

T H E M O U N T A I N



*United Nations: October 22<sup>nd</sup>*

**M**ORGAN EXITED THE CAB at the library on 47<sup>th</sup> street. Walking to the U.N. building from there would give him a chance to recover from the Lusaka night flight and reacquaint himself with Manhattan. He had a half-hour pad, so he started trudging in the direction of P.J. Clarks on Third Avenue, an old haunt. Memories came flooding back: good food, great places to hang out, a girl, and four days of serendipity before reporting for Marine Corp duty.

The streets were packed with frowning humanity emerging from the subway labyrinth, hordes of ants with specialized tasks. At P.J.'s Morgan turned left onto 57<sup>th</sup> Street and passed St Patrick's Cathedral, checking the clock between the twin spires. It had rained last night, and the air was unusually crisp and clean in the bright morning light. It was going to be an Indian-summer day.

The reverie was short lived. Dr. Courtney's death lay heavy, and it had robbed him of sleep he should have gotten on the plane. He wanted whatever was going to happen here to be over as quickly as possible.

A block away from the U.N. building the streets and sidewalks were cordoned off around inspection stations. Morgan emptied his pockets, dumped the contents of his backpack, and walked through an archway scanner similar to the ones at the airport. He hadn't thought about it until now. Khaki attire and a field pack were probably out of place, but it didn't seem to phase the hardened security.

Inside the huge glass-encased main floor, elevator banks, the escalator to the cafeteria and lounges, and all the formal hustle bustle appeared exactly as it had been two years ago when he'd interviewed for the ISUP job.

A large information counter stood out near the center of the floor-space, and Morgan checked in with a very cute, uniformed Pakistani girl. He answered her questions, but every time she looked up from typing on the computer, she had a strange smile on her face.

She picked up the phone, mumbled something he couldn't make out, handed over a plastic pass with the same smile, and pointed to the security check at the elevators. The pass card had a magnetic strip like a credit card. He pushed it into a slot, and the elevator doors opened. It automatically rose to the fourth floor, leaving him wondering if it would have stopped any place else.

Shuffling out of the elevator, he turned away a flurry of security-card memories and shuddered at the thought of being sucked into the same world he'd given up in the military.

The room was ornate, carved wood everywhere. Country plaques, flags, and coats of arms were displayed along the walls with long inscriptions. Intricate cornices outlined the ceiling and came to sculpted corners, and a dozen or so large, brass antique chandeliers

hung on chains from the dark wood ceiling. It was humbling, and he felt out of place in his boots and field clothes. But at least they were clean, the khakis semi-pressed, and he'd shaved on the plane.

Three steps up to the reception square he was faced with a choice of greeters, all dressed in the same dark-blue suits and yellow ties like sophisticated cowboys. Signs indicated languages. Morgan selected the English position, commanded by a young redheaded guy with a British accent. He'd been expected, and Dr. Rao would be down shortly. He asked if Morgan wanted coffee and a continental plate. Morgan politely declined and followed directions to a lounge filled with the smell of lemon polish and old, under-stuffed antique furniture. Only four people were waiting this morning, well dressed with brief cases, munching on bread and sipping coffee.

Morgan took a seat, but before he could get to a magazine Dr. Rao came up from behind and stood in front of him, smiling with his arms held out. They shook with both hands and leaned into a hug.

Rao was a giant of a man in his late 50s and in solid shape. A former Indian ambassador to the United Nations, he'd held the position as Deputy Secretary General for eleven years. "Good to see you, John Henry. I'm so sorry it's under these tragic circumstances. It's been two years, hasn't it?"

"Yes sir, and a bit more. I still recall the interview process as one of the strangest experiences of my life."

"I remember well," Dr Rao said gently. "Those were compressed times. ISUP needed to be quick-started. Professor Courtney wanted you so badly. I think Donald would have been much happier with you at his side. He trusted you explicitly. But that's in the past. We were all so sorry your father's death intervened."

"I appreciate your confidence, sir, and I know you must be very busy. You said Professor — "

"Let's go to my office where we can talk."

Dr. Rao led the way over connecting stringers of plush blood-red carpet, turning down a wide hallway to another reception area. Morgan had been here before when he'd met briefly with the Secretary General. Two office suites were opposed with a common waiting vestibule. The receptionist stood and smiled widely as they were walking through. She wasn't the same one, but Morgan waved anyway. Dr. Rao sidestepped and said something to her, and then motioned him to follow.

"Do you want something to snack on, John Henry?" he asked over his shoulder. "A coffee perhaps?"

"No, nothing thanks."

Morgan followed him into an office almost exactly like the Secretary General's, old antiques in the corners, dark wooden walls with large pictures of past dignitaries, standing brass ashtrays, silver cigar box, and a heavy mahogany coffee table surrounded by leather couches and chairs.

Sliding behind a massive wooden desk, Dr. Rao indicated a straight-backed Victorian chair with a thick red seat-pad. Morgan unslung his backpack, laid it on the floor with his jungle hat, and took the chair at the side of the desk.

"We want you to consider undertaking an assignment as a U.N. Representative. Do you smoke, John Henry?"

Morgan said no and was soon fidgeting in the seat, watching Dr. Rao open the shiny ornate box at the front of the desk, process a cigar, and light up.

"Very well then. To bring you up to date, the body of our friend is being held in Belize by Minister Byron Jacobson, in their equivalent of a temporary morgue. It will be returned to us here on one of our own airplanes sometime tomorrow. His daughter, the only living relative, has given permission for an autopsy — would you be comfortable assigning your responsibilities in Zambia to a senior graduate

student for say a week or so? I understand from speaking with Mitchell Church, ISUP's Director of Operations, that you have several students with three summers of project experience."

"Yes, Gallagher could handle it, but Mary Ellen is fully capable of doing anything I can do."

"Good. I was counting on that — but I have something else in mind for your talented and rather headstrong Dr. Rollins."

"I don't think I'd describe her quite that way."

"As I recall, charming characteristics you share in common. But let us move on. The assignment. I've laid out some information in the conference room for you to examine. You should get right at it, and we can talk again."

Morgan picked up his pack, tied the jungle hat to a strap, and followed Dr. Rao through an open door on the other side of the coffee-table arrangement. The conference room was vast and formal, the scent of wax and old leather, an environment designed for settling important world issues. Double doors marked an additional entry point. Another single door presumably led to the Secretary General's office. File folders, maps, and stacks of pictures were neatly arranged at one end of the table.

Dr. Rao pulled out three chairs in front of the documents and reached out to push an ashtray over to the head of the table. Coffee and tea service, bread, and fruits were pre-set, so it appeared Morgan was going to be here a while.

"I told you as much as I could in the cable. I do hope it didn't sound alarmist, but our protocols require the use of cables on important business. The insecure delivery method precluded going into detail. Almost two weeks ago Minister Jacobson called me directly — an unusual step. Procedure dictates communication through country ambassadors. He informed me — in rather a straight-laced manner as I remember — there'd been an incident in the western jungle, and Dr.

Courtney had been killed. The Belize government was keeping it quiet until it figured out exactly what happened, and the body was being held in a refrigerated room used for artifact preservation. He wouldn't discuss it further on the telephone, and asked if, after review of information he was sending by courier, would we consider providing a security unit to police the mountainous area where the alleged *incident* took place. It was all very fuzzy at that point until the dossier arrived — which you will find at the first chair,” he said pointing. “And yesterday, at Jacobson’s direction, I received a translation of a recently-discovered Mayan diary from an archeologist at the University of Mexico. It sheds considerable light on this potential fiasco.” He waved a hand. “You will find it at the second chair. The remaining stack contains several detailed satellite maps we requested from the United States. They supplement the photographs and maps contained in the dossier. I want you to take whatever time you need, right now, and go through the information. Get your own sense of where we are. We’ll talk again when you finish. And be advised, we’ve already put the wheels in motion for the security unit. We asked NATO for the assistance, as we did in Zambia. And by the way, I understand Commander Barr, the NATO officer we work with, is an old friend of yours. But I’ll leave you now. If you need anything, ask Olga. She’s the receptionist just outside the double doors.” He nodded at the table and stood. “Coffee, scones, biscuits, fruit, whatever you like,” he said, and marched toward the door to his office.