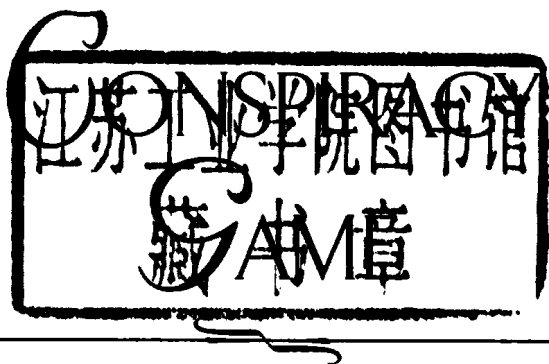


*New York Times*  
Bestselling  
Author of  
*Night Game*

*If you want to live,  
start running.*

CHRISTINE  
FEEHAN  
CONSPIRACY  
GAME



CHRISTINE FEEHAN



JOVE BOOKS, NEW YORK

## **THE BERKLEY PUBLISHING GROUP**

**Published by the Penguin Group**

**Penguin Group (USA) Inc.**

**375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA**

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada  
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia

(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi—110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), Cnr. Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany, Auckland 1310, New Zealand

(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

### **CONSPIRACY GAME**

A Jove Book / published by arrangement with the author

#### **PRINTING HISTORY**

Jove mass-market edition / November 2006

Copyright © 2006 by Christine Feehan.

Excerpt from *Deadly Game* by Christine Feehan copyright © 2006 by Christine Feehan.

Cover photograph by Anna Pena / Getty Images.

Cover design by Marc Cohen.

Text design by Kristin del Rosario.

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without permission. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

For information, address: The Berkley Publishing Group,

a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.,

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014.

ISBN: 0-515-14216-6

### **JOVE®**

Jove Books are published by the Berkley Publishing Group,

a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.,

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014.

JOVE is a registered trademark of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

The "J" design is a trademark belonging to Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this "stripped book."

# CHAPTER 1

---

Night fell fast in the jungle. Sitting in the middle of the enemy camp, surrounded by rebels, Jack Norton kept his head down, eyes closed, listening to the sounds coming out of the rain forest as he took stock of his situation. With his enhanced senses he could smell the enemy close to him, and even farther away, hidden in the dense, lush vegetation. He was fairly certain this was a satellite camp, one of many deep in the jungles of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, somewhere west of Kinshasa.

He opened his eyes to narrow slits to look around him, to plan out each step of his escape, but even that tiny movement sent pain shooting through his skull. The agony from the last beating was nearly shattering, but he didn't dare lose consciousness. They would kill him next time, and next time was coming much quicker than he had anticipated. If he didn't find a way out soon, all the physical and psychic enhancements in the world wouldn't save him.

The rebels had every right to be angry with him. Jack's twin brother, Ken, and his paramilitary GhostWalker team had successfully extracted the rebels' first truly valuable American political prisoners. A United States senator had been captured

while traveling with a scientist and his aides. The GhostWalkers had come in with deadly precision, rescued the senator, the scientist, and his two aides along with the pilot, and left the camp in shambles. Ken had been captured and the rebels had had a field day torturing him. Jack had no choice but to go in after his brother.

The rebels weren't any happier with Jack for depriving them of their prisoner than they had been with Ken. Jack had laid down the covering fire as the GhostWalkers were extracting Ken and had taken a hit. The wound wasn't critical—he'd been testing his leg and it wasn't broken—but the bullet had driven his leg out from under him on impact. He'd waved his team off and resigned himself to the same torture his brother had endured—one more thing they shared as they had in their younger days.

The first beating hadn't been so bad—before Major Biyoya showed up. They'd kicked and punched him, stomping on his wounded leg a couple of times, but for the most part, they'd refrained from torturing him, waiting to find out what General Ekabela had in mind. The general had sent Biyoya.

The majority of the rebels were military trained, and many had at one time been of high rank in the government or military, until one of the many coups, and now they were growing marijuana and wreaking havoc, raiding smaller towns and killing everyone who dared to oppose them or had the farms or land the rebels wanted. No one dared cross into their territory without permission. They were skilled with weapons and in guerrilla warfare—and they liked to torture and kill. They had a taste for it now, and the power drove them to continue. Even the UN avoided the area—if they did try to bring medicine and supplies to the villages, the rebels robbed them.

Jack opened his eyes enough to look down at his bare chest where Major Keon Biyoya had carved his name. Blood dripped, and flies and other biting insects congregated for the feast. It wasn't the worst of the tortures by any means, or the most humiliating. He had endured it stoically, removing himself from the pain as he had all of his life, but the fire of retribution burned in his belly.

Rage ran cold and deep, like a turbulent river hidden beneath

the calm surface of his expressionless face. The dangerous emotion poured through his body and flooded his veins, building his adrenaline and strength. He deliberately fed it, recounting every detail of the last interrogation session with Biyoya. The cigarette burns, small circles marring his chest and shoulders. The whip marks that had peeled the skin from his back. Biyoya had taken his time carving his name deep, and when Jack made no sound, he'd hooked up battery cables to shock him—and that had been only the beginning of several hours at the hands of a twisted madman. The precise, almost surgical, two-inch cuts covering nearly every inch of his body were identical to what this man had done to his brother—and with each slice, Jack felt his brother's pain, when he could push away his own.

Jack tasted the rage in his mouth. With infinite slowness, he eased his hands to the seam of his camouflage pants, fingertips seeking the minute end of the thin wire sewn there. He began to draw it out with a smooth, practiced motion, his brain working all the while with icy precision, calculating distances to weapons, planning each step to get him into the foliage of the jungle. Once there, he was certain of his ability to elude his captors, but he first had to cover bare ground and get through a dozen trained soldiers. The one and only thing he knew, without a shadow of a doubt, was that Major Keon Biyoya was a walking dead man.

Two soldiers tramped through the camp toward him. Jack felt the coil inside of him winding tighter and tighter. It was now or never. His hands were tied in front of him, but his captors had been careless, leaving his feet free after the last torture session, believing him incapacitated. Biyoya had smashed the butt of a rifle into the wound on his leg several times, angry that Jack had given no response. Jack had learned at a very young age never to make a sound, to go somewhere far away in his head and separate mind from body, but men like Biyoya couldn't conceive of that possibility. Some men didn't, *couldn't* break, even with drugs in their system and pain wracking their bodies.

A hand bunched in Jack's hair and yanked hard to bring his head up. Ice-cold water splashed in his face, ran down his chest

into the wounds. The second soldier rubbed a paste of salt and burning leaves into the wounds as both laughed.

“Major wants his name to show up nice and pretty,” one said tauntingly in his native tongue. He leaned down to peer into Jack’s eyes.

He must have seen death there—the cold rage and icy determination. He gasped, but was a heartbeat too slow in trying to jerk away. Jack moved fast, a speeding blur of his hands as he looped thin wire around the rebel’s neck, dragging him backward off balance, using him as a shield as the other soldier jerked up his gun and fired. The bullet slammed into the first rebel and drove Jack back.

Chaos erupted in the camp, men scattering for cover and firing toward the jungle, confused as to where the shooting was coming from. Jack had only seconds to make his way to cover. Pulling a knife from the waistband of the rebel, he stabbed the dying soldier in the lung and turned the blade to the ropes binding him, still holding the soldier as a shield. Jack threw the knife with deadly accuracy, drilling the rebel with the gun through the throat. Dropping the dead body, Jack ran.

He zigzagged his way across the open ground, kicking logs out of the fire pit, sending them scattering in all directions, deliberately running through the soldiers so that anyone firing at him would chance hitting one of their own. He ran at one soldier, slamming his fist into the man’s throat with one hand and relieving him of his weapon with the other. He leapt over the body and kept running, ducking into a group of five men scrambling to their feet. Jack kicked one in the knee, dropping him hard, wrenching the machete from his hand and delivering a killing blow before whirling through the other four, slicing with an expertise born of long experience and sheer desperation.

Shouts and bullets rang through the jungle so that birds rose from the treetops, screeching into the air. Screams of the wounded mingled with the desperate sounds of angry leaders shouting to establish order. A soldier rose up in front of Jack, sweeping the area with an assault rifle. Jack hit the ground and somersaulted, lashing out with his foot, taking the man to the ground, ripping the rifle out of his hands, and using his enhanced strength, delivering a killing blow with the butt of the

gun. He slung the weapons around his neck to leave his hands free and snagged a long knife and another rifle as he raced toward the cover of the jungle. The soldier had inadvertently provided him with covering fire, shooting several of his fellow rebels.

Jack dove for the thickest foliage nearest him, somersaulting into the leafy ferns, and ran at a low crouch along the narrow trail made by some small animal. Bullets rained around him, one or two coming too close for comfort. He kept moving fast into deeper jungle where the light barely penetrated the thick canopy. He was a GhostWalker and the shadows welcomed him.

The rain forest was made up of several layers. At the emergent level, trees grew as high as two hundred and seventy feet. The canopy was about sixty to ninety feet above him, where most of the birds and wildlife resided. Mosses, lichen, and orchids covered the trunks and branches. Snakelike vines dropped like tentacles. Palms, philodendrons, and ferns reached out with large leaves to provide even more cover. The understory saw very little sunlight and was dark and humid—perfect for what he needed.

Once into the darker areas, he blended into the foliage, the stripes and patterns of the jungle covering his skin, from his face down his neck, his chest, and arms. His specially designed camouflage pants picked up the colors surrounding him and reflected them back so he virtually disappeared into the vegetation, as if the jungle had eaten him.

Jack leapt into the trees, using low-lying branches, climbing swiftly up to the crotch of a tall evergreen tree that was particularly heavy with foliage. From his view, he could easily see the forest floor. It looked bare, but he knew it was teeming with insects, like a living carpet over the poor soil. He waited, knowing the rebels would come swarming through the jungle. Major Biyoya would be furious that Jack had escaped. Biyoya would have to answer to the general, and General Ekabela wasn't known to treat kindly anyone failing him.

Shouted curses and orders, anger and fear in the voices, drifted with the smoke through the trees. Jack hoped one of the burning logs he'd kicked out of the fire pit had set on fire the small leaf-covered hut the major liked to use.



Jack took stock of his weapons. He had two assault rifles with limited ammunition, a machete, and two knives, and sewn into his pants were several garrotes. More than guns and knives, Jack had his psychic and physical enhancements, products of experimentation enabling him to become a member of the covert GhostWalker team.

Around him, the heavy foliage kept him hidden and the vines enabled fast travel up and down the trees should he need it. The sound of the rain was a steady companion, but the heavy drops barely penetrated the thick canopy above him. The moisture that did touch him helped to ease the oppressive heat.

The soldiers entered the jungle in a standard search pattern, the men spaced no more than four feet apart, but spread out to cover a wide area. That told him the major was on scene and directing his men, establishing order in the midst of chaos. Jack hunkered down, rifle in his arms, and watched the rebels emerging through the broad, leafy plants and giant ferns. They thought they were quiet, but he heard the steady gasp of breath as air moved through their lungs. Even without that, he would still have spotted them easily. To his GhostWalker-enhanced vision, the yellow and red heat waves of their bodies glowed neon bright against the cooler jungle foliage. He smelled the excitement oozing from their pores. It should have been fear. They knew they were going into the jungle after a wounded predator and that he would be hunting them, but they had no way of knowing what kind of man he was.

Jack had moved fast across the bare ground of the camp, but once under cover of the shadows, he was certain he'd hidden his tracks. He'd been careful not to disturb the plants on the trees as he'd gone up, leaping most of the way, landing lightly on the balls of his feet so as not to smear moss or lichen to give away his presence. They expected him to run toward Kinshasa, to get away as quickly as possible. None of them looked up, certainly not into the high canopy, and he sat quietly while the first wave of about thirty soldiers passed him by.

He examined the weapons thoroughly, familiarizing himself with the feel of each one. He took his time weaving a sheath for the machete, using a vine for the sling. All the while he watched and listened, hunting in his mind, picking his trails from his

vantage point, listening to the whispers of the men as they passed directly under his tree. Thirst was a problem, and as soon as the last of the stragglers had passed, he stashed one of the rifles in the crotch of the tree branch and made his way back toward the edge of the camp in silence. Using the vines to spider across the treetops, he cut a succulent vine containing replenishing liquid and held it to his mouth, careful to keep from spilling a drop.

A chimpanzee screamed a warning a few hundreds yards to his left, and he froze, gradually allowing the hollow vine to slide back into the tangle with the rest. Inverting his body with slow precision, he moved like a wraith, headfirst, down the vine toward the forest floor. Dangling a few feet above ground, he made a graceful turn to set his feet carefully on the damp surface, landing in a crouching position, weapon up and ready. He froze when the two perimeter guards looked directly at him but didn't see him, his body blending in with the trees and foliage around him. The two lone soldiers looked around themselves warily, and exchanged heated comments culminating in one handing the other a joint.

Smoke billowed from one of the huts, and Jack caught glimpses of small flames still flickering in the remains. Two soldiers worked to stack the bodies of the dead while a third and fourth helped the injured. Jack skirted around the clearing, keeping to the heavier foliage as he closed in on the armory. He knew the weapons cache was enormous. The supplies had belonged to the former government and had come from the United States. When the general and his soldiers abandoned their jobs in the military and scattered, they had raided a number of the government armories. As an army they were well stocked, well trained, and completely mobile, a good five thousand troops strong. The general ruled the area with a ruthless and bloody hand, keeping people in line with swift violence whenever he deemed lessons necessary. The main encampment was at least a hundred miles into the interior, and the smaller, satellite camps spread out from there like a spider's web.

Near the armory, Jack dropped to his knees and elbows, crawling through the layers of rotting vegetation. Ants, beetles, and termites poured through the leaves and branches, over and

around him. He ignored them as he kept moving forward at a snail's pace, staying to the shadows as much as possible. One guard walked over to another and gestured toward the wounded men, talking animatedly.

Jack moved forward inch by inch, until he was out in plain sight, his skin and clothing now reflecting the deeper colors of the ground. Night had fallen, and the sounds emerging from the interior of the forest had changed subtly. A cheetah coughed in the distance. Birds called to one another as they settled in the higher canopy. The chimpanzees quieted as the larger predators emerged. The insects grew louder, a continual sound that never ceased. Fog rolled in over the mountains and drifted into the forest and along the floor.

Jack kept moving steadily across the ground, heading for the area where the guards were heaviest, his goal the circle of vehicles with the cargo inside. The main armory would be a bunker at the central camp, but all the outlying camps had to carry supplies with them—and they would keep those supplies under heavy guard and as mobile as possible. That meant in the vehicles. The jeeps and trucks were parked a short distance away from the camp for safety.

The guards were set six feet apart. Most were smoking or talking, or watching the surrounding jungle. The two closest were taking bets on what the major would do to the prisoner when they got him back. Jack slithered through the grass to the first jeep parked in the tight circle. He rolled beneath it and examined the area with a cautious lift of his head. The arms were in crates in the truck to the center of the circle, right where he'd guessed they would be. He made his way to the back of the covered truck and once again waited in the grass while the beetles crawled over his body. When the closest guard looked away, Jack went up the bumper and leapt in like a human spider.

They were well supplied with guns. He helped himself to several clips for the M16s as well as for a nine-millimeter handgun he took. The boxes contained assault rifles, belts and cans of ammunition, as well as crates of clips. Boxes of grenades were toward the front, and claymore mines with detonators and wire were at the back.

Jack had shifted back toward the tailgate, needing to stash

his supplies, when a bloody barrel caught his eye. His heart jumped in his chest as he reached down to clear debris from the weapon. The sniper rifle had been carelessly thrown in with a crate of AK47s. It was a Remington, covered in his brother's blood, even bearing a few smudged prints. He recognized it immediately; it had never been treated with other than the utmost respect. He picked it up and cradled it to him, running his hand over the barrel as if he could wipe away what had been done.

Jack's fingers tightened on the rifle as memories poured over him. Sweat broke out on his body and he shook his head, driving away the sound of childish screams and the feel of pain and humiliation, the sight of his brother staring at him, tears streaming down his face. That face changed to that of a man's, and Ken was looking at him with that same despair, that same pain and humiliation. When Jack lifted him, he had been horrified to see that the skin had been peeled from Ken's back, leaving a raw mass of muscle and tissue covered in flies and insects. He heard the screaming in his own head and looked down at his hands and saw blood. There was no washing it away and there never would be. He breathed deeply, forcing his mind away from the madness of his constant—and all too real—nightmares.

Major Biyoya had a lot to answer for—and torturing Ken was first on the list. Jack wasn't walking away quietly. He'd never just walked away in his life. It wasn't in him and never would be. Biyoya was going to be brought to justice—his justice—one way or another—because that was what Jack did.

He slung the rifle around his neck, tucking the scope and shells into an ammo belt. As fast and efficiently as possible, he gathered his weapons, using a pack from the back of the truck. The nine-millimeter handgun was a must. He took as many grenades, blocks of C4, and claymore mines as he could carry. Loaded down, he crept to the tailgate of the truck and peered out. The guards were watching the cleanup of the mess he'd made of the camp. Jack went out of the truck headfirst, going down to the ground and sliding beneath the truck for added cover.

It was a much more difficult challenge to move his supplies from the circle of vehicles back to the jungle. He inched his way, feeling the numerous bites from insects, the oppressive

heat, the ground and grasses tearing up his body, and the mind-numbing fatigue. He could no longer block the fiery pain of his various wounds. In spite of the darkness, it took longer than he'd anticipated crossing the open circle and making his way through the guards.

He was nearly away from the vehicles when one of the guards turned abruptly and walked straight toward him. Jack froze, sliding his cache of weapons under the broadleaf plant closest to his hand. He had no choice but to lie prone in the darkness, relying on the camouflage of his body. The guard called to a second one and the man ambled over, shifting his rifle across his body. They spoke in Congolese, a language Jack was somewhat familiar with, but they were speaking rapidly, making it difficult to make out everything they were saying.

The Fespam Music Festival in Kinshasa was supposed to be larger and even better with the performances that had been brought over from Europe this time, and the guard desperately wanted to go because the Flying Five were performing. The general had promised them they could go, but unless they found the prisoner, no one would be going anywhere. The other guard agreed and dropped a cigarette almost on Jack's head, crushing it with the toe of his boot before adding his own complaints.

Jack's breath stilled. The Flying Five. What kind of a coincidence could that be? Or was it sheer luck. Jebediah Jenkins was a member of the Flying Five and he had served with Jack in the SEALs. If Jack could make his way to Kinshasa and find Jebediah, he could get the hell out of Dodge—or would he be walking into another trap?

The moment the guards moved on, he began to inch toward the forest again. Once into the heavier foliage, he went up into the trees, stashing his supplies and taking the time for another satisfying drink. He repeated the trip into the circle of vehicles, making his way back through the guards to the supply truck. This time, he went for more claymore mines, wires, and detonators. Patience and discipline went hand in hand with his profession, and he had both in abundance. He took his time, thorough in his setup, never once allowing his mind to freeze under the pressure, not even when soldiers nearly stepped on him.

He wired the beaten path leading into the jungle—tents, the

outhouse, and every remaining vehicle. Minutes turned into hours. It was a long time to be in the enemy camp, and he felt the strain. Sweat dripped into his eyes and stung. His chest and especially his back were on fire, and his leg throbbed with pain. Infection in the jungle was dangerous, and he'd been stripped of his gear and all medical supplies.

Somewhere in the distance Jack caught the cry of the chimpanzees and immediately sorted through the sounds in the rain forest until he caught the one he was waiting for—the sound of movement through brush. Biyoya was bringing his soldiers home, wanting to wait until they could examine the damp ground for tracks. Jack knew Biyoya would have confidence in regaining his prisoner. Rebel camps were spread throughout the region, and few villagers would risk death and retribution by hiding a foreigner. Major Biyoya believed in torturing as well as ethnic cleansing. His reputation for brutality was widespread, and few would be willing to oppose him.

Jack finished his last task without haste, before beginning to crawl backward toward the jungle. He angled his entry away from the well-used trail and into the thicker foliage. The smell of the returning soldiers hit him hard. They were sweating from the suffocating heat in the interior. He forced himself to maintain his slow pace, making certain not to draw the eyes of a sentry to him as he slipped under the creeper vines and broadleaf plants surrounding the camp.

He lay for a moment, his face in the muck, and let himself breathe before pushing to his feet and running in a crouch back toward the taller trees. He could hear the soldiers' breath blasting out of their lungs as they hurried back to their camp, their angry leader berating them every step of the way.

Jack stood for a moment under the chosen tree, breathing his way through the pain, gathering his strength before crouching and leaping up to the nearest broad branch. He worked his way from branch to branch until he was in the thickest of them, sitting comfortably, his brother's rifle cradled in his arms while he waited. The night was comforting, the familiar shadows home.

The first group of rebels came into sight, in a semiloose formation, eyes wary as they tried to pierce the veil of darkness for any enemies. Two jeeps had gone out with the group, taking the

muddy, torn-up road that curved away from the forest and then looped back for miles into the interior. The jeeps were coming toward camp, motors whining and mud splattering around them. The main body of soldiers came through the trees, still spread out, guns at ready, nervous as hell.

Jack fitted the scope to his brother's rifle and calmly loaded the shells in.

The blast was loud in the quiet of the night, sending a fireball into the sky. It rained metal and shrapnel, sending debris slamming into the camp and embedding metal into trees. The screams of dying men mingled with the cries of birds and chimpanzees as the world around them exploded into orange red flames. The lead jeep had hit the wire right at the entrance to the camp, tripping the claymore and blowing everything around it into pieces. The soldiers hit the ground, covering their heads as fragments rained from the sky.

Jack kept his eye to the scope. Biyoya was in the second jeep, and the driver instantly veered away from the fireball, nearly spilling the passengers as the vehicle careened wildly through the trees. Biyoya leapt out, ducking into the foliage, screaming at the soldiers to fan out and look for Jack.

Using the chaos of explosions and screaming men as cover, Jack squeezed the trigger, taking out one of the soldiers on the edge of the forest. Switching targets, he rapidly fired three more times. Four shots—four kills. Not wanting the soldiers to spot where he was firing from, Jack immediately caught hold of a vine and went down headfirst on the opposite side of the tree from the soldiers, crawling hand over hand, until he could flip to the ground. He landed softly on the balls of his feet, fading into the overgrown ferns and dropping to his belly. Through the brush, he could slither along the almost invisible game trail that brought him up behind Biyoya's personal guard.

Jack rose up, a silent phantom, blade in hand. He went in fast and hard, careful to make certain the guard couldn't give away his presence with a single sound. Jack slipped back into the foliage, his skin and clothes blending with his surroundings.

Biyoya turned to say something to his guard and let out a shocked yell, leaping back away from the dead man and ducking around his jeep. He shouted to his soldiers and they sprayed

the jungle with bullets, lighting up the night with the flashing muzzles. Leaves and branches fell like hail, raining from above, and several soldiers went down, caught in the cross fire. Biyoya had to shout several times again to establish control. He ordered another sweep through the surrounding forest.

The soldiers looked at one another, obviously not happy with the command, but they obeyed with reluctance, once again shoulder to shoulder, walking through the trees. Jack was already back in his tree, leaning his weary body against the thick trunk.

He slumped down, but kept his eye to the scope in hopes of getting a clear shot at Biyoya. He tried to keep any thought of home and his brother from his mind, but it was impossible. Ken's body—so bloody—so raw. There hadn't been a place on him that wasn't bleeding. Had Jack been too late? No way. He'd know if his brother was dead—and if it was at all possible, Ken would come for him. Even now, might be close. Intellectually Jack knew better—knew Ken's wounds were too severe and that he was safe in a hospital thousands of miles away—but he couldn't stop himself. Jack reached out along their telepathic path, the way he'd been doing since they were toddlers, and called his brother. *Ken. I'm in a fucking mess. You there, bro?*

Silence greeted his call. For one terrible moment, his resolve wavered. His gut churned and fear swamped him. Fear for his own situation and something nearly amounting to terror for his brother. He held out his hand, saw it shake, and shook his head, forcing his mind away from destructive thoughts. That way lay his own destruction. His job was to escape, to survive, to make his way to Kinshasa.

The soldiers tramped through the forest, using bayonets to thrust into the thick shrubs and ferns. They stabbed the vegetation on the floor and walked along the banks of the stream feeding into the river, blades pounding the damp embankment. The jeep slowly began to move, only the driver and soldiers surrounding it vulnerable as they made their way past the wreckage of the first vehicle into camp.

Jack lowered the rifle. It was going to be a long night for the soldiers. In the meantime, he had to plan his way to freedom. He was west of Kinshasa. Once in the city, he could find Jebediah



and hide until they found a way to call for extraction. It sounded simple enough, but he had to work his way through the rebel encampments between Kinshasa and his present position. He wasn't going to kid himself; he was in bad shape. With so many open wounds, infection was a certainty rather than a possibility.

Weariness stole over him. Loneliness. He had chosen this life many years ago, the only choice he had at the time. Most of the time he never regretted it. But sometimes, when he sat thirty feet up in a tree with a rifle in his hands and death surrounding him, he wondered what it would be like to have a home and family. A woman. Laughter. He couldn't remember laughter, not even with Ken, and Ken could be amusing at the most inopportune times.

It was too late for him. He was rough and cold and any gentleness he might have been born with had been beat out of him long before he was a teenager. He looked at the people and the world around him stripped of beauty, seeing only the ugliness. It was kill or be killed in his world, and he was a survivor. He settled back and closed his eyes, needing to sleep for a few minutes.

He woke to the sounds of screams. The sound often haunted him in his nightmares, screams and gunfire, and the sight of blood running in dark pools. His hands curled around the rifle, finger stroking the trigger even before his eyes snapped open. Jack took a long, deep breath and looked around him. Flash fires came from the direction of the camp. Several of his traps had been sprung, and once again chaos reigned in the rebel encampment. Bullets spat into the jungle, zipped through leaves and tore bark from trees. The ghost in the rain forest had struck again and again, and fear had the rebels by the throats.

On and off over the next few hours, some hapless soldier tripped a trap, probably trying to get rid of it, and the camp would erupt into pandemonium, confusion, and panic nearly leading to rebellion. The soldiers wanted to head for the base camp and Biyoya refused, adamant that they would recover the prisoner. It was a tribute to his leadership—or cruelty—that he was able to rally them after each attack. There was no sleep for anyone, and the fog crept into the forest, blanketing the trees and mixing with the smoke from the continual fires.

Through the haze, Jack saw the camp on the move, abandoning their position. Biyoya screamed at his men and shook his