

Nairobi, July 14, 2003

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Was bad?" Michael asked.

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

"I am sorry...."

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

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

Easing back in my seat, I ignored my knapsack with the Sig Sauer P229 and the extra .40 caliber ammo. The old windshield wipers raced against the heavy downpour, squeaking and scratching. The men encircled us. Ahead, the brightly lit entrance to the Nairobi Serena Hotel beckoned, but the steel gate topped with layers of barbed concertina wire remained closed.

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

"Bombs?" I asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Identification,” he commanded. “You stay at the hotel?”

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

The dog nudged me. Startled, I smiled at the police canine staring at me. Its dark eyes bore into me as the smell of wet fur permeated the interior. The guilt pangs of leaving Sheba, my Siberian Husky, in Washington, DC, with my friend Jim Schaeffer surfaced. Maybe this animal understood. My underarms grew damp—nerves and the humid heat. Then the Shepard jumped outside and stood by his master, looking at me.

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

“Yes, I am.” I pocketed the passport.

“The photograph looks different.”

I grinned, understanding the political game of confronting foreigners.

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

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

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

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

The grinding brakes stopped the van by the hotel doors as a bellman greeted us and loaded our luggage onto a cart. Michael's nephew didn't hesitate. He turned the vehicle around, accelerating toward the gate, fleeing the stare of the soldiers.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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