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The Ares
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A Covert One Novel

Series created by Robert Ludlum

Written by Kyle Mills

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Robert Ludlum's™

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A **Covert-One** Novel



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Written by **Kyle Mills**



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CHAPTER ONE

Above Northern Uganda

November 12—0203 Hours GMT+3

The roar in Craig Rivera's ears combined with the darkness to make everything he knew—everything real—disappear. He wondered if astronauts felt the same sense of emptiness, if they wondered like he did whether God was just at the edge of their vision.

He looked at a dial glowing faint green on his wrist. The letters were Cyrillic, but the numbers tracking his altitude and coordinates were the same as the government-issue unit he trained with.

Rivera tilted his body slightly, angling north as he fell through fifteen thousand feet. A hint of warmth and humidity began to thaw the skin around his oxygen mask, and below the blackness was now punctured by widely scattered, barely perceptible points of light.

Campfires.

When his GPS confirmed that he was directly over the drop zone, he rolled onto his back for a moment, staring up at a sky full of stars and searching futilely for the outline of the plane he'd jumped from.

They were alone. That, if anything, had been made perfectly clear.

He knew little about the country he was falling into at 125 miles an hour and even less about the man they'd been sent to find. Caleb Bahame was a terrorist and a murderer so cruel that it was difficult to know if the intelligence on him was accurate or just a bizarre tapestry of legends

created by a terrified populace. Some of the stories, though, were undeniable. The fact that he demanded his men heat the machetes they used to hack the limbs from infants, for instance, had considerable photo evidence. As did the suffering of the children as they slowly died from their cauterized wounds.

The existence of men like this made Rivera wonder if God wasn't perfect—if even he made mistakes. And if so, perhaps his hand was directly involved in this mission.

Not that those kinds of philosophical questions really mattered. While Bahame wasn't good for much, he would probably be just fine at stopping bullets—a hypothesis that Rivera was looking forward to testing. Preferably with multiple clips.

He glanced at his altimeter again and rolled back over, squinting through his goggles at the jungle canopy rushing toward him in the starlight. After a few more seconds, the glowing numbers turned red and he pulled his chute, sending himself into a fast spiral toward a clearing that he couldn't yet see but that the intel geeks swore was there.

He was just over a hundred feet from the ground when he spotted his LZ and aimed for it, beginning a sharp descent that sent him crashing to earth with a well-practiced roll. After gathering up his canopy, he ran for the cover of the jungle, dropping his pack and retrieving his night-vision goggles and rifle.

The well-worn AK-47 felt a little strange in his hands as he swept it along the tree line and listened to his team touch down at thirty-second intervals. When he counted four, he activated his throat mike.

“Sound off. Everyone okay?”

These kinds of jumps were impossible to fully control and he felt a little of the tension in his stomach ease when all his men checked in uninjured.

Rivera moved silently through the jungle, the roar of the wind now replaced by the buzz of insects and the screech of tropical birds. They'd picked this area because the brutal terrain discouraged people from settling it. About twenty

miles into the hike out, he imagined he'd be cursing the choice, but right now the fact that no one was chasing them with red-hot machetes was a big check in the plus column.

His team coalesced into an optimally spaced line as they moved north. Rivera fell in behind a short, wiry man wearing a black sweatshirt with cutoff sleeves revealing arms streaked with green paint. The Israeli machine gun in his hands swept smoothly from left to right as he glided over terrain that would have left a normal man stumbling hopelessly from one tree to another. But he wasn't a normal man. None of them were.

Their equipment and clothing were a patchwork collected from around the world. None of them had any tattoos or other identifying marks—even their dental work had been altered to make its country of origin indeterminate. If they were captured or killed, there would be no fanfare or place in history. No heroic stories for relatives and friends to take comfort in. Just a tiny headstone over an empty grave.

“Approaching rendezvous point,” the man on point said, his voice slightly distorted by Rivera's over-the-counter earpiece. “Approximately ten meters.”

The neat line of men dissolved into the jungle again, surrounding a small patch of land that had been recently burned by a lightning strike. Rivera peered through the foliage at the blackened trees, finally spotting a tall Ugandan standing alone in the ash. He was completely motionless except for his head, which jerked back and forth at every sound, as though the earth was jolting him with leftover electricity.

“Move in,” Rivera said into his throat mike.

He'd seen it a hundred times in training, but watching his men melt from the jungle always made him feel a twinge of pride. On neutral ground, he'd put them up against anyone in the world, be they the SAS, Shayetet 13, or hell's own army.

The man in the clearing let out a quiet yelp at the ghosts materializing around him and then threw an arm over his face. “Take off your night-vision equipment,” he said in heavily accented English. “It was our agreement.”

“Why?” Rivera said, peeling his goggles off and signaling for his men to do the same. It had been a bizarre precondition, but it was indeed part of the deal.

“You must not look at my face,” the man replied. “Bahame can see through your eyes. He can read minds.”

“Then you know him?” Rivera said.

The Ugandan was only a shadowy outline, but he sagged visibly as he answered. “He took me as a child. I fought for many years in his army. I did things that cannot be spoken of.”

“But you escaped.”

“Yes. I chased a family that ran into the jungle when we attacked their village. I didn’t harm them, though. I just ran. I ran for days.”

“You told our people that you know how to find him.”

When he didn’t respond, Rivera dug a sack full of euros from his pack and held it out. The Ugandan accepted it but still didn’t speak. He just stared down at the nylon bag in his hands.

“I have six children. One—my son—is very sick.”

“Well, you should be able to get him help with that money.”

“Yes.”

He held out a piece of paper and Rivera took it, sliding his night-vision goggles in front of his eyes for a moment to examine the hand-drawn map. The level of detail was impressive, and it seemed to more or less match the satellite photos of the area.

“I have done my part,” the Ugandan said.

Rivera nodded and turned back toward the trees, but the man grabbed his shoulder.

“Run,” he said. “Tell the men who hired you that you could not find him.”

“Why would I do that?”

“He leads an army of demons. They cannot be frightened. They cannot be killed. Some even say they can fly.”

Rivera shrugged off the man’s hand and slipped back into the jungle.

Hell’s own army.

CHAPTER TWO

Off the Eastern Coast of Africa
November 12—0412 Hours GMT+3

You must understand, Admiral, that it is precisely the destructive reign of Idi Amin that makes Uganda such a shining example. We have made tremendous strides—economically, politically, in the control of disease. But the world doesn't see this. It doesn't see how far my country has come. And because of that, donors are pulling back. Problems that were so close to being eradicated are reemerging.”

Smoke from one of Admiral Jamison Kaye's personal stash of Arturo Fuentes flowed from Charles Sembutu's mouth as he continued to pontificate about the world's moral obligation to the country he led.

Kaye kept his expression impassive, exercising his well-practiced gift for hiding his distaste for politicians. He himself had grown up dirt-poor on a farm in Kentucky, and no matter how bad it got, his family had never gone looking for a handout. His father always said that no one had the power to pick you up. Either you did it yourself or you stayed the hell down.

“So you can see the importance of what we're doing here, Admiral. You can understand the magnitude of the threat.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. President.”

His wife constantly admonished him for judging politicians too harshly, and she was usually right. Not this time, though. Sembutu had taken over Uganda in a bloody coup that had ended in the deaths of the former president, his family, and no less than a thousand of his supporters.

There was a quiet knock on the door, and the admiral watched gratefully as his captain entered.

“The feeds are up and running, gentlemen. If you could please follow me.”

The control center for this operation was buried in the depths of the carrier—a cramped space designated for monitoring events that weren’t ever going to hit the papers.

The two women manning the room’s sophisticated electronics leapt to their feet when the admiral and his guest entered, but a dismissive wave sent them immediately back to their seats.

“These are pictures from your soldiers?” Sembutu asked, pointing to five live monitors. Each cast a greenish glow, depicting a hazy view of the jungle as it slid slowly past.

“Each man has a camera on his uniform that transmits to us via satellite,” Kaye said.

Sembutu moved forward, reading the names of the individuals scrawled beneath their respective monitors while Kaye dialed a number into a secure phone.

He was feeling distinctly queasy as it rang. As far as he was concerned, fighting was the natural state of Africa—war didn’t occasionally break out there; peace did. Sending his boys into a situation that they didn’t fully understand and, in his opinion, was none of America’s business had too many shades of Somalia. But there was absolutely nothing he could do about it. This wasn’t some harebrained operation dreamed up in a forgotten corner of the Pentagon. Not by a long shot.

The phone clicked and the unmistakable voice of Sam Adams Castilla came on.

“Yes, Admiral?”

“They’ve made contact and are on the move.”

“Anyone hurt in the jump?”

“No, Mr. President. So far, everything’s by the numbers.”

CHAPTER THREE

Northern Uganda

November 12—0609 Hours GMT+3

The light of dawn was beginning to penetrate the jungle canopy, dispelling the darkness that had become so comfortable. Lt. Craig Rivera slipped past the man in front of him, wanting to take point personally until the confusing twilight finally gave way to day.

The condensation on the leaves was already starting to heat up, turning into mist that weighed down his clothes and felt thick in his lungs. He eased up a steep, rocky slope, dropping into a prone position at its crest. More than a minute passed as he scanned the tangle of leaves and branches for a human outline. Nothing. Just the endless shimmer of wet leaves.

He started to move again but froze when a voice crackled over his earpiece. “Keep your eyes on the sky.”

Rivera pressed himself against the broad trunk of a tree and looked up, putting a hand to his throat mike. “What have you got?”

“Bahame could swoop down on us at any minute shooting fireballs from his ass.”

The quiet snickers of the men closest to him were audible in the silence, and he started forward again, trying to decide how to respond. “Radio discipline. Let’s not forget what happened to the other guys.”

An African Union team had gotten a tip on Bahame’s location and come after him about six months ago. All that was left of them was an audio recording.

He'd never admit it to his men, but Rivera could still hear it in his head—the calm chatter and controlled fire devolving into panicked shouts and wild bursts on full automatic, the screams of attackers who sounded more animal than human. And finally the crash of body against body, the grunts of hand-to-hand combat, the bloody gurgles of death.

After he and his team had listened to it, they'd blown it off with the expected bravado. African Union forces? Hadn't they gotten taken down by a Girl Scout troop in Cameroon? Weren't they the guys whose mascot was a toy poodle?

As team leader, though, Rivera had seen the dead soldiers' files. They weren't reassigned meter maids from Congo as one of his men had suggested after polishing off the better part of a twelve-pack. They were solid operators working in their own backyard.

Rivera threw up a fist and crouched, aiming his AK through the trees at a flash of tan in the sea of emerald. Behind him, he could hear nothing but knew his men were fanning out into defensive positions.

He eased onto his stomach and slithered forward, controlling his breathing and being careful not to cause the bushes above him to sway with his movement. It took more than five minutes to cover twenty yards, but finally the jungle thinned and he found himself at the edge of a small village.

The woven straw wall of the hut in front of him was about the only thing that hadn't been burned—and that included the residents. It was hard to determine precisely how many blackened bodies were piled next to what may have once been a soccer goal, but forty was a reasonable guess. It seemed that their intel was good. This was Bahame country.

Behind him, he heard a quiet grunt and something that sounded like a body hitting the ground. Swearing under his breath, he headed back toward the noise, finger hooked lightly around the trigger of his gun.

“Sorry, boss. Nothin' I could do. She came right up on me.”

The woman was cowering against a tree, holding her hands in front of her in frozen panic. Her eyes darted back

and forth as his men materialized from the foliage and surrounded her.

“Who you figure she is?” one of them said quietly.

“There’s a village up there,” Rivera responded. “Or at least there was. Bahame got to it. She must have given him the slip. Probably been living on her own out here for the past few days.”

There was an infected gash in her arm and her ankle was grotesquely twisted to the right, bones pushing at the skin but not quite breaking through. Rivera tried to determine her age, but there were too many contradictions—skin the color and texture of an old tire, strong, wiry arms, straight white teeth. The truth was he didn’t know anything about her and he never would.

“What are we going to do with her?” one of his men asked.

“Do you speak English?” Rivera said, enunciating carefully.

She started to talk in her native language, the volume of her voice startling in the silence. He clamped a hand over her mouth and held a finger to his lips. “*Do you speak any English?*”

When he pulled his hand away, she spoke more quietly, but still in the local dialect.

“What do you think, boss?”

Rivera took a step back, a trickle of salty sweat running over his lips and into his mouth. He didn’t know what he thought. He wanted to call back to command, but he knew what Admiral Kaye would say—that he wasn’t there on the ground. That it wasn’t his call.

“She’s no friend of Bahame’s based on what he did to her village.”

“Yeah,” one of his men agreed. “But people are afraid of him and don’t want to piss him off. They think he’s magic.”

“So what are you saying?” Rivera said.

“If we let her go, how do we know she won’t talk? Hell, we can’t even tell her not to.”

He was right. What was it their contact had said? That

Bahame could see through people's eyes? Legends had roots in reality. Maybe people were so terrified of the man that even the ones who hated him told him everything they knew in hopes of working their way into his good graces.

"We could tie her to the tree and gag her," another of his men said.

This was stupid. They were exposed and wasting time.

"Boss?"

"We can't tie her to a tree. She'd die of thirst or an animal would get her."

The man standing behind her silently unsheathed his knife. "She's not going to last out here on her own anyway. We'd be doing her a favor."

Rivera stood frozen for what he knew must have seemed like far too long to his men. Indecisiveness was not a particularly attractive quality in his profession.

The knee-jerk reaction was always to fall back on his training, but this kind of situation had never been dealt with in a way that meant anything when actually faced with contemplating ending the life of an innocent woman.

"We're moving out," he said, turning and starting in a direction that skirted the burned-out village. There would already be a lot of explaining to do in the unlikely event that he ever laid eyes on the Pearly Gates. Murdering helpless women wasn't something he wanted to add to his list.

CHAPTER FOUR

Southern Namibia

November 12—1358 Hours GMT+2

Dr. Sarie van Keuren threw a hand out, grimacing as her fingers closed over a branch covered in thorns. There had been no rain for weeks, and the dirt on the embankment she was scaling could barely hold her fifty-four kilos.

She ignored the blood running down her sweaty palm and hauled herself forward, fighting her way to the tripod-mounted video camera set up on the ridge.

She blew the dust from the lens and peered into the leafy bush it was trained on. Even under the glare of the African sun, it took her a few moments to find what she was looking for among the berries—an ant from a nearby colony.

Normally, members of this species were slim black ground dwellers. But this individual had been transformed by the invasion of a tiny parasite. Its abdomen had swollen and now gleamed bright red, perfectly mimicking the surrounding berries. Even worse, the parasite had infected the ant's brain, compelling it to climb into the bush, clamp its jaws around a stalk, and stick its colorful abdomen in the air.

At first, it had fought to get free, six legs pulling mightily against the grip of its jaws. But now all its appendages appeared to be paralyzed—probably because its clever little invader was chewing through the nerves.

She glanced into the washed-out blue of the sky, looking for the birds the parasite was trying to attract. This particular nematode could breed only in avian guts and had no

means of transportation of its own. A match made in heaven. Unless, of course, you were an ant.

Van Keuren sat, wrapping her arms around her knees in an effort to get as much of herself as possible into the shade of her oversized hat. Below, the dry landscape stretched endlessly in every direction. The only way she could be sure that the modern world even existed was her Land Cruiser, broken down at the base of the slope.

She tried to calculate how many species she'd discovered over the years but soon found her mind drifting back to the first. It had been twenty-five years ago this week that her father had come home with a slightly dented VCR and a box of tapes—an unheard-of luxury in the Namibian farming community where she grew up. She'd been barely eight at the time and was absolutely mesmerized by the children's videos, sitting for hours examining every nuance, memorizing every line. After a while, though, they'd started to get boring and she'd dug into the box again, finding a worn copy of *Alien* beneath a flap at the bottom. Her father had insisted that it would give her nightmares, but she'd watched it anyway, transfixed by the creature that grabbed people's faces and gestated inside them.

Who would have thought that a horror movie hiding in the bottom of a box would spark an obsession that would define her life? Thank God it hadn't been a copy of *Rocky*. She'd probably be getting beat up in some ring right now.

The angle of the sun continued to dip, but that did nothing to diminish the temperature she guessed was creeping up on forty-five Celsius. Time to retreat back to the shade of her truck.

Down was easier, the loose dirt allowing for a semi-controlled standing slide to the bottom. Once back on solid ground, she dabbed a little water on a rag, looking in the side-view mirror as she unstuck the blond hair from her cheeks and wiped the dust and salt from around her mouth.

Her hat was large enough to border on sombrero but wasn't enough to keep her skin from turning deep red and her nose from looking like it was molting. Despite her

family tracing its history in Namibia back for generations, she was cursed with the smooth, fair skin her mother had taken such pride in.

Deciding it was hopeless, she reached into a cooler full of melted ice and pulled out the makings of a gin and tonic. A couple of prospectors had driven by six days ago and assured her that they'd tell the Toyota people in Windhoek that she was out there, but now she regretted refusing their offer of a ride out. Sometimes her single-mindedness could be a virtue, but mostly it just got her into trouble.

Sarie pressed her back against the vehicle and slid down the hot metal, settling in against the slightly cooler rear tire. She had no more than a day's water left in her primary container, but there was a spring a few kilometers away. Her food stores were a bit better, but it didn't really matter—she could live off the land pretty much indefinitely if she had to. The real problem was the gin. There were only a few centimeters left, and that was just unacceptable.

She frowned and sighed quietly. When the sun went down, she'd have to start walking out. It was probably two days to the road and another day of waiting around for someone to drive by. What had happened to the note she'd written herself to buy a satellite phone? Probably in the glove box with all the other unread reminders.

Halfway into her third drink, a distant shape began to form in the heat distortion. At first she just thought it was the alcohol, but soon it coalesced into an outline that was distinctly human. She reached back through the truck's open door and pulled out her rifle, sighting through the scope at the approaching figure.

It was a boy of about sixteen with skin turned almost obsidian by a life spent outdoors. He was shoeless, wearing only a pair of khaki shorts and carrying a canvas sack over his bare shoulder.

She poured the last of her gin in celebration, sipping happily at the hot liquid as he drew nearer.

"Howzit!" she said when he came within earshot. "If you have an alternator in that sack, bru, then you're my hero."

He stopped in front of her, a look of confused concentration on his face. She tried Afrikaans with no more success and finally succeeded with the now very rusty Ndonga she'd learned from the people who had worked her family's farm.

"Yes," the boy responded, nodding wearily. "The car men in Windhoek gave it to my father and he told me to bring it here."

She dug a Coke and some food from her sweltering cooler, handing it to him before crawling into the back of the vehicle for her tools. "Rest in the shade. With a little luck, we'll be driving before dark."