

Outback Refuge Sample

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Chapter One

ALICE SPRINGS, CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

In almost the geographic centre of the Australian continent, Jennifer Bancroft stood under the overarching shade of a stately rivergum, her designer sunglasses battling glare from its snow-white trunk and the dry river's sandy bed. The desiccating heat didn't dampen her determination, her engaging smile a foil to the faces of her three companions. Companions still coming to terms with their recent ordeal. Companions all sporting cracked skin and blisters.

"Should have arrived by now." Mike Thompson glanced down Sturt Terrace towards the concrete causeway, the main crossing point over the sandy riverbed.

"No hurry." Jennifer's smile softened as she nodded to her copper-faced companion. She always tried to remain detached from her interviewees but after her two-hour grilling before the event, her re-

spect for the off-duty policeman had grown considerably. Pleased with her final editing, she was certain it would draw her viewers' attention.

Noting the swing of her other companions' heads, she also turned, eyes following the path of the battered white 'troopie' heading in their direction. A screech of brakes, and the Toyota stopped in front of the group.

"Apart from your swags and your hold-alls, everything we need is in the van." A distinctly southern African accent reached them despite the somewhat tinny clang of the van's door.

Jennifer froze. *No. Couldn't be.*

The driver jumped up onto the roof-rack. "Chuck your gear up and I'll tie it all down. I've got a spare swag for Mike's friend."

"Meet Robin." Mike advised as he waved his hand in the driver's direction.

Jennifer nodded acknowledgement, walked to the van and removed her sunglasses. Both faces flushed as their eyes met, instantly looking in the opposite direction.

"No need for an introduction." Eyes now steely, face severe, Jennifer ignored the driver and faced the others. "We've met."

An embarrassed silence cloaked the group, like the red dust that settled on every flat surface.

"Well, as there's no need for further introductions, we'd best get on the road." Mike tried to break the tension. "Need to arrive well before dusk."

Mike and the two women climbed through the back door and sat on the wafer-thin padding along the side of the van, Jennifer on one side, the others side-by-side opposite. Their African-American friend sat in the front passenger's seat and Robin commenced driving, his eyes never deviating from the road's white centre-line.

An awkward silence engulfed the Troopie as they headed for Heavytree Gap, the wide opening in the rust-red mountain range whose commanding presence dominated the town. The only sound the growl of off-road tyres forcing their way over smooth bitumen.

“Should take roughly an hour and a half,” announced Mike, attempting to shatter the oppressive stillness.

“You mean we’re travelling over a hundred kilometres just to see a sunset?” The ridges in Jennifer’s frown deepened.

“Not very far by Central Australian standards,” Mike explained as he placed his hand on his partner’s knee and gave a supportive squeeze. “But well worth it. Just wait and see.”

Beyond the town boundary, the rumble increased as the speedo reached 130 kilometres per hour.

“You must be exceeding the speed limit.” Jennifer’s lips were as if sucking a lemon.

The back of Robin’s neck reddened.

“130’s fine in an old girl like this,” said Mike. “Because of the huge distances in the Territory we have no speed limit on the major highways. They say there’s a bigger danger of people falling asleep if they drive too slowly. Unlike the rest of Australia, the NT police don’t need to spend endless hours setting speed traps.”

Jennifer shrugged, her reply a disagreeable grunt, frustrated at the ongoing silence. Her trip’s purpose had nothing to do with the out-back view at the end of their journey, but to discover every detail of the recent attack. Details from all around her who had been directly involved. She broke the silence. “You were all at the Blatherskite Park incident, weren’t you?”

It was all it took. They’d all suffered in some way, each having compartmentalised their memories, their fears and the event’s impact. Too traumatised to discuss the incident with others, Jennifer’s words

breached a fissure in their emotional dam wall. Finally addressing their suppressed denial, they began recounting the episode from their own perspective. Voices finally inundated the vehicle, each adding their piece to the catastrophe jigsaw. While a splinted hand, blisters and burns were the only physical reminders of their recent nightmare, all were coming to terms with their near-death experience. An experience which would forever deepen their already strong bond.

Only Jennifer Bancroft remained quiet, taking in every word, particularly focused on exploiting her friendship with the incident's two key players. Using her experience as one of the British Broadcasting Network's most experienced journalists she dug deeper, skilful questions probing both the incident itself and its impact on her fellow travellers. Her mind raced, determined to further expand the report she'd already aired across the globe.

But talk petered out as the Troopie neared the final disaster site, their comradeship suddenly frozen.

Unbelievable. Jennifer shivered at the devastation. She'd reported on many wars and conflicts and seen the effects of mortars, artillery and bombs. But this was different. The sparse, wilting vegetation was charred for a 300-metre radius, the tarmac road surface contorted, scorched, deformed.

She knew each had played a role, the trauma again commanding their minds as silence returned.

Chapter Two

NEWLY NAMED CITY OF HARARE, ZIMBABWE- RHODESIA

Six years earlier, also far inland from two great oceans, Inspector Robin Harwood sat in his claustrophobic office. An office on a different continent. In a different land.

A land which had experienced it all.

Squabbles, rivalry, migrations, invasions, abductions and wars. Acts as old as Man. Acts as old as time. From the ancient, pre-human beings to the primitive early tribes. From the great Bantu migrations to the gold trading civilisation of Great Zimbabwe. From the kidnapping

Arab slave traders to the Zulu impis' invasion from the south. Then the death and destruction of the white man's maxim machine guns.

And yet again, there'd been another fight for supremacy. Three tribes fighting for control, each convinced of the justness of their cause. The majority Shona tribes, the minority Matabele tribes, and the desperate tribe of white citizens.

And after fourteen years, the weapons were finally silent. For a short time at least. Only one victor and great would be their celebration. Bitter their revenge.

Face propped in his hands, the irritating clack, clack of a decrepit fan gave Robin no relief as it circulated the hot, dry air. Circulated the futility of the last fourteen years. He despaired that his beloved country had fallen to new rulers. Dismayed at the loss of all he held dear – a once happy family, the family farm, a loyal workforce that was as much part of his family as his mother and father. The rule of law. White friends and family killed and maimed. African friends and strangers killed, tortured and maimed for not supporting the insurgency.

Both whites and blacks uncertain of the years ahead.

His gut churned at the memories. The worst, the wedding day murder of his fiancée and mother by Mkondo, his one-time boyhood friend.

Soon, the highly productive family farm his father had carved out of the virgin bush would be in ruins. Seized as a war trophy by one of the new ruling elite or offered to their supporters, disintegrating into subsistence plots.

My spiritual home. But what options now?

Little did he know that sanctuary awaited half a world away. To another place well inland of two great oceans. In the town of Alice Springs in Australia's vast Northern Territory.

As an outgoing Special Branch intelligence police officer, he'd spent twelve years trying to halt the tide. But forces far greater than he had been at work. Insurgents backed by the communist might of China, the Soviet Union, North Korea, Cuba and the European Iron Curtain countries. Sanctions from one-time friends the UK and US. Forces far greater than those of his small country.

Didn't lose the military war, but certainly lost the political war.

The dark rectangle above the building entrance said it all. Stark against thirty years of faded paint, a rectangle now exposed to the sun after the removal of the sign announcing a British South Africa Police facility. The BSAP, an organisation dating back to the British South Africa Company which invaded, and for thirty years governed present-day Zambia, Malawi and Zimbabwe. The para-military police force that continued under British colonial rule and during Ian Smith's independent Rhodesia.

The wall's faded paint a stark reminder of a faded regime. Robin's lapel badges soon for the rubbish.

Despite the weight on his shoulders, there was one redeeming feature. A chance that Jennifer Bancroft might come back into his life. A smile crept across features furrowed by more than a decade of war.

But would their reunion end like so often in the past?

As a member of the old regime's intelligence service, Robin knew he was in Mugabe's sights. Unless of course, Mkondo got in first.

And as if on cue, in a cloud of dust a battered Mark 2 Jaguar screeched to a halt outside his office. Joshua Mkondo lept out of the once luxury car which pre-dated the country's ongoing sanctions, his suit lightweight, tailor made. Six armed henchmen followed, their crisp new uniforms matching their equally new Chinese BJ212 jeep that followed. They swept through the foyer as if they owned the

building, the metallic thud of brand new, hob-nail boots rattling the steel treads as they tramped up the staircase. Mkondo's men remained in the corridor.

Robin looked up as Mkondo strode into his office, returning the black glare of his deadly enemy. Loathing charged the room. Not just of two men who'd fought on opposite sides of a decade-long war; their loathing was lifelong. The lethal eye of the intruder's pistol swept to Robin's head.

Stabbing pain seared through Mkondo's body as he tenderly cupped his groin with his remaining hand, the hatred of his victim engulfing his every cell.

Gut in turmoil, the fingers on Robin's hand automatically gripped the wide gold band on his right finger, rotating it an automatic reaction at any thought of Mkondo. Visions of that night etched in his memory forever

"Get up and follow." Pearl-like teeth glared through the gunman's dark-skinned leer.

"I know you can't wait to use that on me but you're a bit bloody early." Eyebrows heavy, Robin returned the gunman's glare. "You and your cronies may rule the roost in three days' time but until then you can fuck off!"

"Always thought you were the king when we played as kids. But now I'm the boss."

"For a while perhaps. They say Mugabe's giving you command of his planned 5th Brigade and he'll exploit your brutality while it suits him. I can only image the carnage you and your fellow zealots will you'll cause. But Mugabe won't put up with your hot-headed insanity forever."

"Hot headed or not, you're my target now."

“Don’t fool yourself.” Robin fought to disguise the dread invading his body. “Like it not, your cronies need me until the after the independence ceremony. To prevent the catastrophe that you and your thugs so bloody well deserve.”

“Typical, arrogant to the last. But you’re a dead man walking.” Mkondo’s eyes relished the weapon that he reluctantly lowered. “I’ll be waiting and if anything goes wrong with the ceremony, yours won’t be a quick death. I’ll enjoy skinning you alive.”

“I’m sure you’ll salivate over every moment. But you’ve tried before. Many times. Always failed.”

“Not this time,” Mkondo spat out. “You won’t stand a chance.” Chest swollen and with an abrupt turn, he strode back to his vehicle.

Chapter Three

BSAP OFFICE, HARARE, ZIMBABWE- RHODESIA

Welded to his chair, beads of perspiration erupted across Robin's forehead. The sweat of uncertainty. The trauma of surviving so many past Mkondo attempts.

In three days, he and his colleagues would be under the new rulers' control. The new ruler's revengeful bloodlust. But despite the looming peril, Robin still had a duty to perform. While bile rose in his throat at the prospect, his role was to ensure no threat to the momentous independence ceremony, and after a decade of investigating and fighting, his instincts screamed. Every nerve sensing a catastrophe.

But what threat? Where? When? How? By who? He poured over his 'persons of interest' lists, those who could disrupt the ceremony or

worse. There was no shortage of possibilities. Disgruntled members of Mugabe's party and army officers jealous of his success; supporters of the Matabele and other unsuccessful freedom movements; agents of the Republic of South Africa's Bureau of State Security; Africans whose families had been butchered by the insurgents for not supporting their cause; whites refusing to accept reality; whites whose loved ones had been slaughtered in the seemingly endless war.

Where to start? The list almost endless and should he get it wrong, his fate wouldn't bear thinking about. Foreboding crept through every crevice, sensing an inevitable disaster.

He studied every file, painstakingly eliminating the less likely until 47 names remained. He completed a summary document and his trusty Matabele sergeant copied photos of each suspect. During his security briefing later that afternoon, Robin would issue all 47 images to those manning every security checkpoint.

Despite every bone in his body sensing trouble, he collapsed exhausted in his lop-sided office chair. His mind drifted, no longer to the horrors of the last decade but to Jennifer Bancroft. Back in town yet again for the British Broadcasting Network, no doubt gloating that her beloved Marxists had finally seized power. Eager to see defeat in Robin's eyes. After her cutting words on their last break-up, no doubt ecstatic that his old white regime was receiving, what to her, was its just desserts.

Jennifer Bancroft. School temptress. Murdered fiancée's cousin. Frequent lover. Mugabe devotee. Socialist know-all!

Bitch!

NEW CHAPTER *****

xxxxx Jennifer Bancroft was wherever there was a good story. As the BBN's southern African correspondent, the up-coming ceremony was a must. Essential to record the end of a regime. To celebrate the end of

an era. To the fall of the last vestige of colonialism. To savour her part in its destruction. Her part in a new beginning for millions of now free Africans.

Becoming an avid socialist during her Cambridge years she'd keenly followed the conflict, spending weeks trekking with the country's freedom fighters - Mugabe's Shona guerrillas largely supported by China and Matabele fighters supported by the Soviet Union. She felt an affinity with the victors, for it was her victory too. And while following successful struggles through Colonial Africa appealed to her anti-establishment beliefs, her work on the Dark Continent had been good for her career. Her face and stories a regular feature on British television and around the world. With Mugabe's final victory, her report on the celebrations would be her crowning glory. Insightful, penetrating, visually spectacular.

Jennifer's interviews primarily featured the Shona majority.

"We'll now lord over the whites. Take all their riches," gloated one man.

"Good schools and modern hospitals," said another, Jennifer nodding in agreement, despite knowing that although primitive by British standards, Rhodesia had the best school and medical system for the African population of any country on the continent.

But to 'appear balanced', she also interviewed a selection of whites.

"We used to consider ourselves more British than the British until the grubby UK politicians sacrificed us to prop up their growing immigrant vote." The distraught woman was in tears. "It stinks. And the British stink with it."

"It's a victory for the bloody communists you idiot. Britain spends billions fighting the Cold War in Europe against them, but openly encouraged them to overthrow our country."

Ian Smith, leader of the defeated white controlled Rhodesian Government was unavailable for an interview. He was on a South African lecture tour.

She couldn't wait for her exclusive interview with Mugabe, the incoming prime minister whose party held 56% of the new parliamentary seats. Knowing Jennifer to be a strong supporter and that she would ensure the widest audience for his words, he offered an exclusive interview.

“The wrongs of the past stand forgiven and forgotten. If yesterday I fought the Whites as an enemy and the Matabele as rivals, today they are our friends and allies.” Jennifer enthusiastically recorded every word, well aware of the real meaning behind the new leader's mealy-mouthed statements. Of his dictator ambitions. That he and his henchmen would seize the white's assets and inflict genocide on his Matabele rivals. Of his eagerness to join the continent's Afro-Marxist kleptocrats, ransacking the country as the west basked in the glow of liberating a down-trodden population.

As Jennifer conducted her interview with Mugabe, Joshua Mkon-do paced to and fro in his spartan office on the city's outskirts. Appointed by Mugabe as commander of the planned elite Fifth Brigade, his agile mind plotted to ingratiate himself even further into Mugabe's inner circle. With his tribal chieftain heritage dating back centuries, he'd been targeted in his early teens for recruitment into Mugabe's ranks. “Never again be subservient to the whites,” they'd cajoled. “You'll become a great leader like your ancestors. A leader in the new Chimurenga. A leader in the new independent and Marxist Zimbabwe.”

Embracing the challenge, he ruthlessly clawed his way up the freedom movement's leadership, a trail of torture, murder, assassination,

coercion and violence in his wake. Fearless and brutal to all who stood in his way. The dreaded White soldiers. Their traitorous African police and soldiers. His father who believed freedom fighters only thugs. The rival Matabele independence movement. Any villager not 100% behind the uprising.

When Jennifer Bancroft had questioned why he'd killed his father, he'd laughed. "He refused to embrace the Freedom Fighter's cause, sought to prop up the despised Smith regime by supporting the proposal for a parliamentary Upper House of Tribal Chiefs." But the reality was that his father had continued his loyalty to bloody Robin Harwood's family.

At the thought of Robin Haywood, Mkondo pupils narrowed, his eyes as dark as that of his skin. The bastard had thought we were friends, playing and exploring together, but he always had to be the boss. Always bloody superior. Unconcerned that Joshua's family lived in the farm's Kraal of mud-walled rondavels, working for a pittance while the Harwoods lived like lords in their grand homestead.

Haywood's escaped too many times. Never again!

Chapter Four

HARARE, NEW NATION OF ZIMBABWE

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"Education and medical treatment for all," said another. Jennifer smiled agreement despite knowing that for the African population, Rhodesia had Africa's highest educational and health care standards.

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Chapter Five

INCOMING ARMY OFFICE, HARARE

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police and African volunteer soldiers who made up the majority of the old army; his own father who believed freedom fighters only thugs; the rival Matabele independence movement; any villager not 100% behind the uprising.

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Chapter Six

ZIMBABWE INDEPENDENCE CEREMONY, RUFARO STADIUM, HARARE

It was to be a night of celebration. Of spectacle. Of festivity. Of pomp. Of ceremony.

For months they'd prepared the huge soccer stadium, the 'Zimbabwean Theatre of Dreams', expanding its capacity to 30,000 carefully vetted invitees. All to witness the formal handover of a land and its

people, giving hope to those disadvantaged by more than a hundred years of colonialism.

Those who'd skilfully exploited international politics to gain unfettered power would be there. Their jubilant Communist supporters from the Soviet Union, China, North Korea, Cuba, Vietnam and the Iron Curtain countries of East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Yugoslavia and Hungary. The UK and the US, both hated by the defeated Whites' for betraying their country. Leaders of the independent African states and from all the British Commonwealth countries. Citizens from every corner of the new nation.

But outgoing White Rhodesian leader Ian Smith would be absent.

Like many of the outgoing political and administrative figures, Robin Harwood was forced to attend, all to have their noses ceremoniously rubbed into the faeces of their defeat. But regardless of the change in his superiors, Robin's presence was critical to the handover's success. While he'd identified the main suspects who could foil the ceremony, he had no part in the event's physical security. As a member of the loathed BSAP, he knew he'd be watched as carefully as any potential threat.

While he'd done all he could, he was certain there'd be an incident. After ten years of front-line and back-room warfare, his bones screamed their warning.

A jubilant crowd danced their way to the stadium entrance, naively believing that fourteen years of struggle would bring peace and prosperity to all. And while on-site security was not his job; Robin still scanned every roof and window on the main approach, then circled and scrutinised each of the huge grandstands. Possible ambush sites, possible sniper positions, anything out of place. Possibilities everywhere, but nothing immediately raising his suspicions.

The sight of Jennifer Bancroft spiked his blood pressure as she interviewed members of the jubilant dancers, her camera and sound men recording the setting and the excitement-charged crowd.

“Typical,” he mumbled under his breath, a fervent mix of carnal memories, contempt, regret, betrayal and desire. *Just like her to big-note herself, to thrust her face into the world’s lounge rooms.*

Finishing a final piece to camera before moving into the actual arena, he noted her eyes narrow on seeing him in his formal uniform on the outskirts of the crowd.

Both sets of eyes steely. Both aloof. Both tinged with remorse for what could have been.

As the last stragglers entered the venue, Robin was forced to follow, taking his allocated seat with a row of white former police, army and air force officers.

Then the sight of Jennifer again, now part of the huge media contingent cordoned-off in front of the TV out-door broadcast van which streamed the ceremony throughout the world.

Stress finally reducing, the long ceremony began.

Prince Charles headed the official delegation in his white naval commander’s uniform, a perfect foil for his blue riband sash, pilot’s wings insignia, service medals, orders of The Bath and The Garter. A gold-braided aiguillette glittered from his right shoulder. Mugabe, the British Prime Minister’s envoy and the UN Secretary General followed.

With a more modest aiguillette on his formal uniform, Joshua Mkondo sat to the side of the official party, next to other senior freedom fighter leaders. His look smug as his eyes focused on Robin.

The Reverend Canaan Banana then entered, Mugabe’s selection of a puppet President. The revolutionary movement’s obscure underling had once declared “whenever I see a guerilla, I see Jesus Christ”. His

pompous stance reminded Robin of the UK's Lord Carrington's jest that the man would help transform the economically buoyant but recalcitrant rebel white Rhodesian colony into a Banana republic. In more ways than one.

But despite his contempt for all assembled in the official party, Robin's eyes continued to scan the vast stadium.

First came singing. Endless singing.

Then dancing. Endless dancing.

Then the speeches. Endless speeches, fortunately interspersed with a performance by Bob Marley, the Caribbean born reggae singer. He would give another performance the next day for 100,000 fans not invited to the stadium performance.

Nearing Midnight, the finale approached. Robin knew it would be his last chance to catch anything unusual.

The arena lighting dimmed as Mugabe moved to a large, shining cauldron set in front of the official grandstand. Uttering a few words he ceremoniously lit the Flame of Independence.

The lights continued to fade as Prince Charles walked down to the arena, a cloth bundle under his arm. As Mugabe and the prince continued to the towering flagpole now starkly spotlighted in the centre of the field, Mkondo used the darkness as an opportunity to slip out of his seat, and head for his long-time enemy.

As the arena gradually dissolved into darkness, Robin saw movement.

But not Mkondo. Something out of place at the base of one of the large lighting towers. Straining his eyes he couldn't identify the face, but he certainly recognised the limp. Fearful of the tubular object the man carried. *No Jack! Don't be so fuck'n stupid!*

Robin had eliminated Jack Hale from his persons-of-interest list; overlooking the significance of Jack's work as a lighting contractor for

the big event. Like so many others, his was a sad story. Volunteering for Britain's Royal Air Force in WW2 he survived the Battle of Britain and was shot down twice. Once over the England and once over the snow-covered Italian Alps where he'd walked shoeless to safety in Switzerland, frostbite taking six toes. Toiling after the war despite his affliction, he turned an area of untouched bush into a thriving farm and while away on rotation as an Air Force Reserve pilot, the terrorists struck. His wife, children and the farm's entire African workforce and their families had been butchered, defiled. Robin knew of Jack's hatred of Mugabe and his cronies, but it was the betrayal of Rhodesia's white population by the Britain he nearly died defending, that had been bitterest pill to swallow. The British politicians who'd sold-out Rhodesia to buy the grubby immigrant votes necessary to keep their wafer-thin majorities in the UK parliament.

Mkondo's eyes sought out Robin's form in the darkness, unholstering his pistol as the prince and the new prime minister stood at the base of the flagpole, the Union Jack fluttering above. The prince's white uniform, trimmed with gold, commanded everyone's attention as he began his formal hand-over speech in the local Shona language to endear himself to the vast crowd. Concluding the speech in English, he turned to two Royal Navy petty officers standing rigid at the base of the flagpole. One lowered the British flag, the two sailors folding it with great precision.

Mkondo crept closer.

The prince then took the bundle from under his arm and formally presented the new Zimbabwean flag to Mugabe and saluted. Mugabe bowed acceptance, turned and handed the ensign to one of Mkondo's junior officers. With the flag clipped to the halliard, a drum-roll echoed through the stadium as the multi-striped flag, with its distinctive bird statue image, gradually crept up the flagpole.

Robin's eyes locked on Jack Hale in the increasing blackness.

Mkondo's strained to confirm Robin's location.

With the new flag reaching the top of the flagpole, there was an ear-shattering cheer. Both the Prince and Mugabe took two steps backward and saluted the new flag.

Boom!

The first report of an artillery 21-gun salute overshadowed the boisterous voices reverberating through the arena.

No Jack! Robin's plea silent as Hale extracted a rifle from the cylinder and knelt behind the spotlight tower.

Ignoring the noise and unseen by his quarry, Robin crept towards Jack's back, hopeful his movement went un-noticed.

But Mkondo saw Robin and circled to approach from Robin's rear, his target obscuring the rifleman's vague silhouette.

Boom! The second round of the 21 gun salute reverberated around the stadium.

Oblivious of his surroundings, Jack raised his weapon.

Centred his sights on the heart of the heir to the British throne.

He took a deep breath, the telescopic sight's crosshairs hovering over the medals on the prince's chest.

Boom!

Robin made a desperate lunge before Jack could fire.

Face contorted in defeat; Jack felt his rifle pulled from his arms as he fell to the ground.

Boom!

Mkondo took three steps forward.

"Freeze!" he shouted as he ground his pistol's barrel into Robin's neck, pleased he'd caught his arch enemy red-handed. A rifle in his hands pointing towards Mugabe.

Robin's heart raced.

Boom!

“Not content with killing our courageous Freedom Fighters. You want to assassinate our leader too?”

“Don’t be absurd. I just saved him from being shot!”

Boom!

“I’m not blind! I can see what I can see.” The darkness hid the glee in Mkondo’s eyes.

“You know I came with no rifle. I’ve only just seized it.”

Boom!

“I’m no fool! You obviously planted it in advance. An assassin’s rifle. Caught you in the act.”

“It’s my job’s to ensure no incidents tonight. Do you think I’d cause one?”

“Couldn’t care your motives.”

Boom!

“It’s too late now, but you deserve to be strapped to one of those artillery guns. Have your guts blown to smithereens, like Rhodes did to my forebears.”

Mkondo’s face lit with a smile of accomplishment. An end to his loathed enemy. The man who’d escaped so often. The man whose rifle had inflicted the greatest insult of all.

Boom!

“No escape this time,” he spat as the pain in his groin throbbed once more.

Robin stood rigid, refusing to accept that a Mkondo bullet would finally shatter his head.

“Always said you’re a hot head, never thinking things through. I won’t be the only one to die if you shoot. Do you think Mugabe will forgive you for ruining his beloved ceremony in front of the eyes of the world. You won’t last a few days.”

“Typical. Trying to manipulate things to the very last. Thinking you’re superior! But the guns will hide the sound of my shot, and your body won’t be found until the end of the ceremony. I’ll be hailed as a hero!”

Boom!

With the hatred surging between the two men, neither noticed the figure moving silently from the media enclosure. Unseen as they also approached from their rear.

Boom!

With all her might, Jennifer Bancroft swung the base of her heavy microphone. Colliding with the back of Mkondo’s head, he dropped his pistol as he too collapsed onto the ground.

Boom!

“What?”

“Run. You silly bastard!” Jennifer urged as she knelt and picked up Mkondo’s pistol.

Boom!

“No. Running will only draw attention.” Robin was cool and collected, despite yet another near-death experience. “Walk naturally through the darkness. No one will know what happened until the lights come back on.”

He bent down, pulled the stunned Ted Hale upright and grabbed his shoulder as they walked away.

Boom!

Robin approached the African police sergeant commanding the gate security, who saluted on seeing the inspector. Robin returned the salute, desperate to hold the guard’s attention to enable Jennifer and Ted to walk past the barrier un-noticed. “Seen anything suspicious sergeant?” The man was amongst those he’d briefed that afternoon.

“Nothing so far.”

“Hear anything out of the ordinary?”

“No sir.”

“Well, keep on your toes anyway. The danger’s not over until the official party are tucked up in bed.”

Boom!

“Leaving before you’re caught up in the departing crowd sir?”

“Yes sergeant,” Robin continued through the checkpoint, his gait casual. “There’s a lot for me and Ted Hale here to arrange before tomorrow’s special Bob Marley concert.”

Boom!

Jennifer’s BBN hire car was parked nearby and with its three occupants; it crept down 7th Street, pushing its way through the sea of people prevented from accessing the arena. Finally free of the crowd, it picked up speed as the guns’ final explosion completed their salute.

At the first public telephone box, Jennifer jumped out to ring her bureau chief in Johannesburg, leaving a message on his answering machine

“Hi Bill, I’ve come down with a sudden wog and the way I feel, it’ll probably take a good few days to get over it. I’ve completed all the interviews needed for the Independence piece and left Jack and Adam to complete filming the actual ceremony. It hit me so suddenly I didn’t have a chance to tell them I was leaving. Bill will fly down the tapes, and as it’s all self-explanatory, you shouldn’t need my input with editing. I’ll leave the hire-car in the hotel carpark, the key on the top of the front, driver’s side tyre.”

They dropped Ted Hale off at his warehouse, leaving him to enact his own escape plan.

Chapter Seven

UMTALI ROAD, ZIMBABWE/MOZAMBIQUE BORDER

Planning for a possible urgent get-away, Robin had squirrelled away an old Vanguard Estate car holding his escape requirements. Jennifer drove them to the vehicle's garage on the city outskirts where Robin changed out of his uniform for the very last time. *Worn a uniform almost every day for nearly ten years. Like losing part of me.*

Donning civilian clothes brought his situation into focus. His precarious future.

Jennifer grabbed her gear from the hire-car and put it in the back of Robin's vehicle. A hold-all with make-up and spare clothes, her professional still camera and tape recorder. "From now on you're my driver/cameraman."

"I need more than a change of clothes to reduce the chance of being identified. Here's some hair clippers, give me a quick crew-cut."

After a pile of blonde hair cascaded onto the pavement, they followed in convoy to Jennifer's car drop-off point, continuing in the Vanguard to the city boundary checkpoint.

"Bugger. The sentries aren't BSAP, their Mugabe's ex. guerrillas. Won't be as easy as leaving the stadium."

A single soldier stood in the middle of the road, his stance arrogant as he held one hand in a stop signal, his rifle in the other.

Robin's throat dried as he came to a stop. With three accomplices standing to the side, he could see the brand-new Zimbabwe Army uniforms, their AK47s pointing directly at the two occupants. At the sight of two white people, their commander's eyes lit, his face sneering.

"Hold your breath," Robin muttered, "time for the first real test."

With the car stationary, time stood still.

Then guard movements as a rifle barrel pressed into Robins temple, the leader and two others grouping around Jennifer's window.

"Papers!"

They were sitting ducks, but there was no way Jennifer would be a victim.

She charged out of the car, pushing the soldiers out of the way, desperate to deflect attention away from Robin. "Just who's in charge here? How dare you stop a personal friend of Robert Magabe."

The soldiers' eyes changed instantly, their swagger dissolving, their faces reflecting doubt and panic. Mugabe was to be feared by victorious guerrillas as much as any white.

"When we spoke at Government House just two days ago, Robert told me to report anyone who interfered with my role as his preferred international TV journalist. I'm here to show the world your wonderful victory, and here you're threatening me." Her eyes bored into those of the leader. "Here's my press pass. Just make sure I don't have

to report your behaviour to both Mugabe, and to TV viewers around the world.”

A sheepish look on his face, the senior sentry waved them through, none daring to inquire about Robin.

“Bloody hell. You saved the day there,” said Robin as he turned east. “Saved the day a second time.”

Jennifer gave a self-satisfied grin, the vehicle then engulfed in silence as both contemplated the consequences of being caught. Then, after 150 miles, Robin turned onto a faint track he’d reconnoitred the previous year. A horseshoe of rocky kopjes hid the car from road traffic and an Umbrella Thorn tree provided shade. It was their first real opportunity to talk.

“What the fuck have you done?” Robin’s voice couldn’t hide his suspicion over Jennifer’s rescue motives. “What on earth were you thinking? Why risk everything like you did tonight? I thought you were far too smart for that. Too committed to your beloved Marxist mates.”

“Just why do you think?”

“How would I know? You’ve told me often enough that I no longer mean anything to you. You’re too fixated on your murderous terrorists. Your cherished TV audience.”

“I know Mkondo only too well. What a murderous swine he and his cronies are. How he justifiably hates your guts. I had to protect you!”

“Protect me? Why the hell would you do that? You’ve spurned me time and again. You hate my politics. You hate the way I love the old Rhodesia. You hate the way I’ve always tried to bring black and whites together instead of conflict and hate.” Robin’s voice rasped in his throat. “You glorified Mugabe and his band of cut-throats as they rampaged through the countryside, murdering black and white alike.”

“Robin, it was never like that.”

“Of course it dam-well was. I’ve never understood what you’re really on about, but whatever it is, it’s nothing like me. But we’ve got a dangerous day tomorrow and we both need a good rest.”

After sharing a can of cold Spam and a handful of raisins, they settled on an old kapok mattress laid out on the van’s cargo floor, both taking great care their bodies didn’t touch. Robin’s mind raced. *Escape really possible? But what future?*

Nightmares! Of a capture too gruesome to imagine. Of Jennifer and times past. Of torrid times. Of bitter break-ups. Of visions of war, far worse still.

Despite their determination to keep apart, each could feel the other’s movements. Their breathing. The heat radiating from their bodies. Their unique aroma. It was essential they be fully alert in the morning, yet sleep escaped them despite the long, stress-draining hours leading to and escaping from the ceremony. They tossed and turned in the confined space, adrenalin still surging through their every cell. Adrenalin surges that turned to carnal need as their bodies fought to wall out the danger. Two pelvises pounding for the first time in years. No words. Just grunts and groans to block out an unknown future. To block the bitterness of past partings.

With pulses returning to normal, it was if they’d exorcised their fears. Their past regrets. Spent, they fell into each other’s arms. Into the arms of a welcoming sleep.

Robin woke to a face hovering over his. Soft kisses as Jennifer lowered her head, her fingers caressing his cheek.

“Morning lover-boy.”

He smiled. An expansive, welcoming smile. “Look who’s talking.”

“I know we’ve had a roller coaster relationship, but I’ve loved you ever since I set eyes on you way back at Rannoch. You must know

that! Just because we don't believe in the same things doesn't mean I've stopped loving you. There was no way I'd let you get killed last night."

"You'll never know how much of a wreck I became after each break-up." Robin was unsure of venturing into this questionable territory. "I've been besotted ever since the snow-cave incident. But your career, your politics, always get in the way."

"Rightly or wrongly the die is cast. We're together now." She kissed him on the forehead. "But there's no time to prattle. Time to leave."

Robin's family always vacationed in their holiday home on the coast of adjoining Mozambique and knew that unlike British colonialists, the Portuguese had interbred with the local population for over three centuries. Its population ranged from the blackest of black to the whitest of white. Mid-brown was Robin's choice.

Still naked, he fished out his disguise kit from the spare tyre area: rugged peasant's clothes set off with a motley straw hat, a hole on one side and a haphazard fan of straw filaments. He passed Jennifer the hair-clippers again. "They're on the lowest setting now so cut the hair as short as possible." That done, a battery razor followed, totally erasing the last traces of blonde hair, his bald pate glowing in the morning sun.

After a thorough facial shave, he gave her a bottle of mid-brown stain and a lint cloth. "Made from the tannin of crushed Umbrella Thorn bark. Keep giving it a good shake as you apply it to my entire body, every crack, every crevice. One coat to the soles of my feet, two coats to my palms, four coats elsewhere and five to the places where my skin would be exposed to the sun - face, neck and lower arms."

She poured the coloured liquid onto the cloth and commenced the first coat until reaching his morning erection, still stimulated by memories of their evening's antics.

“Oh Robin! Put that thing away,” she laughed, giving his protrusion a playful swipe.

“Certainly not,” he replied as she re-shook the liquid. “It’s critical that everything’s fully stained. The last thing I need is fine white stripes around him if he’s stained while wrinkled.”

She continued, paying particular attention to his nostrils, the folds of his eyelids, ears, ear canal, groin, scrotum and bum crack. A cotton bud assisted in getting the stain into the necessary folds and crevices.

She stood back and looked at her first coat handiwork. “It’s no good. All patchy.”

“Why we need a number of coats.”

She finally produced a uniform coverage, satisfied with her achievement. Lighter and darker in the areas required.

Robin then opened a small, spring-loaded box and fitted its contents. Obtained from one of his South African security service contacts, the dark coloured contact lenses disguised the iridescent blue of his eyes.

“Done this before then?”

“Not on me, but something similar with past agents.”

Next came black dye for his pubic and under-arm hair and further razor work to remove all blonde body, arm and leg hair. Jennifer was more confident using the black eyebrow pencil and mascara to darken his eyelashes.

“Pass muster?”

“Sexiest Mozambican I’ve ever met.” Jennifer grinned. “But is this all really necessary?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. But it’ll be too late if we wait until a detailed search. In military intelligence circles, the starting point is to always anticipate an enemy’s possible strategy and tactics. If it was me, I’d in-

sist on strip searches to prevent a high-profile white male from crossing the border.”

“But how’s your Portuguese?”

“I’ve been visiting Mozambique since I was a kid and it’s far better than most Zimbabweans.”

“Right! Let’s get moving. Train leaves at 9.00.”

Jennifer’s press pass continued to work wonders at the remaining checkpoints, no guard questioning why a journalist would have a brown-faced driver. In a Rhodesia sanctioned for many years, old cars were a common sight.

Abandoning the Vanguard half a mile away, they walked towards the station ticketing counter.

Chapter Eight

UMTALI RAILWAY STATION, ZIMBABWE- MOZAMBIQUE BORDER

Despite the clear blue sky, dark clouds crushed Robin Harwood's soul as he approached the station. Cyclonic clouds. His beloved, sixty-year heritage no more. The shaft of a new reality striking his heart at the name on the railway station. 'Umtali' painted over, the new 'Mutare' painted crude by hand.

He approached the phalanx of soldiers surrounding the railway complex. Arrogant faces, AK47s at the ready.

Mkondo must have sent a platoon to every border checkpoint.

Robin waited back as Jennifer approached the ticket-box, showed her passport and purchased a first-class ticket to the Mozambique coastal port of Beira. Their eyes met briefly as she reached the line of soldiers, each trying to dispel the other's fears. Lumping her hold-all, camera and recorder, she braced herself as she walked past the new regime's searing faces. Not stopped, she entered her carriage.

Thank God. They don't realise we're together. Robin forced himself to look straight ahead as he queued at another ticket box, and buying a fourth-class ticket, he showed a forged, but deliberately dirtied and dog-eared Mozambique identity card. Prodded at gunpoint, he reached a hessian screen at a side entrance and joined the line of male, largely rural Mozambique and Zimbabwean workers with third and fourth-class tickets. Aided by his darkened skin, he fought the capillaries that sought to flush his face; warn of the fear raging under his disguise as the line shuffled forward, until a soldier's arrogant voice ordered all to strip.

As expected.

Robin stood naked, his throat like leather, his pulse thundering, praying the last-minute stain would go unnoticed amongst the variety of skin shades of his fellow travellers. His hairless, mid-brown scalp glistened in the sun as he gripped well-worn boots between thumb and fingers, scruffy clothes and hat balanced on his other hand. With both hands hidden, the guards couldn't see they weren't the dirt-ingrained, callous covered hands of his surrounding passengers.

"Papers!" The Zimbabwean soldier's demand was in Shona.

Robin shrugged, nodding to his identity card and train ticket he'd stuck in the headband of his battered hat. The soldier extracted both, studied them and stared into his face.

"Purpose of your visit?" The man again spoke Shona

Again, Robin shrugged.

"Purpose of your visit?" Voice raised, the man's demand was now in English.

Robin shrugged once more.

"Purpose of your visit?" The soldier finally spoke in stilted Portuguese.

"Return home." Robin's reply was in the best Portuguese he could muster, but far more fluent than his interrogator. "Visited sister in Dangamvura to celebrate your independence. Real party."

"Yes. Final victory after our glorious struggle." The soldier raised his fist in the air.

"Your final victory." Robin lifted his boots, attempting to duplicate the man's insurgent salute.

"But move along."

As Robin re-dressed in his thread-bare clothes, Jennifer settled into the front carriage of the plush, first-class compartment that he had travelled in so often before. Now his second time travelling fourth-class, he walked to the end carriages and pushed his way into the last spot on the wooden bench running around the carriage perimeter. The entry would remain doorless for the entire journey, the only light and ventilation in the putrid, crowded structure. The remaining passengers sat on the floor, surrounded by chicken cages, baskets of produce, cardboard boxes and cloth-wrapped bundles.

The rattle of rifles and the scraping of boots silenced the babble. Not satisfied with their platform gate vetting, the troops re-checked

identity papers and tickets. At each mid-brown male, they studied both the man's face and the handful of photos each soldier carried.

Robin pulled down his hat, covering his face as he heard them approach. With little floor-space, the soldiers kicked over the passengers' cargo. Butted them aside with their rifles.

Robin's hat flew across the room. "Stand when you see a freedom fighter."

He immediately stood, trying not to swallow as the man's rifle pushed deep into his larynx, his body rigid as the soldier's eyes swept from the photo to Robin's eyes. *Hopefully his shadow will obscure the reflection from my contact lenses.*

The rifleman's eyes glazed, evidently deciding Robin's brown skin and shaved head differed from the photos clutched so tightly in his hand. He continued his inspection.

Only then did sweat pour from Robin's forehead. *Hope the stain doesn't run.*

In their respective parts of the train, Robin and Jennifer's heartbeats gradually slowed as the soldiers departed. The locomotive took up the strain and domino-like, the carriages began to move one by one.

Escape!

When anyone spoke, Robin replied in Matabele, the language of the new Zimbabwe's southwestern provinces. A language rarely spoken by the country's eastern dwellers.

He sank against the hard carriage wall as it rattled and swayed on the poorly maintained track, his mind going back to his last fourth-class journey. To the dusky woman he met in the port-side bar in Beira while awaiting its departure. A woman attracted by his youth and handsome, fresh face, a welcome change from her usual rough seamen and labourer clients. A woman who relished giving her virgin student a morning-long lesson in the art of love, but still charged him everything

in his wallet except for a fourth class ticket home. His smile grew at the memory; at the value he'd got from his hard-earned savings. A paltry price to discover more in those few hours than the average man would learn in a lifetime.

And while he would never forget those morning's lessons, it was the afternoon that indelibly seared itself into his mind. Mkondo's train ambush, Robin the only Caucasian survivor. Robin's fluke rifle shot that pulverised Mkondo's testicles, further intensifying the man's hatred of his one-time boyhood friend.

Then his desperate escape until he staggered into the Umtali police station ten days later.

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