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Damien Lewis

OPERATION RELENTLESS

**THE HUNT FOR THE RICHEST,
MOST DEADLY CRIMINAL
IN HISTORY**



CHAPTER ONE

HIGHVELD EAST OF JOHANNESBURG,
SOUTH AFRICA, MAY 1995

He came to with a start. His limbs were stiff and cramped with the cold. For a brief moment he tried to work out what had woken him. Then he heard it: the squawk of radio static reverberating around the bare and echoing hold.

With bleary eyes Mike Snow checked his alarm clock: 3.15 a.m. Who in the name of God was calling at this time? Of one thing he felt certain: it couldn't be good news. He was still weak from a bout of malaria, and he wasn't feeling on top of the world.

Mike had slept the night in the aircraft. It was a crazy thing to have done, but he'd just felt too tired to drive home after a long day working on the engines. An icy wind whistled through the open-sided hangar, rattling the tin-sheet roofing. It was one of those bitter nights for which the South African highveld – the high-level inland plateau – is famous.

He swung his legs off the fold-up camp bed. His throat felt parched, his eyes smarted and he was frozen to the bone. He forced himself to focus on the caller: 'Can you send a taxi to Northgate ASAP?' the voice intoned.

The message was from the UNITA representative then living

in South Africa, UNITA – the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola – being a US-backed guerrilla movement fighting the leftist government of Angola, an oil- and diamond-rich nation set on the west coast of Africa.

The message was code for: ‘Depart for Charlie Two right away.’

Charlie Two was a rich alluvial diamond mine set amidst the rugged folds of the Kwango River valley, in north-eastern Angola. The Kwango River’s diamonds were UNITA’s chief source of revenue right then, but for Mike it was a punishing eight-hour flight away.

For a moment he considered replying: ‘Taxi out of order.’ But he didn’t want to ruin his reputation for prompt and reliable service. Instead, he replied: ‘Will be there shortly.’

He sat on the bed, head pounding and throat rasping. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt this bad. *Coffee. He needed coffee.* He sent a second message, this to his co-pilot: ‘I cannot sleep.’ Standard code for: ‘Get yourselves here; we have a flight.’

That done, he wrapped his sleeping bag tighter around himself and shuffled out of the aircraft, reaching for the camping stove.

The hangar lay on the edge of a dirt airstrip that had once served a remote farmstead, both of which were now long abandoned. It was still perfectly usable, if freezing cold and unwelcoming at this time of the year. The early highveld winter had proved harsh: frost had already burned the thick bush grass an anaemic yellow.

From the far corner Mike heard bodies stirring. Kema and Zorro, his trusty Congolese flight mechanics.

A figure made his way through the darkness. ‘Bonjour, boss. Do we have work?’

Mike nodded. The way he was feeling right now, he wouldn't be up for speaking much until Kema had made him several cups of his signature strong black coffee. Snow could be blunt-spoken and abrasive, and he was known to rub people up the wrong way, but his Congolese aircrew were fiercely loyal, as he was to them. Wherever Snow went across strife-torn Africa, Kema and Zorro followed.

Kema squatted, reaching for the percolator. 'I will make café,' he announced, quietly.

Zorro joined him, lighting the Petromax paraffin lantern and setting it on its hook. They settled back to watch the coffee brew, chatting softly in Swahili – their native tongue – while Mike contemplated the journey ahead.

The wind gusted, setting the lantern swinging and sending ghostly shadows dancing through the hangar. Somehow, he found the hiss of the burner and the familiar smell of kerosene fumes comforting. Despite the state that he was in, he felt sure they'd be all right. Joe Reilly, his first officer, had just had three days' solid rest. He was sure to be raring to go.

Mike, a former SAS soldier turned bush pilot, known to all as 'The Bear', was short, squat, shaven-headed and massively barrel-chested, with rugged, weather-beaten features. Everyone presumed it was his physique that had earned him his nickname. It wasn't. As a child he'd been something of a rebel without a cause. When he was twelve, he'd been given a cast-off rabbit-skin coat by his father, who'd worn it to fend off the cold when serving as an electrician in the RAF during World War Two.

Mike had cut the sleeves off, turning it into a body-warmer. He'd taken to wearing it the wrong way around, with the fur on

the outside. One day he'd gone to visit a schoolmate. His friend was out, but when the kid got home his father had told him: 'One of your mates called. He was wearing this coat with the fur on the outside. Made him look like a bear.' After that, he'd been 'The Bear' ever since.

Mike's teachers had told him that he'd 'never amount to anything'. Repeatedly. At age sixteen he'd gone for a stint in the Merchant Navy, then tried for SAS selection, largely to prove them wrong. After a decade or more in elite soldiering he'd struck out for Africa. Having earned his SAS wings in Britain, he'd gone on to win his pilot's wings in South Africa, and flying had become his passion. It had proved a crazy, highwire ride for the past two decades – a long blast of adrenalin-fuelled adventure.

No doubt, tonight's mission promised more of the same.

The snarl of Joe Reilly's flame-red Ducati announced his arrival. He swept into the hangar dressed like an Eskimo, trussed up against the bitter cold. A stocky redhead with close-cropped hair, fellow-Brit Reilly was Mike's long-time co-pilot. A bundle of energy, he made a beeline for the mug proffered by Kema, and with one hand supping coffee and the other stripping off his biking gear he began firing questions at Mike.

Mike told him the little that he knew about the coming flight: their destination, plus the call in the middle of the night signifying that it had to be urgent. Joe had checked on the weather conditions: they'd have a good tailwind at between twelve and seventeen thousand feet, though it would be minus sixteen degrees outside.

'It's going to be one cold flight, that's for sure,' he added.

Mike stared into his coffee mug. 'I'm not looking forward to it, to be honest. But we need the money.'

By now the coffee pot was drained dry, and Mike was feeling marginally better. There were three hours until sunrise, in which time they needed to get airborne and well on their way.

Mike got to his feet. He eyed Joe. Dressed in his thick sheep-skin flying-jacket he looked more like a Second World War fighter pilot than any modern-day sanctions-busting adventurer, which considering the age of the aircraft they were flying was somehow rather apposite.

‘Let’s do it,’ Mike growled, his thick north-east of England tones overlain by a South African accent, the legacy of the years spent living in the country.

He clambered into the aircraft. In his mid-forties, his limbs weren’t quite as nimble as they used to be. Still, he figured he had a good few years flying left in him.

Joe set off on a pushbike to place storm lanterns at the far end of the runway. Mike needed a reference point to aim for in the darkness. Kema and Zorro hooked up the aircraft’s tow bar to Mike’s 4x4, and dragged it out of the hangar.

Joe returned, and stood where Mike could see him, giving the thumbs up: *start engines*. Mike felt the aircraft rocking in the wind as he flipped the magnetos for engine one: it coughed into life almost instantly. Those three days on maintenance had been time well spent.

The roar of the lone engine shook the entire airframe, as all fourteen cylinders began to fire smoothly. Mike had his eyes glued to the oil and fuel gauges. Once those had stabilized he fired-up number two engine. He raised his eyes to Kema and Zorro and gave the signal to remove the chocks from the wheels.

They darted beneath the wings, reappearing moments later

chocks in hand. Struggling against the back-blast from the props, they rushed around to the rear and handed the chocks inside, before squeezing through the cargo door that battered against them in the wash.

Several minutes later and with oil temperatures ‘in the green’ – the safe operational zone – Mike taxied on to the runway. He lined up, nose into the teeth of the wind. The buffeting tugged at the flight controls, making column and rudder pedals judder back and forth, as he fought to keep hold of them.

Joe glanced at Mike from the co-pilot’s seat. ‘The sooner we get airborne and out of this wind, the better.’

‘Thirty inches manifold pressure,’ Mike ordered.

‘Thirty inches,’ Joe confirmed, nudging the throttles forward. ‘All temps and pressures in the green.’

Mike reached out his hand and eased the throttles to take-off power, keeping his eyes glued to the two marker lanterns twinkling in the darkness up ahead. He felt Joe tap his hand, to indicate they were at max power, and he released the brakes. As the aircraft surged forwards, Mike felt that familiar buzz of being poised to take to the skies.

‘Forty knots, temps and pressures all in the green,’ Joe intoned. Then, as they gathered speed: ‘V1! Rotate!’

Moments later Mike felt the wheels lifting free of the dirt strip. It had taken a bare few seconds and six hundred feet for this ageing war-bird to claw her way into the stormy skies.

You didn’t find many DC3s flying commercial operations outside of Africa these days. The military cargo version had proved one of the most iconic aircraft of the Second World War, but it had been quickly superseded by more modern airframes. Yet its rugged construction, ease of maintenance and ability to land just

about anywhere made it a regular in some of the remoter parts of Africa.

Mike loved the aircraft. Everything about it thrilled him, not least its classic lines. This morning, as they pulled away from the airstrip he could tell that she was flying beautifully.

At two hundred feet he levelled off. They would steer a course north through the hills, keeping low to avoid detection by the nearest radar station at Johannesburg's international airport. Joe spread a chart across his lap, showing the altitude and direction they needed to fly between each marked waypoint.

Some legs required Mike to lose altitude; others to climb to avoid a small hill or power cables. It had taken hours of daylight flying to plot this route, ensuring they could execute it in pitch darkness. Still, there was little room for error. One moment's lost concentration, one wrong move, and the DC3 would plough into the highveld.

As they thundered onwards the atmosphere was thick with tension. This was flying at its most challenging and there were no words spoken, except for the turn and altitude instructions from Joe and Mike's terse verifications. Two sets of eyes scanned the night, not that there was a great deal to be seen. Outside the glow of the flight deck it was a sea of inky black.

They pressed northwards towards the Magaliesberg Mountain range. Rising to some 6,000 feet, the Magaliesbergs formed a natural barrier where the highveld gave way to bushveld – lower-lying semi-tropical plains stretching north. The passage through the Magaliesbergs presented Mike his greatest challenge.

The twists and turns and heart-stopping plunges became ever more extreme as he threaded the DC3 along a thickly wooded pass between knife-cut peaks, the snarl of the engines rever-

berating off sheer rock walls. Mike kept one eye glued to the oil temperature and pressure gauges; the slightest change might signal danger, and in such terrain disaster could quickly follow.

He threw the DC3 through the last of the split-second manoeuvres, and they left the peaks of the Magaliesbergs behind them. Mike would have to stick to tree-top height until they reached the vast expanse of the Kalahari Desert, to avoid detection by the radar base at Botswana's capital, Gaborone – the next major airport on their flight path – but at least it was mostly flat terrain.

The first streaks of silver-blue rent the distant horizon. So far it had all been perfectly timed: all any observers on the ground might have seen was a flash of blue exhaust flames as the DC3 roared overhead, but no one would be able to identify the aircraft.

They pressed on for thirty minutes, flying at one hundred feet across flat grasslands dotted with acacia trees, before Mike figured they had to be well out of radar range.

He handed the controls to Joe. 'Configure to climb at fifty feet a minute, target altitude 12,000.'

It was a slow rate of climb, but deliberately so, to conserve fuel. Once they reached 12,000 feet they'd accelerate to the DC3's cruise speed of 200mph, for the air was thinner at altitude and made for faster flying.

Mike ducked through the doorway leading into the hold and was hit by a blast of freezing air. The aircraft's bare metal sides acted as a cold sink, sucking the chill through to the inside. Kema and Zorro were busy strapping down camp beds to lugs set in the floor.

Snow busied himself over the stove, frying bacon and brewing coffee to ward off the chill. They needed it: for every thousand feet of climb, the outside air temperature plummeted by three

degrees centigrade. The men perched on the camp beds and ate and drank in silence, as the aircraft continued to gain altitude.

They were flying over one of the harshest lands in Africa – the 360,000-square-mile Kalahari Desert – where it is terribly tough to survive. Likewise, the African airfreight business was a cutthroat, dog-eat-dog affair. Mike had resorted to stripping out the DC3's heating system, to save weight. Removing it meant that more cargo could be carried. He'd replaced it with a simple but well-tested system: blankets, plus Second World War sheepskin flying jackets.

Mike felt confident they'd slipped through invisible to any radar. Once they crossed the border into Angola there would be few such worries, for that country possessed no radar facilities whatsoever. But the Angolan government did operate a Beechcraft King Air, a fast turboprop aircraft packed full of electronic warfare equipment. It could detect electromagnetic emissions from aero-engines at up to 26,000 feet, and would have little problem finding the DC3.

Mike had one card up his sleeve: the Beechcraft was flown by a pilot who was an old acquaintance of his. Mike had warned him that if he ever interfered with The Bear's operations, he should expect long and lasting retribution. The pilot has assured him that he'd turn a blind eye, for Mike was 'one of the boys'. In due course he'd even telephoned to warn Mike of Angolan Air Force operations in his area.

But Mike still didn't trust the guy entirely: once into Angolan airspace they'd need to keep a close watch on surrounding skies. As they alternately munched on bacon and took a sniff of oxygen – you needed it at such altitude – they chatted away about why they might have been called to Charlie Two at such short notice.

‘Maybe Savimbi is sick and needs to get to hospital,’ Zorro suggested.

‘Nah,’ Mike replied. ‘If he’s that sick they’d have called for the Learjet.’

Jonas Savimbi was the UNITA leader. A man of that importance and means would call for a fast executive jet were his life in any danger, not a relatively slow DC3.

‘Yeah, I guess it’s got to be something more . . . interesting,’ Zorro conceded. ‘But what?’

They threw the question around for a while, but no one seemed to have any answers. They’d just have to see what transpired upon arrival at Charlie Two. They were making excellent progress and Mike figured they’d complete the entire flight within seven hours, a record for the DC3, which was normally laden with cargo.

Beer, cigarettes and whisky were the commonest loads, hence the need to keep below any radar cover. The deal with Savimbi was simple. His miners needed feeding and watering, and Mike had to show his purchase receipts upon delivery. He was allowed to make twenty-five per cent on top, to cover his expenses, but if he was ever caught messing with diamonds he was out.

One hundred miles out from Charlie Two the DC3 began its descent. Mike was back in the pilot’s seat, and he was scanning the Angolan air traffic control frequencies. He’d detected no other aircraft, but there was always the chance that another operator was ‘silent running’, so they’d need to keep their eyes peeled.

Mike waited until he was executing his final turn, before making contact with UNITA’s air traffic control. If the King Air pilot was out flying search patrols, he’d be monitoring the UNITA frequencies. He could warn ground or airborne units to intercept Mike’s

aircraft, but not when he was this close to landing. In active war zones like this, it was such precautions that kept you alive.

As he neared Charlie Two, Mike searched the long expanse of red dirt, checking for any recent deliveries. The real player when it came to jetting in supplies to UNITA was a somewhat mercurial Russian called Viktor Bout. Bout was former Russian military, reputedly former Russian intelligence, and a serious contender in the airfreight business. In contrast to Mike's lone DC3, Bout operated a fleet of gnarly Eastern European cargo planes, including dozens of giant Ilyushin and Antonov aircraft.

He had a reputation – hard won – of being able to fly just about anything anywhere. It was an open secret that he was shipping in weapons and victuals to both sides in Angola's civil war. The UNITA high command's attitude seemed to be 'better the devil you know', plus there was no one else with anything like the capacity, the connections or the clout of Viktor Bout.

Mike did what he did for a love of flying, of Africa and adventure. Bout, by contrast, was a skilful and clever businessman with truly global reach. He'd made millions – some said billions – of dollars from his airfreight operations, and his mantra was never to fly empty. He'd even furnished Savimbi with a training force for his fighters, led by Slava Grinche, a friend from Bout's military days, leading a force of Russian military veterans.

Mike and Bout knew each other, of course. Your paths couldn't fail to cross in this kind of business. Over the years the two men had developed a wary respect for each other, and it made sense for Mike to keep an eye on what the big guy in the airfreight business was up to. But he wasn't naive or deluded enough to ever consider himself a competitor. They were in totally different leagues.

Mike couldn't see anything strikingly new at Charlie Two in terms of deliveries. The touchdown went without a hitch, and he taxied to a standstill on a dirt airstrip fringed with thick bush. He powered down the engines and hurried aft to greet Americo, the UNITA Chef du Bas – the chief of operations at Charlie Two.

'Mark, Mark, how are you?' Americo asked, thrusting out a hand in greeting. He pronounced Snow's first name as 'Mark', Mike seemingly beyond him. 'We are so happy you could make it today.'

Mike shook his hand. 'Always happy to oblige, Americo. And how is everything right now?'

Americo rapidly dispensed with the pleasantries, leading Mike towards his headquarters. 'Come. I explain everything.'

Mike was doubly intrigued. Such directness was unusual with the UNITA crowd. Normally, there was plenty of time for swopping news and stories.

Americo's headquarters hardly warranted the name. It was a tin shack with a dirt floor about the size of a single garage. Inside it was furnished with a basic wooden desk, a gaudy red velour sofa and a fridge. That was about it. Americo waved Mike towards the sofa, and asked if he'd like tea or a soda.

'Tea please. I'm still cold from the flight.'

It was stiflingly hot here in the Kwango River valley, but Mike had yet to warm up. Americo ordered his batman to fetch tea, then settled behind his desk.

'Mark,' he announced, leaning forward, 'this is a very, very, very important job you have to do for the boss.'

Mike nodded his reply. The floor was uneven, and he noticed that the desk tended to wobble back and forth as Americo talked.

'You have to fly one of our Special Forces officers to South.'

‘South’ was coded slang for South Africa. ‘You will fly him to a grid reference that he will give you, and there . . . he will parachute from your plane. Do you understand?’

Mike’s mind was racing, as images of what he was being asked to do here flashed through his head: a lone UNITA parachutist leaping out over South African territory. For what possible purpose, he wondered? Mike was somewhat taken aback, but there was no sense in betraying that to Americo.

‘Yes, sir, I understand,’ Mike replied, evenly.

‘Good. I’m curious. Have you ever done anything like this before?’

‘Many times. When I was younger I flew a lot of skydivers.’

Americo smiled. ‘Ah, Mark, that is very, very, very good.’

During his time in the military Mike had jumped out of a fair few aircraft himself. Indeed, it was that experience and watching the pilots fly the C130 Hercules that had first given him the idea that one day, he’d like to give this flying lark a go. But it wasn’t until he’d reached Africa that he’d finally got the chance.

The tea arrived, and Americo told the batman to go and call the individual who was going to jump out of Mike’s plane. A lean figure entered, dressed in a military-issue jumpsuit under a thick khaki parka. Strange attire for the hot and sticky Kwango River valley, but not for leaping out of a DC3 into the freezing blue. Mike noted the gaunt face and the obligatory ‘thousand-yard stare’ that most battle-hardened UNITA troops seemed to possess.

He offered a hand. ‘I am Lieutenant James Bokk.’

‘I’m Mike. Why don’t you show me what you’re intending.’

By way of answer Bokk pulled out a map and with a thin grass stalk pointed out the Drop Zone (DZ) where he wanted Mike to

deliver him. 'This is the DZ. It will be lit with good lamps, so it should be easy to spot?'

'Let's hope so,' Mike affirmed. 'We can talk more once we're airborne. No point wasting any more time.'

Bokk went to fetch his gear. Mike bid farewell to Americo and made his way back to his aircraft. Joe had refuelled the DC3 from barrels of avgas stacked beside the strip, and was busy having a 'bush shower' – using a bucket with holes punched in the bottom slung from the port side propeller.

'We've got one VIP passenger going back to Jo'burg, for a special meeting,' Mike announced. 'Get done with your ablutions and let's get rolling.'

Kema and Zorro made do with throwing a bucket of water over their heads. The take-off went smoothly, and less than two hours after touching down they were heading back south at altitude.

Mike handed the controls to Joe, and went aft to speak to 'Skydiver,' as he'd nicknamed Bokk in his head. Bokk handed Mike a scrap of paper with the scribbled latitude and longitude coordinates of the DZ.

'Are you good to drop me from 15,000?' he asked.

'Say that again?' Mike queried.

Jumping from 15,000 feet put this into the kind of territory that Mike had trained for, when serving with Special Forces. Sure enough, Bokk planned to execute a HALO – a High Altitude Low Opening jump. In a HALO you jumped at anything up to 30,000 feet, and plummeted to earth in a crazed freefall, triggering your chute at the last possible moment, which gave the enemy minimum time to target you while in the air.

'I can do 15,000, but it's not without its risks,' Mike told Bokk.

'I've got no way of knowing the wind speed at the DZ, and I can't exactly get on the air and ask anyone.'

Bokk pulled out a compact satellite phone from his backpack. 'I'll call the reception party at the DZ, and ask.'

Mike shrugged. 'I'll drop you from 15,000. But it's your funeral.'

They talked over the details of the jump some more, before Mike's curiosity got the better of him. Where had a UNITA Lieutenant learned to HALO, he asked. Bokk explained that a handful of UNITA high-fliers had received training from Brazil's Special Operations Brigade – their nearest equivalent to the SAS – and he was a veteran of dozens of HALO jumps.

Bokk's explanation had answered one of Mike's questions. But the big one – the elephant in the room as it were – remained: what exactly was Bokk's mission? He had hauled a massive rucksack into the DC3's hold, and Mike figured he had to be delivering some specialist kind of cargo. He just couldn't fathom what.

Bokk got his head down and was shortly in the land of nod. Mike studied his maps, matching up the coordinates of the DZ with what lay on the ground. Bokk and his people had planned the drop most carefully. The DZ lay within a vast conservation area, and there were no public roads or human settlements for miles around – no inquisitive eyes to spot the lights marking the DZ.

Over the years Mike had learned not to pry too much about the comings and goings he facilitated from places like Charlie Two, but with Skydiver he felt he had the right to probe a little. When Bokk stirred he popped the question: what was his mission for tonight?

Bokk explained that he was meeting with a general in the South African Defence Force. Mike didn't believe a word. If the

SADF top brass needed to talk to UNITA, they would hop on an aircraft and go to meet Savimbi. It was more likely an illicit diamond deal or cash transfer; eyeing Skydiver's bulging pack, Mike favoured the latter.

UNITA was paid in cash for its diamonds. US dollars, which could be traded on the black market in South Africa for up to twenty-five per cent more than the official exchange rate. It made good commercial sense to bring cash into the country undetected, but even by Mike's standards HALO-ing at night from 15,000 feet to a clandestine DZ was a little . . . extreme.

UNITA would only accept payment in cash for the diamonds they mined, for obvious reasons. Those dollars were in turn used to buy weaponry. Global arms dealers were only too happy to do business with them, and on occasions flights packed with weapons were traded direct for gemstones. Indeed, Viktor Bout was known to have a gemologist that he kept on a retainer, for flying into places like Charlie Two to value parcels of uncut stones.

Many times Mike and his crew had spotted the telltale tracks left by giant Russian Ilyushin IL-76 cargo aircraft – the 'Vodka Burner', to those in the trade – at UNITA airstrips. The massive four-engine jets could carry up to fifty tonnes of cargo, and they left a distinctive signature on the long dirt runways. UNITA kept its own gemologist on hand to ensure that the Russian arms dealers gave them a reasonable price on their wares.

The going rate was for UNITA to accept between three to six per cent below the prices paid on the bourses of Antwerp, Tel Aviv or Zurich, the main diamond-trading centres of the world. It might seem like a small margin, but with parcels of eight to twelve million dollars' worth of stones being handed over for a single aircraft's cargo, there was real money to be made.

Twenty minutes out from the DZ they removed the para-hatch from the DC3's main cargo door. A panel two metres high and one wide, it would be a tight squeeze for Skydiver. As Mike went forward to take control of the aircraft, Bokk was busy on his satphone, warning the reception party of his imminent arrival.

'Five minutes out,' Mike informed all, via the DC3's intercom.

'Jumper ready and has given thumbs-up,' came the reply from the hold.

At three miles out Mike spotted the lights blinking far below – an isolated L-shape marking the LZ (landing zone). He eased the throttles back, slowed to seventy-five knots and began the countdown: 'Twenty, nineteen, eighteen . . .' Far below the lights slipped out of view beneath the DC3's bulbous nose. 'Three, two, one, GO!'

In the DC3's rear the lone figure dropped into the empty darkness. Bokk's head-torch plummeted away from the DC3, as he accelerated into the freefall, before being swallowed into the black of the night.

He was a brave man for sure, Mike reflected.