

CHAPTER TWO



22:05 Southwest of Lake Bisina, Uganda

Special Operator Blake Martin flipped up his night vision goggles and let out an exasperated breath. “Looks like the intel’s correct.”

His partner, Jacob Armstrong, cursed and spat on the ground. “What did you see?”

“They have a scout about one hundred and fifty yards out.”

“Are they here to cause trouble?”

“Not sure.” Blake glanced out over the moonlit terrain. From this vantage point, he could see for miles. “But we need to move these people.”

After days of unrelenting rain, the rivers in central Uganda had widened and pushed life-threatening levels of water into Lake Bisina. Now stranded groups of villagers who’d grabbed all the belongings they could carry were like sitting ducks.

“Roger that,” Jacob answered before he took off down the hill.

A day ago, they’d received intel about a group of rebels

causing havoc among the locals. With villagers displaced from flooding and crops ruined, it was the perfect storm for the bad guys to make their move.

Blake flipped down the goggles and watched the scout, dressed to impersonate a wandering farmer, climb into a truck full of heavily armed men. After a few minutes, three of the men leaped off the back of the tailgate, threw up a few hand signals, then fanned out in different directions. Flames of irritation shot through Blake's veins. There was nothing agricultural about this group—these men were up to something.

The vehicle turned the corner and headed their way. His gut told him these were the men they were looking for. Men who had kidnapped adults near this area to test out a new deadly drug and trafficked kids to fund the project.

Jacob and he, under the banner of a humanitarian mission, were here to collect intel, not start a war. However, if this group of men wanted to cause trouble, they'd need to engage.

He had about three minutes to make a decision.

Blake pushed away from the hill and took off toward the river where Jacob organized the people and loaded them and their belongings onto the backs of battered trucks and mopeds. Blake's plan? Move the families east, over the grassy embankment, and out of sight. After that, he and Jacob would circle back, use the night to their advantage, and shadow the unwelcomed visitors to get a read on their intentions.

"Don't let these kids out of your sight." Blake handed two younger kids to Jacob. There's no way he'd let this group of innocent people lose any children on his watch. "I'll catch up with you after I secure the perimeter."

"Copy that." Jacob hollered his response over the rumbling engines.

The trucks sped off, and before Blake fell too far back, three

lanky teens ran toward him shouting. From what he could decipher from their panicked pleas, a family of three was left fishing down by the inlet.

Blake's neck muscles twisted into a knot like an angry snake. Night fishing. It made sense. Now swelled from the rains, the lake carried an abundance of fish for the locals to feed their families. He lifted his eyes to the ebony sky, and several heavy droplets of water pelted his face. The torrential rains were both a blessing and a curse for those who relied on the elements to survive.

Blake ordered the teens to catch up to the trucks before he slid down the rain-soaked hill. Mud splattered across his face and arms, and he whispered a prayer of gratitude for the earth's natural camouflage. After he landed on the saturated ground, Blake closed his eyes and allowed his hearing to take over.

Rushing water.

Rain.

The flapping of a bird's wings.

But no voices.

Flipping down his night specs, Blake crept closer to the water. Scanning the embankment, he growled softly. Too late. He took a few more steps, and the sludge suctioned onto the heels of his boots. Keeping his gaze level, he checked for a pulse on the two bodies lying face down in the mud. Nothing.

A stormy wind moved across the water, and along with it, a child's whimper. He searched the tall grass and sent up a silent petition, asking for a break in the rain. Twenty feet ahead of him, a little girl, with a shaved head and a raised jagged scar over her right cheek, stood sobbing in the stream. The child's eyes opened wide when she caught sight of him. *It's okay, little one.* Blake surveyed the edge of the river before bringing his finger up to his lips to quiet the frightened child.

He took another step forward and strained to listen for any other sounds beyond the pouring rain. Between the trees, a shadow moved. Steadying his weapon, he aimed. The girl stopped crying and turned toward the shadow. He curled his finger around the trigger. *Steady*. As the pad of his finger pressed, the shadow lunged and yanked the child out of the water. Blake adjusted but could not execute a clean shot. The girl's shriek sliced through the tepid air, and an icy shiver traveled down Blake's spine. *There are more of them*.

Something shifted in the trees behind him. Pivoting, Blake peered through the verdant haze filling his goggles and searched for movement. A branch creaked. Holding his breath, he zeroed in on the direction of the sound. Inhaling slowly, Blake shifted to the right. As he exhaled, an arm shot out from behind a tree and thrust a needle into his bicep. His muscle flexed, forcing burning liquid through his veins like an out-of-control wildfire.

His vision blurred. Two forms moved out of the shadows and raised their weapons. *What did they inject me with?* Blake struggled to keep his firearm level as he battled the disorienting effect from the jab. Releasing a frustrated growl, he threw out a hand toward a gnarly tree trunk and fought to hold himself upright.

One of the men paced in front of him and fired off a litany of questions in Swahili. "What are you doing here? Are there others with you? How long has the American military been here?"

They didn't come across as hardened killers. Only amateur soldiers who'd been given vague orders.

When he didn't answer, the man leaned into his face and yelled again. Blake's heart pumped faster as he blinked past the haze and tried to unravel the distorted words. From what he could gather, this wasn't going the way they'd planned. He

echoed their sentiment. Whatever they'd shot into him made his mind feel like it bobbed in black tar.

I'm running out of time. Blake's weapon slipped through his hand while searing heat drove through his body like a bullet train. His eyelids drooped. *Keep it together, Martin.* His partner would come for him, but by the time he did, it might be too late.

As he grasped for the knife fastened to his thigh, the man jammed a second injection into his neck. Clutching at the tree bark, Blake begged his body to combat the red-hot lava binding to his muscles and clouding his mind. Losing the battle, his hand scraped down the tree, and in a split second, his vision went from blurry to black.