



## ONE

Horia Ursu, former professional wrestler and current Romanian gangster—something he'd fallen into as naturally as he'd fallen and tumbled in his previous career—sat in a blind on the edge of the island's grasslands. He was watching a rhino with his three companions through the rather large slit in the blind. They'd paid a lot of money to come here and watch this rhino, among other animals. Well, not just watch—shoot, too, but there hadn't been much of that going on this morning. Their weapons all lay on a table next to their low-slung chairs.

Horia observed John Gustat with special interest. The other two men, Jimmy Tau, a white arms smuggler from Johannesburg, and Nathan Colquhoun, the liquor baron turned smuggler from Washington D.C., he had known via e-mail for a couple of years. There weren't a lot of blacks back in Romania, and Horia found himself again envying the almost-purple brown of Colquhoun's skin, even the sweet-potato tint to Tau, victim of what looked like the world's worst tan. Horia himself was pale as a grub, allergic to sunlight, avoiding it when he could because he burned easily.

White, brown, or purple, Gustat was another matter. Gustat claimed to be a captain of industry, a billionaire risk-taker, who had been in U.S. Special Forces and now, at the edge of sixty, had taken up big-game hunting. Which was why he, like the rest of them, had decided to come to this clandestine hunting lodge, cut off from communication with anyone.

But Horia wasn't so sure. He'd seen enough fakes in the ring to tell when something wasn't quite right. Beneath the healthy,

muscular exterior—Gustat had to be taking human growth hormone to look that good at his age—there lurked a secret and a sadness. Was what he was hiding personal or professional?

Still, Horia didn't mean to condemn the man with a glance. They'd brought Gustat here to test him, to see if maybe he might be persuaded to enter into an alliance with them—and Jimmy Tau was doing just that right now, while the rhino grazed peaceably and no one even thought about shooting it.

They'd been drinking thirty-year-old McClelland's whisky and smoking premium limited-edition Partagás cigars even though it was only eleven in the morning. This tended to make them less inclined to kill anything, at least right away, although God knew they'd assembled quite an arsenal. Gustat had brought the booze, but wasn't drinking much of it, which Horia also thought odd. The sweet-harsh smell of cigar smoke curled around the inside of the blind. How long until the rhino smelled it? Or, hell, heard them talking.

"Always ways to make more money," Tau was saying. "Just depends on your will. That's why some lions thrive and some get toothless and starve to death, isn't that right, Colquhoun?"

That was Colquhoun's cue to nod in agreement; he'd been drinking the McClelland's like it was soda pop, so the nod was a little haphazard.

*Here it comes . . .* Horia downed his shot of whisky in one quick, slow-burning gulp. Every time Colquhoun talked Horia wanted to run out of the blind and amble back to the lodge, three miles away. That was one of the problems with being a criminal—a lot of the people you hung out with bored you to death, especially the ones never met in the flesh before. Colquhoun's online persona was a lot less annoying. Not to mention that Colquhoun and Tau, as far as Horia could see, had fallen into a disgusting macho love for one another's nefarious accomplishments.

"See," Colquhoun said, "and I've always held that this is true, because what's true is true, Jimmy's getting at a

fundamental rule: that multi-billionaire is better than billionaire, Gustat.”

Funny, how they all called him Gustat, didn't think of him for a second as “John.” No such luck for an ex-wrestler who even Colquhoun and Tau had recognized when they'd first seen him five days before. Everybody always used “Horia,” no matter what the context. Even if he was hiring a contract killer.

Gustat looked at Colquhoun and at Jimmy Tau, and then, finally and most penetratingly, at Horia.

Horia had to smile, even though it was a bit of a tell. Clearly it hadn't been lost on Gustat that Horia hadn't been drinking much either, except when Colquhoun talked.

“I've made as much as I want to,” Gustat said. He had taken out his .40 Smith & Wesson, a Walther P99, as sweet a weapon as Horia had seen, and begun cleaning it.

So: Gustat didn't want to drink. Showed no real interest in the business at hand. Or in the hunt, for that matter. Maybe Horia was just bored, but he found the man fascinating. You paid all of this money for an illegal hunt in the middle of nowhere, at the butt-end of the world, and this was your attitude?

True, maybe Gustat had come here not for business or the kill, but because he got a thrill from hanging out with thieves and gangsters. Horia had seen the type before, bled them for enough money to make them pay for their addiction.

“That poor rhino out there is just begging to be shot,” Horia said, to test the waters. “Look nice on someone's wall.”

“It's not going anywhere,” Jimmy Tau said. “Not unless you spook it, Gustat, with all of that unnatural talk of having made enough money.”

“Yeah, that's some bullshit there, that's the truth, if I've ever heard bullshit,” Colquhoun said.

Horia looked at Gustat and Gustat looked back. Horia could tell they had the same thought: Colquhoun definitely heard a lot of bullshit, that is, if he'd ever listened to himself talk.

Gustat put down the Walther, said, “Okay, how about you just tell me what you’ve got in mind. It’ll save a whole lot of time for all of us.”

Now there was a shocker.

Horia grinned, took a draw of his cigar, said, “Americans are just like Romanians. Passionate, direct, and to the point. I like that.”

“Yeah, well, I’m American, too,” Colquhoun said, “and I prefer things be a little more *indirect*, just in case anyone’s listening.”

Out in the long grass, the rhino raised its head, snorted, suddenly uneasy.

“He’s listening,” Jimmy Tau said. “He wants to be a partner, pardner.”

But Horia felt a prickle of unease. Now his attention was divided—between the conversation and the rhino. In Romania, having “split senses,” as his grandpa had put it, often saved you from a shotgun blast, a glass full of poison, or piano wire across the throat.

Gustat, too, he noticed, took a lot more interest in the rhino than in the conversation.

“Now, the deal is this,” Jimmy Tau was saying as a gentle breeze blew into the blind from the grassland, carrying the smell of rhino shit. “There are freedom fighters all across Africa who need good, dependable weapons—like the ones we have here . . .”

Horia carried a Beretta 93R and, just for today’s expedition, a Ruger M77 hunting rifle, while Colquhoun just had some piece of crap the lodge owner, Rath Preap, had loaned him, and Tau had brought a ridiculous Chinese QBZ-95 he’d modified into more of a hunter’s weapon because he apparently didn’t care if there was anything left of what he shot for a trophy. Or meat, for that matter.

“. . . now Horia’s got the muscle in case things go south, but what we need is a legitimate front. Trucks with a safe

brand name on them. Planes that won't be looked at too closely. Yeah, we could do it without that, but . . .”

Actually, Horia had counted on this trip being a holiday, but in his business, there really were no holidays, and so he knew he had been kidding himself. At forty-four he shouldn't have felt so tired, and yet he *was* tired—sick of the deals, the double-deals, the constant hustling required to remain illegal.

Thinking back, that was probably why, at the critical moment, he wasn't paying much attention to the others, was looking out, along with Gustat, at the placid rhino, which still had its head up, ears flicking off insects.