the knob for the right engine’s mixture lever.

“Confirm number two,” Chartier said.

“Confirm,” Parson said, after looking to make sure Chartier hadn’t chosen the wrong control.

Chartier pulled the mixture lever to idle cutoff. He reached overhead and put a finger on the feathering button for the right engine.

“Confirm two,” he said.

“Confirm,” Parson responded.

Chartier pressed the button, and the right propeller stopped wind-milling. As its blade angle changed, the prop slowed down until it stood motionless in the slipstream.

“Number two standing tall,” Geedi called from the back.

“Thanks, Geedi,” Parson said. “See anything on that cowl?”

“Leaking some oil.”

That told Parson little. If those old Pratt & Whitney radials weren’t leaking oil, it meant they didn’t have any oil. Some DC-3s had been upgraded with turboprop engines, but this one staggered through the skies on Depression-era technology.

“Everything still tied down good back there?” Parson asked.

“I’m checking now,” Geedi said.

“Good man.”

The cargo compartment contained pallets of food. One pallet held several hundred pounds of Humanitarian Daily Rations, much like military MREs. Another consisted of hundred-pound bags of rice. Yet another pallet held boxes of cooking oil and bags of flour and beans. Charitable organizations had donated these relief supplies for Somalis returning home from Kenyan refugee camps.

From the start of the civil war in 1991, Somalis had fled their homeland by the thousands. For more than two decades, Somalia had no real central government. Armed clans and Islamic militants ran riot, and Somali pirates threatened maritime shipping. Now, at least, Somalia had a president and a parliament, but the country remained impoverished, unstable, and dangerous.

Adding to the chaos, neighboring Kenya had decided it could no longer host the world’s largest refugee camp. The Dadaab camp complex had housed nearly half a million refugees. Now they were heading home, usually on foot, across miles of dust-blown wasteland and thickets prowled by lions and hyenas.

Economic pressures played a role in Kenya’s decision, but so did politics. In a 2013 attack on the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi, terrorists from the Somali Islamist group al-Shabaab killed dozens of

people. In 2014, al-Shabaab stopped a bus in northern Kenya, separated Muslim passengers from non-Muslims, and murdered twenty-eight. The terrorists said the attacks were retribution for Kenyan military deployment in Somalia. Now Kenyan leaders wanted to wash their hands of the problems next door.

Cash-strapped governments elsewhere offered little assistance. Bad memories of the 1993 Battle of Mogadishu left American leaders reluctant to commit troops to the region. Many politicians couldn't find Somalia on a map, but all of them knew about the films *Black Hawk Down* and *Captain Phillips*.

If help was coming from anywhere, it was from private donations. A few pallets at a time. In airplanes old enough for museums. Parson and his crew had picked up this load at the international airport in Djibouti. That's as close as some big cargo carriers wanted to get to Somalia. Supplies had to travel the rest of the way in rattletraps flown by pilots with more guts than sense. Over the past year, Parson had made two previous short trips as a volunteer pilot for World Relief Airlift, but this was Chartier's first flight with WRA. Geedi was WRA's only paid staffer on the crew.

Chartier ran through the emergency checklist for a single-engine landing. He turned off the bad engine's fuel valve. Closed the oil shutter. Turned off the failed engine's magnetos.

"Guess we better tell Baidoa we're limping our asses in on one engine," Parson said. Baidoa was Parson's original destination, and it was the closest airport with a fire department.

Chartier pressed his transmit switch mounted on the right yoke. "Baidoa Tower," he called, "World Relief Eight Two Alpha with an emergency. Right engine failure."

The answer came back in accented but competent English: "World Relief Eight Two Alpha, Baidoa Tower. We copy your emergency, will have equipment standing by. You are cleared for a straight-in visual approach, Runway Two-Two."

"Cleared for the visual to Two-Two," Chartier said. He released his

transmit switch and said to Parson, “I am surprised they have any equipment to put on standby.”

“We’re lucky they even have a tower,” Parson said, “but that guy sounds like he knows what he’s doing.”

Parson had landed this DC-3 on dirt strips in Somalia with no facilities beyond a wind sock. At least this time he had nearly ten thousand feet of pavement, and personnel to help with an emergency.

A dusty plateau of reddish soil and scattered vegetation stretched below. Acacia trees studded the terrain. The seedpods from acacias made good livestock fodder, and the blooms supported honeybees. But the acacias bristled with thorns. Everything about life came hard and painful in this part of the world.

Baidoa slid into view through the distant haze. Home to more than a hundred thousand, the city had suffered a tortured past. When militias blocked food shipments during a 1992 famine, Baidoa became known as the city of walking skeletons. Starvation killed up to sixty people a day. Aid groups and UN troops helped ease the famine the following year, but the city remained a battleground.

In 2006, the country’s Transitional Federal Government attacked Islamists holed up in Baidoa. Somali government troops, aided by Ethiopian forces, routed Islamic Courts Union fighters. Two years later, another terrorist group, al-Shabaab, laid siege to the city, and Baidoa fell temporarily to the militants. Ethiopian and Somali troops eventually retook the city. Somalia’s new government now controlled Baidoa—at least for the moment. But terrorists still fought to turn the entire country into an Islamist caliphate under sharia law.

Today, Parson just hoped Baidoa remained stable enough for him to land and get the engine fixed.

“All right,” he said, “let’s see if we can get this pig on the ground.” He throttled back on his one good engine and began to descend.

The airport lay southwest of the city, and Parson approached from the north. The DC-3 glided above the rubble of blasted concrete and cinder-block buildings. Other structures showed glimpses of life

within: clotheslines draped with bright fabrics, smoke from cooking fires.

"*Mon Dieu*," Chartier said, "That is a bleak-looking place. What if you always had to cook over a fire in this heat?"

The outside air-temp gauge read thirty degrees Celsius. Mental math told Parson that meant eighty-six degrees Fahrenheit. Not as hot as the Iraqi desert, which Parson knew well, but plenty warm in a place without the luxury of air-conditioning.

"At least they got something to cook," Parson said.

"*Oui*."

"Gimme one-quarter flaps, will you?"

Chartier reached down between the pilots' seats and pulled a lever until it clicked into a detent. Parson let some of the airspeed bleed off. The airspeed indicator, old enough to show miles per hour rather than knots, read 120. The luminescent paint on the needle had yellowed and cracked with age. Reminded Parson of the dashboard in an old hand-cranked car.

"Thanks, Frenchie," Parson said. "Put the gear down."

"Yes, sir."

Parson started to tell Chartier not to call him "sir." Their ranks held no relevance in World Relief Airlift. But Parson let the honorific stand. Military courtesy meant more than respect for those of higher ranks. *Sir* implied a respect for the overall institution, a regard for shared experiences, acknowledgment of an ordered brotherhood and sisterhood. Get a group of veterans together who've not worn a uniform in decades, and you'll still hear "sirs" and "ma'ams."

Chartier moved the landing gear lever, on the floor near the flap handle, from NEUTRAL to DOWN. The gear extended and locked, and Parson felt the increased drag slow the plane further. He shoved the throttle for a few more inches of manifold pressure to hold his airspeed.

Geedi returned to the cockpit and buckled into the jump seat.

"Cargo all secure, sir," he said.

"Good," Parson replied.

The tower called again. "World Relief Eight Two Alpha, you are cleared to land, Two-Two. Altimeter setting three-zero-zero-one."

"Eight Two Alpha cleared to land," Chartier answered. He dialed the new barometric pressure setting into both altimeters.

The altimeter needles swung through four thousand feet. Baidoa lay at a field elevation of eighteen hundred feet above sea level, so Parson knew he was roughly two thousand feet above the ground. The runway loomed straight ahead, centerline stripes faded nearly to invisibility. Parson saw no traffic on the taxiway, and only three aircraft parked on the ramp. He recognized an Ethiopian Airlines Dash 8 turboprop, along with a UN helicopter, and an Antonov An-24 from whom he knew where. Maybe bringing in the daily shipment of khat.

"I think we got the field made now," Parson said. "Full flaps."

Chartier moved the flap lever again, and Parson pitched for ninety-five miles per hour. With the power almost back to idle on the operating engine, the old bird floated smoothly down to the pavement. Parson had spent little time in tailwheel airplanes, but he managed a smooth landing.

For all Parson's grouching about the outdated aircraft, he loved returning to the cockpit. The responsibilities of a full-bird colonel had kept him on the ground for most of the last year. He took it easy on the brakes, let the DC-3 roll along and slow itself to walking speed. In the scrub brush off the runway, two derelict Hawkers lay in the dirt on collapsed landing gear. Artifacts of a defunct Somali air force, the old aircraft were subsonic fighter bombers built by the British in the 1950s.

Parson shook his head. What a sad end for once-magnificent jets. The sight added to the aura of decay and anarchy.

Near the end of the runway, Chartier unlocked the tailwheel. Parson tapped the right brake to begin a turn, and he goosed the left throttle ever so slightly. The plane handled a little differently on the ground with a dead engine, but Parson used differential braking to make up for the loss of differential power. He rolled onto the taxiway while Chartier cleaned up the after-landing checklist.

“Geedi, does any of this look familiar?” Parson asked.

“Not really. My family moved to Minneapolis when I was little.”

Parson scanned the temperature gauges so he could watch the good engine cool down in idle before he shut it off. He kept the palm of his hand cupped over the engine’s throttle.

“Who the hell are those guys?” Geedi asked, pointing out the windscreen.

“Oh, boy,” Chartier said. “What a welcoming committee.”

Parson looked up. Four Somali men walked toward the airplane, brandishing automatic weapons. Three of them carried AK-47s, but one wielded a PKM, a belt-fed machine gun. Bandoliers of ammunition dangled from his neck. The armed men strolled casually, and they wore civilian clothes and ratty tennis shoes.

Alarmed, Parson wished he could take off on one engine. But if these guys wanted him to stay on the ground, they could riddle the engine—or the cockpit—before he ever got airborne. Parson pulled the left mixture control to idle cutoff, and the propeller spun down to a stop. Without taking his eyes off the gunmen, Chartier reached overhead and turned off the magnetos.

Underneath his flight suit, in an elastic bellyband holster, Parson wore a Beretta nine millimeter. A lame defense against a PKM, but all he had. He unzipped the suit, drew the weapon, zipped his suit back up. Parson held the pistol low, below the cockpit windows, invisible to the gunmen on the ramp. Clicked off the safety.

“You’re armed?” Geedi said. “We’re not supposed to be armed.”

“Neither are they,” Parson said.

# 3.

Four armed men surrounded Parson's airplane. In one of the world's most lawless countries, he knew anything could happen next. What did happen was the last thing he expected. Sophia Gold came out of the terminal building. Or what passed for a terminal building, with its broken windows, peeling paint, and sagging electrical wires. She wore her ever-present green-and-black Afghan scarf, a green bush shirt, khaki tactical trousers, and desert combat boots. Given her choice of clothing and her straight-postured walk, even a civilian would have pegged her as ex-military. A former U.S. Army sergeant major, Gold now worked for the United Nations. Still, Parson was surprised to find her here. When he'd spoken to her on the phone yesterday, she was in Mogadishu.

Gold talked with the armed men, and she smiled as if greeting cousins. Chatted briefly with PKM guy, put her hand on his arm for a moment. She looked up at the cockpit and waved to Parson. Parson waved back, still a little dumbstruck.

Parson put his weapon on safe and slid it back into his concealment holster. Wiped sweat from his nose with the sleeve of his flight suit. Now, on the ground in the Somali sun, the DC-3's aluminum hull turned into an oven.

Chartier had also drawn a pistol—the biggest stainless-steel revolver Parson had ever seen. The third big surprise in the space of about a minute.

“Damn, son,” Parson said. “What the hell is that?”

"A Smith & Wesson .500 Magnum."

"You planning on shooting elephants or something?"

"If necessary," Chartier said, grinning. "As your southern Americans say, my *maman* didn't raise no clown."

Parson laughed. "You mean fool," he said. "Your mama didn't raise no fool."

"*Oui*. She didn't raise no fool."

"I agree, but put that thing away before we scare Sophia's friends."

"*D'accord*."

Chartier stowed the big revolver in his flight bag. Geedi smiled and shook his head. Outside, Gold disappeared under the wing as she headed toward the door near the back of the DC-3.

"Well," Parson said, "let's not just sit here. Open the door and let the lady in the airplane."

"Yes, sir," Geedi said.

The flight mechanic unstrapped and headed aft. Parson heard him stepping around the cargo, and then the boarding door squeaked open. Now that Parson no longer worried about getting shot, he turned his thoughts to his other problem. He took off his headset, unbuckled his harness, and looked over at Chartier.

"I wonder why that engine failed," Parson said. "These Prattis are old, but they're usually pretty reliable."

"How much time have they flown since the last overhaul?"

"Less than forty hours."

Chartier shrugged. "Geedi will figure it out."

Parson didn't doubt that; he knew he had a good flight mechanic. He worried more about how long they'd stay stuck in this rat hole of an airport. Had the engine thrown a rod or cracked a piston? What if they had to wait until a newly rebuilt engine could be flown in?

Like any sensible flier, Parson carried an emergency overnight bag. But he didn't relish the idea of sleeping in the terminal on his bedroll. Better to get back to the Sheraton Djibouti Hotel, preferably before

happy hour. Get cleaned up and sip an old-fashioned while looking out over the Red Sea. He flew pro bono for WRA, but at least they put him and his crew in decent quarters. Mama didn't raise no fool.

The sound of Gold's voice interrupted Parson's thoughts. She had climbed aboard, and Parson heard her exchanging pleasantries with Geedi. He turned to see her making her way through the cargo compartment toward the cockpit—an uphill walk in this big taildragger. She smiled when she saw him. Parson had last seen her two weeks ago in Djibouti; running into her today was a bonus.

"I see you guys made a dramatic entrance," Gold said. "What's wrong with the engine?"

"We don't know yet," Parson said. "What are you doing here? I thought you were in Mog."

Gold stepped into the cramped flight deck. Parson rose to greet her, but in the cramped cockpit, he managed to stand up only halfway. Gold embraced him and kissed the top of his head. Even in Somalia's heat and dust, she smelled of scented lotion.

"I was, but I had to come out here to arrange for more security guys," Gold said. "You saw them when you taxied in." Gold turned to Chartier, who remained sitting in the copilot's seat. "Hello, Captain Chartier. I'm delighted you could volunteer your time and talent." She took his outstretched hand.

*"Enchanté,"* Chartier said. "Call me Alain."

"Or Frenchie," Parson said. "He answers to that, too. And Froggy Bastard."

"We'll make it Alain," Gold said.

"You see?" Chartier said to Parson. "She does everything with class. Why can't you be more like her?"

Parson smiled. For him, or anyone, to be like Sophia Gold would amount to a tall order. He considered her the smartest—and toughest—person he knew, and Parson knew a lot of military badasses. He had first met her in the worst of circumstances. Years ago, she had boarded his C-130 Hercules at Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan. At the time, she

served as an Army interpreter accompanying a high-value Taliban prisoner. Soon after takeoff, a shoulder-fired missile downed the Herk. After the crash, Parson and Gold endured a winter ordeal as they evaded capture and kept the Taliban mullah in custody.

They had shared many missions since then, most recently in North Africa to stop a terrorist group armed with chemical weapons. That's when they'd met Chartier.

Parson loved her dearly, though their relationship defied definition. No strings, but strong ties. Because Gold wanted to save the world, Parson had agreed to spend his military leave hauling relief supplies in an antique airplane.

And getting paid nothing—except time with her.

The humanitarian work did have another appeal: he'd gotten checked out on the DC-3, one of the classic machines of aviation history, and he could write off the expense as charity. He was even considering taking a longer break with a new sabbatical deal the Air Force offered. Under the Career Intermission Pilot Program, he could take off one to three years for charity work, a graduate degree, or whatever struck his fancy—then resume his military career.

“So who are those choirboys out there?” Parson asked. “You got the U.S. and French air forces working for you. Did you manage to recruit al-Shabaab, too?”

“Oh, no,” Gold said. Her tone turned serious. “Don't even joke to those guys about that. They *hate* al-Shabaab, like a lot of Somalis.”

“Sorry, no offense.”

“It's okay. Actually, they're private security. And al-Shabaab is the reason the UN hired them.”

“How's that?” Parson asked.

“With all the refugees coming home, Somalia's government wants to show it can handle the situation. Al-Shabaab wants to prove the government can't.”

“Bastards,” Chartier said.

Parson considered the implications. The terrorists might try any-

thing. Interrupting food shipments—a tried-and-true tactic in Somalia. Attacking government facilities. Assaulting civilian crowds. The African Union Mission in Somalia—AMISOM—provided troops to fight al-Shabaab, but the terrorists remained active and dangerous.

And here we are in the middle of it, Parson thought. With a geriatric airplane and two pistols. Perfect.

He didn't blame Gold for getting him into a risky situation. After decades of anarchy, piracy, civil war, and Black Hawks going down, he hadn't expected a trouble-free Somalia. If Parson had wanted to spend his leave doing something easy, he'd have gone fishing. But he liked to keep moving, to keep facing challenges. Though he loved the solitude of water and woods, those quiet moments gave him too much time to think, invited painful memories.

Clanging noises came from the cargo compartment. Parson glanced back. Geedi was removing cargo straps from an aluminum ladder. The flight mechanic needed the ladder to inspect the bad engine.

"Lemme help you with that, Geedi," Parson called.

"Thanks, sir."

"I see you met our flight mechanic," Chartier said to Gold. "He comes from the Somali American community in Minneapolis."

"He's a good dude," Parson said. "Knows his shit. But I better give him a hand with that ladder before it falls on his skinny ass."

Parson went aft and helped Geedi lift the ladder that had been strapped to the floor. They slid it halfway out the boarding door, and Parson jumped down from the aircraft. He took the ladder by its base, and he and Geedi moved it out of the DC-3 and set it up under the right engine.

Black droplets of leaking oil already splattered the dusty pavement beneath the engine, but that was normal. Geedi climbed the ladder. He wore a Leatherman multi-tool in a sheath attached to the waist strap of his flight suit. The flight mechanic took out the Leatherman, opened a screwdriver blade, and began turning the Dzus fasteners that

pinned the cowling panels in place. He worked with a practiced hand, popping open each fastener with a quick leftward flick of his wrist.

Gold and Chartier emerged from the airplane and headed toward the terminal.

“I’ll get some people to unload your cargo,” Gold called.

“Thanks, Sophia,” Parson answered. “Just make sure they don’t take our oil and stuff.” In addition to the relief supplies, the DC-3’s cargo compartment also contained cartons of oil and hydraulic fluid, a spare tire, jacks, spark plugs, and other items Geedi used to maintain the old airplane.

“Will do,” Gold said.

Parson waited underneath the wing to see what Geedi might find. He unzipped a chest pocket on his flight suit, took out his aviator sunglasses, and put them on. While Geedi examined the engine, Parson folded his arms and admired the DC-3’s lines.

The old girl had style, no doubt about that. The sweep of the wings’ leading edges, the rounded nose, the twist of the three-bladed props hinted of 1930s art deco. Built originally as a twin-engine airliner, by modern standards she was small for a passenger plane: She’d have carried twenty-one people. The plush seats had been removed long ago to make way for cargo. A decal on one of the blades read HAMILTON STANDARD PROPELLERS. Reliable enough to survive decades of constant flying, she was a tough plane designed to handle tough conditions and do it with class.

Geedi removed a panel and handed it down to Parson. Parson placed the sheet of aluminum on the tarmac beside the ladder. The flight mechanic dug into one of his leg pockets and produced a mini-flashlight. He shone the light into the engine and looked around.

“See anything?” Parson asked.

“Not really. No obvious damage, anyway.”

“Hmm,” Parson said. Though he’d experienced most of the problems that caused turboprop and turbojet engines to fail, he had logged

little flight time on radial piston engines. Didn't know where to start speculating about the source of the problem. That's why he flew with a flight mechanic.

"Sir," Geedi said, "you don't have to stay out here. This might take a while. You can go inside if you want."

"Thanks, Geedi," Parson said. "Just let me know if you need anything."

"Yes, sir."

Inside, Parson found more activity than he'd expected. About forty people milled about in a room the size of a basketball court. No ticket counters or baggage carousels, just wooden benches along the walls. At an unpainted rough-hewn table, a woman stirred a pot that rested on a grate above a can of burning Sterno. Steam rose from the pot. The smell of something edible filled the air; Parson could not identify the food. Four men stood around Gold as she addressed them in Arabic while Chartier looked on.

"*Hassalan*," one of the men responded. Parson didn't know the words, but the tone sounded like "okay," "you got it," or "will do." The men wore UN ID tags on chains around their necks. They walked outside, and through a broken window Parson saw them begin to unload the bags of rice and boxes of rations from the airplane. The armed guards, still out on the ramp, seemed more alert during the unloading. They eyed the parking areas, the fences, and the road to the airport. One of them hooked his right thumb over the safety lever of his AK, ready to click it into firing mode.

"How come those guys are so spring-loaded?" Parson asked. "Is my flight mechanic safe out there?"

"He's as safe as we are in here," Gold said. "We don't know of any specific threats."

"But you have general threats," Chartier speculated.

"We do. All the older people remember when warlords hijacked aid shipments to use hunger as a weapon. They wonder if al-Shabaab will

take a page from that playbook. Everybody's pretty tense, especially when food comes in."

The woman at the cook pot called out in Arabic, and Gold answered. Then she turned back to Parson and Chartier.

"Lunch is ready for the staff," Gold said. "Do you want to eat something?"

A question Parson hadn't anticipated. He gave Gold a puzzled look.

"Not if food for these folks is an issue. I can wait till I get back to Djibouti."

"Don't worry about it," Gold said. "You just brought us tons of food. I think we can feed you lunch."

Several Somalis, presumably on the UN payroll, lined up at the food table. The cook began spooning something into paper bowls. The Somalis ate with relish, though not as if they were starving. Parson and Chartier followed Gold into the line, and when Parson's turn came, he received a bowl of rice cooked in goat's milk. He dipped a plastic spoon into the bowl and began eating.

"Not bad," he said, though he thought the rice could use some pepper.

"*Bon appétit*," Chartier said.

"Can I take a bowl to Geedi?" Parson asked Gold.

"Of course."

"You won't have to," Chartier said. "He's coming inside."

Parson looked out the window and saw the flight mechanic heading for the terminal, wiping his hands with a red rag. When Geedi came in, Parson said, "Take a break and get some lunch. What did you find?"

"Thank you, sir," Geedi said. "I didn't find anything. I think it was just water in the fuel. I drained several cups from the main tank sump on that side. Drained some out of the carb bowl, too."

Parson frowned. "Didn't you check the sumps before we took off?" he asked.

“I did, and I found a little water then. I think more of it settled out of the fuel later on.”

Entirely possible, Parson knew. They’d filled up at Djibouti, and heaven only knew the quality of fuel storage there. Water could have contaminated the airport’s storage tanks. It seemed the worst of the watery fuel had gone into the DC-3’s right main tank, and not all the water droplets had settled around the sump drain when Geedi first checked it. The water, heavier than gasoline, eventually pooled at the bottom of the tank. In flight, when Parson switched from the aux tank to the mains, the right engine apparently ingested a big slug of water. When flying in this environment, Parson realized, you couldn’t take anything for granted. Hell, you couldn’t even count on your fuel to burn.

“So, do you think we’re good to go?” Parson asked.

“I’d like to run the engine,” Geedi said. “If it fires up and stays running, I don’t know what else to check.”

“You the man.”

Geedi dug into a pocket and found a wet wipe in a paper pouch. He tore open the pouch, unfolded the wipe, and washed his hands as best he could. The flight mechanic stood in line for a bowl of the rice and milk, and he chatted pleasantly in Somali with other people in the line. After he received his bowl, he stood next to Parson and dipped a plastic spoon into the food.

As Geedi ate, Parson asked, “Is this a typical meal around here?”

“It is if they’re lucky enough to have rice and milk at the same time,” Geedi said.

Gold moved to the other side of the room and made a call on her satellite phone. Checking with the UN office in New York, Parson assumed. She looked like a woman in her element—chatting easily with local hires one moment, and in the next moment parlaying with high officials across oceans. Whatever she did, she made it look natural: from holding her own in a firefight—which Parson had seen more than once—to negotiating the bureaucracy of the UN.

The call lasted about ten minutes. When that call ended, Gold punched in another number and made another call, then another. Parson couldn't hear the conversations, but he guessed something was up. Eventually, she turned off the phone and returned to Parson and his crew.

"Can I ask a favor?" Gold said. "Could I hitch a ride back to Djibouti with you guys?"

"Of course," Parson said. "You know you can fly with me any day. What's happening?"

"We're getting a special guest. Carolyn Stewart is coming to shoot a documentary. They want us to meet her in Djibouti and escort her around Somalia."

Parson knew the name. An A-list actress, Carolyn Stewart had appeared in several top-grossing films over the past few years. In *Arlington*, she'd played the wife of a soldier killed in Iraq. In *With Extreme Prejudice*, she'd played an Air Force drone sensor operator torn by conflicting emotions about her job. Reasonably hot, by Parson's reckoning. Mid-thirties, long red hair, nice figure.

Though Parson couldn't remember the details, he knew Stewart also had a second career as a documentary filmmaker. Maybe a bit like Kevin Bacon's side project as a musician, or Angelina Jolie's deal as a UN special envoy. Stewart was a bit too liberal for Parson's taste, though. She had a thing about animal rights and vegetarianism. But if she wanted to draw attention to the plight of Somalis, Parson couldn't fault her for that. To him, it made a lot more sense to worry about human beings than calves destined for veal.

"*Très bien*," Chartier said. "My girlfriend will be jealous."

"You mean your girlfriends, plural?" Parson said.

"*Oui*."

Gold shook her head and smiled. "Do you think you guys can concentrate on flying, with her in the airplane?"

"Nope," Parson said.

"Absolutely not," Chartier said.

“No way,” Geedi added.

“All right,” Gold said. “Try to inspire a little more confidence when she gets on board.”

All in all, Parson thought, an interesting twist for this mission. He hadn’t met many celebrities, and it could be fun to fly one around for a few days. He’d just avoid talking politics—usually a good policy with anybody, let alone a VIP.

But the mood turned serious when Gold told her Somali coworkers about Stewart’s visit. She spoke in English and Arabic, and then the Somalis talked to one another in their own language. They didn’t seem happy about meeting an American movie star. Parson kept hearing one word over and over: *khatar*.

“What’s *khatar*?” Parson asked.

“Dangerous,” Geedi said.