The Jack Courtney Adventures

Cloudburst
Thunderbolt

Look out for more . . .

WILBUR SMITH

WITH CHRIS WAKLING

CLOUDBURST

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PRESS

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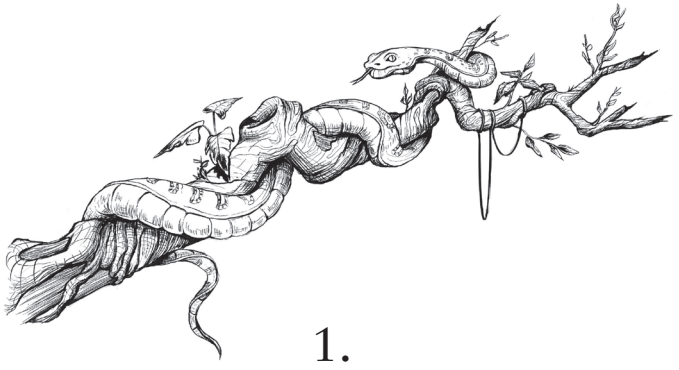
'How far that little candle throws the beams! So shines a good deed in a weary world.'

William Shakespeare

I dedicate this book to all my young readers
whose hearts are in flame for the right to win.

Wilbur Smith



1.

I was asleep when the airliner hit turbulence. It must have dropped a hundred metres in half a second. The swooping up-rush launched my stomach into my chest and my head grazed the ceiling before my bum slammed back into the seat. I opened my eyes as an electronic warning bell started pinging above us. The 'fasten seat belts' light came on.

'Bit late for that,' I said to Amelia beside me.

'I never unbuckle mine,' she explained, showing me the snug clasp before returning to whatever she was doing on her phone. Reprogramming it, probably.

'Of course you don't,' I said, just as the plane bounced hard again.

Mum craned round from the seat in front. 'You OK, Jack? Amelia?'

'Just fine . . . Why wouldn't we be?' we said over the top of one another.

The co-pilot's voice oozed out of the speaker, full of reassurance: 'Ladies and gentleman, we seem to have run

into some unexpected weather. We'll do our best to skirt it, but in the meantime, for your comfort and safety, we ask you to remain seated with your seat belt fastened.'

Beyond Amelia was the porthole window. I leaned across her to look out of it. The endless blue sky was dotted with occasional clouds, but it didn't look particularly stormy. I could make out the lush green rainforest below us without difficulty.

'Seems like a nice day to me,' I said.

'The Democratic Republic of Congo averages more thunderstorms per year than anywhere else on earth,' Amelia replied.

'Good to know. Still, not today, eh?'

As if to prove me wrong, at that moment the plane hit another airborne speed bump, hurling me sideways in my seat. I burst out laughing. Up until this point the trip from London to Kinshasa via Brussels had been long and boring. This was fun.

Mum, however, is a nervous passenger at the best of times. Through the seat gap ahead, I glimpsed her neck, rigid with fear. More loudly than she meant to, she said, 'Will the plane cope, Nicholas?' to Dad, who was in the seat next to hers.

'Of course,' he said, stroking her hand on the armrest.

Unfortunately, Amelia heard what Mum said too. Amelia always means well, more or less, but has a knack of saying the wrong thing. Now she leaned forward and said, 'Mrs Courtney, the wings on an Airbus A330 are tested to more than 5.2 metres of displacement. It would take an extraordinarily abrupt pressure differential to rip them off.'

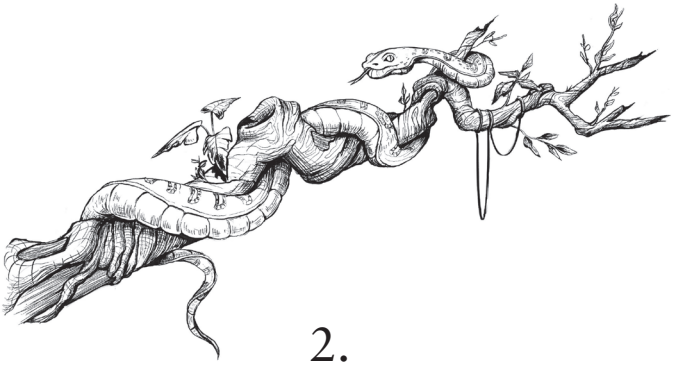
Mum withdrew her hand from under Dad's, her knuckles white.

'Where do you get this stuff?' I asked Amelia.

'What stuff?' she replied, genuinely confused.

Amelia's mother met mine on the maternity ward fourteen years ago; we've known each other since we were babies. How her mind works, though, I'll never understand. It's not short of processing power, I admit, but she uses that power for the strangest things.

'Amelia means we're perfectly safe, Mum,' I said, as another wedge of turbulence lifted me, grinning, from my seat. 'The wind's just giving us a helping hand. We'll be in Kinshasa in no time.'



2.

I was wrong about that. The jagged air got worse. Someone a few rows back threw up (and I mean up) and somebody near the front lost it completely and began wailing. A few minutes later, although I still couldn't see anything other than blue sky out of the window, the co-pilot's super-calm voice informed us that the weather had closed in on Kinshasa. For safety's sake, we were being diverted from N'Djili Airport to somewhere else beginning with *R*, or it might have been *D*. Either way, Amelia immediately informed us that it was five hundred kilometres away. This news turned Mum's fear to frustration: she forgot her concern that our wings might fall off and set to worrying that we would miss the first of the meetings she'd scheduled in the lead-up to the environmental summit she and Dad had flown all this way to attend.

I tried to placate her. 'It's only a few hours' drive, Mum.'

'On a tarmac motorway, yes,' Amelia pointed out. 'But that distance can take days on dirt roads, particularly in the wet season, which it is now,' she added helpfully.