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CALEB CARR

"A nonstop thrill ride.... Carr
is still a master of the cliffhanger."

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KILLING TIME

A NOVEL OF THE FUTURE

CALEB
CARR

KILLING
TIME



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KILLING TIME

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This book is dedicated to

SUZANNE GLUCK

*Anyone who has a problem would do well to
take it up with her.*

I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided, and
that is the lamp of experience. I know no way of
judging the future but by the past.

—PATRICK HENRY, 1775

CHAPTER 1

*Somewhere in the Mitumba Mountain Range of Central Africa,
September 2024*

We leave at daylight, so I must write quickly. All reports indicate that my pursuers are now very close: the same scouts who for the last two days have reported seeing a phantom airship moving steadily down from the northeast, setting fire to the earth as it goes, now say that they have spotted the vessel near Lake Albert. My host, Chief Dugumbe, has at last given up his insistence that I allow his warriors to help me stand and fight, and instead offers an escort of fifty men to cover my escape. Although I'm grateful, I've told him that so large a group would be too conspicuous. I'll take only my good friend Mutesa, the man who first dragged my exhausted body out of this high jungle, along with two or three others armed with some of the better French and American automatic weapons. We'll make straight for the coast,

where I hope to find passage to a place even more remote than these mountains.

It seems years since fate cast me among Dugumbe's tribe, though in reality it's been only nine months; but then reality has ceased to have much meaning for me. It was a desire to get that meaning back that originally made me choose this place to hide, this remote, beautiful corner of Africa that has been forever plagued by tribal wars. At the time the brutality of such conflicts seemed to me secondary to the fact that the ancient grievances fueling them had been handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth alone; I thought this a place where I might be at least marginally sure that the human behavior around me was not being manipulated by the unseen hands of those who, through mastery of the wondrous yet sinister technologies of our "information age," have obliterated the line between truth and fiction, between reality and a terrifying world in which one's eyes, ears, and heart can no longer be trusted.

There are no newspapers here, no televisions, and above all no computers, which means no damned Internet. Dugumbe forbids it all. His explanation for this stance is simple, though no less profound for its simplicity: information, he insists, is not knowledge. The lessons passed on from one's elders, taught by the wisest of them but recorded only in the mind, these, Dugumbe has always said, represent true knowledge. The media I've mentioned can only divert a man from such wisdom and enslave him to what Dugumbe calls the worst of all devils: confu-

sion. There was a time when I—a man of the West, the possessor of not one but two doctorates—would have laughed at and disdained such beliefs; and in truth, during the time I've been here the laws and folklore of these people have come to trouble me deeply. Yet in a world stuffed full of deliberately warped information, of manufactured "truths" that have ignited conflicts far greater than Dugumbe's tribal struggles, I now find myself clinging to the core of the old king's philosophy even more tightly than he does.

There—I've just heard it. Distant but unmistakable: the thunderous rumble that heralds their approach. It'll appear out of the sky soon, that spectral ship; or perhaps it will rise up out of the waters of Lake Albert. And then the burning will begin again, particularly if Dugumbe attempts to forcefully resist the extraordinary brother and sister who command the vessel. Yes, time is running out, and I must write faster—though just what purpose my writing serves is not quite so clear. Is it for the sake of my own sanity, to reassure myself that it all truly happened? Or is it for some larger goal, perhaps the creation of a document that I can feed out over what has become my own devil, the Internet, and thereby fight fire with fire? The latter theory assumes, of course, that someone will believe me. But I can't let such doubts prevent the attempt. *Someone* must listen, and, even more important, someone must *understand* . . .

For it is the greatest truth of our age: information is not knowledge.

CHAPTER 2

In retrospect, the pattern was there to be seen by anyone attentive enough to trace it. A remarkable series of “discoveries” in history, anthropology, and archaeology had made headlines for several years; but they were all, on their surface, attributable to the great advances made possible in each of those fields by the continued march and intermingling of bio- and information technology, and so those of us who might have detected a controlling presence at work simply got on with our lives. Our lives; yes, even *I* had a life, before all this began . . .

In fact, by the standards of modern capitalism I had a good life, one graced by both money and professional respect. A psychiatrist by training, I taught criminal psychiatry and psychology in New York (the city of my birth and childhood) at John Jay University, once a comparatively small college of criminal justice that had grown, during the movement toward privatized prisons that gained such enormous

momentum during the first two decades of this century, to become one of the wealthiest educational institutions in the country. Even the crash of '07 and the resultant worldwide recession had not been enough to stop John Jay's expansion: the school has always produced America's best correctional officers, and by 2023, with mandatory drug and quality-of-life punishments so stringent that fully two percent of the nation's population was behind bars, the United States needed nothing so much as prison guards. All of which allowed those who, like me, taught the headier subjects at John Jay to be paid a more-than-decent salary. In addition, I'd recently written a best-selling book, *The Psychological History of the United States* (the second of my degrees being in history), and so I could actually afford to live in Manhattan.

It was those two areas of expertise—criminology and history—that brought a handsome, mysterious woman to my office on September 13, 2023. It was a grim day in the city, with the air so still and filthy that the mayor had asked the populace to venture outside only if their business was urgent. This my visitor's certainly seemed to be: from the first it was obvious that she was profoundly shaken, and I tried to be as gentle as possible as I led her to a chair. She asked in a hushed tone if I were indeed Dr. Gideon Wolfe; assured that I was, she informed me that she was Mrs. Vera Price, and I recalled instantly that she was the wife of a certain John Price, who'd been one of the movie and theme-park industry's leading special effects wizards until he'd been murdered out-

side his New York apartment building a few days earlier. Murdered, I might add, in a particularly unpleasant way: his body had been torn to such tiny pieces by some unknown weapon that only recourse to his DNA records had made identification possible. I offered my condolences and asked if there'd been any progress on the case, only to be told that there hadn't been and probably never would be—not unless I helped her. “They,” it seemed, wouldn't permit it.

Wondering just who “they” might be, I continued to listen as Mrs. Price explained that she and her husband had had two children, the first of whom had died, like forty million other people worldwide, during the staphylococcus epidemic of 2006. The Prices' second child, a daughter, was now in high school in the city, and even she, Mrs. Price claimed, had been threatened by “them.”

“Who?” I finally asked, suspecting that this might be a case of hysterical paranoia. “What do they want? And why come to me about it?”

“I remembered a television interview you did last year,” she answered, rummaging through her bag, “and downloaded it. Crime and history—those are your fields, right? Well, then, here—” She revealed a silvery computer disc and tossed it onto my desk. “Take a look at that. They confiscated the original, but I found a copy in my husband's safe-deposit box.”

“But—

“Not now. I just wanted to bring you the disc.

Come to my house tonight if you think there's any way you can help. Here's the address."

The flutter of a slip of paper, and she was back out the door, leaving me nothing to do but shake my head and slip the disc into the drive of my computer.

It took all of one minute to look at the images that were burnt onto the thing; and then I found myself grabbing for the wireless phone in my wallet in a state of agitated shock. I began punching a familiar sequence of numbers, until Vera Price's words about "them" came back to me. I ended the wireless call and picked up the land line on my desk. Whoever "they" were, they couldn't have tapped it—not yet.

I redialed the number, then heard a disgruntled voice: "Max Jenkins."

"Max," I said to my oldest friend in the world, a former city cop who was now a private detective. "Don't move."

"What do you mean, 'don't move'? What the hell kind of a way is that to talk to people, you bloodless Anglo-Saxon bastard? I'm going out to lunch."

"Oh?" I countered. "And suppose I told you I'm looking at possible evidence that Tariq Khaldun didn't shoot Forrester?"

Silence for an instant; then: "Is that insane statement supposed to make me less hungry?"

"No, Max—"

"Because it isn't—"

"Max, will you shut up? We're talking about the murder of the president."

"No, *you're* talking about it. *I'm* talking about lunch."

I sighed. "How about if I bring the food?"

"How about if you bring it *fast*?"