

Ignoble

Matt Elham

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For Selena.

Without you, this would never have happened.

Chapter One

Davie Eason leaned nonchalantly against a wall at the corner of Seventh Avenue and Thirtieth Street in central Manhattan. His eyes pivoted regularly from his left to right, from uptown to downtown. He was alert, but knew that things would stay quiet for another hour or two.

He'd been in position for a good few hours now, moving every five minutes or so and taking an occasional break from the chill evening wind in the Staples store a block farther down seventh. He didn't need to be available every second of every hour, but he liked to minimize his time off the street. Every interaction he missed was an opportunity wasted.

He was happy with his progress in the organization but was ambitious for more. He'd spent a tough few months at the lowest level of the organization, doing the really shitty job that was menial and tedious, not to mention risky. He'd been the type of guy he was now waiting for. But he'd worked hard, kept his nose clean and his abilities had been quickly recognized, resulting in a promotion to the role he now held.

In this new role, he was close to making the minimum wage. Breaking minimum would be a landmark to be celebrated. But that wasn't the point. The point was to be good, to get noticed and to get

to the next level in the organization. Then repeat, repeat, repeat until you were in a position where you could make really good money. You'd quickly forget the months spent earning a pittance when the big bucks started to flow. Few people ever reached those heady ranks and there were hundreds applying each day to get their place on the greasy pole, so Davie knew it was a numbers game. It's not like his wage was being taxed anyway, which he knew meant that his take-home pay was above those poor souls greeting customers at Wal-Mart.

So far that shift he'd collected a little over three hundred dollars. He did some quick mental arithmetic and figured that he'd get about twenty-three dollars of that, a little over seven percent. Not that he was working for a percentage. He was paid six bucks for each hour he was on duty so the nearly four hours he'd worked had earned him twenty-three bucks. He knew that the collections would increase as the night went on, which would make his percentage drop. He'd probably end up making around two or three percent. That was what he was averaging over the eight weeks or so he'd been doing this particular job.

He liked doing mental arithmetic like this as he was interested in the economics of the business. Not that he'd advertise this to anyone, but the mental gymnastics helped keep his mind active during the long hours of boredom. Leaning against a wall for hours on end wasn't a mentally taxing job. He'd figured he'd made about one percent doing his previous job, but there were two or three of them for every one of him. So the street team was taking perhaps five percent of the collections as wages.

His current job carried more responsibility than his previous one. He'd worn clean through the soles of a pair of sneakers covering the miles in that previous role. It had required little skill beyond decent physical fitness. Not having holes in your pockets was another key

requirement, Davie thought with a smile. A percentage of recruits inevitably went bad, but the system was structured so that no one person could damage the organization financially. Davie was interested in the finances of the business as well as the economics.

That entry level position was certainly risky. You never had anything particularly incriminating on you, but you operated as a bridge to the talent in the business. And talent was always volatile. Davie had heard some stories about the talent that made his toes curl. There had been one guy Davie had heard about who'd been very ambitious. He thought that he could win respect by pissing on a runner. Literally urinating on him. Some of the talent's support team had held the runner down while the talent pissed on him. Davie wasn't certain that the episode had ever really happened, but the story had quickly become an urban legend around the organization. Although that perpetrator had earned some short-term respect from doing this, Davie had heard that he was quietly moved out of the organization the next month. That kind of story created publicity, and publicity was to be avoided. Davie had quickly figured this out.

The real risk of being a street runner was simply that you were new. Untrusted. Unproven. It was very easy for the talent to blame things on the runner. It was a reasonable conclusion. Talent was established, runners weren't. Talent had a customer base, an established book of business, and so they had a real value to the organization. Runners brought nothing and could be replaced overnight. The couple of stories Davie had heard all ended with the runner getting the blame. Davie had spent some time thinking through the scenarios he'd heard and could see how any blame could easily have fallen on the talent. But the runners always took the fall. Davie was glad those days were over for him. He'd worked hard, been personable and had got through his apprenticeship

without incident. Being a little older than the typical recruit probably hadn't hurt either, as he brought a maturity and discipline to the role that younger people lacked.

The real challenge of his current position was that it required a level of record keeping. He was required to keep a record of who'd brought each dollar. Memories couldn't be trusted, he'd been told time and time again. Those making the drop-off needed to know that the transaction had been accurately recorded. Davie had thought about this a lot during his time as a street runner and it made good sense. It was a good control, to spread the knowledge of the cash flow between multiple people. Davie was interested in the psychology of the business, as well as the finances.

In his current job, there was more cash in his hands at the end of a shift than any of the street runners would ever see. But he'd earned the trust. Still, if someone in his position went rogue, the organization wouldn't go broke overnight. The best night he'd ever had resulted in him passing a little over seven thousand dollars up the chain. He'd made point seven percent that night. He was sure he'd see ten grand one day, and if he ever did and decided to run off with the cash he wouldn't exactly be retiring to Rio. Plus it had been made clear to him during his training that they'd send their Recovery Team after him if he skipped. They regularly reminded him that they knew from the runners how much money had been passed up the chain so would know how much to tell the Recovery Team to collect. Plus they'd add an "Inconvenience Fee", Davie had been told. Davie had quickly figured out that he didn't want to spend time with the Recovery Team.

At the end of each shift he'd take the money he'd collected to an appointed location. This location changed regularly. He'd receive a text detailing the rendezvous point at the end of each shift. Davie had thought a lot about that text too. The text always came exactly

the minute his shift ended. Exactly on the minute. Tonight it would arrive at two A.M. exactly. Not one minute to. Not one minute past. Exactly at two A.M.

Where the runners would find Davie on the street changed every day too. He received a text message notifying him where to go that day precisely an hour before his shift each day. Precisely on the hour. More often than not, Manhattan. Regularly the Bronx. Once he been sent to Hoboken, which had been a challenge to get to in the hour Davie was given to travel.

Davie had thought a lot about the notifications and had decided it was implausible that a human would be so precise each and every day. Which suggested that there was a computer spitting out the texts. This in turn suggested a level of sophistication he hadn't expected to see for an organization of this kind. But then again, it was a big enterprise, with a lot of associates to coordinate. Davie could understand how it would be simpler, and in the long run cheaper, to have a computer doing this kind of chore rather than having someone on the payroll to do it. Besides, people make mistakes, computers didn't. Davie knew the organization was intolerant of mistakes. Davie was interested in the logistics of the business, as well as the psychology.

The drop-off location was usually some dive bar with a dark and smelly back room that was used for the count. Occasionally a quiet corner of a Laundromat. Once it was in the back of a Seven-Eleven. But the process was always the same. He'd be positively identified by some hulking slab of meat on the door. He'd take his records and cash into a back room, where his contact would be sitting. Usually Jorge, occasionally Luis. Once a lean, pasty fellow who'd introduced himself as Nigel.

He'd count the cash onto the table and total up the receipts he'd documented. His counterpart would then count the cash again and

when they agreed totals, both would initial the document. Initials, rather than signatures, Davie had been taught.

Davie would then be handed his wages and he'd leave. They'd come from the pocket of the person taking the cash, never from the cash he'd collected. Another detail he'd noted with interest. Often there were no words said, as the whole process could easily be carried out in silence.

Davie's cash always balanced. He'd keep a running total in his head throughout the shift and would do a quick pre-count on his way to the rendezvous. They'd warned him not to do this, not to draw the cash out in a public place before reaching the rendezvous point, but he'd figured he'd rather be one hundred percent accurate in front of his superiors even if it meant breaking a rule. Davie had never found it hard to find a restroom or a discrete corner where he could conduct a quick count to verify the total he carried in his head.

Once, early in the process when he was still learning the ropes, he'd been two dollars short. It was an easy decision to make the shortfall up from his own funds. A very easy decision as he didn't want to give his superiors any reason to distrust him or to retard his progress through the organization. It was only two bucks, but he was sure that two bucks would matter to his superiors.

He'd thought about that day for some time, wondering how his total had got out of synch with his records. He was very careful to segregate his own funds from the funds he was collecting for the organization. But he's only been off once, which over the forty-nine shifts he'd logged would certainly benchmark well against his colleagues. His bosses believed he'd been accurate forty-nine times out of forty-nine. Davie smiled as he realized that tonight would mark a half century of perfect counts. Maybe Jorge would congratulate him for this. Pat him on the back. Give him a bonus. Davie smiled. Maybe not...

And so the process continued, five or six days a week. The only variation came on a Wednesday. Jorge was the closest thing Davie had to a boss, and Davie always did his count with Jorge on a Wednesday. After the count, but before receiving his wages, Jorge and Davie would speak for a few minutes. Davie likened it to a continual assessment process you might see in large corporations.

Davie would report on anything he'd noticed on the streets. Specifically Jorge was interested in any runners that Davie was suspicious or wary about. Not that snitching was part of the culture, but Jorge made it clear that part of Davie's role was to keep an eye on those bringing cash to him.

Jorge made it clear that Davie wasn't expected to investigate any concerns he raised, Jorge and others would take care of that. Davie was still new enough to the role that he hadn't felt the need to set the dogs on any of his street colleagues, although he sensed that he'd be expected to offer some criticism of a runner at some point, as he matured into his role. It would be expected.

Jorge would occasionally compliment Davie on some aspect of his performance. Never his accuracy, as one hundred percent accuracy was an expectation of the job. Congratulating someone for doing their job to the minimum acceptable standard wasn't part of the culture. Instead, Jorge would often compliment Davie on his appearance or his punctuality. A token compliment to make Davie feel that the organization was pleased with him.

Jorge would usually warn him not to count his cash in public. Occasionally Jorge would tell a story about a runner who'd gone bad. Inevitably the story ended poorly for the runner. Davie would nod and smile through the story, thanking Jorge for sharing it with him, while recognizing that the story was being told for a purpose, as a warning.

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Davie knew that the Wednesday chats were his opportunity to develop a rapport with the higher-ups in the organization. What Jorge said didn't really matter, the fact he was taking his time to say it was what mattered. Davie tried hard to project deference to his superior during these chats, as was required for someone in his still lowly position within the organization. But he tried to blend this with a level of self-assuredness that built confidence. Jorge would be the person to recommend Davie for promotion, as and when the time was right. Davie had been in his current position for only a couple of months, so it was too soon to hope for or to ask for a promotion. But he knew it would come.

Keep your nose clean, Davie boy, he told himself. Balance your counts. Stay out of trouble. The promotion will come...

Chapter Two

Their small aircraft flew across an unbroken sea of mottled green. The canopy of the West African rainforest acted as a shield, through which not even the strongest sunlight or heaviest rains could penetrate. The brilliant green canopy enclosed an ecosystem of such complexity and foreignness that people experiencing it for the first time were often speechless.

Their plane was a sleek corporate jet, a Cessna Citation belonging to GoldRock Mining. It contained space for just eight passengers and was able to fly from New York to Los Angeles without refueling. Its passengers were swaddled in a surprisingly quiet cabin given the power of the twin jet engines located on the sides of the fuselage, just feet from their ears.

The cramped but comfortable cabin belied the widespread perception that corporate jets offered unlimited space and luxury. Certainly, everyone got a window seat, and every passenger could converse with every other passenger without needing to shout. But once passengers were seated, the surprising lack of headroom meant that they would be inclined to remain seated until disembarkation.

The plane was thirty minutes northwest of Ghana's only international airport, and was only ten minutes away from the small

jungle airstrip that was their destination. The three passengers could not have had more differing attitudes to the flight.

Carlos Vasquez, the host for the flight, had lost count of the number of times he'd made this journey. While to others it might have seemed inconvenient to have to fly between meetings, he knew that forty minutes of calm, coddled comfort in the aircraft was infinitely preferable to the rough, dusty and dangerous five hour drive which provided the only alternative. He was one of GoldRock's most senior executives, representing them throughout the region, and as the host he'd taken the front starboard seat of the aircraft. He was dressed all in black and stared resolutely ahead, not feeling any great desire to engage his guests in meaningless small talk.

In contrast, Amber Marshall was making the trip for the first time. Her eyes were intently fixed on the view from her window, as she admired the magnificence of the scenery passing beneath her. The exoticism of the rainforest presented a stark contrast to the industrial landscape she was familiar with from the window of the commuter shuttle from La Guardia to Washington.

She held a small camera discreetly in her hand, but was scared to use it, fearing she'd surrender some credibility by acting like a tourist. She tended to worry that her youthfulness and good looks might interfere with people's perception of her professionalism, and she worked hard to avoid fueling that fear. She'd trust her excellent memory to capture the view. She was a professional, first and foremost, and this was a business trip. On her lap was an old-fashioned notepad and pen, as she knew that preparedness was everything.

Lucas Steadman was also taking this trip for the first time, but as Amber's boss, he was focused on projecting a strong and authoritative image. He tried to resist taking an occasional glance

out of the window but failed, being unable to ignore the lure of the magnificent tropical landscape. He'd noticed Amber holding a camera so had wrongly assumed he could get copies of her photos. Lucas sat across the aisle from Carlos, with Amber seated directly behind him.

Beneath the plane, the uniformity of the canopy was nearly complete. By concentrating hard, Amber could occasionally discern clearings containing small villages. It was a difficult task as these settlements were also predominantly green, from the thatching of the huts to the grass which covered any clearings. An occasional road also could be seen, usually a brown and muddy track, rarely a gray and tarmaced main road.

Then, shockingly, the plane crossed the perimeter of their destination – the GoldRock mine. The landscape instantly changed from a lush, tropical green to a dirty, industrial brown, as the trees and undergrowth had been cleared to facilitate the operation of the mine. The brown earth was punctuated by occasional mounds of gray-brown rock. A runway could also be seen, still brown in color, but with a definition that suggested regular maintenance.

As the plane moved further into the site away from the perimeter, Amber's eye discerned a subtle change in elevation. Her first thought was that the plane was rising, which she thought was odd as they were obviously so close to their destination – she could see the runway. She quickly realized that what she'd sensed wasn't the plane rising. Instead, it was the earth falling away from their plane.

As Amber widened her focus, she could make out a monumental blemish on the face of the earth. A pristine wilderness had been sacrificed in pursuit of the precious metals lurking beneath. The economics of terraforming and man's hunger for exotic minerals

had driven the evolution of technologies which redefined what mankind could do to its planet.

Amber's eyes widened as the mine descended deeper and deeper. She recognized it as a man-made phenomenon from the clearly defined ridge she saw spiraling around the edge of the depression. It was not something that could have formed naturally, and she realized that it was designed to provide vehicular access to the depths. Peering closely, she could make out very small but brightly colored vehicles crawling along the narrow ridge. The vehicles seemed impossibly small from the viewpoint of the Cessna, but Amber knew she was actually looking at some of the largest industrial vehicles ever built. The scale of the mine simply dwarfed the vehicles.

Inside the plane, Lucas's professional facade had cracked a little. He'd found the aerial view so compelling that he couldn't help but gawp at the sights unfolding below him. Sensing that they'd crossed the mine's perimeter, Carlos had also broken his forward gaze to glance at his guests. Seeing they were fully engaged by the view from their windows, he resumed his impassive forward vigil with a barely perceptible shake of his head.

Lucas broke the uncomfortable silence that had held since they'd left the airport in Accra, realizing that they now had something meaningful to talk about.

'You're forty percent complete?' Lucas strived to suppress the incredulity in his voice, but failed. Picturing the mine at two and a half times its current size was a difficult task.

'Correct,' Carlos responded curtly, turning in his seat to address Lucas directly. 'We're already the largest mine in western Africa by excavated volume. When we reach eighty percent completion, we will be the biggest in the world.'

Carlos was hard to age, but people usually guessed that he was around forty. He clearly came from Hispanic stock, with a bronzed and weathered face which was bordered by closely cropped dark hair. An athletic physique clearly lurked beneath his black clothing, but it was his eyes that commanded the greatest attention. Gray and steely, they seemed to be older than the surrounding face. People debated whether this aging came from spending too much time outside, squinting to minimize the harsh effects of the sun. Rarely did those speculating know Carlos well enough to ask.

He spoke English fluently, with a trace of a Spanish accent. The accent was not so strong that a listener became distracted from the words being spoken, but it brought an exoticism to his speech that certainly was unusual for a mine executive living in western Africa.

Amber broke her study of the view and looked at Carlos, blinking as her eyes re-accommodated to the relative gloominess of the cabin.

‘Wow. It’s absolutely huge,’ she said. ‘When do you expect to reach eighty percent completion?’

Carlos turned his head to look at Amber. ‘Another four or five years of blasting. We speed up if gold prices rise. We slow down if they fall.’

He held his gaze on Amber, a gaze which she returned evenly. She realized that Carlos was examining her, looking through her exterior in an attempt to evaluate her interior. By no means was it a threatening gaze, but she knew that its intensity might unsettle some recipients. She sensed that Carlos’s eyes could really motivate someone if that was his goal.

Amber was no stranger to receiving stares from men and had on occasion also received them from women. She was in her mid-twenties and was taller than average at five feet eight inches, with soft hazel eyes and shoulder length chestnut brown hair. All in all,

she was widely regarded as being a very attractive human being. Not that she'd ever admit this; those who know her well felt that her indifference to her own attractiveness actually compounded her appeal. Amber was far more concerned about making her mark in her profession, so she actively resisted any suggestion of attractiveness. She worried that if she acknowledged the label, others may use it against her as an explanation for her success. She also feared that if she began to believe it, she might use it as an excuse to give less than one hundred percent to whatever task was at hand.

She was wearing jeans and a smart linen shirt. She was not averse to dressing well and looking good, as looking good was the professional thing to do. That day, she had carefully selected attire that was comfortable to wear when travelling, but which still looked elegant. She would never have admitted that her clothing flattered what was clearly an attractive physique.

'While we're over the mine,' said Lucas, 'why don't you give us an overview of the mining process? If you'll forgive the pun.' His interjection broke Carlos's gaze, not that Lucas was aware of it as his eyes had been locked on the scenery below the plane.

With a final glance at Amber, Carlos responded: 'Certainly. I instructed the pilot to do a few circuits of the property before landing.'

Lucas settled back in his seat. He knew what was coming, but his interest was in the emphasis that Carlos would put on each step of the process. He also thought that the briefing would help Amber, who he assumed would not be familiar with this particular mining process.

Lucas was coming to terms with being in his thirties. He was good looking in a bookish kind of way, with a single man's taste in clothes. He was educated and informed enough to identify and

purchase high quality items of clothing, but he lacked the higher-level skills required to combine items into effective ensembles. At five ten, he was a few inches taller than Amber, with dark brown eyes and light brown hair that was slightly unruly from being a little too long.

Lucas approached life with an openness and honesty that was certainly endearing, but which sometimes made onlookers question the depth of intelligence behind his attentive, inquisitive eyes. Not that Lucas recognized it, but this generally caused people to underestimate his abilities, mostly to their detriment.

Carlos continued. 'We're after one thing and one thing only. Gold. The days are gone when you could just walk along a river bed picking up nuggets – the material that was easy to find was harvested a hundred years ago. The gold we're after here is embedded in the heart of the rock in particulate form, measuring less than one hundred microns in diameter. Which is about the thickness of a human hair. Extracting it from the rock is a complex engineering exercise followed by a simple chemical process.'

Amber had put down her camera and was scribbling on her notepad. Contrary to Lucas's assumption, she was already familiar with the mine's processes, having researched them before leaving the States. Despite this, she felt a need to look attentive by scribbling down the bulk of Carlos's commentary. Something deep within her felt that this would earn her some respect. The tourist in her would have to wait for a better opportunity to sightsee.

Carlos continued: 'Every day we blast another section of the rock to rubble. Engineers set the explosives during the day, which we detonate at six o'clock each evening, when we change from the day to night shifts. This is the most efficient time as no men are in the mine during the explosion.'

‘This explosion dislodges a few thousand tons of gold-laden ore, which we scoop into trucks. You should be able to see these trucks from the plane, they are very large.’

Lucas and Amber both looked out of the window reflexively on hearing Carlos’s comment. As they did so, Carlos looked discretely at his watch. His delivery was measured but he made little effort to mask his disinterest. He’d done this many, many times before and while the story was interesting to a visitor, it was a chore for him to deliver. Carlos continued, knowing that a comprehensive description of the process now would save him from answering a hundred tedious questions later.

‘Each of these trucks can move around three hundred tons of ore. They bring the material up and out of the mine along the access roads you’ll be able to see around the edges of the excavation. The trucks dump their loads back on the surface, which we then scoop onto conveyor belts.

‘These belts move the ore to a series of crushers, which break the ore into pebbles of a relatively uniform consistency, roughly the size of your M&Ms. This material is then carried on further conveyors and is added to large mounds of crushed ore. Those are the grayish heaps you’ll probably be able to see around the edge of the facility.

‘We situate these mounds very carefully. They are built on large expanses of plastic sheeting. We sprinkle a calcium cyanide solution over the ore, which leeches through the material. As it passes through, the cyanide bonds with any gold particles it encounters, creating a gold-laden solution, which is captured by the sheeting. As we position the mounds uphill from the processing tanks, a combination of the sheeting and gravity channel this liquid downhill into ponds. We add carbon to this cyanide solution and pass it through a smelter, which allows us to extract the gold. Simple really.’

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Lucas noticed that Amber had covered several pages with notes during Carlos's lengthy monologue, which had been one of the most succinct process explanations Lucas had ever heard. He felt a strong need to compliment Carlos, but before he could do so, Carlos indicated that both the lesson and the tour were over.

Carlos leaned forward and raising his voice shouted towards the cockpit: 'Captain – take us down'.

Chapter Three

Carlos sat at his desk, which visitors always considered to be very small for a man with such weighty responsibilities. Despite its size, his desk was uncluttered. A laptop computer was the largest object on the desk. A flat-screen monitor sat adjacent to the laptop, with the screen angled so that any visitor entering the room or sitting across the desk would be unable to see what was displayed on the screen. A telephone and a small stack of uniform manila folders were the only other clues that the desk was actually in use.

The orderliness of the desk mirrored Carlos's wider office. Given the remoteness of the posting and the challenges of living for months at a time at an isolated mine site, visitors expected to see plentiful photos of home and family. At a minimum, they expected to see certificates proclaiming membership of impressive institutions, or perhaps keepsakes from happier postings. Carlos's office did not conform to other people's expectations. The only decorations to be found were a number of dreary but colorful topographic maps of the mine and its surroundings, maps which were impenetrable to the casual observer but which were essential and perhaps even enthralling to a professional geologist.

Lucas and Amber were settling into the uncomfortable visitor chairs provided across the desk from Carlos. Selecting furniture

that was known to be unpleasant to use for any length of time was a tactic deployed by a certain style of leader. Carlos knew that his choice of guest seating communicated a desire for brevity to anyone choosing to sit in them. Regular visitors learned to be so brief that sitting was not required.

Lucas and Amber had both glanced around Carlos's office when they'd entered, noting the sterility of the room. It was the morning after their arrival at the mine, as they'd decided to refresh themselves with a good night's sleep after their lengthy journey from the United States. They were now wearing formal business attire, and while it was still early in the day, it was already very warm and extremely humid outside. A noisy air-conditioner mounted to the wall was battling valiantly to counteract the tropical heat, with limited success.

Amber was coping well with the heat, but Lucas had already developed beads of sweat on his temples. He steadfastly kept his suit jacket on, superficially to appear professional but mainly because he was fearful that sweat tell-tales may have appeared on his shirt which would undermine the aura of professionalism that was so important to him.

Carlos was still dressed in his customary black, and was clearly unaffected by the heat. He waited patiently as Lucas and Amber shuffled in their seats, in a vain attempt to achieve a level of comfort adequate to get them through the meeting.

On the floor beside Amber was a large brief case, similar to those carried by pilots, in which she had brought the cornucopia of files and notepads needed for the engagement. Amber pulled one of the smaller files from the case and after failing to catch Carlos's eye for approval, she delicately placed it on Carlos's desk, conscious that the Zen-like minimalism of the desk was being undermined by her

actions. Hell, what choice did she have? Carlos may not appear to need files, but she and Lucas did...

Their shuffling and general discomfort was forgotten when Carlos spoke.

'You slept well?' A safe opening gambit from Carlos.

Lucas and Amber exchanged a brief glance. Both knew that Lucas would be taking charge of the conversation from their side of the table.

'Yes we did. Thank you. The accommodation is very good for such a remote location.'

'You are most welcome,' Carlos responded, his deadpan delivery conveying the exact opposite. 'Please indulge me. This is our fifth year of operation, yet your first visit...'

Carlos's sentence rather tailed off, as he invited Lucas to continue the discussion. Lucas smiled, recognizing that he'd been invited onto familiar territory. Lucas appreciated the concession from Carlos, which provided him with his turn to be the authority in the room.

'Yes,' Lucas said, settling slightly deeper into the chair. 'The U.S. Congress recently passed a law requiring that all mines owned by U.S. companies comply with U.S. laws, wherever they are in the world. So we've been hired by your corporate team back in New York to certify that your operations comply with those laws.'

'That's an expensive decision,' said Carlos, probing a little to see Lucas's reaction.

'It certainly is,' Lucas replied, acknowledging the implicit criticism of the law. 'But it was also a political decision, which turned out to be very popular with the electorate. American regulations are probably the toughest in the world, so are the hardest and most expensive to comply with. But we all share the same earth.'

Lucas smiled gently, knowing the lecturing tone of his last pronouncement was likely to be lost on Carlos, as it was with most people who actually made a living from the mining industry.

Carlos did not return the smile. 'Indeed. So you work for your Environmental Protection Agency?'

'Actually no,' Lucas responded quickly, refuting what he'd noticed was a common misapprehension. 'That would be way too much work for the E.P.A. to handle. We work for a private firm accredited by the E.P.A. to conduct these reviews.'

Carlos received this information in silence. His gaze passed to Amber, who returned it confidently. Carlos had fully expected this answer, and in fact the entire conversation so far had gone according to the script Carlos had developed in his head prior to the meeting. His interest was more in how Lucas and Amber performed when explaining their roles. One issue of particular interest to Carlos had been answered, though, with the clear confirmation that Lucas was the senior member of the team. Amber did not appear to have much to offer, beyond taking pages and pages of notes.

Carlos decided to test his hypothesis further, and so turned to Amber as he moved to the next page of his mental script. 'So what will you be looking at?'

Amber opened her mouth to speak, eager to participate and to establish herself as a key member of the team, but Lucas was already answering before she could enunciate the first syllable of her response.

'We'll look at the entire process,' he said. 'From blasting through crushing, to smelting. Health and Safety of your employees, that kind of thing. Focusing particularly on your use and control of chemicals, obviously. Cyanide can be nasty stuff.'

Lucas's eyes yearned for a smile from Carlos, for acceptance, for some connection at a human level.

Carlos recognized the gambit, but steadfastly refused to oblige, stared back at Lucas without emotion. Lucas was starting to feel that this would be a long project if they failed to develop any rapport with the mine's senior executive. Lucas was all too aware that an auditor descending on people with the remit of finding fault will find themselves trudging down a lonely road if the level of human interaction never extends beyond the strictly professional.

'I will tell you now that you will not see the smelting room. The strictest security exists over this very sensitive area,' Carlos eventually replied.

Lucas shot a glance at Amber. 'I understand the security conditions, but it's a critical part of the process...'

'By all means raise it with your superiors. Mine have made it absolutely clear to me. Your visit is not a reason to relax our security.'

Lucas noted the very hint of a smile on Carlos's lips as he delivered this news. His eyes shared the moment with both Lucas and Amber.

Lucas shifted in his seat. The discomfort he felt from the seating arrangements was quickly being overtaken by the discomfort he felt from the conversation.

The moment of silence dragged on but Carlos was in no hurry to fill the void. Lucas blinked first, looking at the file Amber had placed on Carlos's desk.

'Well, we can come back to that later. Let us walk you through our detailed scope of work.'

Lucas was the first to yield, and as a result lost the battle. Carlos's smile made everyone understand that he knew it.

Chapter Four

Amber sat on a deckchair outside her guest accommodation. Western visitors were allocated a simple hut which was gently raised on stilts to spare them the worst rigors of mud and flood during the wet season. The hut contained a bedroom, a small sitting area, a kitchenette and a bathroom, which represented all that a western visitor might need to maintain an acceptable level of comfort while still being two hundred miles from the nearest room-service.

The day had progressed like they all seemed to during this part of the year. The first suggestion of sunrise had sent temperatures racing into the eighties en route to the inevitable nineties. The overcast skies produced an oppressive fog of humidity with the threat of an electrical storm building steadily into the afternoon. By mid afternoon, the air could no longer hold the moisture, which was the trigger for the late afternoon shower which would release the pressure from the system. This rainfall pulled the humidity from the air, leaving the mine bathed in pleasant evening sunshine.

The beautiful evenings had turned out to be Amber's favorite part of the day. With the work day over and the humidity under control, Amber had come to enjoy taking some time out to watch as the setting sun painted the African sky with colors from a palate

she'd never seen at her current home in New Jersey or her more tropical childhood home in Louisiana.

Amber had brought a full range of clothing with her, and had wanted to put on some shorty shorts to allow the evening sun to warm her legs, and perhaps to tan them a little. But she knew she was still on duty, even if the working day was notionally over. Besides, she'd quickly decided that the testosterone-laden atmosphere of the mine was not an environment for her to be showing any skin. Some of the stares she'd received when wearing a simple pants suit had already verged on the intrusive, in her opinion. As a result she'd decided to wear jeans and a simple t-shirt that evening. Tanning would have to wait.

She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes as she took some of the waning rays of the sun onto her upturned face. She sighed contentedly – no matter how grim or stressful work had been you still needed to take time each day to grab a moment of joy from whatever nature had on offer.

Lucas emerged from his hut, which was located next to Amber's, the next building up the incline which led down from the accommodation area to the administration block. He carried two bottles of Club beer, a local brew which he'd developed a preference for over the competing Star brand. Lucas had listened with interest when the reasoning behind this simple branding had been explained to him. A significant proportion of rural beer-drinkers were illiterate, so the products differentiated themselves by using simple, easy to recognize logos.

Lucas's only other acknowledgement that his work day was over was to shed his suit jacket. His shirt sleeves were rolled up, and there were indeed marks on his shirt where the tropical heat had caused his sweat glands to overcompensate. He'd resolved to shower and change clothes, but the beer came first.

Amber heard Lucas approaching and opened her eyes, squinting into the tropical twilight. She took one of the beers as Lucas sat down beside her.

‘Thanks. We’ve been here three days, yet it feels like a month.’ Amber broke the silence, putting into words something they had both been feeling.

Lucas took a long draw from the icy beer, contemplating his response. ‘I know exactly what you mean. This is a tough assignment. At least we’re making good progress. We’re a good team.’

Amber easily absorbed the compliment. She knew they were a good team, but she welcomed Lucas’s recognition of the fact. They’d taken plenty of the time during the planning phase to prepare for the trip. They’d clearly allocated responsibilities and developed a thorough audit plan, which they’d been methodically working through. They’d been communicating effectively thus far during the fieldwork. Amber had quickly realized that Lucas was an easy boss to work for, even if she felt that he was reluctant to stand up for himself when contentious issues arose.

Another moment’s companionable silence passed as they both enjoyed the rejuvenating effect of the cold beer.

Amber again was the one to break the silence. ‘Carlos is an odd one though, don’t you think? Never met anyone quite like him.’

Lucas reflected on her comment before responding. ‘Yeah. He’s very hard to read.’ He paused again, then added: ‘Plus he’s the only guy we’ve come across who hasn’t hit on you.’

Amber’s cheek’s flushed red at this comment. She swigged from the beer bottle in a futile attempt to conceal her face, realizing that this was Lucas at his most indiscrete. First of all, he’d obviously noticed that she’d been receiving attention, more than was perhaps usual and certainly more than was appropriate. In some ways she

felt relieved to hear his comment, as his confirmation meant she'd not been imagining it. But was *he* trying to say something? Or was he just being his usual clumsy self? She decided to push the issue and find out.

'You haven't hit on me.'

Lucas contemplated his response for a moment while he studied Amber's profile. Expecting an answer, she turned her head and met his gaze. Lucas didn't sense that she was challenging him with the look, nor did he feel she was threatening him with her comment. Their eyes held each other for a long moment: neither felt that they were competing in a staring contest that had to be won. Lucas was the first to look away. He knew what he wanted to say, but he also knew that he couldn't say it directly.

'No,' he said evenly. 'I'm your boss. For this job at least. I can't hit on you. Even if I wanted to.'

Lucas looked straight ahead as Amber reflected on his concluding comment. The ambiguity left her perplexed. What was he saying? Did he want to? She felt as if a small battle had been fought without a clear winner emerging. She decided to change the subject.

'I've been wondering. Is Carlos Mexican? I don't feel any great desire to ask him directly. He doesn't welcome professional questions so I am sure he doesn't want me asking personal ones. But, if he is from that part of the world, wouldn't that be an unusual background for an African posting?'

Lucas welcomed the return to safe ground. He'd taken a risk by saying what he'd said, a risk he wouldn't usually have taken, but one he felt comfortable with given the unusual situation they were in. The mine's staff had been welcoming enough, but they'd not been able to develop any real friendships with them. Added to that was the frustration that they were so far away from home that they

couldn't decompress with family and friends in the evenings. Lucas recognized that this left them more reliant on each other for emotional support than was normal in their professional world. Lucas thought he'd probably overstepped a boundary but felt oddly relieved to have done so.

Lucas remembered Amber's question and was easily able to respond, as this topic was one he'd given some thought to.

'He's certainly Hispanic, but I think he's from farther south – Chile perhaps. There are quite a few big open-cast mines down that way. Copper mostly, rather than gold, so the chemistry is very different, but the general principle would be the same.'

Amber nodded. The question had been asked and answered satisfactorily, for now at least.

'Right,' she said. 'That makes sense. So how concerned are we *really* about seeing the smelting process?'

'We have no way of forcing them to let us in, but they should really be co-operating with us. We do have the full force and will of the United States Congress behind us, after all. Not that Carlos seems to be too concerned by that fact.'

Lucas took another deep draw from the beer. He looked at his watch, as an array of disparate thoughts formed into a plan in his head. He recognized a rare chance to make some progress with the project, and at the same time show some backbone to Amber. Two birds with one stone – time to go for it.

'C'mon. Drink up. Let's go take a look at this smelting room. They won't invite us, so let's invite ourselves.'

Amber was shocked. 'We can't do that! We can't just go and break in...'

Amber's response hovered tantalizingly between statement and question, which only served to embolden Lucas. Lucas was firmly in charge, and he found himself enjoying the feeling, a feeling he

hadn't experienced much recently, especially when dealing with Carlos.

'Who said anything about breaking in?' he said. 'Let's just go take a look. They're changing shifts so there'll be no-one around. Hey, it'll be an adventure...'

Lucas jumped to his feet. Amber took a further swill from the bottle but stayed resolutely seated, observing Lucas with a mixture of amusement and anxiety. She was seeing a different side of Lucas, a side that she had hoped would appear, but now it was there she didn't quite know how to handle it.

'I didn't sign up for an adventure,' she said, perhaps a little too indignantly. 'I signed up to protect the environment.'

Lucas was standing beside her chair, and her comment caused a smirk to spread across his face. As Amber observed him for another long moment, she realized that she was teasing him with her resistance. She was surprised to conclude that she was doing it deliberately and was shocked when she acknowledged that she was enjoying the control she was exerting over him.

He was waiting for her to act, but was he waiting her approval for him to go? Or was he waiting for her to get up and go with him? Would he really not go on his own? Was he that dependent on her? Eventually she broke into a wide smile. Only one way to find out.

'OK, OK. Calm down. Let's live a little.'

Chapter Five

The smelting building was a small, unimposing structure which at first glance resembled many of the service huts that were scattered around the mine site. Made from wood, it was raised on stilts around eighteen inches from the ground. It was heavily weathered both directly from the tropical rains and indirectly from the mud kicked up by the frequent tropical deluges.

Those with an educated eye would notice some key differences in the design of this particular building, if they had the opportunity to inspect the structure more closely. It was constructed close to the lowest point within the mine site. Gravity fed the gold-laden cyanide solution downhill to a large storage pond, which was logically located at the very lowest point of the area surrounding the mine itself.

The smelting building was adjacent to those ponds, and was fed by pipes which ran underground from the ponds to the smelting shed. These pipes were routed into the building through one of the supporting stilts, and when people's attention was drawn to this design feature, they suddenly noticed that the stilt containing the pipes was around twenty-five percent bigger than the others.

Passing structural engineers might also happen to note that the wood paneling was actually a veneer, covering a very sturdy, cinder

block structure. In addition, the windows were shuttered, as were most buildings on the mine. However this building's shutters lacked hinges, giving away the important detail that these shutters never opened.

The final giveaway was the multiple air-conditioning units mounted to the sides of the buildings. The smelter needed to reach two thousand degrees Fahrenheit for the gold to liquefy, allowing it to be extracted from the slurry. This heat was controlled within a double walled and insulated furnace, but the ambient heat produced by the process needed to be disbursed to make working in the room bearable.

The mine's designers were smart enough not to build ostentatious fencing around the hut, which would have drawn attention to the building, revealing its true importance. So ostensibly, the building was a storage hut for maintenance supplies for the cyanide ponds. The ponds themselves were surrounded by some serious fencing, comprehensively adorned with harsh warning stickers describing some the worst effects of cyanide poisoning. The signage and the pervasive smell of bitter almonds was generally enough to keep inquisitive miners away from the area.

The hut was three hundred yards downhill from the administration area, a distance Lucas and Amber covered quickly, as the excitement of their illicit adventure created a rush of adrenaline that they would rarely derive from their day jobs.

They slowed as they approached the smelting hut, a building whose function they'd learned from the schematic of the mine site they'd studied at the start of their fieldwork. Lucas covered the last few yards to the building with an exaggerated tip-toe, as he'd been instructed to do by countless movies. He pressed his back tightly against the side of the building, attempting to stay invisible in the

lengthening evening shadows. The most rudimentary of surveillance systems would have detected him in an instant, but that was not on his mind as he led Amber bravely towards their evening's excitement.

Amber pressed herself tight to the building beside Lucas, fighting to suppress a grin that was threatening to form on her face from the unfamiliar thrill of being naughty. She looked expectantly at Lucas, waiting for his next move.

Lucas smiled back and motioned for her to follow him. He peered around the side of the building towards the door but instantly recoiled. Amber, who was right behind Lucas, was bumped by his sharp retreat, causing her to emit a sharp exclamation. Lucas held his breath and indicated for her to back up and resume their tight formation against the building. As they did so, a security guard walked into view around the edge of the building.

Fortunately, it appeared that he had not seen or heard them, as he continued his patrol without faltering. He wore what looked like an Army uniform, complete with a military cap. No rank or insignia were displayed on his sleeves, and the uniform looked very old, which led Lucas to idly speculate that this particular guard might not have been the first employee to be allocated this particular outfit.

The most notable thing about the guard, and the thing that immediately drew Lucas's eye, was the large gun he was carrying, slung over his shoulder. Wiser African veterans might not have been too concerned about the weapon. They would appreciate the myriad of ways in which the gun may not represent a threat. Poor maintenance may cause the firing mechanism to lock. The guard may not have been trained on how to fire it. Or it may be

something as simple as the guard not having been given any bullets. But to Lucas and Amber, it was a big, scary gun.

The guard continued his patrol past the smelting building and turned a corner beyond the cyanide pools, passing out of sight behind the pond's fencing.

Lucas released the breath he'd unconsciously been holding as the tension relaxed from his muscles.

Amber whispered to Lucas: 'Jeez, that was some gun. Do you still think this is a good idea?'

Lucas embarked on a short but turbulent struggle between on the one hand, the imperative of self preservation, and on the other, the desire to look strong and authoritative in Amber's eyes. Amber's was staring at him with a look of excitement and dependency, which made this decision a relatively easy one. After all, they were legitimate guests of a legitimate mine, just out for an evening stroll. No-one was going to shoot them on sight. Come on, get a grip, he thought.

'Calm down,' he said, trying to not allow the nervousness to show in his voice. 'They're not going to shoot us. Come on.'

Lucas looked back around the corner of the building. Seeing no-one, he very cautiously tip-toed around the corner, keeping his back closely pressed to the wall. His eyes pivoted rapidly to his left and right, alternately checking the door he was heading for and the direction in which the guard had departed. Amber silently followed his lead, also remaining as close to the wall as she could.

Lucas moved slowly which he hoped would result in progress that was both quiet and undetected. He continued to remain alert to the guard's return as he inched along the wall towards the door. Checking that Amber was still in close formation behind him, he turned back towards the door and reached for handle.

As his fingers drew inexorably closer to the handle, the door flew violently open, missing his outstretched knuckles by mere inches. Three security guards absolutely flew out of the building, guns and voices raised.

‘On the ground,’ one of the guards shouted. ‘Get down. Now!’

‘Get your hands where we can see them,’ amplified a second guard.

Lucas and Amber both fell instantly to their knees – hands outstretched. Their breathing stopped yet their pulses raced – a recipe for a blackout if there ever was one. Amber felt as if several years’ of emotions had hit her central nervous system at once, which produced an overwhelming jolt that sent her head spinning. Lucas flapped his mouth in a vain attempt to speak but couldn’t corral his brain into coherence.

The three guards were shouting and gesturing wildly, both in English and a local dialect unintelligible to Lucas and Amber. Lucas began to realize that there was a near total lack of organization in their actions, with no-one being obviously in command. He suspected that having pacified the intruders, the three men did not really know what to do next. Their training was good enough that they kept their guns steadfastly pointed at Lucas and Amber, which made their broad intentions clear even if specific details remained hazy.

As the first jolt of adrenaline passed, and with growing comfort that the situation had stabilized, Lucas relaxed enough to study the guards in a little more detail. As was the case with the guard who’d patrolled past earlier, they wore old and ratty uniforms, that didn’t seem to fit particularly well. Their uniforms bore no insignia to denote rank or function.

Lucas realized that he and Amber remained mercifully un-shot, so he decided it was time to open negotiations. Remember, he told

himself, we're authorized to be here and we were doing nothing wrong. If he'd actually touched the door handle, perhaps they'd be guilty of some level of trespass, but he hadn't got that far.

'Whoa – we were just looking around.' Lucas said, attempting to steadily modulate his voice in a display of authority and self-assuredness. He was only marginally aware that the stress had made his voice high-pitched and tremulous.

At that moment, two more people arrived. The guard who'd patrolled past them around the cyanide ponds reappeared at a jog, alerted by the noise. The appearance of a fourth gun pacified Lucas again. Seconds later, Carlos arrived, jogging down the hill from the administration block. Lucas's beleaguered brain noted that Carlos did not appear to be out of breath or perspiring, despite his exertions. Carlos instantly assumed command of the situation.

'OK – stand down guards. Good job.'

The guards quickly exchanged glances and deferring to Carlos, they shouldered their weapons, taking a pace or two away from their still cowering captives. Lucas and Amber felt able to relax, bringing their hands down to their sides even if they remained on their knees.

Carlos continued to instruct the guards: 'They're with me.' Turning to Lucas the command was simple. 'Explain?'

Lucas slowly returned to his feet, dusting crusted mud from his knees, breathing hard in an attempt to bring his pulse and his blood pressure down to non-critical levels. He paused for an instant as he prepared his response.

He could assert that they'd every right to be there as representatives of the United States Congress. He could demand that Carlos explain why his guards had acted so aggressively with two unarmed and legitimate visitors. But Carlos's stern demeanor and Lucas's underlying guilt at what he and Amber had actually

been attempting destroyed any bravery he may have initially summoned.

‘We were, er, we were going to look at the cyanide ponds. These guys just appeared out of this building.’

Carlos was clearly not impressed by this response, and neither did he appear convinced.

‘I’m sure,’ he said. ‘Well you’ll no doubt be surprised to learn that you’re right outside our smelting room, hence the aggressive response. Now you’ve had the opportunity to see some of the security we deploy to protect this building. I wasn’t bluffing.’

Amber had also risen to her feet, and was backing gently towards the building, vainly hoping that Carlos hadn’t noticed her. As Carlos explained the purpose of the building she felt less comfortable moving towards it. She felt a desire to speak, to explain, to provide some mitigation that Lucas seemed unable or unwilling to offer. But she smartly concluded that silence remained her best strategy. Lucas continued to take the lead.

‘Yes. We’ve seen,’ he said. ‘The security is, well, it’s impressive. We’d better head off. We can check out the cyanide ponds another time. Thanks Carlos.’

Lucas nodded appreciatively to the guards, and found himself unconsciously lifting his hand part way to his temple in an amateur salute. Realizing how ridiculous he must look, he quickly lowered his hand. The guards stared back, stony-faced. He and Amber turned on their heels and trudged back up the hill towards the visitors’ camp.

Carlos silently watched them depart. Turning to the guards he held each guard’s eyes in turn and gave them a clear nod of approval.