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Warlord

Written by James Steel

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JAMES STEEL

Warlord

AVON

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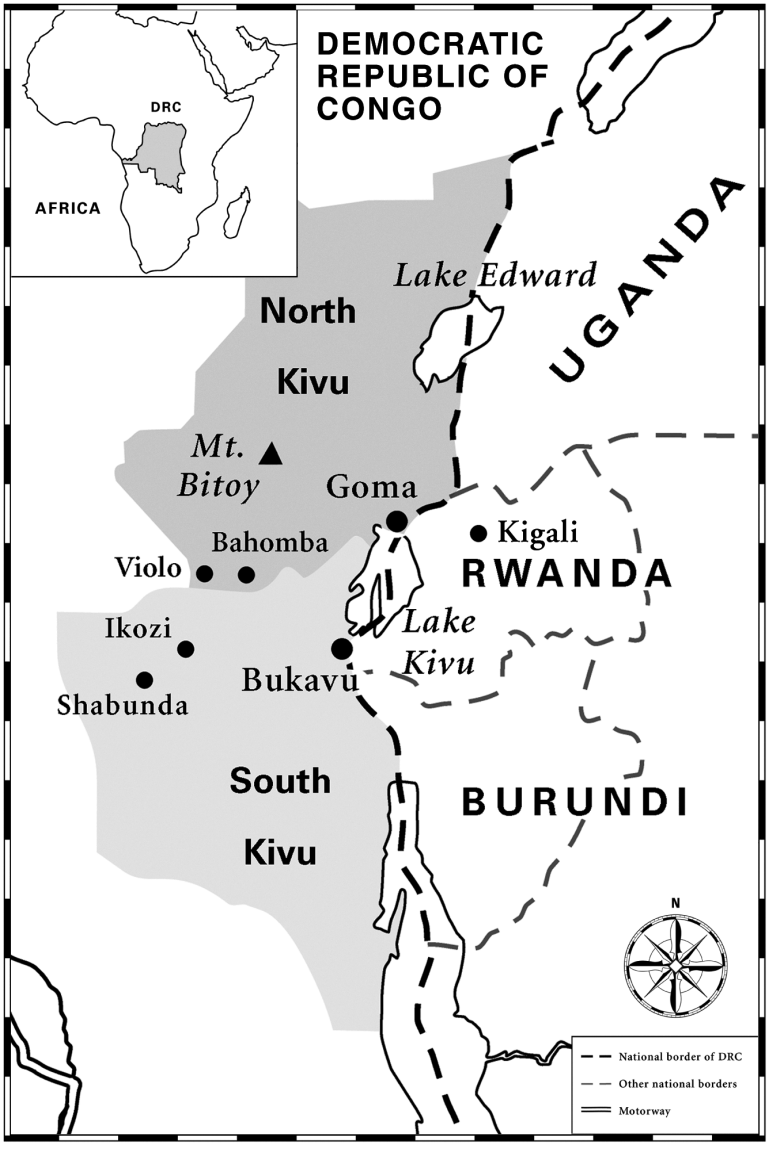
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DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO
DRC
AFRICA
UGANDA
Lake Edward
North Kivu
Mt. Bitoy
Goma
Kigali
RWANDA
Bahomba
Violo
Ikozi
Lake Kivu
Bukavu
Shabunda
South Kivu
BURUNDI
N
National border of DRC
Other national borders
Motorway

'There is no book on the Congo, we must write one ourselves.'

Congo Mercenary
Colonel Mike Hoare,
Commander of 5 Commando mercenary regiment,
deployed in eastern Congo, 1964.

In the Beginning

Chapter One

KIVU PROVINCE,
DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Eve Mapendo sees the figure lit by moonlight.

It has the body of a muscular man stripped to the waist and the head of a kudu, a dark antelope head with two heavy horns spiralling out of it like madness.

The creature stands in an opening in the forest on the hillside above her, at the front of a file of soldiers. They wear black cloth hoods over their heads with ragged holes cut for eyes and mouths. They stand in complete silence; the silver light frosts the surface of every leaf around them.

The horned head turns in her direction, the large eyes darkened by the shadow of its heavy brows.

Her pupils dilate wide as the adrenaline hits them. She clenches her throat muscles and painfully chokes off a scream. It cannot see her in the shadows of the doorway of her shack but she feels its gaze bear down on her like a hard hand gripping her shoulder, pushing her until she crouches on the ground.

The creature unslings the assault rifle from its shoulder, cocks the weapon and gestures to the soldiers to fan out and

move down the hill towards the refugee camp. They disappear into the trees.

A whimper of fear escapes her and the baby stirs inside the shack.

She knows what the creature is and she knows what it wants.

Joseph bares his teeth and screams at his enemy.

It's his first proper firefight and he wants to prove to his platoon leader, Lieutenant Karuta, that he can fight. He's fourteen or fifteen, maybe sixteen – he doesn't know. He was born in a refugee camp during a war and he never knew his parents.

He sees the enemy soldiers darting in and out of the trees across the small valley, a hundred metres from him now, firing wild bursts from their AK-47s and shouting insults. They are wearing a ragtag of green uniforms and coloured tee shirts. The bushes next to him twitch and shudder with the impact of their bullets, cut branches and leaves tumble down around him. The men in his platoon fire back with a cacophony of gunfire.

He glances across at Lieutenant Karuta who is yelling away and firing his rifle in long bursts, spraying bullets. Joseph brings his AK up to his shoulder and squints through the circular sight on the muzzle. The rifle is old and heavy, its metal parts scratched and its wooden stock stained a dark brown by the sweat of many tense hands that have clutched it during the decades of Congo's wars. He's often cursed its weight as the platoon trudged up and down the countless hills in the bush, but now it feels light and vital in his hands, an extension of himself growing out of his shoulder.

He pulls the trigger and the gun chatters, slamming back

hard into his collarbone. It clicks empty and he quickly ducks down, presses the magazine release, yanks it out, flips it over and shoves the spare one, strapped to it with duct tape, into the port. This is his first big firefight but he's practised these moves over and over again.

He doesn't know who the enemy are: one of the poisonous alphabet soup of groups in Kivu – PARECO, AFL-NALU, FJPC, one of the government FARDC brigades, even a rival FDLR battalion or one of the many *mai-mai* militias from the different tribal groups: Lendu, Hema, Nandi, Tutsi. No one knows what the hell is going on out in the bush.

This lot look like a local *mai-mai* militia. Joseph's platoon of soldiers are from the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda, more commonly known by their French acronym, the FDLR. They bumped into the *mai-mai* by accident as they were coming down the valley side into the village and the fighting broke out in a confused way.

An RPG whooshes off near him, the white fire of the propellant shoots across the valley and the rocket explodes against a tree. The enemy gunfire slackens and they begin to withdraw. This is subsistence warfare and no one actually wants to get killed – what's the point? You can't steal, eat or rape if you're dead.

The FDLR soldiers that he is with start yelling and cheering. Lieutenant Karuta is next to him and Joseph looks at his excited face, eyes filled with laughter. The lieutenant is his father figure. His own father was an FDLR soldier killed when he was a baby, somewhere in the middle of the big Congo war. No one knows where or when – over five million people died so it's not like anyone paid much attention to him.

Lieutenant Karuta is forty and a *génocidaire* from the old days in Rwanda. He is a big man in green army fatigues with

a wispy beard patched with white that he grows to distinguish himself from the young men under his command.

He waves his rifle joyfully in the air and Joseph joins in. The village is theirs; they must get there before the peasants run off.

They charge down the valley side, jumping over tangles of vines and bursting through bamboo thickets. The ragged line of cheering fighters rushes out of the shade of the trees and into the sunshine. They hold their rifles over their heads as they bound through the waist-high grass towards the collection of round mud huts with thatched conical roofs on the flat land at the bottom of the valley. Villagers burst out of the huts and start running around screaming in panic. Women try to grab their kids, old men stumble and fall, chickens fly up, goats run around bleating. Joseph is laughing with excitement. He's hungry after weeks in the deep bush living on pineapples and snails.

A woman in a red and blue wrap bursts up from a clump of grass to his right, squawking like a parrot, flapping one arm and dragging a goat on a string with the other. Lieutenant Karuta is onto her, changing direction and chasing fast as she flees down a path into a field of head-high maize. Joseph stumbles, recovers and follows him.

He rushes down the narrow path, the tall green stems blurring past him on either side. Lieutenant Karuta catches up with the woman quickly, kicks the goat out of the way and shoves her in the back so she goes sprawling. The goat runs on over her and the lieutenant has a moment of indecision – do I grab the goat or her?

But her shrieks excite him and he looks down at her on the ground in front of him. 'Get the goat!' he shouts to Joseph who squeezes past him and races down the path. The screaming starts.

Weird high-pitched animal shrieks come out of the night from all around the refugee camp. It turns her blood to cold liquid fear in her veins.

Eve crouches inside her shack clutching her baby, thinking, 'No human being can make that sound.'

She is nineteen, with a broad face, oval eyes, a blunt nose and smooth brown skin. Short and stocky, she wears a patterned *pagne* wrapped around her body and a plastic cross on a string round her neck. Her free hand clutches it involuntarily.

She and her nine-month-old daughter, Marie, are alone in a shelter at the edge of the camp. She has blown out her tiny candle and crouches in terror in the darkness at the back of the hut. It is ten feet long by four feet high; the walls are made of palm leaves woven onto sticks that are fixed to a frame of branches and she can hear everything outside. A piece of blue and white UNHCR plastic sheeting completes the curved roof. Her boyfriend, Gabriel, proudly made a door for her out of a corrugated iron sheet tied onto the branch frame with some electrical flex he found. He showed her how to tie it shut before he left – 'That will keep you safe!'

The camp mongrels started barking at the attackers as they came near but this turns to frightened whimpering once the screaming starts. She can hear the soldiers shouting now in Swahili, 'Over there! Look in that one over there!' 'Open up! Open the door!'

Screams of fear come from her neighbours in return.

'Open the door, or I'll kill you!'

Some confused banging and shouting.

'Where is it? Where is the albino?'

More sobbing and crying and then the dull sound of blows and screaming.

Her blood pounds so loud in her ears, she is sure they can hear it. She tries to still her heart – if she can make herself very quiet and very small she might escape. They want her baby but she can't give it up. Marie starts crying and she forces her hand over her mouth, pressing her face into her breast and smelling her milky baby smell one last time.

The shouting nearby has gone quiet. She hears footsteps approaching the hut. The thin corrugated iron sheet is all there is between her and them. A hand grabs the edge of it and tries to open the door but the flex holds it fast to the branch frame. There is a grunt of anger and then the iron bangs loudly as a machete hacks at the flex. Heaving, banging, tearing, they pull the door off its flimsy hinges and throw it to one side.

The demonic figure silhouetted in the moonlight is half man and half animal. The kudu head and horns look huge. It is stripped to the waist and muscular and in the flat silver light she can see the artery in its neck, beating fast just under the rim of the headdress. It is breathing hard and beads of sweat roll down its chest. The smell of the forest pours into the hut, musty and damp.

Eve cowers on the floor and looks up, wide-eyed in terror. Her hand moves to hold the baby tighter and Marie lets out a loud wail.

The creature holds its Kalashnikov in its right hand and stretches out its left to her. Eve makes a noise of denial, just a whimper. The Kudu is enraged and bellows at her before ducking its long horns under the roof and grabbing her arm. Its fingers are like steel, biting deep into her flesh, dragging her out of the doorway, clutching the baby in one arm. She is screaming now with fear, 'No! No! No!'

As soon as she is out in the open, a soldier in a black

cloth hood shouts excitedly at the sight of the pale baby and hits her in the back with the butt of his rifle. A rib cracks and she makes an *oof* sound as the air is forced out of her.

She loses her grip on the child and the Kudu grabs it by one arm and lifts it up in the air. It throws back its horned head and howls in triumph. The other members of the gang all join in howling and firing their rifles in the air.

Eve lies winded on the ground until they finish celebrating. The baby is taken away and then they look down at her. Rough hands grab her under her arms and throw her on her back and tear off her *pagne*. As the first man presses his heavy weight on her stomach, something inside her says, 'This isn't happening.'

But the tearing and jabbing continues and she thinks, 'Why are you doing this to me, God? Why have you made this terrible country?'

Chapter Two

'We are going to make a new country, Mr Devereux.'

The Chinese businessman looks at him closely to gauge his reaction.

Alex Devereux has the face of a man with strong feelings deeply controlled.

Dark tides run just under the surface but you will never find out what drives them.

His eyes lock onto the businessman's and flicker with interest before a shutter comes down and he glances away to look out of the window over the lawns of his country house.

Alex has a stern cast to his face, the habit of command engraved on his features by his time as a major in the Household Cavalry and his subsequent career as a mercenary commander. He is six foot four, broad shouldered, lean and fit, running every day up and down the hills of his Herefordshire estate – 'exercising his demons' he calls it.

Outwardly he is dressed like a modern gentleman with jeans, loafers and button-down shirt, black hair neatly trimmed; he's just turned forty and there is some salt and pepper at the temples. But there is a lot more to him than that.

At the moment he is very relaxed with one arm thrown

over the back of the old Chesterfield and his long legs stretched out in front of him. It's April, a shower is thrashing the rose bushes about outside, and it's cold so he's lit a log fire in the oak-panelled drawing room of Akerley, the Devereux country house where he lives alone. His family has been there nearly a thousand years, since Guy D'Evereux was granted the land by William the Conqueror. He is currently restoring the house with money from his Russian adventures but it is still always freezing cold.

He looks back at Mr Fang Xei Dong and says, 'That sounds interesting,' without any feeling.

It is a measure of how much more relaxed he is about life than before his success that he can be so detached about such a huge project. He refused to go up to London for the meeting and only agreed to it if it was at Akerley. It is also a measure of how interested in him the businessman must be that he agreed to the demand, arriving just after lunch in the back of a chauffeur-driven Mercedes.

Alex was surprised by Fang when his long limbs unfolded themselves like a daddy longlegs from the car door. He is northern Chinese, as tall as the Englishman, with wavy black hair, blue eyes and an angular face with cheekbones that seem painfully large. His skin is smooth and he looks to be about thirty.

When he arrived he strode up the imposing stone steps of the house towards Alex, full of confidence, completely unfazed by his first time in the heart of the English countryside. He thrust his hand out, 'Hello, my name is Fang Xei Dong but my business name is Simon Jones.'

His English is American-accented but it still has the flat, staccato Chinese diction. He clearly knows that no Westerner will ever get the sliding tones of his name right and doesn't want them to embarrass them with untoward

mispronunciations. He cheerfully laughs off Alex's polite attempts at saying his name. 'Don't worry, in Congo I am called Monsieur Wu. It's the only Chinese name they can pronounce.'

He talks in rapid bursts, his long arms often reaching forwards as he speaks, as if trying to get hold of some perceived future.

He wears the casual uniform of the modern global businessman: neatly pressed chinos, button-down blue shirt with a pen in his top pocket and iPod earphones hanging down over his top button, a casual black blazer and loafers. When he settles himself in the drawing room he sets out an iPad and two BlackBerries on the coffee table in front of him that beep and chirrup frequently.

He sits forward on the leather armchair now and pushes his narrow-lensed titanium glasses back up his nose with a rapid unconscious dab of his hand; they slip off the bridge of his nose because his head jerks about as he speaks.

'This operation is completely covert at the moment but I understand from my contacts in the defence community that you are used to operating in this manner?'

Alex just narrows his eyes in response.

'I am referring to your operation in Central African Republic, which I understand was a Battlegroup level command?'

Alex nods. He is very cagey about his past activities. His CAR mission has achieved legendary status in the mercenary community but they don't know the half of it. Any mention of the word Russia or any possible operations he was involved in there and he clams up completely.

Fang is reassured by his discretion.

'This operation will require that level of skill and more. To be candid with you, we realise that it is . . .' he pauses

'. . . unconventional, from an international relations point of view, and we would prefer to work with a discreet operator such as yourself rather than one of the big defence contractors. They are much more . . . conventional,' he finishes, sounding evasive.

Alex knows that by conventional he means law-abiding. He nods politely in acceptance of the point but winces internally. It wasn't the sort of reputation he had sought at the start of his career. He had always wanted to be able to serve his country for his whole life; major general was what he had been hoping for. Somehow things just didn't work out like that.

Fang blasts on regardless. 'I represent a consortium of Chinese business interests that will lease Kivu Province off the Congolese government for ninety-nine years. Under the terms of the lease it will effectively be ours to do what we want with.'

He stretches out his arms and says with a note of wonder in his voice, 'In Operation Tiananmen we are going to set up a new country and bring order out of anarchy!'

Alex looks at him quizzically. 'Is that Tiananmen as in Square?'

'Yes, it means "the mandate of heaven".'

'What's that?'

'It's the ancient Confucian right to rule, the basic authority that any government has to have in order to form a country. And you are going to establish it, Mr Devereux. It is our new vision for the world.'

Gabriel Mwamba is twenty-one and in love.

He is an itinerant salesman, pushing his *tshkudu* cargo-scooter uphill along a narrow track through the forest, breathing hard and sweating, beads of it stand out in his

black, wiry hair like little pearls. The tendons across his shoulders and neck stand out and feel like red-hot wires.

He has covered thirty miles in two days over the hills; today he started out at 4am. To dull the pain he is thinking about Eve and how he is going to impress her when he gets back to the refugee camp where she lives. He is an ugly man and knows it, so he realises he has to compensate for it in other ways – he will be a successful businessman.

When he met Eve last year he liked the look of her, small and stocky with good firm breasts and smooth skin. When he heard of her rejection by her husband because of her albino baby, he knew she was the one for him. A fellow outcast. She looked so sad and he just wanted to put a smile on her face.

His own features have been carelessly assembled: his jaw is too big, he has tombstone teeth, puffed-out cheeks and heavy eyebrows. His body looks odd, composed of a series of bulges: a large head, powerful shoulders, protruding stomach and bulging calf muscles. It's all out of proportion with his short legs, a broad trunk and long arms. Because he knows he looks unusual his face has an anxious, eager-to-please look that irritates people and leads them to be crueller to him than they would otherwise be. However, Gabriel is an optimist with big plans and he never gives up.

He has been reading a French translation of a self-help book – *I Can Make You a Millionaire!* – written by an American business guru. He has absorbed a lot about spotting opportunities in the market and is sure he is onto one now. Market intelligence is key to these breakthroughs and he listens to his battered transistor radio once a day (to preserve the batteries, which are expensive) to catch the main radio bulletin from Radio Okapi, the UN radio station that broadcasts throughout Kivu.

The local Pakistani UN commander was on the bulletin talking in very bad French about the success of their recent operation against the FDLR and how they had opened up the road into the village of Pangi and installed a Joint Protection Team to allow the market to be held there on Saturday.

Immediately Gabriel knew this was his opportunity. He got together all his money and bought a load of consumer goods off another trader who hadn't heard the news and was selling them cheap. Pangi had been inaccessible for months so they would be crying out for what he had to offer, and that meant profit. As the self-help book put it: 'Adversity is spelt OPPORTUNITY!' It's a big investment but he is going to make a killing.

The *tshkudu* he pushes is loaded up with old USAID sacks containing cheap Chinese-manufactured goods: soap, matches, batteries, condoms, combs, print dresses, needles and thread, some tins of tuna (way past their sell-by date), boxes of smuggled Ugandan Supermatch cigarettes and six umbrellas in a bundle. He also has sacks of charcoal from the charcoal trading network throughout the province – he is following one of their secret paths through the woods.

It is heading downhill now into Pangi. The *tshkudu* is heavy and tugging at his grip. It's six feet long and made of planks – he built it himself. He hauls back on the handlebars to prevent it from running away from him, digging the toes of his flip-flops into the mud. The trail comes out of the trees and onto a dirt road leading to the village, where he passes the local massacre memorial. The date and number of people killed are scorched with a poker onto a wooden board nailed to a tree: 20 July 1999, 187 people. He doesn't give it a second look; every village has one from the war.

He is looking to the future and full of hope. At the moment he is a small-time trader, but one day he will graduate to be one of *les grosses légumes* – the big vegetables, the businessmen in the regional capitals of Goma or Bukavu, running an internet café or a trucking company.

A jolt of fear goes through Gabriel and he stops daydreaming. His step falters and he wants to run away but they have seen him already and to show fear would invite an attack. Three soldiers with Kalashnikovs are lounging at the side of the road on a log, smoking and staring at him through their sunglasses. Like everyone in Kivu, Gabriel is well practised at avoiding attention from the police or the army: his head drops, his eyes look at the ground and his body seems to halve in size as he pushes the *tshkudu* towards them.

The UN commander said there would be a Joint Protection Team in place but there don't seem to be any Pakistani soldiers around. That the three men are wearing the plain, dark green uniform of the government army, the FARDC, is bad enough, but what makes them even more of a threat is that they have the distinctive blue shoulder flashes of the 64th Brigade. The Congolese army is made up of militia groups that have been integrated into it over the years and the 64th Brigade is a former *mai-mai* group, a tribal militia of the Shi people in South Kivu.

Gabriel is terrified of them because he is a Hunde, a member of the Rwandan tribe brought into the province by the Belgians during the colonial era as cheap labour. They are hated by the '*originaires*', the indigenous Congolese peoples.

If he can just get past this group then he can blend into the market, do his business and sneak out with the crowd at the end of the day. His eyes are wide with fear but he

keeps them lowered as he passes the soldiers. Their heads turn and they watch him intently.

Sophie Cecil-Black is feeling carsick and frazzled.

The white Land Cruiser swings round another switchback on the dirt road up the hill and her head swoons horribly.

They've been doing this since six o'clock this morning and it's early afternoon now. Up three thousand feet from Goma to Masisi and then down three thousand feet into the Oso valley and then up another three thousand feet to here.

God, one more swing and I am going to puke.

Saliva pours into her mouth but she tenses her throat muscles and forces the vomit back down.

She looks out of the window. Everywhere around her are stunning views out over rugged hills covered with grassland and small fields. It reminds her of a family holiday to Switzerland in the summer, but she is not in the mood to appreciate the beauty now.

Sophie is thirty-one, six foot tall and slim with straight brown hair, a striking face and a strident manner. Some men think she is very beautiful, others think she is very ugly. It's the Cecil-Black nose that makes the difference: secretly she used to want to file down the prominent bridge of it when she was a teenager but she has learned to live with it now. She wears a tight green GAP tee shirt, hipster jeans and green Croc shoes.

The Cecil-Blacks are a branch of the Cecil family who ran the British government from the time of Elizabeth I. Sophie went to Benenden, her father is a stockbroker and her mother is very concerned that she is over thirty and not married. Sophie couldn't care less about that: she knows she is called to higher things and has been doing her best to break the mould of being a safe, Home Counties girl ever

since she refused to join the Brownies aged seven. She has a first in PPE from Oxford, a Masters in Development Economics from the School of Oriental and African Studies and an ethnic tattoo across the small of her back.

She is now a project manager with an American humanitarian aid charity, Hope Street, which has a large presence in Kivu and specialises in work with street kids, schooling and training them but she also does general humanitarian work. She leads a team of fifteen people based in Goma, where they have a large training facility.

One of her team, Natalie Zielinski, is sitting in the backseat. She doesn't get carsick. She's a small, bubbly Texan with brown, frizzy hair in a bob that never quite works. Sophie likes her optimism, but sometimes finds her irritating.

Nicolas, their Congolese driver, is a slim, self-effacing young man, very glad to have such a cushy job driving for an NGO, it's a lot easier and safer than the backbreaking life of the peasants in the bush. He is quiet and calm with the soft manner of a lot of Congolese men. He drives smoothly but even that can't iron out the constant bumping from side to side on the dirt road and those horrible lurching turns.

They started so early because they need to get a load of vaccines to a remote clinic before they go off in the heat. Several thousand dollars worth of polio, hepatitis, measles and other vaccines are packed into coolboxes in the back of the jeep. Once they get them to the clinic at Tshabura they can go into the solar-powered fridge and will be fine for the big vaccination day that they have set up later that week. The clinic is at the head of the Bilati valley and local field workers have spread the word around the farms and villages there, as well as advertising it on Radio Okapi. They are expecting two hundred children to be brought in to be inoculated.

The other reason they started at six is that Tshabura is on the edge of the area under the nominal control of the UN forces. The security situation in Kivu is always volatile; they listen to the radio every morning for the UN security update, like a weather forecast. At the moment their route is Condition Bravo – some caution is warranted, no immediate threat but follow normal security procedures. Condition Echo means evacuate urgently to save your life but it doesn't happen often. Lawlessness is just part of everyday life in Kivu and Sophie has become used to the daily list of rapes, muggings and burglaries, as well as keeping track of which roads are closed due to militia activity.

After a prolonged security assessment and unsuccessful wrangling with the UN to do the delivery by helicopter, Sophie got fed up with waiting and decided that they could race there in the daytime, get to the clinic, stay overnight in their compound and then race back the next day. White NGO workers are generally safe in Kivu, apart from the usual hassling for bribes from the police and army, but she doesn't want to be out on the roads after dark when armed groups roam at will.

All these factors are weighing on her mind and she's also irate because they are behind schedule. They had a puncture on a track that had been washed out by heavy rain and then lost an hour getting over the river at Pinga where a truck had got a wheel stuck in a hole in the old metal bridge.

The car at last comes to the top of the hill and Nicolas pulls up so Natalie can look around the surrounding area and check the map. She scans either side of the jeep and all she can see are lines of green hills in bright sunshine receding into the distance. It is completely quiet but for the noise of a breeze buffeting the car.

'Daniel Boone would get lost out here,' she mutters, as

she looks back and forth between the map and the view. 'One hill begins to look much the same as another.' The map has proved inaccurate already that day and there are no signposts anywhere.

'Look, can we just get on with it, please,' Sophie snaps.

'OK, OK,' Natalie says cheerfully. 'We're on the right route.'