

THE INVISIBLE DRONE



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by

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Chapter 1

Narrow Escape



18 000 ft above the Alps, 13 April 1999: Humphrey peered at the mountain ahead and his stomach churned. Charlie sat beside him in the pilot's seat and said there was nothing to worry about so long as they remained calm and followed standard procedures. He flicked through a bank of switches and pulled on the joystick. Humphrey glanced at the wings and his stomach churned again. The aerofoils should have moved but they hadn't. The plane was continuing on a steady descent. It was as if they were flying on autopilot and preparing to land. But they weren't on autopilot and there was nowhere to land.

Humphrey knew the area well. They were approaching the Saint Bernard Pass. He could see the famous monastery, built by Saint Bernard a thousand years ago. Snow-capped mountains lay beyond.

He tapped Charlie's arm.

'That's Mont Blanc over there.'

'Yes,' Charlie agreed.

'We're heading straight for it.'

'I'm aware of that.' Charlie's voice remained calm.

'Are you sure you switched to manual?'

'Perfectly ...'

'But we're not on manual.' Humphrey's voice rose. 'If we were the aerofoils would have moved and we would have changed course. You've had three tries ...'

'A minor technical problem.' Charlie thumped the control panel.

'That won't do any good,' Humphrey protested.

'It might.' Charlie thumped the panel again. 'There's a computer in there ... probably a loose connection. Stop fretting. I've been in far worse situations.'

Humphrey wondered what those situations might have been. He could think of nothing worse than flying over the Alps in a small plane that had developed a mind of its own.

He felt seriously stupid. Being too close to Charlie was dangerous. No one in their right mind would work for him. If he had not been so desperately short of money, he would never have taken on the present assignment.

A poorly paid university job was not enough to support his extravagant lifestyle. He needed a second source of income. Charlie paid well and the money was paid into secret bank accounts.

Charlie was the Western World's ultimate Mr Fix-It. Government agencies and big companies called on him to sort out problems they didn't want to handle themselves. Sometimes they lacked the resources. More often, they didn't want their staff to get involved in projects that could land them in trouble.

In the process Charlie made enemies. People lost out when Charlie came on the scene and some went to extreme lengths to protect their interests. Humphrey resolved to keep well clear of him in future ... if he had a future.

They were on their way back to London from Rome where they had attended a conference on cyber warfare. Charlie had gone to spy out the land. Humphrey had gone to deliver a paper on the encryption of security codes.

He narrowed his eyes with a growing sense of doom. Mont Blanc loomed ahead. A few years earlier, he had climbed it by the easy route. That had involved hiring a guide and setting off before daybreak. The climb is arduous and particularly arduous for someone who is overweight and not accustomed to strenuous activity. He was obliged to make frequent stops for rest but finally made it to the top.

The plane tilted slightly. A minor change had been made to their course. It was as if an unseen hand had taken control and was flying them to their deaths.

They were now on a collision course with the summit. Humphrey leant forward as patches of colour appeared against the glaring white of the snow. He identified them as climbers on the same route that he had taken. If nothing was done, they would soon be joining them.

The time for pussyfooting was over. Charlie could talk about standard procedures and the need to stay calm. This was not a standard situation. Staying calm could be fatal. Drastic action was called for.

'We've been sabotaged!'

Humphrey yelled at the top of his voice and yanked at the cover of the control panel. The plastic snapped and the cover came away. A maze of wires confronted him. There wasn't time to work out what they did.

'Get ready to go onto manual.'

His hand shot out and he tore at the wires.

'Right! Take over!'

Charlie pulled on the joystick. Humphrey expected to see the aerofoils move but, again, nothing happened. They remained in their old positions and the plane continued on its former course. He glanced at the mountain. Only seconds separated them from total oblivion. Charlie remained unperturbed.

'Have you ever skydived?' he asked.

'No,' Humphrey wheezed.

'That doesn't matter.' Charlie leant over the back of his seat. 'We'll go tandem.'

He produced a parachute and Humphrey resigned himself to the inevitable. Charlie always had a way out. That was why he had survived so long. He arched his back as a harness was fastened around him.

'Get ready to leave.'

A pair of goggles was slapped on his face.

'Hold your breath.'

Charlie threw open the cabin door and dragged him out. A blast of cold air hit them and everything went with a rush. Humphrey felt weightlessness. His stomach seemed to be floating free. That was disturbing but it didn't last long. Weightlessness was replaced by a sensation of swimming.

The air swirled around like water and buoyed them up. Humphrey had read about it in books and guessed they had reached terminal velocity. Put in simple terms, they were going so fast that air resistance was stopping them from going any faster.

He recalled that terminal velocity, for the human body, is about one-hundred kilometres-an-hour. Or, was it miles-an-hour? He didn't care. The exact speed wasn't relevant. The main point was that terminal velocity is measured in the direction of down. They were hurtling towards the ground at a speed that would have devastating consequences if nothing was done to slow them down.

He opened his eyes and felt oddly better. The sensation was now more of hovering than falling. The air was clear and the afternoon sun shone on a peaceful scene below. Fear gave way to fascination. It was surprisingly busy down there. The mountain road was packed with vehicles making their way up to the pass.

He saw buildings that looked like tourist chalets and made out details. Then a sudden jerk told him that the parachute had opened. The air no longer felt like water. They had stopped falling and had started to glide. He had experienced the sensation before. It was a bit like going down a steep hill on a bicycle.

His thoughts returned to the monastery. In times past, the monks operated a search and rescue service. They had dogs that dug stricken travellers out of snow drifts. They were called *Saint Bernards* and had small casks of brandy about their necks for people to revive themselves. He guessed the dogs had been replaced by a modern rescue service and expected to see vehicles with flashing lights.

None appeared. They continued on their glide and Charlie took them towards one of the chalets. They passed over a car park and landed on a patch of grass at the far end. There was a bit of a jolt but little else. A woman and child turned to watch. Otherwise, no one showed the slightest interest.

Charlie turned to Humphrey.

'Your tie is crooked.'

Humphrey straightened it.

'Put a comb through your hair.'

Humphrey did as he was told. He could scarcely believe he was still alive. They had been seconds from disaster. If they had stayed in the plane, they would both be dead.

Charlie folded the parachute and returned it to its pack.

'Don't look so glum.'

Humphrey managed a smile.

Charlie shouldered the pack.

'It's getting busy. We had better book in.'

'Book in?'

'Yes. We're not going to spend the night out here.'

Humphrey followed him towards the chalet. It was scarcely believable. Charlie was behaving as if life-threatening incidents were an everyday occurrence. All you had to do was stay calm and follow standard procedures.

Half-a-dozen languages were being spoken at the reception desk. Charlie could have chosen anyone but stuck to English.

'I need accommodations for two persons?'

He spoke in a broad American accent. Humphrey guessed he would be using his American passport and hoped his wasn't needed.

The receptionist consulted her computer.

'Our only current availability is a suite of rooms with common bathing, masseuse and recreational facilities ...'

The price was staggering. Charlie wasn't fussed.

'That sounds just fine.'

He produced a bankcard. Humphrey watched as the transaction was approved and the card returned. Registration forms were pushed in their direction.

'I shall need to copy your passports.'

'My colleague is Danish,' Charlie said. 'Does he need to show his?'

'An identity card or passport is acceptable for EU citizens.'

Humphrey pulled out his Danish passport and kept his Australian passport hidden. He was legally entitled to both. He suspected that Charlie wasn't entitled to any of his. Right now he was James B. Heckman, a businessman from Detroit. In Rome he had spoken with a posh English accent and had used the name George Hanbury-Brown.

Their suite was spacious and the view magnificent. Humphrey wasn't surprised that the price was steep. They had paid as much for one night as most people would pay for a week. Charlie took it in his stride. He was at home wherever he went. It wasn't difficult to imagine him kipping down in a dangerous slum or living it up on a luxury yacht owned by a billionaire. He dumped the parachute in a cupboard and went across to the drinks cabinet.

'How about a beer?'

Humphrey slumped into a chair.

'Something stronger would be more appropriate.'

'In what way?'

'It might steady my nerves.'

'What's the problem?'

'The way we got here ... it was a trifle unnerving.'

'We arrived safely.'

'That's not the point.'

'Yes, it is. Outcomes are what matter.'

'We've not finished yet.' Humphrey loosened his tie. 'The people at the desk ... won't they find it odd?'

'Find what odd?'

'The way we arrived ... it was hardly conventional.'

Charlie surveyed the contents of the drinks cabinet.

'They must have seen us,' Humphrey continued.

'They see lots of paragliders.' Charlie removed a bottle of whisky and two glasses. 'As far as the people here are concerned, we came up on the bus.'

Humphrey remained unconvinced.

'Isn't it usual to alert the authorities?'

'What authorities?'

'The civil aviation authorities. Shouldn't we inform them that our plane developed problems and we were forced to bail out?'

'Certainly not!'

Charlie gave him a scathing look.

'I'm not in the habit of informing anyone of my problems.'

He poured two glasses and handed one to Humphrey.

'Get that under your belt and stop worrying.'

Humphrey raised his glass and savoured the bouquet. The whisky was very good. The bottle would have cost a small fortune. Working for Charlie had its good points. He pondered the possibilities. A more permanent relationship could get him out of teaching and into a more agreeable lifestyle.

Shouting interrupted his thoughts. People were crowding out onto the terrace and gathering around the telescopes that had been put there for the convenience of guests. Cries rang out in a multitude of languages.

'Plane crash!'

Charlie picked up his glass and sauntered over to the window.

'Looks like there's been an accident, Humph.'

'Probably our plane,' Humphrey replied.

Charlie shielded his eyes.

'It appears to have scored a direct hit on the summit of Mont Blanc. There's a lot of smoke. It must have caught fire. We were carrying a lot of fuel so that's not surprising. Everything will be totally destroyed. Our luggage will be burnt to a cinder.'

'You sound pleased.'

'Most definitely. People in my line of business avoid drawing attention to themselves. There is nothing to identify me with the plane and nothing to say you were on board.'

'But, there will be an inquiry.'

'Undoubtedly.'

'Someone might have seen us bailing out.'

'That is conceivable.'

'They could check the hotel register. I used my Danish passport. That's real. It's not one of those fakes that you carry.'

'Stop worrying Humphrey.'

Charlie returned to his chair.

'Our presence here is perfectly explainable. We didn't give a car registration number so an investigating officer will assume we came up on the bus. Bus companies issue tickets, without recording names, so there is no way of proving otherwise. Tomorrow we shall leave by bus and vanish into obscurity.'

The chalet served buffet meals. Charlie placed a modest portion of fresh trout on his plate and added a modest portion of boiled potatoes and green salad. He eyed Humphrey's huge plate with disapproval.

'You'll die before me.'

'I think that unlikely.'

'I'm old enough to be your father and twice as fit.'

Humphrey managed a faint smile.

'Some people think you are my father.'

'That's because your mother insisted on having your birth certificate made out in such a way that it recorded your paternity as *Father Unknown*.'

'She did it to upset my grandfather.'

'It doesn't matter why she did it, Humphrey. You can't go on stuffing food into yourself without paying the ultimate price. Obesity leads to an early grave.'

'I'm not obese.'

'You are heading that way.'

Humphrey returned some of the contents of his plate to the buffet table. Charlie wasn't his father but he had been his mother's lover. That was when they were counter-intelligence agents working for the Australian Government.

Charlie changed the subject.

'That plane was sabotaged.'

'Yes,' Humphrey agreed.

'I set it on autopilot and couldn't get it off. It was like being on duel controls. I had the feeling a second pilot had taken over and there was nothing I could do about it ...'

His voice petered out and he nudged Humphrey's arm.

'We have company.'

Humphrey followed Charlie's gaze to a man heading towards the buffet table. Olaf Magnusson had delivered a string of papers at the Rome conference and was an acclaimed expert on cyber warfare. He arrived by their side and was piling his plate with oysters when he noticed Humphrey.

'Dr Hansen. What are you doing here?'

'We dropped in after the conference,' Humphrey said.

Olaf looked past Humphrey and his face turned from rosy pink to ashen white when he saw Charlie. His hand went limp and oysters slipped from his plate.

'We decided to return by bus,' Humphrey explained.

Olaf stared at Charlie and more oysters fell to the floor.

Charlie reached out a hand.

'George Hanbury-Brown,' he announced in his posh English accent. 'Dr Hansen and I decided to take in some of the scenery.'

Olaf shook his hand limply.

'I recall seeing you in Rome, Mr Brown.'

'Hanbury-Brown,' Charlie corrected.

'Yes. Please forgive me. I find your English names confusing.'

Olaf's accent had begun to sound more Danish than American. Humphrey recalled that he came from Bornholm Island and had won a scholarship to an American University at the age of sixteen. The boy genius had become a world expert on artificial intelligence.

'I attended your lectures on digital imagery,' Charlie said. 'I am interested in the work you are doing to record ancient monuments before they fall into total ruin. Dr Hansen and I visited Pompeii and were horrified by what we saw.'

'Yes. It is distressing,' Olaf agreed.

'An entire city was caught in a moment in time when Vesuvius erupted two thousand years ago,' Charlie continued. 'Archaeologists excavated it. Now, it is falling into ruin. It would have been better if Pompeii had remained buried. A priceless glimpse into the past is being lost. Future generations will condemn us for what we have done.'

Olaf's eyes bulged and he began to stutter.

'I ... I had no idea that you shared my views.'

He stared back and forth.

'I am currently working on a project to record the monuments digitally. The world has moved ahead since the Pompeii excavations. Everything is aimed at forensic investigation and ...'

He stopped in midsentence. Humphrey glanced towards the door. A man had entered. His arrival had a stunning effect on Olaf. He glanced in the man's direction then turned on his heels and walked away without saying another word.

Chapter 2

Flight-145

Canberra, 2 April 2005: Kirstin sorted through the morning newspapers. The front pages looked much the same. A photograph of an airliner was accompanied by pictures of anxious relatives. Headlines announced the mysterious disappearance of a Boeing-717 on its way from Paris to Toronto. A plane packed with politicians, bankers and captains of industry had vanished in mid-Atlantic.

Humphrey emerged from the kitchen. He was trying to reduce weight and had confined his plate to two poached eggs, a slice of toast and a single rasher of bacon. He placed the plate on the breakfast table and poured himself a mug of strong black coffee. Kirstin intervened before he could add cream to it.

'You are on a diet, Humphrey.'

'Yes, Mother.'

He glanced at the newspapers and grinned.

'There will be a few jobs going after this little upset.'

'Hardly little, Humphrey. There was a prime minister on board plus some senior bankers and their staff.'

'Bankers ...'

Humphrey squeezed tomato sauce onto his eggs.

'They won't be missed ... anyone we know?'

'One of your former employers. Sir Henry Thomlinson of the GNBC Bank was on the plane.'

'Good Lord!' Humphrey looked shocked. 'I never liked the man but I wouldn't wish this on him. I met his wife once ... a very nice lady.'

'Yes. Humphrey. We are talking about real people. They have families and others who will miss them.'

'It's just scandalous ...'

'What is, Humphrey?'

'The way planes can take off and simply vanish. The civil aviation authorities should insist that they maintain continual radio contact with a monitoring station. The necessary technology has been around for years. I've published papers on it and given interviews.'

Kirstin removed the tomato sauce from the table.

'Charlie doesn't want you to give anymore interviews.'

'Charlie?' Humphrey looked up from his eggs.

'He thinks he knows what happened to the plane and he wants to speak to you. He's flying in. David is already here in Canberra. We will be meeting them at the Paget residence this afternoon. Sir George has arranged everything.'

The Paget residence was in Canberra's plush suburb of Red Hill. Kirstin wondered why she was still calling it as a residence. The term dated from when she worked for Sir George as a counter-espionage agent in his Special Investigations Unit. Convention demanded that senior government officers, like George Paget, lived in residences. Ordinary people, like herself, lived in houses. Charlie was George's son.

They had not met for almost twenty years. They had talked over the phone but that was different. Kirstin wondered what it would be like to meet him in the flesh. They had once been very close. She had even wondered if they would get married. It was probably as well they didn't. Charlie Paget was a great lover but would have made a terrible husband.

He could never settle down. Charlie was always looking for something new. Now in his early sixties, he was still behaving like the crazy twenty-four-year-old who won her over with his charms. His nephew, David, looked like him, at the same age, but had a very different personality.

They went in Humphrey's new car. He was now flush with funds and no longer addicted to rusting wrecks that he kept alive to save money for fine wines and other luxuries. But her son didn't splash money around

unnecessarily. The vehicle was modest. Humphrey didn't want to draw attention to his newly acquired wealth.

The car was a big improvement on its predecessors but Humphrey's driving was as bad as ever. The little boy who couldn't ride a bicycle had grown into an adult who couldn't drive a car. But he knew a lot about cars just as he knew a lot about guns. Mercifully, he had the good sense to keep well away from guns even if he couldn't apply the same caution to cars and other means of transport.

They turned a corner and the Paget residence appeared. It was one of the first to be built when Canberra was created, from farmland, and designated as Australia's capital. The house was less than a hundred years old but looked older. It was built in the grand style of an earlier era and hadn't changed much over the years.

Kirstin was amused to see lace curtains at the windows. She was reminded of visits for tea and cucumber sandwiches when she was a junior operative and Charlie was her boss' son. The curtains parted. Forty years earlier, she would have seen George's wife. Now, his equally nervous daughter appeared.

Her face lit up. Cecelia Paget was a kindly soul who laboured under the burden of having a brilliant father and an equally brilliant brother. Cecelia couldn't compete and regarded herself as stupid.

She threw open the door.

'Kirstin. I'm so glad you could come. The darling boy is here. He so wants to see you.'

Cecelia always referred to her son, David, as the darling boy. Kirstin recalled occasions when he had been driven to fury when he heard himself spoken about in that manner. Now, at the age of twenty-four, David seemed to regard it as a joke. He emerged from a doorway and strode towards her.

'How is my favourite girlfriend?'

'As beautiful as ever, David.'

'And how is Lizzie?'

'My granddaughter never stops asking about you.'

David moved closer and dropped his voice.

'Charlie says she has become a free operator.'

Kirstin saw the look of concern on Cecelia's face at the mention of the term *free operator*. David was her only child. Cecelia's greatest fear was that he would follow her brother, Charlie, into the murky world of espionage.

A furniture van pulled up outside and David's face broadened.

'Charlie's here!'

Cecelia peered through the curtains.

'In a furniture van?'

'Yes, Mother,' David grinned. 'Charlie is trying to save money. He got one of his mates to pick him up at the airport.'

Cecelia failed to get the point.

'I didn't know Charles was hard up.'

Kirstin watched as two men emerge from the van and removed a chest of draws from the rear. She recognised the driver. The elderly man doubled as Sir George's chauffeur and minder. The man beside him was, presumably, Charlie. Both men wore blue overalls and peaked caps. If David hadn't pointed them out, she would have assumed that they had come to make a delivery. Charlie always covered his tracks.

Sir George's spacious study was on the second floor of the big house. Kirstin was the first to enter. She had known him for most of her adult life. George was now in his late eighties. His health had deteriorated but his mind remained lively.

She sat down in a leather chair and Charlie sat beside her. He had grown a beard. She suspected it came on and off like the spectacles he had been wearing when he arrived. Apart from that, he had an uncanny resemblance to George at the same age. The three generations of Pagets were strikingly alike in appearance.

David was twice a Paget. His mother had married a cousin of the same name. All three had sharply chiselled features. George and Charlie were brilliant linguists. David didn't share their intellectual skills but was a smart operator when practical problems had to be solved. He was there because George wanted him to follow the family tradition of spying.

The old man removed his spectacles and placed them on his desk. Kirstin was reminded of briefing sessions when she was one of his operatives. He was very thorough then. She guessed he would be very thorough now.

He glanced from one to the other.

'An airliner has gone missing. Two days ago, a Boeing-717 left Paris with some highly distinguished people on board. It failed to reach its destination and its loss is deeply disturbing. I and certain of my colleagues are reminded of a similar incident that occurred in Africa forty-four years ago. It was not properly investigated and we fear the same could happen in the present case.

We have accordingly resolved to mount an investigation and have assembled funds for that purpose. I call upon the four of you to join our team. Remuneration will not be at the preposterously high rates to which some of you are accustomed. However, you will not be out of pocket.'

Sir George turned to David.

'I shall give the background to the case for your benefit. People of your generation have lived in a world that is very different from the one I knew at your age. When I was born, the Western nations ruled the roost. They had huge empires and thought themselves innately superior to the rest of humanity. They were mistaken. They owed their power to the industrial revolution.

Their forebears had developed the means to produce weapons of devastating power. The Gatling machine gun was one and it was decisive in their quest for empire. A few imperial troops, armed with that formidable weapon, could take on whole armies equipped with muskets and spears.

The Europeans set about conquering Africa and, by 1900, most of the huge continent was under their control. The French and British were the main players but not the only ones. The Belgian royal family acquired the Congo and ruled it as a private estate. Most was soggy rainforest with little economic potential but one part was immensely rich in minerals. They separated it off from the rest of the Congo and called it Katanga.'

Sir George glanced at his notes.

'By the late 1950s, a wind of change was blowing through Africa. The Africans began to acquire modern weapons and the colonial powers realised it was time to leave. The British pulled out gradually and the Belgians left in a rush. That was popular with the electorate back home in Belgium but the white settlers were deeply resentful. They felt that they had been let down. Most could do little more than complain but the mining companies had the power to act.

The miners backed a local politician called Moise Tshombe. He declared Katanga an independent country and set himself up as president. It was a cosy relationship. Tshombe needed the miners' support to stay in power and they needed him to keep the mines going as before. The newly created Congolese government refused to recognise Tshombe. War broke out and the United Nations intervened.

Sir George looked up.

'I come now to the crucial part.'

He returned his attention to his notes.

'The United Nations sent in peacekeeping forces and they came under attack. A crisis developed and UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold decided to intervene. On 18 September 1961, he boarded a Douglas DC-6 airliner and was on his way to negotiate a ceasefire when the plane crashed near Ndola in what is now Zambia. Hammarskjold was killed together with fifteen others on board. Their bodies were retrieved but crash investigators were hampered by lack of cooperation from people on the ground.'

'Were you involved?' David asked.

'No. But my British colleagues were. Their Colonial Office was meant to be in charge of the case but effective power was in the hands of white settlers and they enjoyed a high degree of self-rule.

The investigation was inconclusive. My British colleagues were unable to prove anything but were left in little doubt that the plane had been shot down. Hammarskjold was near to putting an end to Katangan independence when he was killed.'

'And they suspected the miners?'

'Yes,' Sir George nodded. 'They believed the plane was shot down by forces working for the big mining corporation, Union Miniere. Former US President, Harry Truman, was of the same opinion. He didn't go so far as to name Union Miniere but came very close.'

'What's this got to do with Flight-145?'

'It looks as if the past has been repeated.'

'You mean there was a top UN official on the plane?'

'No. But there are disturbing similarities. Some of the investigators into the Hammarskjold crash are still alive. They want the plane's disappearance to be investigated by an independent team and I have agreed to help them put one together.'

'What sort of similarities?' Kirstin asked.

'Flight 145 was taking some very distinguished people to a high-level meeting in Toronto to discuss how national governments might rein in the powers of multinational corporations. The plane was owned by the de Villiers Foundation. Its present head is Richard de Villiers. He and others on the flight received death threats and were warned not to participate in the meeting.'

'Why us?' Humphrey asked.

'I know I can trust you.'

'Is that all?'

'You have the necessary skills.'

'Who pays?'

'My colleagues and I will guarantee a living wage. We don't have the resources to do more. There are people who would be willing to assist financially. We don't want to be beholden to anyone outside our small circle.'

'David can have my pay,' Charlie said.

'And mine,' Kirstin nodded.

She prodded Humphrey.

'Yes ... mine too.'

'So the three of you agree to be part of the team.'

Sir George turned to David.

'How about you?'

'I'm in, Grandfather.'

'Does that mean you have decided to abandon your career as a commercial diver and follow the noble tradition of espionage?'

'No, Grandfather. It means I want to find out what happened to Richard de Villiers. I know him. I've worked for Richard.'

'As a political activist?'

'No. As a volunteer diver. Richard funds marine science projects. He puts up the money for the logistics. The marine scientists and divers work for free. His projects are about preserving the environment. If he's

still alive, I want to work for him again. If Richard is dead, I want to know who killed him.'

Chapter 3

Invisible Drone

Dinner at the Hansens was always messy when Humphrey did the cooking. Charlie's intervention didn't help. Both regarded themselves as experts in the culinary arts and refused to take advice. Kirstin recalled the saying about too many cooks and spoiled broth. It was as true now as it had ever been. She left the kitchen and joined David in the dining room. He wanted to talk about her granddaughter Elizabeth.

'Have you any recent photos of Lizzie?' he asked.

Kirstin produced a photo album. Elizabeth was passionate about David. He was five years older and had flitted back and forth in her life since they were children. Kirstin couldn't imagine a better relationship. She found a photograph of Elizabeth, in a swimming costume, posing beside a bronze mermaid.

'Where is she now?' David asked.

'She finished her studies in Copenhagen and enrolled in a linguistics course at the University of British Columbia. That's in Vancouver. I have a cousin there and she is living with her.'

'Charlie says she's a talent spotter for free operators.'

'She is,' Kirstin nodded. 'Lizzie has put him in contact with people who can provide the sort of expertise he needs.'

'That's a bit of a laugh ...'

'In what way?'

'Some people are recruited. Others get sucked in. That's what happened to me. I guess the same happened to Lizzie.'

'She wasn't sucked in,' Kirstin protested. 'Elizabeth forced her way in against her father's wishes. Humphrey was determined to shield her from the hazards of our way of life.'

They were interrupted by Humphrey's booming voice.

'Dinner is served. Come and get it.'

He appeared, carrying a steaming casserole. Charlie followed with a tray of dishes. A rich aroma of fresh spices filled the air. Humphrey placed the casserole on the table and Charlie arranged the dishes around it. A bottle of vintage wine was uncorked.

Kirstin sat down and David took his place beside her. She was pleased to see that Humphrey and Charlie were careful to limit their intake of wine to a few glasses. She and David stuck to mineral water. This wasn't a party. It was a business meeting.

The meal ended. Charlie cleared away the dishes and Humphrey produced a sheet of butcher's paper. It was time for a case diagram. Kirstin sat back. It was like old times again. Sir George insisted on case diagrams. Kirstin and Charlie had been trained by him and they always used them.

Charlie selected a felt pen and drew a circle in the middle of the sheet. That was the defining point. A mistake could set them off on the wrong foot. He turned to David.

'What do I write here?'

'Flight-145,' David said.

'Agreed,' Charlie nodded. 'The case begins with the missing flight. I've checked the details with my contacts in the aviation industry. The plane was a Boeing-717, modified to accommodate sleeping and office facilities. There were five crew members and twenty-five passengers on board.

He included the information in the diagram and looked up.

'Humphrey thinks the flight was droned.'

'What do you mean by that?' David asked.

'Taken over by a third party. We think that's what happened to the plane Humphrey and I were in ... the one I told you about.'

'When you were forced to bail out?'

'That's right. The plane continued on its merry way and crashed into Mont Blanc. It was quite a spectacle. Some mountain guides recorded the event. They had reached the summit with their parties and had them lined up for a video when the plane arrived out of the blue.

The videos went viral. People were passing them around. Humphrey and I spent hours studying them. At first, we were reminded of the cruise missiles that knocked out Saddam Hussein's blockhouses during the First Gulf War. They were programmed to hug the ground and follow a programmed route to their target.'

'Do you think that happened to you?'

'No, David. I put the plane on autopilot after we left Rome and everything felt fine until I tried to go onto manual. After that it was like flying a plane with dual controls ... and another pilot had taken over.'

'That got us thinking about drone missiles,' Humphrey said.

'You mean like those used against insurgents?'

'Yes. They are flown by a pilot sitting at a desk and sending instructions by radio. He might be in the warzone or a long way from it. Distance doesn't matter so long as the signals get through.'

David rocked back on his chair and pursed his lips. Kirstin could almost see him thinking. He didn't have Charlie's skills with foreign languages or Humphrey's knowledge of computers but he had a good basic grasp of how things worked.

'You think someone tampered with your plane?'

'Precisely, David. We think it was converted into a drone. Perhaps during servicing. Maybe at some other time. A competent team could have completed the transformation in a few hours. A single person would have taken longer. That would be my way of doing it. The fewer people involved the better.'

'And you didn't notice anything?'

'No,' Charlie shook his head. 'You wouldn't in a modern plane. Pilots don't pull levers anymore. The same goes for cars. Drivers once used muscle power. Then power steering came in. The next big change was when computers came on the scene. Drivers and pilots now rely on them and computers can be accessed from outside. It's no longer necessary to break into the pilot's cabin to hijack a plane. You can do it from the other side of the world if the plane has been suitably modified.'

'It's a frightening thought.'

'It is, David, and it doesn't stop there. Have you ever wondered why you are told to turn off computing devices during take-off and landing? The message for humble passengers is that their computers can stuff things up. Even without trying they can menace the operation of a plane. Think what they could do if they tried.'

'You think that happened to Flight-145?'

'It's a distinct possibility.'

'And the plane that hit Mont Blanc?'

'Ninety-nine-point-nine percent certain. It was a precision shot. The plane zeroed in on the summit. The investigators were amazed by what happened but couldn't find anything to explain it. There were no charred bodies and no black box because the plane wasn't carrying one. Everything that could burn had burnt. The plane's electronic circuitry was totally destroyed. The incident has gone down in the annals of aviation history as an unexplained mystery.'

'I think of it as an invisible drone,' Kirstin remarked.

'A what?'

'Invisible drone, Humphrey. It's one of those things that you fail to see because you think it is something else. It looks like a normal plane but it is really a drone.'

Humphrey crossed out *Droned Plane?* in the case diagram and replaced it by *Invisible Drone?* Then he wrote *Olaf Magnusson?* beside it and drew a line connecting the two.

'Who is Olaf Magnusson?' David asked.

'A clever fellow who invented a control system for drones and failed to take out a proper patent. He accused the companies that manufacture drones of bribing his attorney to make a bum job of the patent application. He could be right for all I know. At any rate, he lost a lot of money when he should have gained a fortune. It made him very bitter.'

'What's that got to do with the plane crash?'

'Magnusson was staying at a tourist chalet near the Saint Bernard Pass when we dropped in. He was more than a little surprised to see us. We met him at dinner and had a confused conversation. Then a sinister-looking fellow arrived and Olaf took off. I had seen him with Olaf at a conference in Rome. He never let Olaf out of his sight.'

'Like he was Olaf's minder?'

'Precisely.'

'Is that the only thing to connect him with the plane?'

'No. The patent attorney, who let Olaf down, died in a mysterious car crash. The man's widow sued the car's manufacturer, claiming that the vehicle's cruise control had malfunctioned. The manufacturer produced convincing evidence to prove otherwise. Witnesses described how the car left the road and made a series of complicated manoeuvres before crashing through a fence and plunging into a reservoir. A coronial court recorded a verdict of suicide.'

'You think the car was converted into an invisible drone?'

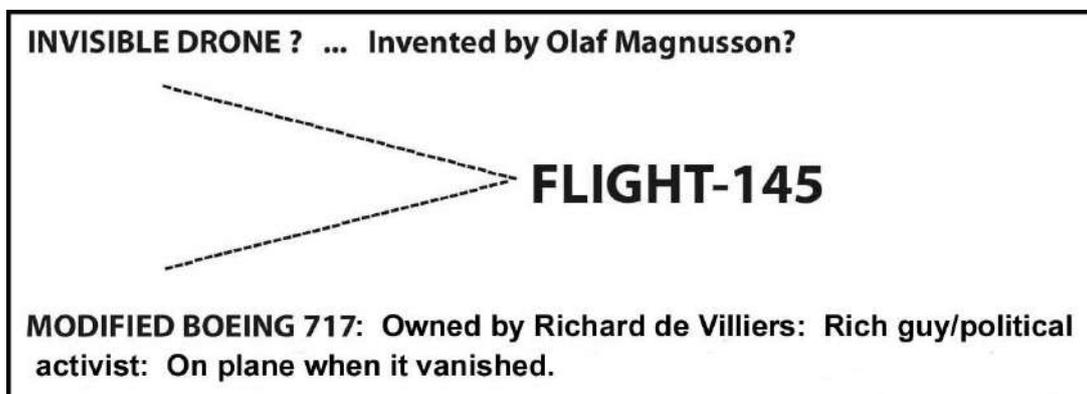
'I think that is a distinct possibility,' Humphrey smiled. 'At any rate, Kirstin and I intend to go to Europe to see if we can track down Olaf Magnusson. On the way, we shall visit an elderly fellow, called Steven Mason, who is a close friend of the de Villiers family.'

He handed the felt pen to Charlie.

'Tell us about the de Villiers.'

'The missing plane belonged to the Simon de Villiers Foundation,' Charlie said. 'In his day, Simon was one of the world's great mining moguls. His interests stretched from gold and diamonds in South Africa to copper and other minerals in South America. His eldest son, Richard, now heads the de Villiers empire. Richard is best known as a political activist and environmentalist. He is also an exceedingly rich and powerful man.'

Richard married a black lady who died some years ago. They had two daughters. Steven has met both of them. Petra is twenty-two and of a serious disposition. Anna is five years older. She is a very different sort of lady.'



Petra

Petra rubbed cream into her cheeks. She rarely used make-up. Today was an exception. Her face looked blotchy. Having a white father and black mother was part of the reason. The colours had mixed well but not totally uniformly. Usually, she had a clear complexion. When she was stressed the blotches appeared.

She was stressed now. Her father's plane was missing. Three days ago it vanished. The newspapers were still carrying the story on their front pages and everyone was talking about it. Nothing made sense. How could such an awful thing happen?

Planes couldn't just disappear. They surely maintained contact with their base and sent out radio signals to say where they were. And what about the spy satellites? They were meant to follow everything that was happening on the face of the earth. Her father said you couldn't blow your nose without a government agent knowing what you were doing.

Father was like that. People said he was paranoid. They called him a *conspiracy theorist*. It didn't matter what happened, he always had an explanation that conflicted with the official story. Some of the things he said were plausible. Others were totally crazy.

He claimed that men never landed on the moon. He said that it was a hoax put out by the Americans to fool the Russians during the Cold War. He said the Twin Towers didn't collapse because a couple of planes flew into them. He claimed that they had been wired up with explosives and it was all about invading the Middle East and stealing oil from the Arabs.

Petra examined herself in the mirror. She had inherited her father's straight hair and her mother's African features. Mother was Xhosa. She belonged to the same tribe as Nelson Mandela. Or, should the term be nation? Father said it should. There were more Xhosas in South Africa than Scots in Great Britain and the Xhosas spoke a distinctive language.

Again, he was going against officialdom. The South African Government insisted that there was only one nation but recognised different language groups. Three languages were spoken in Petra's household. One was English, another was Xhosa and the third was Afrikaans.

She straightened her skirt and went into the hall. Nelson Mandela's portrait hung there next to that of her grandfather. Plaques announced in gold letters that both had been presidents. Nelson had been president of South Africa. Simon de Villiers had been president of a string of mining companies.

Like the famous De Beers diamond family, the de Villiers were staunch opponents of the white supremacist government that had ruled South Africa. Simon sent her father to a multiracial boarding school in

Swaziland. That was where he met her mother. Petra once joked that he could have become Nelson's son-in-law. Winnie Mandela sent her daughters to a neighbouring school while Nelson was locked up in Robben Island Prison. Her mother went to the same school and, like Winnie's daughters, spoke English with a posh British accent.

The multiracial schools were where those with an eye to the future sent their children. Her mother's family had a long history of education. Her ancestors sought out the British missionaries. Like Nelson's family, they belonged to the Xhosa aristocracy. The Zulus were their enemies and they weren't unduly upset when white soldiers seized Zulu lands to their north.

Petra peered out into the yard. The de Villiers residence was regarded as a hippy commune by their neighbours. The Cape Town suburb of Constantia was home to the world's ultra-rich. Princess Dianna's brother, Earl Spencer, had a mansion nearby. Margaret Thatcher's son, Mark, had a home just down the road. The Chinese were moving in and the black political classes were staking out their claims.

Her heart sank. In the early days of majority rule, everything had been about humanity and justice. Now money and power were all that mattered. Her mother had died worrying about it. Cancer had struck her down at an early age. She'd had great dreams for South Africa and they had soured. Grandfather had tried to comfort her. His dreams were souring too. They died within weeks of one another.

Petra waved to the people in the yard. Her father had created a place for individuals to express themselves. Grandfather would turn in his grave if he could see what had happened to his once stately home.

On a normal day, she would be at university. But today was not normal. Her father was missing and an old friend of the family had phoned to say that he had flown in from London and must speak to her. His plane had landed at the airport and he would meet her there.

Petra made her way to the garage and peered through the window. Her grandfather's Bentley was inside. It had not been used since his death. Her father regarded Bentleys as ostentatious and insisted on practical vehicles which were kept going until they fell apart.

Her own car was nine years old and needed constant attention to keep it running. That was part of its charm. She didn't feel like a privileged rich kid when she drove it to the university.

The car would be ideal for her present mission. Her elderly contact had told her to adopt a very low profile. His name was Steven Mason and he belonged to her grandfather's generation. She vaguely remembered Steven from when her grandfather was alive. He spoke with a distinctive English accent and she recognised his voice immediately. His final words to her were chilling.

'Fetch me and don't tell anyone what you are doing.'

Steven looked much older than when she last saw him. Petra did a rapid calculation. He was nearing ninety, perhaps older. He said he wanted to go for a drive then return to the airport. What he had to tell her would take no more than a few hours. The sooner he flew back to England the better. His presence in South Africa would arouse suspicions if he stayed longer.

He asked her to take him onto a road that ran around the back of Table Mountain. There were things he wanted to show her. Petra couldn't think what they might be. The university and the zoo came to mind but they were hardly worth a daytrip from London.

Steven remained a mystery. She assumed he had come to speak about her father's disappearance. He would, no doubt, do so in his own time and she wasn't going to hurry him. Steven and her grandfather had been close friends. Both were slow and methodical in everything they did.

The drive took them past the shanty towns that were springing up on the vast expanse of flat land between the airport and city. Steven remarked that they had grown immensely since he was last there. At one point, a concrete wall divided the freeway.

'That's a bit high for a crash barrier,' he remarked. 'I would have thought the materials could be put to better use building houses. The standard of accommodation here is appalling.'

'It's not a crash barrier,' Petra explained.

'Then what is it?'

'It was put there to stop people driving cattle across the road and causing accidents. The people in the shanty towns come from the Eastern Cape. They are Xhosas like my mother's family.'

'What are they doing with cattle here in Cape Town?'

'Bride price ...'

'In a city?'

'It's the traditional way. There's a joke that some bulls have been shuffled around so often they have been used to marry a thousand girls.'

'Old traditions die hard,' Steven muttered.

'Yes. The people from rural areas are poorly educated.'

'Hgh,' Steven grunted. 'Don't make the mistake of thinking that outmoded traditions are confined to the uneducated. Some very well-educated people are obsessed by traditions that should have been consigned to the junk heap of history and one is the quest for empire.'

'Those days have surely gone.'

'No, Petra. The beast is still alive and kicking ...'

'Good Lord!'

He was suddenly distracted.

'That's Langa ... isn't it?'

'Yes. It means Sun in the Xhosa language.'

'But Langa was a drab township for migrant workers when I lived here. It was surrounded by a high fence and there was a police post at the gate. Residents had to carry passes and were constantly harassed by the security forces. The present houses are totally presentable. Indeed, some are impressive by any standards.'

'The early migrant workers built a decent life for themselves when the apartheid laws were relaxed,' Petra said. 'The change happened slowly. I remember when Desmond Tutu became Archbishop of Cape Town. That would have been unthinkable when my parents were born but it happened under the old apartheid regime.'

'Your parents were married in Swaziland, if I recall correctly.'

'Yes. Mixed-marriages were illegal in South Africa.'

'And they came to live with your grandparents?'

'That was illegal too but no one was going to do anything about it.'

'Not if that meant taking on someone as powerful as your grandfather,' Steven chuckled. 'I remember seeing you at your grandparents' house when you were a child. You have changed a lot since then. I suspect that I have too.'

'You have a bit.'

'But, you remember me?'

'I recognise your face and your voice.'

'That's good. My colleagues chose me for this mission because they hoped you would recognise me as an old family friend ... someone who can be trusted.'

They were nearing the end of the airport freeway and approaching the road that ran around Table Mountain. Petra pointed to a collection of buildings on the lower slopes.

'That's where I should be now.'

'You mean the university?'

'Yes. I'm skipping classes.'

'What are you studying?'

'History and Law.'

'You want to be a lawyer?'

'No. A politician.'

'Which party?'

'I haven't chosen one yet.'

'Spoken like a true de Villiers,' Steven smiled. 'Your grandfather would approve. He never took a firm position on anything until the time was ripe.'

'Which grandfather?'

'Simon, of course.'

'You never met my mother's family?'

'No.'

'They were clan chieftains. That's the term you British used because you recognised the similarities with the Scottish clans.'

'And they always hedged their bets?'

'Of course.'

'So you are a smart cookie on both sides of the family?'

'I hope so. South Africa needs smart cookies.'

He pointed ahead. 'Go right at the next intersection. There's a place I want to visit ... if it's not been torn down.'

'Why should it have been torn down?'

'It's called Rhodes' Seat or something like that.'

Petra switched lanes. 'I know what you are talking about but we won't get there by turning right.'

'A lot has changed since I was last here.'

'Yes. Cape Town has grown. People are crowding in.'

She entered a side road and proceeded in low gear. The old car protested at the steep gradients and crept up slowly to the annoyance of motorists behind. After many twists and turns they reached a parking spot and got out.

Steven pointed to a statue.

'It's still there. I can't understand why you people didn't just blast it away. That man was an abomination.'

'You mean Cecil Rhodes?'

'Yes. Cecil was obsessed by power and influence. He was an Anglican vicar's son who acquired a fortune from diamonds. When he died in 1902, at the young age of forty-nine, he had acquired 90 percent of the world's production of diamonds. The Anglican Church later made redress for his sins by appointing Tutu as Archbishop of Cape Town.'

Petra was surprised by Steven's passion. For her, Rhodes belonged to history.

'They are the curse of mankind, Petra.'

'Who?'

'Empire builders. Rhodes used his great wealth to invade the lands of the Shona, Ndebele and other tribes. The British recognised his conquests and incorporated them in their Empire under the name of Rhodesia. That vast territory has since been divided into what we know as Zambia and Zimbabwe. Your family still has big financial interests there.'

Petra followed the statue's gaze towards the vast interior of Africa. That's what the Rhodes Memorial was about. The great man was meant to be sitting there contemplating the empire he would one day create.

It was a beautiful day. Her mind felt ready to explode. Her world had turned upside down. A week ago she could have been sitting with her father talking about the problems the world faced. Now, he had vanished

and she was with a man who was so old he almost belonged to history. Steven Mason had popped up like a genie from a bottle.

He produced a photograph.

'This fellow is called David.'

The face that peered up at her was young and earnest. He had closely-cropped, blond hair and sharp features.

'David is your first contact,' Steven said. 'You can keep his photograph. The person you really need to meet does not allow his photograph to be taken. David will introduce you to him.'

He grasped her hand.

'Your father was almost certainly murdered. He upset some very powerful people and they caused his plane to crash. David and his colleagues want to find these people and bring them to justice. They will arrive in the next few days. David will phone you from the airport. He has worked for your father as a volunteer diver and knows him well. Make a place for him to stay with you. That is important. You may need David for protection.'

His fingers tightened.

'You have grown into a fine young woman, Petra, and I am sure you can face life's challenges. You have told me that you want to become a politician. That is a noble path for those who tread it in a noble way. You have Mandela and Tutu as your guides ... but there are other players.'

'What other players?'

'You must find them for yourself, Petra.'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'You will, Petra ...'

Steven suddenly seemed very weak.

'It is time for me to leave ...'

He took her arm and she helped him to the car. She had expected more but it didn't come. They drove back to the airport and she left him at the departures lounge. It seemed that he had discharged his mission and told her all she needed to know. She would learn more when she met David.

Chapter 5

Tower Hamlets

Kirstin pulled up the blinds and peered out at a brick wall, lined with wheelie bins and sacks of rubbish. Life had returned to normal. They were staying in low-cost accommodation again. They weren't being paid for their labours and their travel allowance had been cut to a minimum. Sir George said they wouldn't be out-of-pocket but mustn't expect to live

in the luxurious style to which they had recently grown accustomed. She had not expected to go so far downmarket.

'This place stinks, Humphrey.'

'If you say so, Mother.'

He was lounging in an old armchair, tapping away at his computer.

'The internet connection is good. That's the main thing ...'

'No. It's not the main thing Humphrey,' Kirstin fumed. 'This whole case is looking ridiculous. Two old men have a hunch and we're going along with it.'

'Which old men?'

'Sir George and that fellow Steven Mason.'

'I thought there were more.'

'Charlie thinks it's just the two of them. They've got a bee in their bonnets and George is paying for it.'

'A bee?'

'Humphrey ... pay attention!'

'I am, Mother. I'm researching the case we're meant to be working on. I know you think it's nonsense. I don't. There were some immensely distinguished people on that plane.'

'Distinguished idiots. That man, de Villiers, is a crank. No one in their right senses would have anything to do with him. He's a conspiracy theorist gone mad. You only have to look at his website to know he is totally crazy. His latest outburst is on global warming. He thinks it's a plot by the Russians to change the world's climate in their favour. How dafter can you get than that?'

'Richard de Villiers is a very rich man.'

'That doesn't make him any saner.'

'He has mounted a damaging campaign against globalisation.'

'Yes. He has been likened to the hooligans who try to disrupt Davos and the G-20 meetings.'

'His people don't go around breaking windows, Mother. They conduct research into the rising power of the multinationals and they have come up with some very disturbing findings.'

Kirstin reached for her coat.

'Humphrey, I'm freezing. You could, at least, have found a place that is heated. I had forgotten how cold it can be in London at this time of year. I'm going for a walk. I need to get warm.'

'I'll join you, Mother.'

Humphrey shut down his computer.

'I suggest we go down beside the river. We are in the ancient borough of Tower Hamlets. Dickens based a lot of his stories here. We can imagine ourselves walking in the footsteps of Oliver Twist. Then it will be time to visit Steven. We are invited for dinner. He lives just around the corner from here.'

Dinner was Madras curry served with appropriate accompaniments and delivered by a young man in a white van. The contrast between the Paget residence and Steven's small apartment was striking. The old man was living in a high-rise block overlooking the River Thames. Kirstin remembered him from when she was in George's Special Investigations Unit.

He used to visit them in Canberra when he and George were working on joint intelligence operations for the British and Australian governments. He looked much older now but his voice hadn't changed. Steven had the distinctive London accent known as cockney.

Dinner ended and the plates were loaded into a dishwasher. The apartment was modest but tidy. Kirstin noted that there was a place for everything and everything was in its place. Steven was getting on in years but in command of all his senses. Her initial suspicions were dispelled ... the man was far from gaga.

Humphrey wanted to see the view and they went out onto the balcony. A cold wind was blowing. Kirstin retreated back into the shelter of the doorway. In one direction they could see up the river towards Tower Bridge. In the other, they could make out the huge warehouses of the old docklands.

'I've returned to my roots,' Steven said.

'Were you born here in the East End?' Humphrey asked.

'I lived here as a boy. Not in this building, of course. Tower Hamlets was flattened during the war. I was one of the wardens who helped save Saint Paul's Cathedral. This whole area was ablaze. I was working as an interpreter then. That was before I was drafted to Bletchley Park. That's where we cracked the German military codes ...'

Kirstin listened intently. Steven reminded her of George Paget. He never rushed into anything. If George wanted to tell you something he would get around to it with a seductive chatter that slowly zeroed in on its target. Humphrey was clearly impressed by the mention of Bletchley Park. She felt the cold.

'It's a bit chilly out here, Steven.'

She retreated into the living room and the two men followed. Steven switched on a heater and they sat around it in easy chairs. Humphrey was keen to get the conversation going again.

'You mentioned Bletchley Park ...'

'Yes. I was one of those fellows who translated the coded messages transmitted by the Nazi high command. The work was very hush-hush and it is only recently that we have been able to talk about it. One might ask why it had to be kept secret for so long.'

'We've heard a lot about Turing being the code breaker,' Humphrey said. 'He was the genius who designed a computer to handle the

computations needed to break the codes. Others must have been involved.'

'Most definitely,' Steven nodded vigorously. 'I would name three people as essential to the project. One was Bill Tutte who died recently. Bill used pure logic to discover how the German encrypting machine worked. The Germans called it Lorenz. We called it Tunny.'

'How did it differ from Enigma?'

'Enigma was invented in the 1920s and was on sale commercially. It used cogwheels that could be shuffled around to scramble messages. If you knew the settings, you could unscramble them using another Enigma machine. The German military used them and produced manuals which gave the settings for each day. The Poles devised a way of deducing the settings from the messages. Some commanders always ended their messages with Heil Hitler and that helped a lot.'

'But how did Lorenz differ?'

'More cogwheels and other complications. It says a lot for Bill Tutte's perseverance that he was able to draw up plans for copies to be made. The next step was to design a computer to handle the computations needed to work out the settings.

That's where Turing came in and the computer he designed was on a far grander scale than anything that had previously been built. The old way was to use cogwheels like those in Enigma. But the sheer number made that impossible. Another solution was required and it was provided by Tommie Flowers.'

'He's your third man?'

'Yes. Tommie was a working-class lad like me. He had trained as a telephone engineer and he was brilliant. Tommie built Turing's machine. It was the world's first electronic computer and was huge by the standards of the day. Three thousand electronic valves were needed to make it work. We called it Colossus ...'

Kirstin let the words flow over her. She knew it already and so did Humphrey. What made it all the more ridiculous was that Steven knew Humphrey knew. George had picked Humphrey for the case because he was an expert on encryption. The conversation was nonsense and a total waste of time.

The coffee percolator started to bubble. Steven went to it. Earlier in the evening, he had asked how they liked their coffee. Humphrey wanted black with sugar. Kirstin asked for cream. He returned with a tray. The cream was there in a small jug and there was brown sugar in a small bowl. He put down the tray and pretended to have lost track of the conversation.

'Now, what was I saying?'

'You were telling us about Bletchley Park,' Humphrey said.

'Ah, yes. I was telling you about the code breakers. None received the recognition they deserved until recently. Most were dead before that happened. Bill Tutte was one of the few who lived long enough to hear

his praises sung. Our mouths were sealed. We had signed the Official Secrets Act. We could have gone to jail for breathing a word about Bletchley. You can imagine our indignation when Alan Turing was jailed for being a homosexual. The man was a great patriot. He should have been hailed as a national hero.'

Steven reached for his coffee.

'Secrecy was essential at the time and rigorously applied. We were not allowed to talk to our colleagues about our work. Doing so could lead to immediate dismissal and worse. I had no trouble with that. But you have to ask why it went on for so long. Long-term secrecy only makes sense if it serves long-term interests.'

'What was your role at Bletchley?' Humphrey asked.

'I was there because I spoke German. My mother was German. Fortunately, she was able to pass herself off as Jewish, otherwise we might have been interred. The British wartime authorities believed her even if a rabbinical council would have rejected her claim.'

'And you worked at Bletchley as an interpreter?'

'Turing's machine churned out vast amounts of high-grade intelligence. The level of security was such that only a few of us were employed as translators. As far as I know, I am the last to survive. When I die, my secrets will die with me. The same goes for George Paget.'

He looked from one to the other.

'The Lorenz transmissions weren't just military. Certain individuals wanted detailed information on treasures looted from museums and bullion seized from banks. They used Lorenz for their own private ventures.'

Steven took a sip from his cup.

'We rarely saw whole documents. We were given snippets to translate. These were then assembled for analysis by intelligence officers. However, on occasions, we were so short-staffed that one person would receive work that was normally spread amongst a dozen people. During one particularly severe flu epidemic I found myself translating whole messages.

That was an eye-opener. I discovered that Goering was amassing a huge collection of stolen artworks. I learnt about the Nazi death camps and I discovered that companies, which I had always considered as American, were cooperating with the Nazis.'

'Was this before or after America entered the war?' Kirstin asked.

'After. In late 1943, I read and reread a transmission. It was phrased in precise language and there could be no misunderstanding. Standard Oil of New Jersey was supplying fuel additives to the Luftwaffe. Germany didn't manufacture them and Hitler's planes couldn't fly without them.

My immediate thoughts were that the Germans had discovered that we had cracked Lorenz and were sending out false reports to destabilize our relationship with the United States. I got the translation to my seniors

and was immediately sworn to the utmost secrecy. Later, my security rating was jacked up and I was assigned to top secret work.

Other multinational firms came under deep suspicion. They included Ford Motors whose foreign subsidiaries built trucks for German troops and the Chase Bank which managed the international money transfers needed to pay Nazi money to the parent companies.'

'And those parent companies weren't always American ...'

'That's right,' Steven agreed. 'Some were British. The two governments launched enquiries after the war and much was revealed. But a lot did not come out. Governments are not all powerful. President Roosevelt knew what was going on and coped the best he could during the war with Germany. Unfortunately, his successors needed the cooperation of the same corrupt companies in the Cold War that followed with Russia ...'

Kirstin felt herself dropping off to sleep. Humphrey could cope with jetlag. She couldn't. Her eyes closed and the men's voices grew fainter. She had heard it all before. There was nothing new. It was all well-known. Humphrey might find Steven interesting ... she didn't.

The gas fire flickered and went out. Kirstin went to the stove and saw that it had suffered the same fate. She was halfway through cooking breakfast.

'Humphrey. The gas has gone out.'

'That's because you haven't put any coins in the meter.'

'What meter?'

'The one that supplies the gas.'

'You are saying that you have brought me to a place where I'm expected to pay for the gas. You will be telling me next that I have to pay for the electricity.'

'That's what the other meter is for.'

'How could you do such a thing, Humphrey?'

'London is one of the most expensive cities in the world.'

'So is Sydney. I'm surprised you didn't book us into a backpacker hostel.'

'I tried, Mother. They are all full.'

He was standing beside the kitchen table, photographing pages in a cardboard folder. Kirstin was reminded of when she worked in George Paget's Special Investigations Unit. The Australian government had inherited a lot of traditions from the British. One was an obsession for punching holes in the upper-left corners of documents and lacing them together.

'What are you doing, Humphrey?'

'Copying some papers that Steven lent me.'

'They look old.'

'They are, Mother. Steven rescued them from the shredder. He pulled them out and took them home before they were lost to history.'

'Where were they going to be shredded?'

'In the offices of MI5 and other places.'

'I recall that Steven was an MI5 officer.'

'Yes. He joined British Military Intelligence after he left Bletchley.'

'And he keeps these secret documents at home?'

'We removed a floorboard to retrieve them. You were asleep at the time. Otherwise, we would have asked you to help.'

Kirstin dumped a half-cooked rasher of bacon on a plate and placed a fried egg beside it. The electric toaster was still working but the butter was rock-solid. She pushed the plate towards Humphrey.

'You sort it out.'

'Thank you, Mother. It looks delicious.'

'No, Humphrey. It's not. I've had enough of this ridiculous charade. Steven didn't say anything we don't know already. He and George are trying to recreate the world of espionage they knew as young men. They are trying to relive their lives and I'm having no part in it.'

Humphrey reached for the tomato sauce.

'Steven's arguments were highly plausible. He saw how President Roosevelt had to battle the multinationals like Ford and Chase Bank. After the war, President Eisenhower had the same problem. He talked about the power of the military-industrial complex. Eisenhower had been Allied Supreme Commander in World War II. He saw the Western Allies to victory. As president of the United States he was unable to control the big multinationals.'

'Yes, Humphrey. I'm well aware of that and I didn't cross the world to hear it again.'

'You failed to hear all of it, Mother. You were asleep at the time. If you had been awake and paying attention you would have heard something new. Steven told me he learnt things that never came out in the enquiries conducted by the American and British governments after the war.'

'Such as?'

'The names of American and British nationals who were sympathetic to the Nazi cause.'

'I've seen the list, Humphrey. As you have just remarked, Henry Ford was one of them.'

'Yes. His Nazi sympathies are well-known. Henry made no secret of them. Others were equally sympathetic and their contribution to the Nazi war effort was hushed up. That's why people like Steven were sworn to secrecy and forced to remain silent long after the war ended. He rescued those papers from the shredder so that the truth would not be lost. Some very important people are named in them.'

'And they are still alive?'

'No. Mother. They are dead but their empires live on and the people who run them are as vicious as ever. Steven believes that his life would be in danger if they found out that he has those papers in his possession.'

'And you believe him?'

'Yes.'

'Well. I don't care what you believe, Humphrey. I'm going back to Canberra. And, when I get there, I'm going to hand in my resignation to George Paget. We are meant to be investigating the disappearance of an airliner. I have seen nothing to indicate that it was converted into a drone and flown to some secret destination. That is pure speculation and I'm having no part in it.'

'Very well, Mother.' Humphrey reached for a slice of bread. 'You can make up your own mind. I ask only one thing. Please accompany me back to Steven's apartment and thank him for last night's hospitality. I have promised to return these folders to him.'

A police car drove past as they approached the high-rise block where Steven lived. Kirstin thought nothing of it until they turned a corner and were confronted by a crowd. She tapped Humphrey's arm.

'Something has happened.'

'I can see that, Mother.'

'It looks as if the police have declared a crime scene.'

'It does.' Humphrey slowed his pace. 'I suggest we hang back. They will probably want to question people entering the area. I don't relish the thought of having to explain why I have top-secret government papers in my possession ... even if they are thirty years old.'

Kirstin glanced back and forth. Most of the people in the crowd were female and wore saris. They were speaking in a language she couldn't understand. She kept going and heard English. A black woman with a Caribbean accent was talking to a white man.

'They've taken him away. It was awful seeing him like that. You would have thought they would have put him in the ambulance. But they left him there and put that plastic tape up ...'

Kirstin saw the shape of a fallen figure on the ground. It had been marked out with chalk and told an obvious tale. Someone had fallen from one of the floors above.

'Steven was a nice old man,' the woman continued. 'He once told me he had been born here. That was before the war and this place was bombed. It was interesting to hear his stories of how it was then ...'

Kirstin felt Humphrey's hand on her arm.

'Time to go, Mother.'

He kept his voice down and spoke in Danish. When things got difficult there was advantage in using a language that few understood.

'The police are treating it as suspicious.'

'Yes, Humphrey.' Kirstin moved away. 'They've got a full team of forensic investigators up there. I've rarely seen so many people in white coats. Did you see those cardboard boxes they're taking away?'

'I did, Mother. They are like those that Steven had under his floorboards. They contained documents with a high security classification.'

'What do you intend to do?'

'Get rid of this incriminating material.'

Humphrey grasped the bag with Steven's documents.

'As soon as I can find a suitable place to dispose of them I shall do so. I have made copies and they are stored in cyberspace.'

He took Kirstin's arm and walked slowly away.

'Do you still intend to return to Canberra?'

'I shall stay on.' Kirstin squeezed his hand. 'You are right and I was wrong. There is far more to this case than two old men trying to relive their past.'

Chapter 6

Sipho

The weather was pleasantly warm. Sipho Maduna sat in the porch of the de Villiers mansion and waited for Petra to emerge. Her father's attorney had called. Richard de Villiers had been missing for five days and hope of finding him alive was beginning to fade.

At twenty-eight, Sipho was six years older than Petra. He had a wife and child back home in the Xhosa tribal lands of the Easter Cape. The de Villiers were supporting him and his family while he was in Cape Town, studying for a degree in electrical engineering.

Richard had offered him a room in the family home but Sipho preferred to live in the rambling assortment of buildings in the grounds. The neighbours called it as a hippy commune. All sorts of people lived there. They came and went. Some were artists. Most were scientists working on environmental projects funded by the Simon de Villiers Foundation.

The neighbours regarded Richard as mad. Sipho was thankful to have him as a friend. The de Villiers treated him as a member of the family and referred to him as a cousin. By European standards, that was stretching the relationship. He shared a surname with Petra's mother and belonged to the same clan. But most members of the clan used the surname and there was no evidence of a blood relationship. If Richard knew he didn't care. And it didn't worry him that Sipho's parents were poor farmers and the social inferiors of Petra's mother who came from a family of chieftains.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway. Siphon recognised the heavy tread of the attorney and guessed that the meeting was over. The front door opened and the man emerged followed by Petra. She looked tired and anxious. Her face was blotchy and her hair was a mess. Siphon had noticed that it got like that when she was stressed and couldn't stop scratching her head. She waited for the attorney to leave then turned to speak to him.

'Thank you for waiting, Siphon.'

'You said there was something I could do.'

'Yes. I want you to pick up someone from the airport. I was going to do it myself but I don't have time. There is so much happening. Anna is coming and so is Carla. They are worried about Richard. We are running out of hope.'

Petra usually referred to her father as Richard. Most people called him by his first name and Petra was no exception. She produced a photograph.

'This is the person I want you to fetch. His name is David and he is coming to stay. Take my old car and don't tell anyone what you are doing. If anyone asks, say that David is a diver and he has come to work on one of Richard's marine survey projects.'

David was easy to spot. He was tall and suntanned and stood out amongst the passengers streaming into the arrivals hall. Siphon watched him go to the carousel and remove a heavy backpack. He walked across.

'You must be David.'

David looked down at him.

'Who are you?'

'Petra's cousin ... she sent me.'

David hoisted the backpack onto his shoulder.

'Petra couldn't come ...'

David continued to eye him suspiciously.

'She's very busy ...'

David showed no sign of listening. He took a phone from his pocket and pushed up a number. Siphon heard a dialling tone. It went on for a while and no one answered. David switched off the phone.

'Was that Petra you were phoning?' Siphon asked.

'Yes.' David's manner seemed to soften a little.

'Her phone is probably turned off.'

'Why should it be turned off?'

'The newspapers won't leave her alone. They want to know if she has anymore news about her father. He was on that plane ... the one that vanished ... it belonged to him. It's been five days now.'

David returned the phone to his pocket.

'You said you were Petra's cousin ...'

'Our families belong to the same clan.'

'And that makes you cousins?'

'Not in your country but in mine it does ...'

He did his best to explain. David asked more questions. Siphon had never come across anyone like him. He had to recount his life history before David would agree to get into the car with him. The guy was seriously weird.

Petra glanced in the mirror. The blotches had gone. A half-hour yoga session had done wonders to calm her nerves and her complexion was back to normal. Siphon was her saviour. He had gone to the airport to collect David.

He was the first of two mysterious people who were coming to help her. The other would arrive later. Perhaps, he was already here. She didn't know. Steven hadn't made that clear. All he had said was that the second man didn't like his photograph taken. It was all very strange and more than a little frightening.

She braced herself for the inevitable. Richard had been missing for over five days and was almost certainly dead. The two of them had been very close since her mother died. He said she was just like her ... kind and caring.

Richard had never described Anna like that. Her sister's behaviour had brought their mother to tears. Anna was a self-willed teenager who grew into a ruthless, self-seeking adult. She flaunted her fame as a daughter of one of South Africa's richest families and made friends with the sort of people her parents loathed.

Anna liked being fabulously rich and despised people who weren't. Her disputes with Richard provided rich pickings for the writers of gossip columns. They relished her lavish lifestyle and contrasted it with that of Richard who lived modestly and devoted his energy to "*controversial*" projects.

"*Controversial*" was their way of saying "nutty". Anna had no such inhibitions. She went out of her way to say her father was a crank and joined the chorus of applause when he was called a crazy conspiracy theorist who couldn't recognise reality when it stared him in the face.

Richard had no problems with reality. His problem was with people who might want to kill him. Names like Union Miniere, Tshombe and Hammarskjold came to mind. Petra remembered him talking about them and saying that he didn't want to suffer Hammarskjold's fate.

Jag Hammarskjold was UN Secretary General and the mining companies took him out because he threatened their interests. Richard was threatening a lot of interests and they weren't all in mining. The world had moved on. Multinational companies were bigger and stronger and some were doing things that Richard detested.

'No one fears a nutter.'

Petra remembered him saying that. She was about sixteen at the time and didn't fully understand what her father was trying to tell her. His message was much clearer now. Richard was using the immense resources of the de Villiers Foundation to take on some very dangerous people. In doing so he was putting his life at risk. His defence was to paint himself as a harmless nutter.

It looked as if his enemies had seen through his ruse. A shiver ran down Petra's spine. She was now the only one who would continue his struggle. Anna was opposed to everything her father stood for and so were the other members of the family.

They would be arriving soon. The de Villiers clan was flocking back to the ancestral home like vultures to a corpse. There would be rich pickings if Richard was declared dead. The vultures would fight over his bones.

Chapter 7

Anna

The limousine swept down the driveway and stopped in front of the old house. The de Villiers' mansion was built in the Dutch colonial style and was an impressive building by any standards. David sat on a bench outside Siphos cabin and sorted through his diving equipment. It was a good place to spy out the land and see what was happening.

He recognised Anna from her photograph. The tall, statuesque woman who unfolded herself from the car was unmistakable. Charlie had likened her to a panther. David was inclined to agree. Then he wondered if *cougar* would be more appropriate.

Anna had a companion. A slightly built young man clambered out to join her. He looked no more than twenty and wore baggy shorts and a white T-shirt that contrasted with Anna's tight trousers and smartly tailored coat.

The pair mounted the steps of the house together. David expected them to go inside. Instead, they stood beneath the impressive portico as if expecting something to happen. He heard the odd word and realized Anna was speaking Spanish or something similar.

The young guy was evidently called Mario. That much he could make out. Then the rear door of the limousine opened and a young woman emerged. She was plainly dressed. Anna called her Maria.

Mario and Maria.

It sounded like a joke. David wondered if Anna was bisexual and kept a toy boy and a toy girl. Maria produced a camera. He recognised it as the sort professionals use. Anna placed herself beside a pillar and posed. Maria's camera flashed. Anna clearly knew a lot about posing. She gave

instructions and summoned Mario to her side as if he was an accompaniment to her act. A pet poodle could have played the part just as well.

Petra tried not to tense. Anna had intimidated her for too long. Her sister had always seemed so much more grownup and mature. Anna had learnt about boys at an early age and had greatly distressed their mother in the process. Petra recalled one incident when mother had confronted Anna and called her a harlot.

Mother spoke in Xhosa and Anna pretended not to understand. That was a double betrayal. Their parents had insisted that they should be proficient in the languages of both sides of their family. They had been brought up to believe that it would be tragic if they could not speak to their relatives in their own tongue.

Anna had never learnt Xhosa properly. She could say a few words but no more. Her attitude towards Sipho was appalling. He had struggled to improve his position and she treated him with contempt. Anna was incapable of recognising him as a relative in the old tribal sense.

Anna belonged to a bigger tribe ... hers was global.

Richard had welcomed globalisation for a while. He saw it as a way to break down the barriers of race and religion. Then, its more sinister aspects became apparent. Globalisation could concentrate power in the wrong hands.

He liked to repeat something Winston Churchill had said.

Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Those words described the present situation. Heroes like Nelson Mandela and former Prime Minister de Klerk had fought hard to bring the white supremacist regime to an end. They had done so out of the conviction that a bond existed amongst the diverse people of the nation. South Africans knew their destinies were entwined and worked hard to overcome their differences.

Richard had sent Anna to South America to look after family interests there. Petra had always assumed that he wanted to get rid of his delinquent daughter. Now she was back.

She watched from her window as Anna crashed in and started to rearrange everything around her. She was behaving as if she owned the place. Anna was seizing control.

Like all the de Villiers, she travelled with an entourage of security guards. Anna spoke to them in Portuguese. Richard's chief clerk had his office appropriated before he knew what was happening.

Anna was living in Brazil. The de Villiers owned mines there and she had a seat on the board of directors. Richard approved of the arrangement. Petra figured that he was glad to have her out of his way and turned a blind eye to her extravagant way of living.

One member of Anna's party didn't fit it. His name was Mario. Petra had seen him before and couldn't make him out. At first, she assumed he was Anna's latest lover. In the past, her sister had gone for tough, bronzed, athletic types. It seemed that her preference had strayed to a more delicate type of male.

Mario was pale and lightly built. He spoke English with an American accent and was very polite. Anna ordered him around, like she ordered everyone around. Mario usually did her bidding but, when it came to a certain matter, he politely refused.

Anna wanted them to share the same room. She spoke to him in Portuguese. Mario replied in English, making it clear to anyone who was listening, that it would be inappropriate for them to sleep in the same room even if it was equipped with two beds.

Anna started to argue. She spat out the words. Most people were intimidated by her outbursts. Mario stared into space as if totally bored. Petra tried not to smile. It was like watching someone try to beat a pillow to death by thumping it. She knew, instinctively, that Richard would approve of Mario.

Chapter 8

Carla

Sipho sneaked in through the backdoor and made his way to the kitchen. Anna's people were already there. It was like witnessing an invasion. Two vehicles had followed Anna's limousine into the grounds. They were the sort the local security companies used but the people in them weren't South African ... they were South American.

A woman and a man were giving instructions to the staff and inquiring about the contents of the wine cellar. They were speaking in highly accented English. Sipho guessed they wouldn't understand a word of Xhosa.

He stood in the doorway and nodded to one of the cooks. The elderly woman belonged to his tribe and he knew her well. She raised her head, in a sign of recognition, and walked across.

'I must speak to the mistress.'

He called Petra *mistress* as a mark of respect. It was the traditional Xhosa way of referring to people in authority. A younger generation might find that old fashioned. In the tribal homelands it was the way things were still done. To do otherwise would be regarded as boorish and rude.

'The mistress is upstairs with her sister and those people.'

Sipho noticed that the old woman had consigned Anna to the lowly role of sister. She clearly shared his views on what was going on.

'I must speak to the mistress alone,' he said quietly. 'I'll go into the kitchen garden and wait for her there.'

Petra pushed the backdoor open and peered into the garden. She had managed to slip away while Anna was screaming into a phone, telling someone to get off their arse. To her relief, Siphos was there. She restrained a desire to collapse into his arms.

'Siphos. I'm so glad to see you.'

He was like a big brother and she desperately needed one now.

'Mistress ...'

He spoke in Xhosa.

'No, Siphos.' She grasped his hand. 'Call me Petra. You do that when we speak English. Call me Petra now ... I'm feeling so lonely.'

'Petra. What is going on?'

'I don't know. Richard has been missing for almost a week ...'

They spoke in a confused mixture of Xhosa and English. Petra always referred to her father as *Richard* when she spoke English. In Xhosa he was *lord*. She decided to stick to *Richard* and forget the niceties of tribal practice.

Siphos changed the subject.

'David ...'

'What about him, Siphos?'

'He is weird.'

'What do you mean?'

He told her about the meeting at the airport and how David had bombarded him with questions before agreeing to get into the car.

'David is a special agent.'

'A what?'

'He has been sent to look after us, Siphos.'

She told him about Steven Mason and how he was a close friend of her grandfather when he was alive.

'You must help him, Siphos. Tell him you have spoken to me. Anna is here with her gang of Brazilians. Uncle Henry will arrive soon from Columbia. His people are even worse than Anna's.'

A helicopter appeared overhead. David drew back into the shelter of a doorway as it blew leaves from trees and stripped clothes from a washing line. Henry de Villiers had arrived and he wasn't the sort who wasted time traveling by road. His private jet had landed at Cape Town international airport and he had flown on from there.

Siphos had told him about Petra's Uncle. Most of it he knew already from the briefing he had received from Charlie and Sir George. Henry de Villiers was Richard's younger brother. While their father was still alive,

he had been sent to live in Columbia and look after family interests there. Henry married a fiery Columbian lady and they had a daughter called Carla, who was accompanying her parents on their visit.

The helicopter blades slowed. A door flew open and a figure jumped out. David guessed it was Carla. Charlie had shown him photographs of her. He said the lithe, dark-haired beauty fancied herself as a gymnast and had won prizes in international competitions.

The pilot signalled for her to wait until the blades came to a halt. Carla took no notice. Neither did her parents. They were not the sort who took orders from servants.

Carla stormed in. She knew the old house well and had no trouble finding her way around. Petra watched as her cousin poked her head around corners and peered down corridors. Her tongue lashed out and her dark eyes flashed. Carla had inherited the features and fiery temperament of her mother's Spanish forbears.

'Where is she?'

They were the first words she said. Petra assumed they were addressed to her. Carla had entered the house without a single hello or any other form of greeting.

Petra was determined to keep her cool.

'To whom are you referring?'

She spoke in the carefully-modulated voice she used in class when debating with other students. Carla didn't scare her. Her cousin sounded more like a chicken in a farmyard than the formidable lady she claimed to be.

'Anna, of course!'

Carla expected other people to be mind-readers.

Petra's face remained calm.

'She is talking to her friend.'

'What friend?'

'His name is Mario.'

A shadow entered the hallway. Petra saw Anna. Her sister had Mario in tow. He lagged behind. She advanced with long determined strides. Petra was reminded of a prize-fighter spoiling for a fight.

'Slut!'

Carla let fly with a tirade of abuse. She began in English and lapsed into Spanish. Petra concluded that it was richer in the sort of words Carla needed. She knew enough Spanish to know that Carla regarded her sister as a whore, harlot, fag and a hundred other things that would damn her in the eyes of certain important people.

She kept referring to them but it was far from clear who the important people were. One thing was certain. Mario was the cause of the upset. Both women thought they owned him.

Mario stood to the side with a bemused expression on his face. Petra wondered what was going on in his mind. Two women were fighting over him. He seemed more amused than disturbed by the incident.

Carla grabbed his hand.

'You will sleep with me and my parents in our quarters.'

'No! He will not!'

Anna grabbed the other hand. It was a ridiculous situation. Petra stepped forward and intervened. She was reminded of the biblical story about two women fighting over a baby. The wise King Solomon volunteered to cut the child in half to decide the issue. That seemed an inappropriate solution to the present problem.

'There is a spare room next to mine,' Petra said. 'I use it as a study. A bed can be brought in and Mario can sleep there.'

'That's fine by me.'

Mario was quick to agree.

'Good. That's settled.'

Petra took Mario's arm and led him away before the two women had a chance to object. Uncle Henry and the rest of his entourage were streaming into the house. She guessed that neither Carla nor Anna would create a scene in front of them.

Chapter 9

Coup D'état

There was an appalling thoroughness to the operation. Petra watched as Uncle Henry's Columbians and Anna's Brazilians joined forces and cleared the compound of the people who had come to stay when Richard was in charge. Anna and Carla had come to a truce. Henry wouldn't tolerate their bickering. He said the family was facing great challenges and great opportunities. They must combine and work together as the de Villiers had always done.

Henry said Siphon could stay. He admired his determination to succeed in his university studies and advance himself. He had no time for the rest. He called them hippies and parasites. Petra didn't argue. Some fell into that category. They were there to hide the people who really mattered.

Everyone agreed that Richard was dead. All that remained was to get official recognition and share out the spoils. The family attorney would be calling the next day. Henry had set him to work and expected quick results.

Petra turned her mind to David. There had been no chance to speak to him. Siphon was their go-between and she intended to keep it that way. Uncle Henry was watching her like a hawk. She didn't want to do anything to arouse his suspicions. David was her man and she wasn't

going to share him with other members of the family. Richard hadn't trusted them and she wasn't going to either.

David retreated into Siphos cabin and watched as people gathered their belongings together and fled from the compound. To the casual eye, they looked like a ragbag collection of hippies, Hari Krishnans, junkies and outright nutters. A more discerning observer would have noticed that many were packing scientific instruments into their vehicles and looked anything but crazy.

Sipho was taking advantage of the mayhem and planting listening devices around the de Villiers' mansion. Charlie had supplied them and he had given detailed instructions on where they were to be put. David could scarcely believe his luck. He didn't even need to pass the instructions on to Siphos. The guy was brilliant. He was working for a Master's Degree in electrical engineering and knew exactly what had to be done.

Chapter 10

Unexpected Call

The vibrator on Humphrey's phone burst into action and he spilt coffee on his waistcoat. He preferred vibrators to devices that played tunes. Vibrators were discrete and that was important when you didn't want to attract attention.

He was sitting in a café, near Christies auction house in London, waiting for the establishment to open. The Chinese were buying back old pots and other things that had been looted from their country. As a renowned expert, on Chinese porcelain, his advice was sought by people who wanted to make sure they were bidding for genuine items. Those acquired by British and French troops, when they stormed the Imperial Palace, during the so-called Boxer Rebellion, were greatly prized and fetching a fortune.

He put the phone to his ear, expecting to hear a Chinese voice. Instead, he heard Charlie. Humphrey recalled that he was in Cape Town.

'Where are you?'

Their phones were fitted with scramblers. That meant they were safe from government spooks and others who might be tapping into the radio waves as they bounced around the world. Humphrey remained vigilant. Scramblers provided no security against people sitting at neighbouring tables.

He kept his voice down.

'I'm in a café ... and it's very crowded.'

'Where's the café?'

'In South Kensington.'

'I thought you were going to see your folks.'

That was an allusion to Denmark.

'Some opportunities have come up.'

'What sort of opportunities.'

'A client is seeking an opinion on a Ming vase.'

'Is he called Brad?'

That was an allusion to Olaf Magnusson.

'No. I've put Brad on the backburner.'

'Then take him off. Brad was here a week ago. Now he's missing. Go and see his mother. She might know where he is.'

The phone went dead. Humphrey returned it to his jacket pocket and pondered the latest piece of information.

Olaf was recently in Cape Town.

Flight-145 left from there. It could be a coincidence. Maybe he went on holiday. On the other hand, he could have gone to rewire a Boeing-717 and transform it into a drone.

Kirstin was sceptical about Olaf's role in the disappearance of Flight 145. This should change her mind. He consulted his watch. There was time to meet his Chinese client and earn a hefty commission. Then they would board the first available flight to Copenhagen. Olaf's mum lived there. He and Kirstin would pay the old lady a visit.

Chapter 11

Frank

David loaded his bags into the back of Siphos old car and climbed into the passenger seat. Charlie's bugs were in place and it was time to leave. Siphos had achieved miracles. The man was a genius. He had placed the listening devices in key places and hidden a small transmitter amongst the satellite dishes on the roof. It was linked in with their power supply. If the dishes were turned off the transmitter would be turned off too. That way it was less likely to be detected.

They had spent hours listening to conversations in the old house. They couldn't see who was talking but it wasn't difficult to tell one from another. Petra spoke with a soft, well-modulated voice. Uncle Henry had a gruff voice and made no secret of his desire to control the de Villiers' fortune. Anna and Carla spent most of their time squabbling over the young guy Mario. The only time they heard Mario was when he left his room and asked the way to the toilet.

Siphos got into the car and took a slip of paper from his pocket. 'Henry gave me this. It's a pass to get back in. His Columbians are guarding the gate.'

David fastened his seat belt.

'Are they checking on people leaving?'

'I don't know.'

'That could pose a problem. I'm not meant to be here.'

'If they ask, I'll say you are a student with me at the university.'

'Let's hope they don't.'

'Yes,' Siphon nodded. 'If they are doing their job properly, they will be keeping a log of everyone who enters and leaves. Henry de Villiers is a hard man. He will want to see the log and he'll want to know who you are.'

Siphon engaged gears and they moved off. The driveway curved away from the house and rose steeply towards the road. Two men were standing at the gate, dressed in bright yellow raincoats and wearing wide-brimmed hats. Both were armed with automatic weapons. Siphon pulled up and produced his pass.

David sat stony-faced and did nothing that might attract attention. It was raining heavily and the windows were misting up. He noticed that Siphon had made no attempt to clear them. One of the guards stepped forward and glanced at the pass.

'Wait here!'

He held up a hand for them to stop. His other held a phone. David wondered if he had received a call from the house and been told to check them out. The man nodded as if receiving instructions.

David stared directly ahead. A car passed and a truck appeared, grinding its way slowly up the hill. It was followed by a school bus and a stream of cars. The guard continued to nod into the phone. From time to time he said the odd word.

Finally, he took the phone from his ear, stepped into the road, looked back and forth, and waved them on. David smiled. Henry's Columbians weren't checking on the occupants of vehicles leaving the grounds but they were checking to see that the road was clear and it was safe for them to continue. They had got that part of the operation right.

He sat back and began to relax. Siphon put on the fan and the windows cleared. The visibility was still poor. Rain was pouring down and the road twisted and turned. David couldn't see far ahead but he knew what was there.

He had studied maps of the area and examined thousands of photographs. With the help of Google, he had driven down the road a score of times. That's what you did when you were preparing for a mission.

The operational side fascinated him. There was pride in overcoming obstacles. He had to do that as a commercial diver, working at extreme depths, and he had to do it when on secret missions.

As a teenager, he had been fascinated by the cult of the warrior. His karate instructor practised Zen and preached it. He taught that the

perfect warrior was an island to himself: a mysterious figure who appeared when needed, did great deeds and vanished back into obscurity.

David now considered such ideas as childish. True warriors were people like Richard de Villiers. They weren't islands to themselves. They were dedicated members of the community with firm ideas on right and wrong. Richard died for what he believed in. Powerful interests eliminated him because he stood in their way.

'Those are the botanical gardens.'

Sipho disturbed his thoughts. David glanced towards a slope covered in luxuriant vegetation. Banks of blue flowers lined the road. He recognised them at once.

'We have them in Australia,' he said, 'but they are not as good. Those over there are just brilliant.'

'They are called agapanthus,' Sipho said. 'This is where they come from. That is why they look so good. The conditions are just right. Once, they were only here ... nowhere else in the world.'

'You mean nowhere else except South Africa?'

'No. Only here on this side of Table Mountain. Nowhere else. The climate is very special. On the other side of the mountain it is much drier.'

'But not just in this one spot, surely ...'

'Yes,' Sipho was adamant. 'Table Mountain is where relic populations have survived. It was an island for a long time. Most of South Africa's unique plants are found in a small area of the Western Cape ... nowhere else.'

'I thought you were an electrical engineer ...'

'Yes. But that doesn't stop me from being interested in botany. Richard has programs to save threatened environments. The de Villiers Foundation has spent millions buying land and eradicating foreign species like pines from California and eucalypts from Australia.'

They drove on. Sipho was showing yet another side of his nature. David had thought of him as a bit of a nerd. There was clearly far more to Sipho Maduna than that.

'That is the university over there.'

Sipho pointed to some buildings. David wondered about his family background. He always spoke so precisely. Perhaps he had learnt English from books and that was why. David pictured him as a studious little boy in a church school somewhere deep in the Xhosa heartland. He guessed that Richard de Villiers discovered him and took him to Cape Town where he indulged his passion for learning.

Sipho signalled to turn.

'I will put you down at Observatory Station. You can catch the train into the centre of Cape Town from there.'

David knew about Observatory. It was one of Cape Town's many suburbs. Siphon filled in the details.

'The British established an astronomical observatory there when they captured Cape Town from the Dutch. The first director was a man called John Herschel and he founded Herschel College. Richard is going to pay for my daughter to go there when she is old enough.'

That was another surprise. David hadn't thought of Siphon as a family man.

Table Mountain was wearing its famous tablecloth when David arrived at the central railway station. The clouds that were bringing rain to the landward side were flowing over the flat top and tumbling down on the seaward side. David had seen videos of the amazing phenomenon and was thrilled to see it in action.

He put down his bags and took in the view. Frank Nesbit's dive shop was beside the harbour. Frank and Charlie were old diving buddies and Charlie was staying with him. David guessed that Frank had once been known by a different name.

He and Charlie had been in a lot of scrapes together. Their big coup was when they salvaged gold from Japanese ships sunk by the Americans during the Second World War. Both countries thought the gold belonged to them and were grieved when it fell into private hands. Frank and Charlie made some very dangerous enemies and had to find powerful friends to protect them.

David had a clear picture of how to get to Frank's place and trudged towards it, ignoring the many offers to carry his bags. He felt sorry for the ragged individuals who wanted to earn money as porters but wasn't going to let anyone lay hands on his precious cargo.

The dive shop was easy to find but not so easy to enter. Access was along a narrow walkway that stuck out over the water. David surveyed the impressive catamaran, moored at the far end, and concluded that Frank ran a highly profitable business of one form or another. On the face of it, he was a dive operator. In all probability, there was far more to his business than that.

He reached the end of the walkway and entered the shop. A genial face greeted him. David guessed his arrival had been followed on CCTV. A big hand stretched in his direction.

'Davo!'

That was what his diving mates called him.

'Frank!'

He went through the routine. A customer would have thought that two old friends were being reunited. There weren't any customers. That didn't matter. He and Frank were following the correct procedures.

'Is Tom about?'

'Yeah. Out at the back ...'

Charlie was now responding to the name Tom. David wondered if he would rise to the same level of obscurity. Would he be sucked ever further into Charlie's world and spend the rest of his life as a person with no fixed address and no fixed identity?

He followed Frank into the rear of the store and found Charlie sitting at a bench, working on a piece of electronic equipment. He looked up when David entered.

'What gives, Davo?'

Charlie spoke with an American accent. David recalled that his present persona, Tom, came from the California.

'I've been chucked out.'

'What?'

David described how Henry de Villiers had arrived with his Columbians and seized control of the de Villiers compound. Charlie already knew part of the story.

'We received news of Uncle Henry's arrival,' he said. 'Frank has people at the airport. They keep us informed on the comings and goings. They say Henry was given VIP treatment by the airport authorities and met by a helicopter. You, on the other hand, were met by a young man in a battered old car.'

Charlie put down his soldering iron and examined a join he was making. David had never seen him in spectacles before. He looked quite distinguished: more like the high-ranking government officer he could have been if he had stuck it out in Canberra and not become involved in ventures that governments didn't want to know about.

He removed his spectacles. 'Did you plant the bugs?'

'Yes. They're all in place and operating.'

'Good man.' Charlie looked pleased.

'I had a bit of help.'

'You mean from Petra?'

'No. Sipho.'

The smile faded from Charlie's face.

'Who the fuck is Sipho?'

'The guy who met me at the airport. He lives with the de Villiers. He's a sort of relative. Petra couldn't make it and she sent him instead.'

'That's what she told you?'

'No. I've not had a chance to talk to her.'

'But you have seen her?'

'Yes.'

'How close?'

'Through a window.'

Charlie looked as if he was about to explode.

'You are telling me that you were met at the airport by a perfect stranger who claimed to be a relative of the de Villiers and he drove you to their residence.'

'That's right.'

'Then what happened?'

'Sipho said that Petra was with her attorney and I would have to wait to see her.'

'But you didn't?'

'No. Anna arrived with her Brazilians before I could do anything. I had to hide in Sipho's cabin. Then Uncle Henry bombed in. He had his daughter with him. She's called Carla and she got stuck into Anna over some young guy.'

'What young guy?'

'A young guy who was with Anna. I figured he was her toy boy. Anyway, Carla thought he belonged to her.'

'What did he look like?'

David described the young man and said he was called Mario. Charlie seemed pleased with the answer. His next question was not so easy.

'How did you come to tell Sipho about the bugs?'

'Petra told him about me. She's not told anyone else. He's the only one who knows. She doesn't trust Anna or Uncle Henry.'

'Is that what she told you?'

'No.'

David shook his head. 'I've not spoken to her yet.'

Charlie's eyes bored into him.

'So you failed in your prime mission which was to make contact with Ms Petra de Villiers. Instead, you placed your confidence in a third party who claims to be related to her.'

'Sipho is studying electrical engineering at the university?'

'I don't care a fuck what he's studying.'

Charlie forgot his American accent and gave David a full blast of the voice he used when he was working in Australian military intelligence and debriefing rookie agents.

'He planted the bugs in all the right places, Charlie.' David tried to explain. 'I couldn't get into the house without attracting attention. Sipho could. Henry de Villiers said he could stay.'

Charlie considered the reply.

'You say the bugs are in place and working?'

'Yes. And I've already gathered a heap of intelligence. I've heard Carla and Anna arguing over that young guy, Mario. Petra sorted them out. She's arranged for Mario to sleep in her study. He seemed to be happy with that arrangement ...'

A broad smile developed on Charlie's face.

'Yes. I expect he is. Mario Mendez-Klein is heir to one of the world's greatest mining empires. He is a highly eligible bachelor. I'm not surprised that the ladies are fighting over him.'

'Sipho is going to set up a communications channel. We'll be able to sit here and listen to what happens next. I've given him a scrambler. He knows how to use it. We're lucky to have someone like him.'

'Do you believe in luck, David?'

'Yep. It's the corollary to Sod's Law.'

'And what's that?'

'You should know. You told me.'

Charlie nodded thoughtfully.

'Yes. I remember. I was on leave from Saudi at the time. You would have been about fourteen.'

'You can't lose them all. Sometimes you have to win'

Charlie remained thoughtful.

'Never rely on Lady Luck, David. She is a mean bitch and she doses out her favours grudgingly. I'll get the boys to check out your new friend. They'll soon see if Mr Sipho is everything he claims to be. If he's not, we'll deal with him accordingly.'

Chapter 12

Copenhagen

Kirstin pulled off her woollen hat and placed it on a chair. It was cold when they left England and even colder in Denmark. That didn't bother her; she was back in one of her favorite cities and staying in one of her favorite locations. Humphrey had given her a treat. It was her birthday and he had dipped into one of his secret bank accounts.

He looked up from his computer.

'Charlie sends his regards, Mother.'

'That's nice of him.'

Kirstin took off her coat and tried to maintain a casual manner. She knew Humphrey was bursting to tell her something. Charlie never made contact unless it was important. They spoke on the phone or internet and their conversations were always scrambled. That didn't make them entirely safe. People who use sophisticated scrambling devices come under scrutiny.

'He wishes you many happy returns of the day.'

'Is that all?'

'He did mention that he has just met up with David.'

'Thank you.' Kirstin sat down. 'Now, perhaps, you will tell me the real purpose of Charlie's call. I assume it has something to do with David.'

'Yes, Mother.'

Humphrey swivelled around in his chair.

'The young man has exceeded all expectations. Within hours of landing in Cape Town he has staged a major coup ... at least, that's one way of interpreting events.'

'What's the other?'

'He could have landed us in the poo.'

'You speak in riddles.'

'Yes, Mother.'

Humphrey seemed to regard the remark as a compliment. Kirstin wondered if he would ever grow up. She listened as he told her about Siphon.

'The gentleman sounds too good to be true.'

'He does,' Humphrey agreed. 'Siphon Maduna claims to be an expert in electronics and says he is related to Petra's mother.'

'Does that check out?'

'Not entirely. Petra's maternal family are easy to trace. They are members of the Xhosa aristocracy. Charlie's people did a search and could find no one like Mr Maduna amongst them. If Siphon is related to Ms de Villiers, then it is a very distant relationship.'

'And the expertise in electronics?'

'That's undoubtedly real. David watched him wire up a communications system. They couldn't have operated without it. Charlie is greatly impressed. With Mr Maduna's help he is listening to conversations in the de Villiers' household and has no doubt that they are genuine.'

'My instincts tell me to be suspicious.'

'So do mine, Mother. Richard de Villiers' empire is up for grabs. Ruthless people are descending on Cape Town from all around the world. Siphon Maduna could be working for any one of them. He could be working for the very people who hired Olaf Magnusson to sabotage Richard's plane for all we know.'

Humphrey shut down his computer and returned it to its case. Kirstin removed a camera from her handbag.

'You've not asked me what I've been doing.'

'No, Mother.'

She handed the camera to Humphrey.

'While you were playing with your computer I was out in the cold gathering information. Olaf's mother, Louise, lives in a smart apartment overlooking the harbour.'

Humphrey flicked through the images.

'Very swish. The lady isn't living off her state pension.'

'No, Humphrey. Not all sons are tight-fisted. Olaf appears to be looking after his mother in her old age.'

Humphrey ignored the remark.

'Have you spoken to Mrs Magnusson?'

'I telephoned her,' Kirstin replied. 'Louise Magnusson speaks with a distinct Bornholm accent. I told her about my cousin Bendt who farms there. That got her talking. She lived on the same side of the island and vaguely knows his family. She said her husband was killed in a farming accident. Olaf was ten at the time. She sold the farm and moved to Copenhagen so that he could get a better education.'

'That seemed to have worked.'

'It certainly did. The Danish education system recognises bright children. It doesn't label them *autistic* and dumb them down. They get scholarships. Olaf went to Princetown University, in America, at the age of sixteen, speaking perfect English and proficient in higher mathematics.'

'Did you discover his whereabouts?'

'That is our task for tomorrow.' Kirstin reached for her camera. 'We have an invitation to visit Louise for coffee. I told her that you are working in the same field as Olaf and greatly admire his work. I expect you to be on your best behaviour.'

The cold front had passed and it was pleasantly warm. Humphrey adjusted his bowtie. It was one of the props he used when he was playing the role of the bumbling academic. Kirstin wore a long dress. She preferred trousers but thought a dress more appropriate for the mother of the sort of character Humphrey was trying to be.

He was convinced that Olaf Magnusson was behind the disappearance of the missing Boeing-717. She had been sceptical. Now she was inclined to agree. Charlie had discovered that Olaf was in Cape Town shortly before Richard de Villiers left on his ill-fated trip to Canada.

Olaf had gone to South Africa to record rock paintings in the mountains to the north of Cape Town. His visit was known to archaeologists and other enthusiasts in rock art but had attracted little public attention. Humphrey didn't doubt Olaf's sincerity in the preservation of the past. He was interested in what Olaf did when he left the mountains and returned to Cape Town.

The big problem was to find him. Olaf had grown into an overweight middle-aged man who kept to himself and devoted his considerable talents to recording relics from the past. He worked with a small team of experts using advanced laser-scanning equipment that he had developed.

Olaf's projects were funded by the media tycoon, Cuthbert Maguire, who made a big splash publicising them on his many TV-channels. Humphrey recalled that Cuthbert's father, John Maguire, was one of the people identified, by MI5, as a Nazi sympathiser. That sensitive piece of information would have been lost to history if Steven Mason had not rescued a Top Secret file from a shredder and hidden it under his floorboards.

Louise Magnusson lived in a stylish apartment on Copenhagen's famous waterfront. The exterior retained the charm of a bygone age. The interior had been extensively renovated and was tastefully modern. Humphrey followed Kirstin up a narrow stairway to a landing with two doors. One opened and a face appeared.

'Come in out of the cold. I've been expecting you.'

Louise Magnusson's country accent sounded even stronger now. Perhaps it was her appearance. She had the ruddy complexion of a farmworker and her choice of clothes was not what one would expect of someone who lived in such an elegant apartment.

Kirstin looked around. Pictures of Olaf hung on the walls and littered shelves. Those of him as a child were of poor quality. Then highly professional shots appeared. She scanned through a row of images of a pale-faced teenager with ultra-blond hair. He was dressed in a dark suit and receiving prizes. The suit hung loosely on his fragile frame in the first shot and clung tightly to him when the last shot was taken.

Louise turned on a coffee percolator and joined Kirstin.

'That's my son, Olaf.'

'Yes. He has grown into a very famous person. My son, Humphrey, greatly admires his work, both in information technology and the preservation of the past.'

Kirstin got in a plug for Humphrey but to no effect. Louise started to chatter about Olaf and totally ignored him. Humphrey wondered if the reference to information technology had gone right over the woman's head. Kirstin spoke a very formal sort of Danish. Louise sounded like a country bumpkin. He doubted if she had the slightest idea of what her son did and why he had become so famous.

His eyes strayed around the room. A battered teddy bear had pride of place in an old armchair. Models made from Lego decorated a sideboard. Degree certificates hung in gilded frames. A graduation hat and gown hung on a hook. The place was a shrine to Olaf.

His later photographs showed the chubby fellow that he now was. His hair was gathered in a ponytail. Sometimes he wore a headband. None of the shots provided any indication of where they were taken and he was always alone. Nothing could be learnt about where he went and the company he kept.

A large vase caught Humphrey's eye. It stood in the fireplace and was stacked with expensive-looking blooms. He recognised them at once. They were proteas. He knew them from a walking trip he had taken in the mountains near Cape Town where they grew wild and covered whole hillsides. A label poked out from one of the stems. He bent down and squinted at it.

'Olaf sent them.'

Louise Magnusson approached with a cup of coffee.

'They really are magnificent,' Humphrey enthused. 'Wherever do they come from?'

'I don't know ...'

Louise set the cup down beside him.

'They look foreign,' Humphrey prompted.

'He often sends things from foreign.'

'Does he say where?'

'No. It's his work you see.'

'His work?'

'It's very important. Sometimes I wonder why they don't leave him alone. I mean there can't be anything wrong with talking to me and asking if I'm well. It's the least a son can do for his mother.'

'It certainly is,' Kirstin agreed. 'I can't think why anyone would want to do such a thing.'

'The other day he phoned and asked how I was. I could hear people talking English. I know English when I hear it and it didn't sound like how Americans speak it. So I thought he might be in England. That's not very far away.'

'Little more than an hour by plane,' Kirstin said.

'Yes, that's what I thought. So I asked if he was going to come and see me. He said he had time to drop over for a day. Then someone told him to stop. I know "stop" when I hear it. You can't mistake that.'

'And did he stop?'

'The phone went dead.'

'You mean like he'd been cut off.'

'Yes. It was the anniversary of his father's death. He always phone's me then. He knows how upset it makes me.'

Tears came to Louise's eyes.

'That was so heartless of them ...'

Kirstin oozed sympathy. Humphrey guessed she really meant it. Sometimes it's not necessary to put on an act and tell lies to get information. All you have to do is be your normal self.

'My son, Humphrey, would very much like to get in touch with Olaf. As I said, on the telephone, he greatly admires your son and wishes to acquaint him with some priceless murals in remote monasteries in Tibet. The authorities there are aware of Olaf's work and are keen to speak with him.'

'Oh. That's nice ...'

Louise's mouth hung open. Humphrey suspected she only half understood what had been said. He ventured a question.

'How do you contact Olaf?'

'You mean write to him?'

'Yes.'

'I use his drop box. They don't know about it. I thought it would be difficult but it's not when you know how. You just type what you want to say and click where it says "Send". Olaf gave me his computer.'

Louise pointed to a small laptop.

'Wow!' Humphrey sounded impressed.

'Is it special?'

'One of the very best!'

Humphrey switched on the computer and located Olaf's drop box. Everything was going swimmingly. Lady Luck was definitely on his side. He had penetrated the inner secrets of Louise's computer. His next task was to rip the label off her proteas.

Chapter 13

Snail Pace

The rain stopped and a new day dawned. Petra sat on the terrace and gazed down on the valley below. That was where her father's side of the family had settled three hundred years ago. Her mother's people hadn't penetrated so far south. When the Europeans arrived, the Cape of Good Hope was peopled by Hottentots and Bush People.

The Hottentots were pastoralists, like the Xhosas, and kept herds of cattle. The Bush People were hunters and gatherers who lived off the land. Petra had seen wax models of them in the museum. The Hottentots were tall, statuesque people. The Bush People were small, with high cheekbones and narrow eyes like the Chinese.

The Xhosas had intermarried with them and shared some of their features. Like the Bush People, they were relatively light-skinned and their language used the strange click sounds with which the Bush People spoke.

There were now no pure-blood Hottentots or Bush People in South Africa. They had been absorbed by the Europeans and their descendants were mixed-race like herself. People of mixed race made up a large part of the population of Cape Town and most spoke Afrikaans. It evolved from Dutch and other languages which the Europeans brought with them when they settled the lands around Table Mountain.

One of these other languages was Indonesian. Richard used to joke that the Dutch settlers were of mixed-race from the start. Many were employees of the Dutch East India Company and arrived in the Cape with their Indonesian wives and mistresses. Uncle Henry said that was nonsense and insisted that the de Villiers were of pure European descent before his brother took a kaffir for a wife.

Petra recalled her mother being upset by his outbursts. Henry poured out his racist venom in Afrikaans and was fully aware that his sister-in-law spoke the language, even if he had not taken the trouble to learn a single word of hers.

She glanced at her watch. The family attorney was about to arrive. Uncle Henry had set him to work and expected quick results. They would

be meeting in her father's office. Henry was behaving as if it now belonged to him. Siphso had foreseen that possibility and had bugged it with listening devices. David and his mysterious colleague would hear everything that was said.

The attorney was in his seventies but no less sharp than when he worked for Petra's grandfather as a much younger man. The Republic of South Africa followed the Roman-Dutch system of law and Anton Vandergrift was well-qualified to act on their behalf. He arrived in an immaculate dark suit and blue tie. Henry met him at the door and showed him through to the office.

The rest of the family was already there. Henry's wife, Manuela, ruled the roost in his absence and made sure that Anna and Carla were kept well apart. Anna joined Petra at one end of the room. Carla lounged in a chair at the other.

Anton Vandergrift sat down at Richard's desk and Henry stood over him like a headmaster about to check the homework of an errant pupil. He was the first to speak.

'So nothing is decided.'

Anton Vandergrift produced some papers from his briefcase.

'We are proceeding with all due haste, Mr de Villiers.'

'Yes ... snail pace ... that's how you people earn your money,' Henry lapsed into Afrikaans. 'You need to know that it's a new ball game now, Mr Vandergrift. You are not dealing with my brother anymore. I'm in charge. I'm the one who signs the cheques and I pay for results. That means quick-smart. Time is of the essence in my line of business.'

Anton Vandergrift stuck to English.

'I appreciate your concern, Mr de Villiers.'

'What does that mean?'

'You are convinced that your brother is deceased ...'

'Blind Harry can see that,' Henry continued to speak Afrikaans. 'His plane left Frankfurt ten days ago and vanished over the Atlantic. The rescue services have abandoned their search. They are convinced there is no chance of finding anyone alive.'

'The rescue services may be convinced, Mr de Villiers, and their views will be taken into account in a coronial enquiry. However, until a court of law declares your brother deceased, the terms of his Will remain confidential. I am not permitted to divulge them. Nor is anyone else.'

'That's the sort of crap ...'

'Henry. Speak English.'

Manuela bore down on her husband. Petra watched as he changed his stance and pulled a face. His next outburst was in a language his wife could understand.

'You must surely understand, Mr Vandergrift, that I have major responsibilities for the group of companies established by my father and managed jointly by me and my brother. The present situation cannot be allowed to remain in limbo without serious consequences.'

'Your brother was aware of that possibility.'

Anton Vandergrift shuffled through a stack of papers.

'At his request, I drew up the necessary documents for the transfer of powers in the event of his incapacity through ill health or any other reason. That document will need to receive a seal of approval by a court of law before its terms can be legally enforced under the present circumstances.'

'And how long is that going to take?'

'Not very long. Knowing your sense of urgency, I took the liberty of submitting the document for immediate examination.'

'And we will then know its terms ... when it's passed?'

'You can hear them now if you wish.'

The scowl on Henry's face relaxed. Anton Vandergrift adjusted his gold-rimmed spectacles and began to read.

'My brother, Henry, to assume responsibility for those of my holdings that lie within the Columbian sphere of our joint operations.'

Henry nodded approvingly.

'My daughter, Anna, to assume responsibility for the Brazilian sphere of my operations subject to the terms and conditions currently pertaining to her exercise of that role.'

Anna looked less than satisfied.

'You do understand ... don't you ... Ms de Villiers?'

'Yes.' Anna's face remained sullen. 'Nothing's changed.'

'What about the de Villiers Foundation?' Henry asked.

'I was coming to that.'

Anton peered at Henry over his spectacles.

'My daughter, Petra, to assume responsibility for the duties and functions of Chairperson of the de Villiers Foundation subject to the advice of ...'

'That's preposterous!' Henry's face reddened. 'She's only a girl. She can't possibly handle the responsibilities of such a position. Richard must have been out of his mind when he came up with that.'

'Do you wish to challenge the document, Mr de Villiers?'

'Is that possible?'

'Yes. You could claim that his mind was unsound when he signed. However, in doing so, you would forgo the advantageous terms afforded to you under current arrangements, until a court of law has reached a decision.'

'And that will take a long time.'

'Yes, Mr de Villiers. While a rapid decision is likely on your brother's current incapacity, a decision on his soundness of mind will undoubtedly take much longer.

Henry looked gobsmacked. Petra stared at him as her head went into a spin. Richard had assigned most of his responsibilities to her. It didn't take much imagination to figure that he had also made her heir to most of his huge fortune.

The deck outside the dive shop was crowded. David watched as Frank's customers climbed onto his big wave-piercing catamaran, talking excitedly. Their enthusiasm was understandable. They were about to dive amongst the amazing sea creatures that live in the cold, nutrient-rich waters off the Cape of Good Hope.

He pressed his earphones against his head and returned his attention to the drama unfolding in Richard de Villiers' office. Charlie sat opposite chuckling. Frank lolled in a hammock and seemed equally amused.

Henry had been outwitted. A hand from the grave had struck the bastard down. His brother had given him a present with one hand and taken it away with the other. Henry couldn't challenge Richard's decision to give Petra control over the de Villiers Foundation without threatening his own position.

What followed was something of an anticlimax. Henry could be heard speaking Spanish. He was presumably talking to his wife and daughter. Anna's voice blasted away in another corner of the room. She spoke in English and was trying to have an argument with Petra. Then, suddenly, the voices ceased. Doors banged and there was silence.

Charlie removed his earphones and grinned at David.

'He's a smart operator ... your friend.'

'Who?'

'Richard de Villiers. You're always singing his praises. Most people think he's a total screwball. Ask Frank.'

'Right around the twist, David.'

Frank clambered down from his hammock and went to the window. His staff were loading the last of the gear onto the catamaran and preparing to cast off. He returned their wave and walked back.

'Richard is one big joke around here. He turned the family estate into a hippy commune and puts out a newsletter to publicise his thoughts. The latest is full of maps and diagrams to show that global warming is a Russian plot to change the climate in their favour. If Richard is correct, there will be no arctic ice in twenty years and they will be growing bananas in Siberia.'

'He does that to hide what he's really doing.'

'Yes, David. You know that and so do the people who killed him. They're smart and their eyes will now be on Petra. She has just received an immense amount of power and is ill-equipped to handle it.'

'You will have to look after her,' Charlie cut in.
'How do you expect me to do that?'
'They're going to the Flamingo.'
'The what?'
'The Flamingo Resort, David. It's part of an exclusive network of international resorts created for the world's richest and most influential people.'
'Where is it?'
'Cape Agulhas ... not far from here.'
'How do you know Petra will be there?'
'Henry plans to take her. Didn't you hear him talking to his wife and Carla about it?'
'You know I don't speak Spanish.'
'Ah. Yes.' Charlie gave him a disapproving look. 'I had forgotten about that lapse in your education. If you had put some effort into foreign languages, you might have understood that an important event is about to take place. Big names are descending on the Flamingo. Henry will be there and he intends to take Petra and Anna with him.'
'How do I fit in?'
'You will be going too.'
'Big deal! Shall I use your bankcard?'
'That won't be necessary,' Charlie smiled. 'You won't be going as a guest. You will be there as a staff member. Frank supplies the resort with divemasters. They get through a lot and are always asking for more. It will be easy to slot you in.'
'Get through a lot ... what do you mean by that?'
'It's the way they operate.' Frank tapped David's arm. 'They do things differently. You'll soon find out when you get there.'

Chapter 14

New Image

The blotches had appeared again. Petra rubbed cream into her face and was determined to get rid of them. They showed that she was stressed. Strangers didn't know that but members of her family did. It was the tragedy of her life. Family should be supportive. Hers were her worst enemies. Tears flooded into her eyes and added to her confusion. She wiped them away with a tissue and saw a movement in the mirror.

'Oh. Please excuse me ...'

She turned and saw Mario.

'I didn't know there was anyone here.'

They had exchanged no more than a few words since his arrival. Mario had thanked her for letting him use her study as a bedroom. When she

apologised for putting him in such a cramped place he said he often slept in tents. His present accommodation was luxury in comparison.

'One of my contact lenses has gotten displaced.'

Petra looked puzzled.

'I need a mirror to locate it.'

She moved aside and watched as Mario stared into her mirror and probed his eye with his finger. Then he covered each eye separately and declared that both lenses were back in position.'

'I take a mirror when I go camping,' he explained. 'I should have packed one this time then I wouldn't have bothered you.'

'It was no bother.'

'But I shouldn't have barged in like that.'

He looked embarrassed. Petra wondered about his background. Her sister and cousin were fighting over him and it couldn't be for his sexual allure. Mario was hardly the strong masculine type. Petra had seen some of Anna's live-in boyfriends. They came in a variety of colours, had bulging muscles and played violent sports. Mario would be pulverised if he went anywhere near them.

He turned to leave.

'My parents are arriving soon. They are flying in from Buenos Aires. I'll be going back that way. The route goes right over Antarctica. That will be very exciting.'

'Your parents are coming?'

'Yes. But not to here. They'll take a chopper from the airport. They're going to the Flamingo. Do you know it?'

'It's a big resort. My grandfather used to take us there.'

'You mean Simon de Villiers?'

'Yes. We went while he was still alive. My father hates the place. He won't go anywhere near it.'

'I don't blame him,' Mario dropped his voice. 'I've been to some of the others. They're all the same. Full of obscene rich kids trying to outsmart one another. That's how their parents behave.'

'You would have liked my father,' tears returned to Petra's eyes. 'You sound just like him ... that's the sort of thing he said.'

'Mario! Mario!'

Petra heard her uncle's voice.

'I must go.' Mario touched her arm. 'Henry mustn't see me here. He's taking me in his chopper. It will be here soon.'

'Taking you where?'

'To the Flamingo. We're all going.'

There was no washing on the lines and the helicopter came and went without causing as much mayhem as before. Petra looked around. The

compound had been cleared of its residents but the animals in Richard's private zoo remained and some were distressed.

She went to calm them and found Siphon inside the enclosure where the cheetah lived. Her father had rescued her from a trap when she was still a cub. The tiny animal's paw was badly injured and he flew her to Johannesburg so that the wound could be properly treated. She wasn't strong enough to cope with the dangers of the wild and he brought her to live with them. Anna named her Constantia and claimed her as her own. She was Constantia of Constantia Nek, which was where the de Villiers mansion was situated.

Siphon looked up as Petra entered the enclosure.

'Those bastards frightened her.'

'You mean the helicopter?'

'No. The Columbians set their dogs on her ...'

He spoke in a confused mixture of English and Xhosa. Petra gathered that the dogs charged the fence and almost brought it down.

Petra stuck to English. 'Did my uncle try to stop them?'

'He shouted at the guards and they called the dogs off. Carla wanted them to go on. I think that's what she said. She was speaking Spanish. The young man told her to stop.'

'You mean Mario?'

'I think that is his name.'

'His full name is Mario Mendez-Klein,' Petra said. 'His family is one of the richest in South America. Mario is going to join them at the Flamingo. Uncle Henry wants me to go too.'

'Are you going?'

'I don't know,' Petra shrugged. 'Richard never went. He hated the Flamingo. I'm representing him so perhaps I shouldn't go either.'

She reached down and stroked the cheetah.

'What do you think I should do, Constantia?'

The cheetah licked her hand. That wasn't much of an omen. There was no easy way to decide. She wasn't a fairy-tale princess who talked to animals.

Her mind cleared. Richard didn't go to the Flamingo because he didn't like the people there. They probably didn't like him but that was not a reason for staying away. Quite the contrary, it was a good reason for going. She needed to meet the people her father detested and get to know them better.

Charlie adjusted his headset. David watched from the other side of the room. Petra was holding a staff meeting in Richard's study. She intended to represent her father at the Flamingo and was determined to make a good impression. Her grandfather's Bentley was to be got out of the garage and sent into town for a total overhaul. None of the old

wrecks, currently in service, would be allowed anywhere near the resort. Suitable cars would be hired and staff would be issued with uniforms. No one must dress casually. Petra intended to create a new image.

David smiled when she announced that her cousin, Mr Siphon Maduna, would accompany her as private secretary. He spoke English, Afrikaans, Xhosa and Zulu. He had assisted her father in the operation of the de Villiers Foundation and was an ideal person for such a position.

The meeting ended. The staff left and Petra could be heard talking to Siphon. At one point, he went to the bug that he had planted in the study and spoke directly at it.

'David. I hope you heard what Petra has just said. We are going to the Flamingo. I shall remove the scrambler from the transmitter and incorporate it in my computer. That way we shall be able to communicate. Most guests at the Flamingo use scramblers so the transmission will not be suspicious ...'

He spoke in his slow melodic voice. David waited for him to finish. There was a slight pause followed by a click to say the transmission had ended. He turned triumphantly to Charlie.

'Now, do you believe me?'

'Believe what?'

'That Siphon is for real?'

'I never doubted he was real.'

'You doubted he was dinkum.'

'I did not jump to your hasty conclusions, David.'

'You should have checked on who was paying his uni fees.'

'I did and duly discovered that Richard de Villiers was paying for Mr Siphon Maduna to undertake postgraduate studies at the University of Cape Town.'

'And that wasn't enough?'

'No. Your Mr Maduna could have been an imposter.'

'But, you are convinced now?'

'Ninety-five percent ...'

'Stop arguing!' Frank cut in. 'I'm ninety-nine percent sure and that's as far as I'm prepared to go on any issue.'

He was perched on a high stool, peering through a window and listening at the same time. The big catamaran had returned and ropes were being thrown down.

Frank turned to David.

'We had better get you to the Flamingo as soon as possible. They are pestering me for instructors. You can go under any name you like. They won't ask for a diving licence. They leave that to me. Their standards are rat shit.'

'Where will I stay?'

'You will be given a bed in the staff quarters. There's a security check when you enter the main resort and another when you leave. That way they know who is staying overnight.'

Charlie leant forward. 'That's something to consider. Handsome fellows, like you, are in high demand.'

'Steer well away from the young ones,' Frank advised. 'Some parents take extreme offence if their teenage daughter is found in bed with a man. You could join the list of missing persons who have worked at the Flamingo and never been seen or heard of again.'

'Seriously?'

'Yes. Seriously.' Frank's voice hardened. 'You will be investigating people who are prepared to bring down an airliner to kill just one man. They won't hesitate to murder some young guy who has insulted them by fucking their daughter. One of my divemasters was found, washed up on the rocks, with terrible injuries. The resort's doctors certified his death as accidental. I saw the body and there was nothing accidental about it. He had been tortured to death.'

Frank turned to Charlie.

'Tell him I'm not exaggerating.'

'He's dinkum,' Charlie said. 'The Flamingo is a law unto itself. The members are so powerful. No one is prepared to take them on. What they say goes and not just here in South Africa. Confine your attention to older women who haven't got their partners with them.'

'Hang on!' David raised a hand. 'I came here to track down the bastards who killed Richard de Villiers. I'm not on a sex safari.'

'You joined this team to collect information,' Charlie growled. 'If you are going to do that you need to penetrate the enemy's inner core.'

'You mean fuck their women?'

'It's the classical way, David. The Russians worked wonders in the Cold War. Their rivals' secretaries were frustrated, thirty-plus virgins. They sent in men who could add spice to their lives and get a peep at the papers they were typing at work.'

'You want me to play Mata Hari?'

'That's the general idea.'

'I didn't come here to be a gigolo.'

'How else are you going to operate?' Charlie looked pained. 'We expect you to stick to well-tried procedures and behave in a professional manner. Life is real and life is serious, David. We are here to do a job and get results.'

All the humour had gone from Charlie's voice. David suddenly realised that he wasn't joking. He sounded like the uncle who lectured him on correct behaviour when he was a child. His mother was shocked by her brother's views on morality and horrified to discover that he was teaching them to her darling boy.

'You aren't going to learn anything by giving scuba lessons in a dive pool,' Charlie flicked his fingers in David's face. 'A far more focussed approach is needed. I thought you were determined to find Richard de Villiers' killers.'

'Yes, but ...'

'No *buts*, David.' Charlie got up. 'It's too late to pull out now. You have taken on this assignment and you are committed to seeing it through to the end.'

Chapter 15

Love Child

The marriage, births and deaths register exhibited a distinct shortage of family names. Kirstin was pleased that Louise Petersen had married Hendrik Magnusson. There weren't too many Magnussons on Bornholm Island. Otherwise, the task of locating Olaf's family would have been far more difficult.

She looked over Humphrey's shoulder and watched as he sifted through the information of the computer screen. The Hansens were there in profusion. She guessed he was researching his own family. They weren't hard to find and he soon brought up his own birth certificate.

Father: Unknown.

She remembered filling in the form in the old-fashioned script she learnt as the child of a missionary family in China. She was twenty and a naïve little virgin until deflowered on the backseat of a Volvo, down by the harbour, near to the hotel where they were now staying.

Humphrey was conceived on that fateful night. Her lover went by the name of Andy and played in a band. That was as much as she knew about him.

Humphrey ran the stylus over the document. Kirstin guessed he had seen it before. She wondered if he thought it contained information that he had somehow missed. Her son seemed grieved that he had never known his father. The other tragedy in his life was that his wife had died while their daughter was still a baby. Lizzie had never known her mother.

He flicked back to the Magnussons.

'Ooh! Olaf was a love child.'

'Are you sure?'

'Apparently so. Louise Petersen married Hendrik Magnusson five months before Olaf was born. There aren't many Magnussons on Bornholm and even fewer Olafs.'

'When did Hendrik die?'

'April 2 1970. Olaf would have been ten at the time.'

'That checks with what Louise told me.'

'It does more than that, Mother. April 2 is the day after Flight-145 went missing. Louise said Olaf phoned her. He always does on the anniversary of his father's death because he knows she feels particularly lonely. She asked if he could come and see her and he said he might be able to squeeze in a daytrip ... then someone shut him up.'

'Louise thought he was in England.'

'It doesn't matter where he was,' Humphrey rummaged in his jacket pocket. 'Olaf was close enough to make a daytrip. That means he was no longer in South Africa.'

He produced a label and placed it on the table.

'I removed this magnificent item from Louise Magnusson's prize proteas. They are top quality blooms. Date stamps record that they were picked on March 28 and dispatched that same day by air from Cape Town.'

He turned over the label and read from the back.

'To my darling mother with all my love.'

'Is it in Olaf's handwriting?'

'Yes. I've checked it out. He must have purchased the flowers from the florist at the airport. Charlie's informants are adamant that there is no other way to get that particular label. That means Olaf must have been at the airport on the morning of March 28. They examined CCTV videos and made a possible identification.

They think Olaf is the mysterious person, in a woolly hat and dark glasses, who left the VIP lounge and entered the florist shop. He was sought after by a smartly-dressed couple accompanied by a young woman in the uniform of a security guard. The trio located the man in the hat, shortly after he left the florists, and hustled him back into the lounge.'

'Do we know the identity of any of these people.'

'We do, Mother. The smartly dressed couple are none other than Senor and Senora Mendez-Klein from Columbia. They are the parents of Mario Mendez-Klein.'

'The young man Anna and Carla are fighting over?'

'The very same!'

Humphrey threw out his hand triumphantly. Charlie says that Mario has been reunited with his mum and dad. They flew in on their private jet with the man in the woolly hat and are now back in South Africa. They will be joining the other distinguished guests who are gathering at the Flamingo. Petra de Villiers will be there, representing her father, and David will be there, teaching people how to dive. Charlie thinks he's in for a bit of a rough ride.

Flamingo

The Bentley was fitted with new tires and polished to perfection. The interior leather smelt as it had when she was a child. Petra sat in the rear and watched the countryside drift by. She was dressed in a neat business suit of the sort favoured by up-and-coming executive ladies. Her hair was neatly trimmed and she wore just enough lipstick to complement her light-brown complexion. The blotches had gone from her cheeks. Petra was steeled for action. Richard was undoubtedly dead. Her father had died for a cause and she was going to continue his work and find his killers.

Sipho sat in the front seat beside the driver. He wore an expensive business suit of the sort worn by the private secretaries of senior lady executives. The driver wore a uniform bearing the de Villiers insignia. He usually drove around in jeans and a T-shirt emblazoned with Richard's latest slogans on saving the planet. Petra had done her best to get him to adopt a serious demeanour and avoid singing on duty. She had no such problems with Sipho. His demeanour was stuck on *serious* and he only sang when the occasion demanded.

The outer perimeter fence of the Flamingo Resort came into view. Petra noticed that it had greatly expanded since her last visit, over ten years ago. It now took in a vast area of rugged hillside and manicured parkland. A gatehouse straddled the road. She was reminded of visits to England and France. Old baronial mansions had similar buildings. This one looked oddly out-of-place at the southernmost tip of Africa.

They had reached Cape Agulhas. Its name means "*Cape of the Needle*". The famous Portuguese navigator, Bartolomeu Dias, gave it that name when he sailed past in 1488. A few days earlier he had rounded the cape that sticks down from Table Mountain. He figured that he had reached the tip of Africa and had passed from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean.

In so doing, Dias opened up a sea route for his countrymen to sail to the lucrative spice islands of the Far East. He named the first cape "*Cape of Good Hope*". A few days later, he identified a second cape further to the south. His compass needle pointed due north when he got there and he named it "*Cape Agulhas*".

Petra had studied the history of South Africa as part of her university course. The earliest homo sapiens remains had been excavated in a cave near to where she was now. There were other people there before them and they had been displaced. It was the story of the world. Modern human beings displaced their distant cousins. They did so in Africa and they continued to do so when they left Africa. When they reached Europe they displaced the Neanderthals.

But they didn't stay in Europe. Thousands of years later some of them returned. By then, their appearance had changed to adapt to the cold

conditions of the north. They had white skins and were scarcely recognisable as the descendants of people who had left Africa. They conquered the lands of their African cousins and lorded over them as if they belonged to a superior species.

It occurred to Petra that lording over others was a deep-seated human vice. People now recognised that they belonged to the same species. That didn't stop them from behaving as if some were far superior to others.

Race was no longer a dividing line amongst the ruling classes. They came in all colours and women were now accepted into the elite circle of tyrants and demigods who manipulated others for their own selfish ends. She was about to enter their esteemed circle. Some of its members were already known to her. Petra braced herself to meet the rest.

The dive boat flew the South African flag. The boat that raced towards them didn't. Its flag was a flamingo on a dark-blue background. The occupants of the boat wore military uniforms and were armed with automatic weapons. David was reminded of a trip to Guantanamo Bay. The American flag flew there and there was nothing to give any hint that the bay was on the island of Cuba.

The owners of the resort were behaving in just the same way. It was as if they had annexed a slice of the Republic of South Africa and were treating it as a private realm. Frank stood beside David at the controls of the catamaran and brought the boat to a halt.

They had entered the territorial waters of Club Flamingo. Like its land frontiers, its seas were jealously guarded. Trespassers were met with an armed response. Frank raised a hand in salute and the boat kept coming towards them. David braced himself for a collision. Then, at the last moment, the high-powered vessel went into a sharp turn and dumped a pile of spray on the deck of the dive boat, soaking its occupants.

'Welcome to the Flamingo!'

Frank shouted into his microphone. There was a muffled silence followed by laughter. The young passengers thought it was a huge joke, created for their enjoyment. In a way it was. Frank was transporting a bunch of rich kids to the resort. Their parents had made the trip by road or air. Their offspring had opted for a more adventurous journey.

David watched as they chattered excitedly. The going language was English. They spoke it with a variety of accents and used the latest buzz words. As a teenager, he had offended his mother by using *cool* to mean exciting. Now *sick* had replaced *cool*. The potentially dangerous incident was *sick* and they loved it.

They came in all shapes, sizes and colours. The kids had no sense of race or nationality. That meshed with David's attitude towards people but stopped there. He accepted others for what they were. The obscene brats looked down on anyone less privileged than themselves.

Frank re-engaged the engines and took the catamaran into shore. An impressive harbour had been carved out of a rocky foreshore and the usual bunch of harbour seals had made it their home. They milled around the boat as it tied up, swimming on their backs and honking loudly. The crew produced buckets of fish and the kids amused themselves feeding the furry animals.

'They don't know how lucky they are ...'

'The seals or the kids?' David asked.

'Both,' Frank grinned.

'You mean they don't have to work for a living?'

'More than that. They enjoy the protection of Club Flamingo. There's a vicious world out there. Seals get eaten by Great Whites. Rich kids get kidnapped and held for ransom.'

'It's not all fun being rich?'

'No, David. Don't think of everyone at the Flamingo as crooked. There's a lot of very good people here. Very few will be involved in Richard's death. Your job is to hunt them down.'

The apartment was small and tastefully furnished. Petra had chosen one in a row of four, set amongst trees and overlooking the boat harbour. A lot had changed since her last visit when her grandfather was still alive. The resort was much smaller then and the atmosphere far more relaxed. People arrived in cars and their staff hung around. Helicopters were now the preferred form of transport and staff were assigned to quarters outside the main resort. Petra guessed that Anna's Brazilians and Uncle Henry's Columbians were there together with others of their kind. That was the good news. The bad news was that Siphon and David would be with them.

The phone rang. She picked it up, expecting to hear Siphon's mellow voice speaking Xhosa. Instead she heard Uncle Henry speaking Afrikaans. It was his preferred language when he wanted to dominate others and tell them what to do. Her grandfather often spoke Afrikaans. It was the language of the original Dutch settlers and the de Villiers had spoken it as their first language for generations. Grandfather spoke it softly and never shouted.

'Carla told me you had arrived.'

Henry bellowed down the phone before she could speak.

'With whom am I speaking?'

'You didn't tell me you were here.'

'Uncle Henry?' Petra remained calm. 'Is that you?'

'You know who I am and I expect you to inform me of your movements. As the senior member of the de Villiers family I am responsible for our good name.'

'I assumed that you knew I was coming, Uncle. As you know, I am now responsible for the interests and proper functioning of the de Villiers'

Foundation. In that respect I share your responsibilities for the good name of our family.'

'What do you know about responsibilities?'

'As you are aware, Uncle, I am enrolled in studies for a degree in law. I am now in my fourth year and I shall graduate at the end of the coming semester. I have twice received the de Klerk medal, which is awarded to the student with the overall highest grades in constitutional law and international law. That has resulted in offers of employment from leading law firms in this country and overseas. I believe I am justified in claiming a certain degree of competence in matters pertaining to family trusts.'

Petra spoke in English and used the steady, unhurried lawyers' language she had learnt at university. She expected it to infuriate Henry. To her surprise, he moderated his tone.

'Your father never attended meetings at the Flamingo.'

'Then there is all the more reason why I should.'

'I was told you shared his views.'

'You were misinformed, Uncle.'

A silence followed. Petra could almost hear Henry thinking. Finally, he spoke.

'Your sister, Anna, and my daughter, Carla, have developed a rivalry for the affections of the young man, Mario, who you met the other night. You will have witnessed their outbursts against one another.'

Petra could scarcely believe her ears. Henry had switched to English and was speaking to her as if she was an equal.

'Mario is the son of Carmel and Daniel Mendez-Klein,' Henry continued. 'He is their only child and heir to a considerable fortune. The advantages of a marriage alliance are considerable for both families.'

'I had gathered that, Uncle.'

'Their chances are zero,' Henry announced with surprising frankness. 'Mario has nothing in common with them. He is a serious-minded young man ... more your type. I saw you talking. He was far more relaxed with you.'

'Are you trying to play cupid, Uncle?'

Petra allowed herself a playful laugh.

'I am thinking of your future.'

'I appreciate your advice.'

'We must keep them apart,' Henry drifted back into Afrikaans. 'A scene would create an appalling impression. Cuthbert Maguire is here. We will be meeting him tonight.'

'Really ...'

'You, of course, know who he is ...'

'I know who he is. I didn't expect to be meeting him.'

'His yacht is moored in the bay. It arrived yesterday. Cuthbert flew in today. He'll spend a few days sailing then fly on to wherever he is going next.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'Keep that sister of yours under control and be nice to Mario. Guard your tongue and keep your ears open. Charm Cuthbert with small talk and impress Mario's parents with your good sense.'

Henry ended the call as abruptly as it had begun. Petra put the phone down and tried to gather her thoughts. Nothing was happening as she had imagined. Henry was behaving like a devoted uncle. Her instincts told her not to trust him. Her father hadn't and she wasn't going to either.

Chapter 17

Flamingo Palace

David unpacked his bag and laid his diving equipment out on his bed. He had his own private room with en-suite and television. It was up to the standards he was used to on the oil rigs and much bigger. On the rigs, his neighbours were fellow divers and engineers. Here, they were security guards and an assortment of people, like himself, who catered for the needs of the resort's rich guests. He was pleased to see that Henry's Columbians and Anna's Brazilians had been required to leave their weapons at the main gate.

Security at the Flamingo was provided by the resort's own guards. According to Frank, they were recruited in the Zulu heartlands and were tough. David had seen them. They wore dark-blue uniforms emblazoned with a badge showing a flamingo armed with a stabbing spear and rawhide shield.

He consulted his notes. He had to go to the staff office and check in. He was trying to locate it on a map when his phone sounded and he heard Siphos voice.

'I must speak with you!'

Siphos sounded flustered. He was usually so calm. David guessed something was wrong.

'What's the matter?'

'We must meet.'

'Where are you?'

'In the executive compound. You're not allowed here. I'll have to come and see you. There's a place called the Flamingo Palace. We can meet there.'

'I can't do anything until I've been to the staff office,' David said. 'They're going to issue me with a pass.'

'Yes. I understand. But be quick.'

David consulted his watch.

'I'll see you at the Flamingo Palace in half-an-hour. The office is over the road from here. It shouldn't take long.'

A movement caught Petra's eye. A large animal was sneaking down the path towards her. She caught glimpses of it between the bushes. The creature had the colouring of a leopard and was moving like one. The tourist brochures said there were leopards in the mountains near Cape Agulhas and they were small. This one looked big. She decided on a hasty retreat and was hurrying back down the path when she heard Anna's voice.

'Petra! Come on or we'll be late.'

She turned and saw Anna. Her sister had Constantia with her. The old cheetah was on a lead and Anna was striding behind it with long gliding steps. She was dressed in one of her zany South American outfits and looked as if she had just arrived from a street carnival in Rio.

Anna stopped a few paces away and eyed Petra critically.

'Where ever did you find that?'

'Find what?'

'That suit-thing that you're wearing.'

Petra's face dropped. 'I bought it to come here.'

'This is a resort, Petra.'

'I am well aware of that.'

'It's not a lawyer's office.'

'I'm here to represent the de Villiers Foundation.'

'Not dressed like that.' Anna balanced on her high-heeled shoes and glared at her like a toreador about to impale a bull. 'You look ridiculous, little sister. No one dresses like that on holiday.'

Petra shrank back. Anna always made her feel small. Uncle Henry thought she could keep her big sister under control. There wasn't a chance. Anna steamrolled her way over everyone she met.

'Come on!'

She turned and Petra followed. It had always been like that. Some girls grow up faster than others. They dip their feet in the ways of the world while their sisters have their heads buried in books. Anna wasn't just older. She knew how the real world worked.

They padded back along the path. Constantia led the way and her presence caused confusion. Frightened yelps greeted them when they emerged from the bushes and entered the patio in front of the restaurant. Other guests had arrived with their pets and some were alarmed by the sudden appearance of a big cat.

Their cries were music to Anna's ears. She revelled in the mayhem she had caused. Nothing pleased her more than to be the centre of attention. Petra hung back and tried to hide her embarrassment.

A voice sounded in her ear.

'Petra. My parents want to meet you.'

She turned and saw Mario.

'Anna is doing her thing,' he whispered. 'She won't miss you.'

He spoke in his quite unassuming voice. Petra had felt at ease with him from the moment they first met. He slipped into the crowd and she followed him into the restaurant.

A smartly-dressed couple stared in their direction. Petra recognised them from photographs in the annual reports of the Mendez-Klein group of companies. They were seated at a small table sipping mineral water from tall glasses. Daniel Mendez-Klein wore his hair swept back and had a tightly-clipped moustache that reminded Petra of old photographs in her father's library. His wife, Carmel, sat beside him in a dark dress that reached to her ankles. Both looked out of place amongst the brightly dressed people milling around the buffet tables.

Carmel raised her head as Petra approached.

'We have been wanting to meet you.'

She spoke with a strong Spanish accent and had the demeanour of a royal duchess. Carmel Mendez-Klein was totally different from her son. Mario was softly spoken and unassuming. His mother sounded like an inquisitor at a heresy trial.

'Your uncle has spoken of you.'

Petra had guessed as much.

'He says you are studying to be attorney.'

'I am specialising in international law.'

'That is wise decision.'

Carmel's head nodded sagely.

'Do you speak Spanish?'

'No,' Petra lied. 'My languages are English, Afrikaans and Xhosa.'

'My son teach you Spanish.'

Carmel turned to Mario who was staring into space as if detached from everything that was going on around him. Failing to get a response, she returned her attention to Petra.

'I approve your ensembla.'

Petra guessed she was talking about her clothes.

'So senseebla!'

Carmel's accent grew more extreme as she enthused over Petra's smartly cut skirt and jacket. She ended with a virulent attack on her sister and cousin.

'Anna and Carla ... stupida ... stupida!'

Petra waited for more to come but there wasn't any. Carmel switched to Spanish. Petra knew enough to know that Mario was being instructed to be nice to her and not behave like a stupid child as he usually did.

This time, Mario seemed to be listening.

'Petra. My mother and father must leave. Would you like to join me for a meal in the restaurant?'

'That sounds a nice idea, Mario.'

She turned to his parents.

'It has been so nice meeting you.' Petra gave her nicest smile. 'I have so much wanted to make your acquaintance.'

A woman in pink pants dabbed something under David's eyes and a woman with a camera adjusted a spotlight to illuminate his upper body. His lower part was dressed in a sky-blue wetsuit and his upper part was bare. The women enthused over his muscular torso and said he made a stunning subject. David had never imagined that taking a photograph for a staff pass could involve such elaborate preparations.

A mask and snorkel were thrust at him.

'Hold that in your right hand.'

David grasped the mask.

'No! Not like that!'

She twisted the snorkel around.

'Make it point up!'

'That's better. You've got to send the message.'

A dive knife was placed in his other hand. David wondered what message that was meant to convey. He was past caring. The whole operation was farcical. No one had asked for his diving qualifications. They weren't even interested in his real name. The picture wasn't required for his pass. It would adorn the TV-screens in the resort and inform its female clients of the latest exciting addition to the Flamingo Stud.

The woman in pink pants consulted her notes.

'They've got *Davo* written down here.'

'That's what my diving buddies call me.'

'You can't have it.'

'Why not?'

'Too much like *Dino* ... and that's taken.'

'How about *Dave*?'

She didn't seem to hear.

'You could have *Angelo*.'

David shook his head.

'Well. Suggest something.'

'Is *David* alright?'

'Ugh! If you can't think of anything better ...'

She pulled a face and wrote something on a form as the women with the camera sprang into action.

'Head up! Smile! Head to the side!'

The camera flashed. David went through the routine as dozens of shots were taken. The whole ridiculous process was taking far longer than he had expected. By now, Siphon would have reached the Flamingo Palace and would be wondering what had happened to him.

Petra placed a small trout on her plate and surrounded it with vegetables and fresh salad. Mario joined her and was soon venting his anger at the extravagance of their surroundings.

'It's totally disgusting!'

He pointed to a tray stacked with shellfish.

'Just look at those abalones. They're stripping the reefs to feed the bellies of fat slobbers who would be far healthier if they ate less and stuck to plain food.'

Petra noticed that Mario's plate had no fish or meat of any kind. She guessed he was a vegetarian and felt self-conscious about her trout. Mario didn't seem to notice. He wanted to talk about her father.

'Richard tried to stop it. I heard him at Princetown. He came to recruit graduates for his projects. The damage being done by indiscriminate fishing is devastating and not just in shallow waters. Deep-sea trawlers are taking fish from thousands of metres. Everything grows slowly at those depths. Fish take hundreds of years to get to table size. When they're gone there won't be any left. Richard's people have teams going around to quantify what's happening ...'

He continued to sing her father's praises. Petra realized how little she knew about the work of the de Villiers Foundation and decided to change the subject.

'My Uncle Henry says we shall be meeting Cuthbert Maguire.'

'Not just meeting,' Mario grunted. 'The emperor is holding court and his barons have been summoned to his presence.'

'The emperor?'

'That's what he is.'

'You mean Cuthbert?'

'Who else?'

'But he owns newspapers and TV stations. That's not much.'

'That's everything, Petra.'

'Not compared with mining.'

'Cuthbert has power.' Mario's voice hardened. 'He makes and breaks governments. A small swing in the votes is enough to unseat a party in most countries. Cuthbert enjoys power and he is quick to use it. Prime ministers and presidents bend the knee to him.'

Suddenly, Mario seemed much older. Petra stopped thinking of him as a woolly-minded undergraduate, obsessed by fish and furry animals. A very different Mario lay hidden beneath the surface.

'An Australian prime minister learnt that lesson the hard way,' Mario continued. 'He failed to visit Cuthbert when he went to America. He saw the president but he gave Cuthbert a miss. An editorial in one of Cuthbert's Australian newspapers drew attention to the unforgivable sin and the paper switched its support to the opposition. The prime minister didn't just lose his majority at the next election, he lost his seat in parliament.

That's just one example.' Mario's gaze intensified. 'I'll give you another. A certain British prime minister flew to the Aegean for a meeting with Cuthbert. One of his newspapers had been caught phone tapping and awkward questions were being asked in parliament. You would have thought that Cuthbert would have flown to London to sort things out but he didn't. Instead, he summoned the prime minister to his yacht in a bay off Rhodes. That came out in a public enquiry.'

Petra cut a piece off her trout.

'If Cuthbert is an emperor what does that make us?'

'I'm a prince and you're a princess,' Mario grinned.

'But the de Villiers holdings are small compared with the really big minerals companies. Some of them are huge. They must be ten or twenty times our size.'

'Yes. And they are owned by superannuation funds. The people who run them are employees. That is the difference, Petra. You can be managing director of the biggest company in the world but, if you don't own it, you are just a humble servant in Cuthbert's eyes.'

Petra considered the point and added a thought of her own.

'And you can be the prime minister of a country but, if you don't own the country, you are a nobody as far as Cuthbert is concerned.'

'Precisely!'

Petra finished off the trout and turned her attention to her nourishing salad and feta cheese. Her encounter with Cuthbert could be more gruelling than she had imagined.

'My uncle advised me flatter Cuthbert with small talk.'

'You'll have to do better than that,' Mario muttered. 'Your father gave them a lot of trouble. For a while they wrote him off as totally loopy. Then they realised that he was cleverer than all of them put together. That got them really scared. Richard knew too much about them and that made him a very dangerous person ...'

Mario's voice trailed away. Petra had the feeling he was about to say more but had thought better of it.

'You said I would have to do more than flatter Cuthbert,' she prompted. 'What did you mean by that?'

'They know that you are not stupid like your sister. Richard never gave Anna any real power. He gave it to you. They'll want to know where you stand on all sorts of issues. Let them know that you are the exact opposite of your father. You know how they think. You must have heard your aunt and uncle raving on. Go one better. Act like an arrogant queen in the making. Pretend that you are going to grow up just like my mother. She'll love you.'

Lights flashed on the ceilings and walls. David was reminded of Las Vegas. The Flamingo Palace was built on the scale of a huge aircraft hangar. There were gaming machines, food counters, liquor bars and a whole lot else. But Vegas had nothing on the Flamingo. Vegas catered for dull, ordinary folk who were out for a bit of excitement. The Flamingo catered for the personal guards of the ultra-rich. Even without their weapons they looked threatening.

He cast his eyes around and recognised some. Anna's Brazilians were amongst them, huddled beneath a huge television screen, watching football and swigging beer. Uncle Henry's Columbians were nearby, picking a fight with a bunch of Chinese in yellow tracksuits and baseball caps.

There was no shortage of action but no sign of Sipho. David wondered if he had given up waiting for him. The idiotic business of issuing a pass had dragged on for over an hour. The women wouldn't let him go until they had kitted him out with a pair of white shorts and a blue shirt, emblazoned with an image of a pink flamingo wearing a scuba mask. His name was printed above the bird in gold letters.

He saw himself in a mirror. The women had smeared him with make-up and he needed to get it off. But, first, he had to find Sipho. He didn't care if he looked ridiculous. There were more important things to worry about. Something had happened. Sipho was desperate to speak to him. He needed to find out what was bugging him.

He hunted around the bars and made a tour of the gaming machines. Sipho wasn't at any of them. That wasn't surprising. Sipho wasn't the gambling sort and he didn't drink anything stronger than tea.

A group of men in dark suits caught his eye. They were chattering loudly in Russian and looked more Sipho's type than the overweight oafs lounging around the bars. David wasn't fussed by their swaggering gait. Many Russian males thought it essential to imitate Vladimir Putin when travelling overseas.

They pushed past and strode through a door with gold mouldings. A sign said it was a relaxation lounge. That was the sort of place where he could expect to find Sipho. There would be comfortable chairs and tables stacked with reading material. David followed the Russians inside and looked around.

To his surprise, there weren't any chairs or tables. The room was more like a corridor than a lounge. Doors lined one side and naked girls lined

the other. It was the sort of thing that happened to his diving buddies. Some of them would have stayed to sample the wares. David avoided brothels. Paying for sex wasn't on his agenda. He turned on his heels and made a swift exit.

Laughter greeted him.

'It's Tweety Pie!'

He guessed he was the source of the amusement. He was smeared with make-up and looked like some exotic creature that had flown in from outside.

'What's the matter, pretty boy?'

David grinned. He was back in familiar company. A group of young men was making tweeting noises and gesticulating at him from barstools. They were dressed in scuba uniforms like his own. David read their names and figured he was meeting Dino and his buddies.

'Did the naughty ladies frighten you?'

He ignored the taunts and ambled across. Dino was in the middle, flanked by Ringo and Rambo. Two others hovered in the wings. All five looked as if they had devoted their entire lives to body building.

He held out a hand.

'I'm Davo. Sorry for the appearance. Those crazy women smeared me with paint. I've not had time to get it off.'

Usually he got a friendly reception from fellow divers, particularly when they were members of the same team. This time he got nothing but bad vibes. Dino eyed him maliciously. David remembered Frank's warning that things were done differently at the Flamingo.

A stubby finger poked him in the chest.

'It don't say that here.'

'Say what?'

'Davo ...'

'They wouldn't let me have it,' David grinned. 'They said it was too much like Dino.'

'Too right it is!'

Dino thumped him on the chest.

'I'm Dino and don't you forget it. I'm the one who gives the orders here. You do what I say or I'll screw your fucking head off and feed it to the sharks.'

David drew back.

'Okay, Dino.'

'You understand what I'm saying?'

'Yes, Dino.'

'Shake on it.'

Dino's buddies leant forward on their barstools and gawped. It wasn't difficult to guess what was coming next. He was amongst muscle-bound morons with a limited experience of how the real world works. They had

no idea of how dangerous it can be for people who think they are invincible.

David winced as Dino's grip tightened.

'Okay. I've got the message.'

Dino kept squeezing. David had been in this sort of situation before. The big oaf was trying to break a finger and that wasn't going to happen. His face contorted in pain.

'I said *Okay*, Dino.'

He kept squeezing.

'Please, Dino ...'

David's knees buckled and Dino's buddies cheered like a pack of drunken monkeys as David sank down. They didn't see what happened next. All they knew was that Dino lost balance and followed David to the floor ... striking his head on the way.

Blood streamed down Dino's face. He looked stunned for a few moments then flew at David, knocking over a table and scattering glasses. David jumped back and was relieved when two security guards intervened.

'You come with me.'

One of them grabbed David and the other restrained Dino. More guards arrived and David was marched away. A big face turned in his direction.

'Where you learn that trick?'

'What trick?'

'Man. You know what I mean.'

'Like how not to get hurt?'

'Ehh!' The guard relaxed his hold. 'Those guys crazy. You top fighter. You kill them all if you want.'

David wondered if Dino or any of his moronic mates was smart enough to know that. He hoped they weren't.

'Your friend want speak to you.'

The guard turned towards the exit.

'There by the door ...'

He let go of David's collar and disappeared as Sipho emerged from a doorway. He looked anxious.

'David. What happened?'

'Nothing.' David pulled his shirt straight. 'I got held up ... that's all. These things happen.'

'Can you speak Spanish?'

David shook his head.

'We must find someone who can.' Sipho grasped his arm. 'They want to kill Petra. I have a recording. Most is in Spanish. Sometimes they speak English. That is how I know.'

Cuthbert Maguire

Richard de Villiers tried to bring up his daughters as ordinary young people and achieved success with one and failure with the other. Petra buried her head in books, mixed with ordinary people and participated in student activities. Anna sought excitement, mixed with the ultra-rich and participated in their lavish lifestyle.

Anna knew all about luxury yachts and the sort of things that went on in them. Petra's experience of boats was limited to marine research vessels and sailing boats. She expected Cuthbert's yacht to have sails and was taken by surprise when she saw it. The impressive vessel, anchored offshore, had neither masts nor sails and was more like a cruise ship than anything she had imagined.

It was reached by boats that ferried guests out to a floating wharf. Uncle Henry had arranged for the five members of his party to go out together. He was with Carla and her mother. Petra joined them and they waited for Anna.

As usual, her sister was late. Henry took it in his stride. Carla fumed and made derogatory remarks about her cousin. Henry told her to calm down and do nothing that could create a scene when Anna arrived.

Petra saw her in the distance. Anna was dressed in one of her outlandish costumes and had Constantia with her. The cheetah was on a lead and Anna was striding behind it. The pair was causing a lot of excitement. Children were running alongside and their parents were taking photographs.

Anna stopped and posed for pictures. Petra expected Henry to tell her to leave the cheetah on shore. To her surprise, he fussed over Constantia and helped Anna load her into the boat that would take them out to Cuthbert's yacht.

The reason for his enthusiasm for the big cat soon became apparent. Constantia was part of the de Villiers' team. A rapturous welcome awaited her. Faces peered down from the yacht as she leapt onto the floating wharf followed by Anna. Cheers rang out and cameras flashed as they advanced up the gangway.

'Anna! Darling!'

A woman in her thirties swept forward to meet them.

'I knew you wouldn't let us down ...'

Petra guessed that the extravagantly dressed person was Cuthbert's latest wife. The lady's beautiful face was Chinese and her voice was American with a hint of something else. Long dark hair hung loosely down her back and a slit in her skirt revealed a shapely leg.

Cuthbert stood by her side in a white suit. Petra recognised him from his many photographs. The media tycoon was in his mid-eighties and

had the shrivelled face and wizened body that often comes from costly and unsuccessful battles to remain young.

Mario said he had his sperm stored in a sperm bank when he was still young enough to have sperm to store. That had enabled him to sire a succession of children by a succession of wives on four continents. All eleven were boys. That had raised questions about what might have happened to any girls that were conceived.

The older of Cuthbert's brood were helping him run his gigantic empire on their respective continents. Mario said that was the sort of thing the sons of emperors did in the past.

'Bring Colin!' Cuthbert croaked.

Petra guessed that Colin was the latest of Cuthbert's brood. Servants scuttled away and returned with a little boy. He wore a sailor suit and had blond hair and narrow eyes. Petra wondered what the future had in store for Colin.

Cuthbert pointed to Constantia.

'Look. Colin. Big pussy cat.'

Colin seemed more cautious than excited.

'Stroke pussy, Colin!'

Cuthbert barked an order and the little boy drew back. Petra could feel his agony. The child was cautious. He had the primeval instincts of all small creatures when faced by danger. His father was trying to override them.

Cuthbert was a monster. Her instincts told her to intervene. Good sense told her to hang back. She watched as the obscene drama unfolded.

'Stroke pussy!'

The child's mother joined in and a tiny hand reached out. Constantia remained calm as Colin swept a frightened hand over her fur. That wasn't guaranteed. Cheetahs are temperamental. The big cat could have bitten the kid's hand off.

Evidently satisfied by his son's obedience, Cuthbert turned his attention to Anna. His body swivelled around and he inclined his head.

'You look more beautiful than ever, my dear.'

Anna kissed the cheek that was offered to her and stepped back as Cuthbert's attention turned to Petra.

'Miss de Villiers. I am delighted to meet you.'

To Petra's relief, he straightened his body and extended a hand. She shook it and stepped back, relieved that the encounter was over. Carla followed. She offered a cheek and received a hand. The look on her face told all.

Henry ushered them along. When you visited royalty you didn't hang around. Rules had to be followed and the de Villiers weren't immune from them. Despite their billions, they had to toe the line.

Petra saw Mario. He was standing with his parents. Something told her that the encounter had been arranged. Henry touched her arm.

'Senora Mendez-Klein wants to speak to you.'

Mario's mother sat severely on a chair.

'Ah, Petra!'

She eyed her like a cat surveys a mouse.

'We are so pleased you could come.'

Petra did her best to be agreeable.

'I am so pleased to meet you again.'

A chair was pushed in her direction.

'Please sit down.'

It sounded more like an order than a request. Petra sat down and adjusted the hem of her skirt. Henry moved to the side and his place was taken by an assortment of people. Petra recognised a prominent politician and a trade union official amongst them.

The interrogation started immediately.

'Your father called me a fascist, Ms de Villiers.'

The trade union man waded in. The white supremacist regime locked him up as a communist then let him out when the mining companies weighed in on his behalf. Joshua Botwama was their sort of man. He knew how to organise labour.

'My father thought your relationship with the employer groups was too close,' Petra said quietly.

'And you agree ...'

'Certainly not!'

She knew she sounded like an old-fashioned schoolmarm when she used that voice. Her fellow students had made fun of her. Petra didn't care. It was the sort of image she wanted to convey.

Joshua put on his famous grin.

'You think I'm okay?'

'I approve of the position you have adopted,' Petra said stiffly. 'The efficient exploitation of the nation's resources can only proceed smoothly if there is an intelligent cooperation between the capital components of production and the labour inputs needed to achieve optimum benefit for the nation as a whole.'

She recited a paragraph from one of the big mining company's annual reports. Her father had poured scorn on it.

Mario's mother eyed her critically.

'Your father ... he no like what you say.'

'We hold different opinions.'

'You no love him?'

Petra stiffened. 'Of course I do.'

'But you say everything he say is bad.'

'Love comes from the heart, Senora.'

'What that mean?'

'He is my father!'

Petra fastened her eyes on the older woman. She had been taught to do that as a trainee lawyer at university. It had seemed so artificial at the time. Now, she realised how powerful the technique could be.

'You no agree with his crazy ideas?'

'My father was an idealist, Senora.'

'He lived in Toy Town,' Henry cut in.

'That is a little harsh, Uncle.'

'But not far from the truth?'

'I prefer to think of him as an idealist,' Petra said. 'His motives were sincere but they lacked realism. The world is not run by people in debating societies. It doesn't work like that. Tough decisions have to be made and none would succeed if they were put to a vote.'

'Are you saying that democracy doesn't work?'

The question came from Cuthbert. He had left his wife and child and was staring at Petra with penetrating eyes.

'It works if the people receive proper guidance.'

'From whom? Miss de Villiers?'

'People like you, Mr Maguire. The masses are ill-informed. They vote for whoever bribes them with the most favours. They mortgage their children's futures for short-term gain. The social democracies are doomed to failure when the vote of a useless, parasitical person is worth the same as that of a hardworking productive citizen.'

Cuthbert nodded approvingly. Petra wasn't surprised. She was quoting from an editorial in one of his leading newspapers.

'Why did he call me a fascist?' the union man asked. 'Most people called me a communist.'

'My father likened the arrangement between unionists, such as yourself, and the mining companies to that achieved by the Italian fascist dictator, Mussolini. He argued that it concentrated power in too few hands.'

'And you agree?'

'With what?'

'That I am a fascist.'

'Mussolini had some bad ideas but not all of them were bad.' Petra glanced around the circle of faces. 'The same can be said for Adolf Hitler. He was an appalling racist. That was his big mistake. Hitler thought he could create a race of blond Nordic supermen. His breeding programs were confined to one small ancestral pool. They could have achieved far more if they had exploited the rich genetic diversity provided by human populations that have been separated for tens of thousands of years ...'

'Great White!'

Cries interrupted her discourse.

'Look! It's got one of the seals.'

'Wow! That's just so awesome.'

'Quick. Get my camera.'

Petra ceased to be the centre of attention. She glanced around as her audience rose and hurried to the rear of the boat. For a moment she felt lost then Mario tapped her arm.

'You were overdoing it a bit there.'

'What do you mean?'

'That talk about Hitler's breeding programs.'

'Cuthbert loved it.' Petra squeezed Mario's hand. 'He's doing the same. He's had four wives and none of them are of the same race.'

'Your father married someone of a different race.'

'My father loved my mother, Mario. That's the difference. Cuthbert has never loved anyone except himself. You should hear what his first wife had to say about him.'

'You know a lot about Mr Maguire.'

'I'm studying politics, Mario. I intend to enter it one day. This country hasn't changed since the days when the white supremacists were in power. The rich-poor divide is as bad as ever. It's no longer based on race. That's the only difference.'

'You believe in communism?'

'Certainly not. That's fascism by another name.'

'Wow! Awesome! Oh My God!'

The shouting grew louder. Mario took Petra's arm. 'Come and see what's happening back there.'

Petra followed him to the rear of the boat. People were leaning over the rail, craning their necks to get a better view. She couldn't see what the excitement was about. All she knew was that the sea was red with blood.

'They attracted the seals by throwing baitfish into the water,' Mario explained. 'That's what the tour boats do to entertain their passengers. Cuthbert goes one better. He sets a blood trail so that the sharks will come in and take the seals.'

'That's just awful!'

Petra threw up her hands in horror.

'Law of the Sea, darling.'

A low voice whispered in her ear.

'What was that?'

Petra turned and saw her cousin Carla.

'It's the same as the Law of the Jungle.'

Carla leant forward and smiled.

'Kill or be killed, darling.'

Kill or be Killed

Sipho was already on the dive boat when David arrived. He was clasping a leather folder and talking to one of Frank's divemasters. David shouted out a greeting as he clambered on board.

'Hi Paul.'

'Hi, Davo. I liked your pic.'

'My what?'

'Your photo, Davo. It's up on the screens. The girls love it. They're fighting one another to get in first. Mr Maduna has come to book a couple in so they won't miss out.'

Paul pointed to a screen above his head.

'Take a look at that, buddy.'

An image appeared on the screen and David went forward to get a better view. His stomach turned. Someone had created a caricature of his real self. He was reminded of the musclemen that appear on the covers of soft-porn novels. Eye shadow had been applied to his cheeks. His lips were unnaturally red. The muscles on his arms and chest had been thickened and his waist had been slimmed down.

'They would have photo-shopped it,' Paul said.

'Yeah,' David scowled.

'It's lucky they didn't get you to strip off.'

'No way!'

'Some guys pose in the nude,' Paul continued. 'You can guess what they do with their pics. The girls must get real disappointed when they come to grips with the real thing.'

David chuckled at the thought. Sipho remained straight-faced. David pictured him as the diligent little boy in missionary school dreaming of a future when he would be wearing smart clothes and not castoffs from other children. Sipho had achieved that goal. His suit would have cost a fortune by many people's standards.

Paul turned to Sipho.

'Mr Maduna has just booked in two young ladies for you. I told him he should have done it at the resort but that doesn't matter. This way they get in first.'

Frank emerged from his cabin.

'Paul. Get up to the office and see that they get it right. They usually stuff things up. Give them the two names and make sure they enter them up correctly.'

Sipho produced a slip of paper from his folder.

'I've printed out their names for you: Anna and Petra de Villiers. Please note that de Villiers is spelt with a small "d" and there is a space

before the "V", which is capitalised. That is important. Computers are case sensitive.'

Paul took the paper and smiled.

'I'll tell them it's small "d" and big "V".'

'And don't forget the space.'

'I'll remember, Mr Maduna.'

Paul left and Frank turned to Siphos.

'Our friend wants to meet you.'

David followed them into Frank's cabin. Charlie was there, wearing a grey wig, tied in a ponytail. His accent was American.

'I must thank you for the invaluable assistance that you have provided in this case, Mr Maduna.' He grasped Siphos's hand. 'I am pleased to make your acquaintance.'

Siphos didn't waste time with formalities.

'Can you speak Spanish?'

'Yep,' Charlie laid on the accent. 'I was born and raised in California. That's one of the languages folks speak there.'

'I made this recording.' Siphos produced a small electronic device. 'I planted a bug in the room occupied by Petra's cousin, Carla. It is next to the one she is occupying herself.'

Charlie reached out a hand.

'How do I play it?'

'Plug it into the USB port on your computer.'

Charlie inserted the device and turned on the sound. David recognised Carla's shrill tones and those of her mother. Carla was speaking in a mixture of Spanish and English and pouring venom on her cousins. Anna was a fucking cunt and Petra was a fucking virgin. He got that much and was lost in the outpourings of Spanish that followed.

Charlie and Frank grinned then their expressions changed. David guessed that Siphos had reason to believe something sinister was being hatched by the two women. They carried on for over an hour. The clinking of glasses indicated that they were drinking. There were breaks when the toilet was used. Then they would start up again. Eventually, they stopped and Charlie turned off the computer.

Siphos turned anxiously to him.

'What did they say?'

'They were discussing Simon de Villiers' Will.'

'He's Petra's grandfather,' Frank cut in.

'Yes,' Siphos nodded. 'Simon divided the de Villiers' estate between his two sons. Carla and her mother were talking about the Will. Carla sometimes used the Afrikaans term for it. Her mother always used the English.'

'That's right,' Frank nodded. 'According to Carla, the terms of Simon's Will require that the de Villiers' holdings remain in the de Villiers family. If one side gets knocked off the other side inherits the lot.'

Sipho's face tensed. 'That's an invitation for murder.'

'You could see it like that,' Frank agreed.

'I doubt if Simon saw his sons as homicidal types,' Charlie said. 'Fathers worry about squabbles but rarely think that their children will kill one another to get at the spoils.'

'They killed Richard,' Sipho said.

'We have no proof.'

'We don't need proof.'

Sipho glared at Charlie. David had never seen him so animated. Sipho was usually so calm. Now he was fired up.

'Petra is in great danger,' he spat out the words. 'She is Richard's daughter. After my wife and child, she is my dearest family. That crazy Carla thinks she can get everything by killing Petra and Anna.'

'Have you seen the Will?' Charlie asked.

'No. I have not seen the Will and I don't know what is in it. That doesn't matter. It is what that mad woman thinks ... that is what matters.'

Chapter 20

Lucky Break

The little mermaid sat on her rock and glistened in the early morning sun. Humphrey sat on a bench nearby and fiddled with his computer. He had left his hotel and was sitting beside Copenhagen's famous harbour, trying to make sense of the message he had received from Charlie. Kirstin sat beside him. She had been feeding the seagulls before a man approached and said bread was bad for them. Both were trying to behave like ordinary people who had got up early and were out and about for a bit of relaxation.

Humphrey preferred to communicate with Charlie in a public place. Using sophisticated scrambling devices inevitably caused suspicion. The remedy was to be anonymous. That meant going out in disguise so that the CCTV cameras couldn't provide any useful information. A Cossack hat, sunglasses and false beard left scarcely a patch of skin uncovered.

Kirstin wore an ankle-length coat over a padded jacket. That disguised her slim figure. A woolly hat and scarf hid most of her face. She leant forward.

'What did Charlie say?'

'Petra is in mortal danger.'

'From whom?'

'Uncle Henry wants to kill her?'

'He's already told us that. Is there anything else?'

'David has been hired as a gigolo. Charlie is concerned that his mother might get to know. He relies on us not to tell her.'

'And ...'

'Nothing. That's all he had to say.'

'You mean we came out here to learn that?'

'No. There is one other thing.'

'What's that?'

'I have received an email from Olaf.'

'But you have only just emailed him.'

'Yes. He was so pleased we visited his mother. He wanted to thank me immediately.'

'Did he ask how you got his address?'

'He seems to think she gave it to me.'

'You mean it never entered his clever head that you might have filched it from his adoring mother when she wasn't looking?'

'Apparently not.'

'What else did Olaf say?'

'He wants to meet me. I said how much I admired his work in the preservation of ancient monuments and asked if I could contribute in any way.'

'And that did the trick?'

'He said he had always wanted to meet me.'

'He knows about you?'

'We are engaged in similar fields of expertise.'

'Anything else?'

'He mentioned my talk on cyber warfare at the Rome conference and our unexpected encounter in the tourist chalet near the Saint Bernard Pass.'

'You mean when he tried to kill you?'

'No, Mother. He was trying to kill Charlie. I just happened to be in the plane at the time. Olaf seemed quite upset when we bumped into one another, at dinner that night, and he realised what had happened.'

'And you think he has no evil intentions towards you?'

'None that I am aware of.'

'What language did he use?'

'Danish ... same as me. I told him about our family connections with Bornholm Island and mentioned cousin Bendt and his folks. Olaf said he remembered them from when he was a child.'

'All very cosy!'

'Yes, Mother. You lectured me on the need to exploit family history when researching a difficult case. People get sentimental about their past.'

'I've not noticed that trend in you, Humphrey.'

'No, Mother.'

'So why do you think that the super-intelligent Olaf Magnusson is imbued with the sort of sentimental slush that you are talking about?'

'I see him as a little boy lost.'

'Did he invite you to meet him?'

'Yes. He is currently engaged in a project to record prehistoric rock art in the mountains of the French Pyrenees. We have received an invitation to join him.'

Kirstin's features hardened.

'Come into my parlour said the spider to the fly.'

'What was that, Mother?'

'Olaf Magnusson almost killed you when he sabotaged your plane over the Alps. Now he's talking about a visit to the Pyrenees. What makes you think he won't try to kill you there?'

Chapter 21

Dive Pool

An albatross circled overhead. David stood beside the dive pool and watched the bird as it hunted. There was no shortage of yellow tail and other small fish nibbling at scraps of flesh and bits of bone left over from the carnage of the night before. Earlier that morning, he had used a long pole to dislodge pieces of fur trapped in the metal grid at the entrance to the pool.

It was tidal and bordered by rocks on the ocean side and freshly-raked sand on the other. The metal grid was there to stop sharks from coming in and eating people taking scuba lessons. A plunge well, at one end, enabled divers to descend to twenty metres. Warm showers and changing rooms were provided and there was enough equipment to cater for people of all sizes and shapes. David had come across similar pools but none as lavish as this.

He consulted his watch. Other instructors would be using the pool. They had not yet arrived. Nor had any of the dive students. The courses were scheduled for low tide. That was when the depth at the shallow end was suitable for beginners.

David was accustomed to things starting on time. Other standards prevailed at the Flamingo and punctuality was not one of them. He was reminded of the old saying: *time and tide wait for no one*. Money could evidently override the basic facts of life.

He heard footsteps and peered over the bushes. Something was happening at last. He craned his neck and saw a cheetah padding towards him, followed by a tall woman. He recognised Anna and recalled that Charlie wanted him to spend the night with her.

Anna had a room next to her prudish younger sister, Petra. There was no chance of spending the night with her. That meant he would have to shaft Anna and make sure nothing nasty happened to Petra while he was doing it.

The cheetah bounded over a bush and entered the pool area. Anna walked around the bush and followed it inside. David tried to imagine what lay beneath her flowing robes. He held up a hand.

'Hi. I'm David. You must be Anna.'

She eyed him up and down. David guessed she was comparing the real him with his photograph. For an awful moment he thought he was going to be rejected. Then she smiled.

'Where shall I undress?'

'Do what?'

'Change into a wetsuit, David. I can't go into the water like this.'

He pointed to a door. 'The wetsuits are in there. We've got all sizes. Find one that fits and put it on.'

She thrust the lead at him.

'Take my cheetah. Her name is Constantia.'

David reached out a hand.

'And don't rub her up the wrong way. Cheetahs bite.'

David wondered if Anna would bite if he rubbed her up the wrong way. He guessed she would and watched her go into the changing room. Constantia came closer. The old animal seemed to prefer his company to that of her mistress. He stroked her neck and noticed that she didn't mind which way he rubbed it. She sniffed the air.

'What's the matter?'

Constantia's ears pricked up.

'Who's coming?'

David heard male voices and female laughter. He recognised the voices as belonging to Dino and Rambo. They were sharing the pool with him. Their dive students were listed as Carla and Mario.

He followed Constantia's gaze to the iron gate at the entrance of the enclosure. Shadows appeared beneath it and he made out the shapes of a large animal and three people. Constantia sniffed the air and prepared to bolt.

David hung on to her as the gate opened and a huge dog appeared, followed by Carla. He guessed she intended to upstage her cousin. Carla had acquired a ridgeback. The ferocious-looking animal padded towards them and Constantia backed away.

The breed originated in Zimbabwe when the country was known as Rhodesia. David recalled that the white settlers kept them as guard dogs

and they had a reputation as killers. Ridgebacks could rip people to pieces and had been known to chase off lions. Carla had hers on a lead and was struggling to keep it under control. Rambo came to her aid and brought the animal to a halt a few paces from David.

His face lit up when he saw him.

'It's Tweety Pie!'

David ignored Rambo. He was far more interested in Carla and she was far more interested in him. Her dark eyes flashed and she looked him up and down. Then she turned her attention to Constantia, who was cowering at his feet.

'Where's Anna?'

Constantia hid her face in her paws.

'Where's that fucking bitch?'

Carla yelled at the top of her voice. The door of the changing room flew open and Anna appeared. She was dressed in a wetsuit that she had failed to zip up properly in her haste to join the fray. Her breasts hung out and she strode forward, like an Amazon on the warpath, brandishing a weight belt at arm's length.

'Get that dog out of here!'

She swung the weight belt over her head.'

'It's got no right to be here.'

Carla surged forward.

'It's got as much right as your cheetah.'

'No. It does not.'

'Why's that then?'

'It's frightening Constantia.'

'Too bad!'

'I rescued her when she was a baby.'

'That's not what I heard ...'

David decided to stay well clear of the conflict. If Carla's ridgeback ripped out Constantia's throat that would be sad but not his fault. In the unlikely event of Constantia biting off the dog's head he would be equally guiltless.

Constantia nuzzled up to him and the ridgeback prepared to charge. A passive role was no longer possible. Ridgebacks can inflict terrible wounds and those in Africa have a reputation for carrying rabies. David drew his dive knife and the blade flashed in the sun. Most dive knives are relatively blunt. His was razor-sharp.

Dino urged the dog on.

'Get Tweety Pie.'

Rambo joined in.

'Bite his balls off.'

David prepared to slash the dog's throat. This was the last situation he wanted. He was there to protect Petra and Anna from power-crazy

tycoons like Cuthbert Maguire ... not from ridgebacks and mindless yobbos like Dino and Rambo.

Suddenly the crisis was over.

'Call off your dog!'

David said a quiet prayer of thanks for the resort's security guards. They moved in and the dog shrank back when guns appeared. One of the guards led it away and another took Constantia. David watched as the cheetah was handed over to a man in a smart suit. He recognised Siphon and saw Petra standing behind him.

He had waited days to talk to her. Ideally, they would speak alone. That wasn't going to happen. Anna had joined her and Petra was anxious to play the role of a peacemaker.

After that, everything went pear shaped. David said they should start the scuba class. Anna said she and Petra had been diving for years and so had Carla and Mario. The scuba lessons were an excuse to have fun and meet interesting people like scuba instructors. She pinched his arm to make the point and Petra went off to talk to Carla.

She returned to say that all misunderstandings had been overcome. Carla had apologised for bringing the ridgeback to the pool and Dino was sorry if some of his jokes had been taken the wrong way. Dino had suggested that they should play water polo and get to know one another better. There was a frightening air of unreality about the whole thing. David hoped he would have a chance to talk to Petra later in the day.

The opportunity came at lunchtime. Anna produced a picnic hamper and they took it down onto the foreshore. Siphon thought that was one of the few places where they could talk and not be spied upon. He said the resort was festooned with bugs. Everyone was spying on everyone else. He had done a sweep of their rooms and removed some listening devices but wouldn't guarantee that he had got all of them.

They found a sheltered spot amongst some rocks. Siphon sat on a clean towel to protect his smart suit. David squatted on a patch of grass and was joined by Anna. Petra sat beside Siphon.

Anna took a bottle of bubbly from the hamper and Siphon reached for a bottle of mineral water. He wanted to talk about Carla. He had already spoken to the sisters about her and made no progress. Neither of them believed that their cousin was seriously planning to kill them. He called on David for support.

'Tell them what your friends said, David.'

David did his best to explain that his friends spoke Spanish and had listened to the recordings of Carla and her mother discussing the terms of grandfather Simon's Will. That got the discussion off to a bad start.

Anna wanted to know why she had not been brought into the act. She spoke Spanish. So why hadn't Siphon gone to her? She could have put him in the picture.

Sipho came up with a weak excuse and that made Anna mad. She threw scorn on everything he said. He didn't know her cousin. Carla was always shooting her big mouth off. If you believed Carla, you would think she was planning to murder half the people in the resort. The place would be filled with corpses. It was the way the silly bitch spoke and no one in their right mind would take her seriously.

Chapter 22

All Night Stand

David sat in Anna's apartment and waited for her to return. She had sneaked him in. At first he thought she didn't want prudish Petra to know that they would be spending the night together. Then he heard Petra's voice. The door opened and she appeared, followed by Mario. He clasped a picnic hamper and she carried plastic bags. Anna followed with Constantia.

Petra dumped the bags down.

'It's simply disgraceful.'

'It certainly is,' Mario agreed.

David hoped they had, at last, come to realise that Carla posed a serious danger. He was wrong. Their fears weren't for their own lives. They were worried about the marine environment.

'They should use paper,' Mario said. 'Plastic gets into the ocean and causes incalculable harm. Turtles become entrapped in it. Thousands die every year ...'

David fully agreed but this was no time to worry about turtles and other things that swam around in the sea. The sisters' lives were at risk and they were behaving as if they were on holiday.

He guessed Anna was always on holiday. Petra and Mario were different. They were serious types. Petra hung on his arm. It was understandable that she would want support. Her father had vanished under mysterious circumstances and was almost certainly dead.

What about Mario?

David's feelings toward him were the same as those he'd had towards Sipho. He felt the guy was genuine. Others wouldn't place much score on that line of thinking. He imagined himself as a CIA or MI5 agent, filing a report and saying something as insubstantial as that. A rival for promotion would shoot his balls off.

That was one of the reasons why Charlie was in high demand. His people didn't file reports. They flew by the seats of their pants. The only thing that mattered was to get results and do nothing that could embarrass the people who paid them.

He returned his attention to the lovebirds.

It was probably an exaggeration to call them that. Good friends would probably be more accurate. Petra de Villiers was clasping Mario Mendez-Klein's hand but she did not look as if she was about to lose her maidenhead. Both appeared to be concerned about what was going on around them.

David decided to adopt a low profile and wait for an opportunity to speak to Petra alone. There was no point in talking to Anna. As far as she was concerned, he was a stud male who was about to perform acts of virility on her sensuous female body.

In the meantime, his stud male duty was to open cans of cat food that Anna had bought for Constantia. Despite her advanced years, the cheetah had a healthy appetite. David laboured over his task. Cheetahs are much bigger than the domestic members of the cat family and they consume far more food.

A couple of cans went nowhere to satisfy Constantia's demands. His wrist began to ache as he emptied can after can into the cheetah's bowl and tried to listen to the conversation between the two sisters.

Anna wanted to know why Mario was with them. She teased Petra about her new boyfriend and got nowhere. Petra continued to fuss over her plastic bags and remained silent. Anna gave up and turned her attention to Mario.

'Darling ...'

She reached out and touched his arm playfully.

'I'm sorry to disappoint you.'

Mario looked puzzled.

'David is keeping me company tonight, my sweet.' She stroked his chin. 'You know I yearn for your charms but I like my men one at a time.'

She turned to Petra.

'Some people prefer quantity.'

'That's something I know nothing about,' Petra replied primly.

'Then you should, darling.' Anna smiled. 'Our dear cousin will be entertaining two men.'

'Our cousin?'

'Dino and Rambo yearned for our bodies, darling. When they found we weren't available, Carla took pity on them. She has a generous heart and a great capacity for love. She won't disappoint the poor boys.'

Petra stared into her plastic bags.

'Don't look so shocked,' Anna smiled. 'Carla will have two men to protect her and I'll have one. It's a shame you won't have anyone to protect you.'

'I'll have Mario to protect me.'

Petra blurted out the words.

'Oh, darling!' Anna reached out and squeezed her hand. 'You are going to lose your virginity at last.'

She turned to Mario.

'You do know what to do ... don't you?'

Mario ignored her.

'If you had told me, in time, I could have brought you one of those books. They've got illustrations to show you where things are and what to do with them. The Anglican Church sells them in its bookshops so they must be alright. I'm sure Archbishop Tutu would approve.'

Petra grabbed her bags.

'Mario and I will eat in my room, Anna. I find your humour distasteful. There is no need for such vulgarity and there is no need to insult the archbishop. Mario is concerned for my safety ... that is all.'

David watched them leave. Petra stomped out and Mario raided the picnic hamper for a bottle of wine before joining her.

Was he really concerned for Petra's safety?

Anna's younger sister was hardly a sex kitten. Mario might think differently. Or, he might have reason to think Petra was in danger. Or, both. There was no way to tell.

Anna uncorked a bottle of Champaign.

'I thought they'd never go.'

She poured two glasses and sat beside him. Constantia stopped chomping on her food and turned towards them. David wondered what it would be like to make love to a super-sexy woman with a cheetah looking on.

Mario set down the wine bottle. Anna had winked at him when he pulled it from the hamper. She probably thought he was going to ply her little sister with alcohol and try to seduce her. He had no intention. South African wines were amongst the very best in the world and he lusted for them ... not for Petra's body.

He admired Richard de Villiers but felt no physical attraction towards either of his daughters. Anna was amusing so long as you kept her at arms' length. Petra was different. They got on well and he could imagine her as a best friend but he couldn't imagine her as a lover. Some girls turned him on. Petra didn't.

Perhaps it was body chemistry. That was something he was studying in his final year towards a degree in biological science. There was evidence that people unconsciously rejected potential partners who had too many genes in common. Race didn't come into it. Smell did. The nose craved something different.

His mother was probably unaware of that. She wanted him to spend the night with Petra. Her dream was of a marriage alliance between the Mendez-Kleins and the de Villiers. He had rebuffed her attempts to get him into bed with Carla and Anna. Now, she was making a bid for Petra. Mother had seen them together. At one point he had put an arm around

Petra. That was not out of affection but to stop her falling overboard on the way back from Cuthbert's yacht.

Petra had gone into the bathroom to change. She had been wearing her business suit. Mario wondered if she would slip into something more sexy. He tried to imagine her in a skirt with a slash down the side, like the one Anna wore. Or, perhaps, an ultra-short skirt that stretched up her slender thigh. Neither image fitted and he wasn't surprised when she emerged in a one-piece tracksuit with a zip up the front. There would be little opportunity for groping even if he had that in mind.

She sat down opposite him.

'You've taken one of Anna's wines.'

'Yes,' he smiled. 'Would you like some?'

'Just a little ... with lots of mineral water.'

Mario poured a small quantity into a glass and topped it up with water. He handed it to her. Petra's legs remained tightly together. Even in a tracksuit she seemed wary of him. It occurred to Mario that she had never been alone with a man before.

'Cheers!'

He raised his glass and clinked it against hers. That seemed to break the ice. A leading question seemed in order. He had been putting it off for a long time.'

'That man David ...'

'Yes.' Petra looked up from her glass.

'He thinks you are in danger.'

'David knew my father,' Petra replied cautiously. 'He doesn't think his disappearance was an accident.'

'I knew your father too,' Mario said pointedly. 'I had great respect for him. He wasn't the fool he pretended to be.'

'What do you think happened?'

'I think the disappearance was arranged.'

'How?'

'I don't know. But, if I could see that his idiot act was a sham, you can be sure others saw through it too.'

'What others?'

'Your father had the means to do immense damage to some very powerful people, Petra. You met some of them yesterday. They won't stop at anything if their interests are threatened. Believe me. I was brought up with them.'

He took a swig from his glass.

'Your father protected you, Petra. Your sister mixes with them but she's too stupid to see what's going on ... like a lot of the rich kids around here. They crap on about the environment and social issues. They've got no idea what their parents are doing.'

'Who do you think did it?'

'Cuthbert Maguire for starters. Nothing happens without his permission. People think of him as a media mogul. Cuthbert is far more than that. His family owns petrol refineries and chemical plants. He's in the arms business. You name it and you'll discover that Cuthbert has a hand in it. He makes and breaks governments and they give him lucrative contracts. Your father was investigating what was going on and they didn't just kill him. They killed his entire team.'

'You think he's dead?'

'He has to be Petra,' Mario dropped his voice. 'It's almost two weeks now.'

'And you think they might try to kill me?'

'Not after the performance you gave on the yacht. It was brilliant. They think you are one of them. In a few years they will be inviting you to join them.'

'David thinks Carla wants to kill me,' Petra said.

'That's nutty,' Mario spluttered into his glass.

'Sipho thinks there's a danger ...'

'From Carla?'

'Yes.'

'They're both nutty.' Mario reached for the wine bottle. 'Carla couldn't kill a mouse, even if she tried. She's all talk and no walk. I've heard her threaten to kill the president of Columbia and his entire cabinet but they're all alive and well.'

He was interrupted by excited shouts from the neighbouring apartment. Carla had returned with Dino and Rambo and they had lost no time in catering for her needs. Petra had no idea that so much noise could accompany the sex act. Anna and David were as quiet as church mice in comparison.

'She'll tire them out,' Mario remarked casually.

'Does that matter?'

'It does if you want a safe trip out tomorrow,' Mario grinned. 'Rambo is skippering the boat and working the shark cage. You'll want him to be in top form when you are on the inside of the cage and there is a Big White staring at you through the bars.'

Chapter 23

White Knight

The little mermaid looked sad. Perhaps it was because a pigeon had just defecated in her eye. Humphrey adjusted his binoculars and scanned back and forth between the bronze figure and a police launch moored nearby. Divers were in the water, wearing wetsuits with Search and Rescue printed on them in Danish. A man in a long dark coat was

watching. Humphrey recognised him as the person who had told Kirstin to stop feeding bread to the birds because it was bad for them.

'He's here again, Mother.'

'I've seen him.'

'Do you think he's spying on us?'

'He's adopted an unbeatable persona if he is.'

'What's that?'

'Stupid, meddlesome old bugger.'

'There's a lot of them around.'

'Yes, Humphrey. That's why it is unbeatable.'

Kirstin returned her attention to Humphrey's laptop computer. They had received another email from Olaf Magnusson. This one gave specific instructions. They were to go to a town called Foix in the Central Pyrenees. He would contact them there and arrange a meeting.

'He is writing as if you are an old school chum.'

'That's what he wants his minders to think. Mother. He sends his emails out through a channel that is normally used for the transmission of digital data. They probably don't know what he is doing but he can't be sure so he makes them appear innocuous.'

'You still hold to your little-boy-lost theory?'

'I think Olaf was sucked into a world he couldn't handle and is now trapped in it. He is crying out for help.'

'And you see yourself as a knight in shining armour, galloping to his rescue, with me by your side?'

'I wouldn't put it like that, Mother.'

'No. But it's turning out like that.'

Kirstin suddenly felt tired. As a young woman she had been exhilarated by the thought of danger. Now, she wondered if she could cope with it.

The unfolding drama in the harbour didn't help. The divers had found a body and were retrieving it from the water. Nearby, the man in the dark coat was talking into a phone. She wondered if he was an intelligence agent or some silly old bugger phoning his wife to tell her what had happened.

Chapter 24

Day After the Night Before

Anna claimed that David was her most exciting male to date. He returned the compliment and she demanded further proof of his masculine prowess. They practiced all the positions he knew and she taught him more. Only two immensely fit and athletic people could have managed their feats of strength and endurance.

David hadn't anticipated anything like it. They kept going longer than he thought humanly possible. Carla's wild screams could be heard from two doors away. They died down long before he and Anna collapsed onto the floor and lapsed into a contented sleep.

Anna insisted on total silence. Heavy breathing wasn't allowed under any circumstances. She said she didn't want to shock her little sister. David found that amusing. Earlier, she had teased Petra about her virginity and subjected Mario to similar jibes.

She fondled David and explained her philosophy towards marriage. Someone in her position needed a spouse with lots of money and good connections. Mario wasn't her idea of an ideal bedfellow but that didn't matter. He was passionately interested in the environment and would be fabulously rich one day. He could devote his energy to saving furry animals and she could get on with her life.

Mario evidently had a very different attitude towards marriage. Anna regarded her chances with him as zero and didn't doubt that Carla's were even lower. She gained immense satisfaction from the thought that Petra would beat Carla to the prize. Their role was to play cupid and bring the two together. An unplanned pregnancy would be a perfect way of achieving that aim. Anna wondered if David could find a way of providing Mario with defective condoms.

They lay in bed as the sun rose and talked about all sorts of things. David did his best to get Anna to take Sipho's recording seriously. He had it in the pocket of his denims and wanted her to listen to it. Anna said that would be a waste of time. Carla spent her life threatening to kill people. You couldn't take Carla seriously ... but you could steal her dog.

She wanted David to help her kidnap the ridgeback and smuggle it back to Brazil. He could go with her. She would introduce him to all sorts of exciting people and open up all manner of opportunities. It wasn't clear if she was planning to launch him on a highly-paid career as a gigolo or had a more professional role in mind.

The buzzer on his watch sounded. David climbed out of bed and began his early-morning exercises. Anna invited him to shower with her. He declined the offer. Being naked with Anna could lead to only one thing. He needed to conserve his energy: not dissipate it in yet another round of sexual gymnastics.

A busy day lay ahead. They were putting to sea with Carla and her two lovers. David had never dived in the waters off Africa's southern tip. They were famous for their amazing variety of sea creatures and he was determined to see them.

From what he had heard, he could dismiss the idea that the sisters were at risk from Carla. In all probability, they weren't at risk from anyone. Richard de Villiers' enemies had eliminated him. There was no reason why they should turn on other members of his family.

His task was to identify the people who had murdered Richard and gather evidence against them. Anna could be a rich source of

information. Unlike Petra, she mixed with the people who were under suspicion. David chuckled to himself. His mission had taken on a new dimension. He could screw Anna for information during the day and screw her for pleasure during the night.

Mario peered out of Petra's window and saw Dino and Rambo emerge from Carla's apartment. They looked none the worse after their night of excitement with Carla. She looked a trifle jaded. He wondered if the boys had overtaxed her with their hectic performance. Both had been with her before so she must have known what she was taking on. Having the two of them together was perhaps more than she could handle.

He had listened to their exploits during the night. Not because he had any desire to be serenaded by Carla's grunts and groans. His sleeping arrangements made it impossible to avoid them. Petra felt uncomfortable with him lying on the floor beside her bed and he had retreated to the far side of the room and spent the night with his head beside the dividing wall.

Carla's room was on the other side and her bed banged against the wall when she and the boys got to work. The knocking was difficult to ignore. He tried stuffing his fingers in his ears but that didn't help. On top of that, he couldn't escape the nasty feeling that he was somehow missing out.

His sexual experience was limited to ineffective groping. The girls he wanted didn't want him. He could have scored with Carla and Anna. Sometimes he wondered if he should have given into their persistent offers to teach him the facts of life. After listening to Carla's attempts at love making he was glad he didn't let either of them try.

He had watched fish cuddle up together in tanks in the marine science laboratory at his university. He had read that birds enjoyed sex and some paired for life. His aim was to gain some worthwhile first-hand experience before finding his ultimate partner and doing his dutiful bit to keep the human genome alive.

Mercifully, the banging didn't go on all night. Carla calmed down after a couple of hours and started to talk. As far as Mario could make out she was making a business offer to the boys. At least, it sounded like that. Mario could catch no more than a few words. When she made love, Carla yelled and screamed in Spanish. When she talked business she used Afrikaans.

Dino and Rambo spoke Afrikaans. Mario didn't and he wouldn't have understood a word if the boys hadn't wandered off into English. That tended to happen when an English word came up and was particularly noticeable when they spoke about dollars. The amounts were usually given in English and they were big.

Rambo wanted to be paid in gold. Dino favoured dollar bills. Mario couldn't work out what the business venture was about. It had

something to do with boats. Apart from that he didn't know what they were planning.

Petra heard a knock on the door. She hoped that Mario had returned. Instead, she found Anna. Her sister breezed in and immediately started to ask questions.

'So how was it?'

Petra looked puzzled.

'Your night of passion, darling.'

'You mean Carla?'

'No, darling. I mean you.'

'I slept well if that's what you mean, Anna.'

'Did Mario sleep well?'

'I don't think so. He was disturbed by Carla.'

'By Carla!' Anna looked shocked. 'You don't mean he was in there with her. Are you saying he was one of her lovers?'

'No. He slept on the floor by the wall.'

Anna glanced across to the pile of cushions that Mario had removed from a sofa and stifled a smile.

'Whatever was he doing over there?'

'He thought I wanted him to sleep over there,' Petra tried to explain. 'He put the cushions down beside my bed. I was concerned that I might disturb him when I went to the bathroom during the night.'

'So you asked him to leave?'

'I didn't expect him to go that far away.'

'Too far to hold hands?'

'Too far to speak to him, Anna. I wanted to talk about father. Mario knew him and so did David. They think his disappearance wasn't an accident.'

'David didn't say anything about that to me,' Anna feigned surprise. 'We talked for a long time before retiring for the night. David is a very serious young man with strong religious views. We discussed the decline of moral values. David was greatly distressed by the sounds of debauchery coming from Carla's room. Those were his very words.'

'And he said nothing about father?'

'No. I will question him about it tonight. His concern for our safety has more to do with wild animals than people. There are leopards and baboons in the mountains near here.'

'But, there's a security fence and guards to protect us.'

Anna ignored the interruption.

'Darling. We are going to dive with the Great Whites today. I want to get some stunning photographs. Carla has done it before with Dino and

that other man. She's always swanking about it. We can't let her get the better of us. We need a really good underwater camera.'

'Mario has one.'

'Yes, darling.' Anna patted Petra's hand. 'That's what I was thinking. Perhaps you could speak to him about it. He won't lend it to me. I've already tried. We've known one another for a long time and he doesn't trust me with his things. I once lost his special binoculars and he's never forgiven me for that.'

'I'll ask him, Anna.'

'Thank you, my sweet. And there's another thing ...'

'What's that?'

'Don't wear that awful bathing thing I saw you in. You've got a good figure. Make the most of it.'

Anna reached into a bag.

'I've bought you this. Mario will be stunned.'

She placed a white bikini on the table.

'It's your size, darling, and not too daring.'

Anna left and Petra picked up the bikini. It looked rather swish. She decided to try it on and hurried into the bathroom. There were mirrors on the walls. She examined herself from several angles and decided that Anna was right. Her figure wasn't too bad after all. She wondered how Mario would react when he saw her in it.

Chapter 25

Kill or be Killed

The resort's dive boat was a converted fishing vessel equipped with heavy lifting gear. It was not as fast as Frank's catamaran but that didn't matter. They weren't going far. David stood beside Rambo as they chugged out to sea and watched the coastline recede.

The view was not as impressive as when he left Cape Town. No distinct promontory marked the southern tip of Africa. There were no towering cliffs or jagged mountains. The coast curved round in a series of low hills. It wasn't difficult to see why the early Portuguese navigators had difficulty charting its exact position.

The Flamingo Resort was not at the southern-most point. Its wealthy patrons probably didn't know or care. So long as they could tell their friends that they had stayed at the famous resort at the tip of Africa they were happy.

David didn't care either. He was interested in the sea rather than the land. Two distinct bodies of water met there. Two oceans collided and that didn't happen in many places. When it did the outcome was always spectacular.

Here it was awesome. Cape Agulhas was the meeting point of the cold, nutrient-rich waters of the southern Atlantic and the warm nutrient-poor waters of the Indian Ocean. Huge eddies spun off as the two oceans combined. The result was an abundance of marine life.

The nutrient-rich waters warmed and algae flourished in them. Small fish ate the algae and were, in turn, eaten by larger fish and seals. Sharks were at the top of the food chain and the biggest of them all was the Great White.

David had dived with Great Whites. That was when he was trying to run a diving business in Australia. The big shark was rare in the waters where he took his divers but the creature did put in an occasional appearance. When that happened, the outcome could be unnerving. On one memorable occasion, two of his divers suffered serious injuries when they panicked and bolted for the surface. They failed to breathe out fast enough and the expanding air burst tiny blood vessels in their lungs.

This time, there would be no such risk. The boat was equipped with a viewing cage that was big enough to take three people. David had examined the cage and it met with his approval. The bars were made of high-tensile steel, the welds were good and the locking mechanism could be operated from both inside and outside.

Dino would be taking Carla and Mario down. David would descend later with Anna and Petra. Anna was an experienced diver and he had no concerns about her. Petra was of a nervous disposition and got stressed when things didn't work out as expected. She was the sort who panicked and would need tight supervision.

He glanced across at the younger of the two de Villiers sisters. Despite a chill wind, Petra was wearing a skimpy swimming costume. It suited her far better than the one she had worn in the dive pool. David figured that she would be quite attractive if she put on a bit of weight and wasn't so skinny. But she would never be like Anna.

Anna was totally amazing. She dominated everything around her. Carla wasn't impressed by her behaviour but Dino and Rambo lapped it up. David watched as she draped herself over them and pointed at buttons and leavers, demanding to know what they did.

Dino and Rambo were going out of their way to be friendly. They slapped him on the back at every opportunity, called him Davo and made jokes about his dive knife and what would have happened if it had come into contact with the ridgeback's throat.

Mario had watched the exchange. As usual, it was impossible to guess what was going on in his mind. His face was always expressionless. David guessed it was a habit he had learnt from his parents. In their sort of company, it was advisable to keep your thoughts to yourself and not let others know what you were thinking.

The young man left the main party and climbed a ladder onto the cabin roof. There was a guardrail and seats that could be used for game

fishing. David decided to join him. The sea was flat and the boat was chugging along at a steady pace.

It wasn't hard to get a conversation going.

'It's a bit like the northern tip of New Zealand,' he remarked casually, 'but on a much bigger scale.'

'Have you dived there?' Mario asked.

'Yep. It's where the waters of the Tasman Sea meet the Pacific Ocean. The temperature difference isn't as great as here but there are some impressive eddies. You have to know what you are doing and not get separated from your boat.'

Mario moved closer.

'How well did you know Richard de Villiers?'

'I met him twice,' David said. 'He was a great guy.'

'Petra says you don't think his disappearance was an accident.'

'I said his disappearance was strange. I didn't suggest that someone had killed him if that's what you are thinking.'

Mario dropped his voice.

'Don't mention Richard's name to anyone. If they find out that you knew him say Richard was a dangerous nutter and the world is better off without him.'

He pointed to a large vessel on the horizon.

'That's a factory ship. It processes fish caught by fishing boats operating from the mainland. The fish could be processed on shore but they aren't. They are processed by big machines fed by labour that is paid even less than the low rates paid in this country. Richard's people collected information. The factory ships sail under the flags of countries that are not signatories to international labour conventions and most are owned by guess who?'

'I don't know?'

'A consortium headed by Cuthbert Maguire,' Mario's tone soured. 'Yesterday, I saw his people feed seals to sharks for the amusement of the guests on his yacht. Richard would have had a few things to say about that but he's no longer around to say them.'

Mario was interrupted by shouts from below. They had reached the dive site and sharks were already congregating around it. They were regular visitors and knew that the sound of a boat meant they were going to be fed.

Footsteps sounded on the gangway. Charlie looked through his porthole and saw Siphon. He was dressed in his smart suit, carrying a brief case, and running as if his life depended on it.

'Frank!'

He clattered onto the deck.

'Frank. I must speak to you.'

Charlie climbed the ladder from the lower deck.

'What's the matter, Siphon?'

'Where's Frank?'

'He's gone into town. Can it wait?'

'No,' Siphon shook his head. 'Do you speak Afrikaans?'

'I speak Dutch ... that's close enough.'

'Then listen to this.'

Siphon produced an audio player from his case and turned it on. Two male voices sounded from the small speaker. They were talking about money and naming prices. Charlie listened intently. The accent was different from Dutch and there were words he had not heard before but the meaning was clear. He turned to Siphon.

'When was this recording made?'

'Last night in Carla's room. I couldn't get it earlier. I had to wait until they'd gone. Then the cleaners went in. It would have looked suspicious if I'd done it then.'

'The two men are Dino and Rambo and the woman is Carla?'

'Yes,' Siphon rung his hands. 'They are planning to kill Petra and Anna in the shark cage. They've already gone. We must warn David. I've tried to call him but he doesn't answer. Petra and Anna left their phones behind so it's no good calling them.'

'You are saying that David, Petra, and Anna have gone diving with Dino, Rambo and Carla?'

'Yes. They will be there by now.'

Charlie pulled out his phone and tapped up David's number. There was no reply and he left a text message. Siphon looked over his shoulder.

'He's not answering you either?'

'No.' Charlie tapped up another number. 'I'll talk to Frank and brief him on what's going on.'

Siphon listened as the two men discussed what had to be done. Frank's opinion of Dino was chilling. He described the big muscleman as a psychopath and accused him of being responsible for the deaths of two divemasters. That was just for starters. There was worse to come. The catamaran was out of service. Frank had gone to Cape Town to fetch a mechanic and collect spare parts. He suspected that they had been sabotaged but couldn't work out how.

'I'll take the inflatable,' Charlie said.

'Best check out the radar,' Frank cautioned. 'There's more than one spot for viewing the Great Whites. Don't go to the wrong one.'

Siphon followed Charlie into the captain's cabin. The radar was kept switched on. Charlie examined the screen.

'Shit!'

He turned to Siphon.

'Have you any idea where they went?'

'No,' Siphon shook his head.

'There are three sites out there and they're all occupied.'

'Go to the nearest first,' Siphon advised.

'Good thinking.'

Charlie grabbed a marine chart and sped down the stairs.

'What do you want me to do?' Siphon called after him.

'Stand by at the resort and await instructions. I'll phone if you are needed. Have a vehicle ready and don't tell anyone what you are doing.'

The sun shone from a clear blue sky. David watched Rambo throw another pig's head into the water. There were sharks around but none were Great Whites. They had missed out. Two boats had gone out before them and were having all the luck. Instead of joining them, Rambo had pressed on. He insisted that their chances were better further out to sea ... and he was wrong.

The moron could spend all morning chucking bits of pig and goat over the side and it would make no difference. There was no chance of luring a Great White to the boat. There weren't many around and the few that had put in an appearance were entertaining the people on boats that had anchored far nearer to the shore.

He watched as Dino arrived on the scene and tipped a bucket of offal into the water. Not surprisingly, the sea erupted in a frenzy of heaving bodies and flashing teeth. Dino seemed to think he had achieved a miracle.

'Great White!'

He jabbed a finger at the water.

'You Beauty! Look at that! There's one!'

David couldn't see anything that looked remotely like a Great White. He didn't believe Dino had either. When Great Whites are around other sharks get out of their way and that hadn't happened.

Carla wasn't put off by the lack of evidence.

'Clever Darling!'

She dashed forward and planted a kiss on Dino's cheek then looked up to the viewing platform where Mario was standing. Her face dropped when she saw that he had been joined by Petra.

'Mario,' she beckoned furiously. 'It's time to go. Get your camera from Petra. Dino is going to take us down first. Petra is going later with David and Anna.'

Mario ambled down the ladder and took up a position beside Carla and Dino. No one checked anyone to see that they were properly kitted out. Rambo was equally casual in handling the cage. It jerked off its stand and swayed dangerously. David grabbed the bottom and brought it under control. He had handled dive cages before. This one was massive.

He figured it would stand up to any amount of battering by any shark that tried to rip it apart.

The cage stopped swinging and Rambo lowered it into the water. Dino jumped in and Carla followed. Mario entered last. David noticed that he had failed to follow Carla's instructions to retrieve his camera from Petra.

'Good luck!'

Petra waved enthusiastically and took photographs as Mario lowered the hatch and checked that it was firmly secured. More photographs followed as the cage sank slowly into the water.

Anna sidled up and whispered in David's ear.

'He let her have his precious camera.'

'He thinks it's safe with her.'

'No. It's the bikini ...'

'The bikini?'

'Did you see the glint in his eye?'

'No.'

'He is lusting after her, David.'

She nibbled his ear.

'Have you talked to him about condoms?'

'Not yet.'

'I think you should, David. There's a brand that falls apart when it's used with Vaseline. It attacks the rubber. The magazines are full of it. You could get some. Tell him to use Vaseline with them. Say it increases the satisfaction.'

'Mario's not stupid.'

Anna considered the point.

'You're right. Better not talk about condoms. Most unplanned pregnancies occur on the first night. That's what happened to me. I should have picked an experienced man like you. Then I wouldn't have had that little problem.'

She ran her hand up his thigh and David returned his attention to the cage. The top was just below the water. He saw flashes of light and guessed that Carla was taking photographs. There was a lot of action. Fins broke the surface and tails thrashed. He didn't doubt that Carla would get some great shots. Some of the sharks were big and very hyped up.

To his surprise, they didn't stay down long. Rambo worked the controls and the cage came back out of the water. Petra took more photographs of Mario as he climbed onto the boat. He said the sharks were putting on an awesome performance and he expected her to get some great action shots.

It was now their turn. Petra stepped forward and David checked her out. All her equipment was correctly in place. She seemed a little apprehensive but that was to be expected. Lots of people are

apprehensive on their first cage dive. He cast a quick eye over Anna and decided not to tell her that her weight belt was buckled on the wrong side. He had done that in the dive pool and been told not to behave like a fussy old maid.

Petra climbed down into the cage and Anna followed. David joined them and watched as Dino lowered the hatch. David checked that it was correctly secured and gave the diver's okay-sign. Dino leant forward and smiled.

For a moment the big muscleman looked friendly. Then his smile contorted into a malignant grin. He stared down into the cage and David felt immensely stupid. All his training had told him to avoid situations like this. Dino and Rambo were psychopaths.

He had formed that opinion of them from the start. Yet he had placed his life in their hands. He had helped prepare his own coffin. Worse still, he was taking two other people to the grave with him. Carla was intent on killing Petra and Anna.

He saw her standing behind Dino, holding the lever that worked the cage. An expression of pure hatred consumed her face. Her mouth opened, her dark eyes flashed and she shouted something as she slammed the lever down.

The cable supporting the cage went slack and it began to descend. David felt the hatch pressing against his head. Anna and Petra pressed up against him. They were locked in an iron prison that was taking them deeper than any scuba diver should attempt to go ... and it was taking them down fast.

The water pressed against his ears. He grasped his nose and breathed out. The pressure in his ears equalised. He hoped Petra and Anna had done the same. If they hadn't they would risk a burst eardrum. Bubbles flowed everywhere.

Then the cage stopped. David guessed they had reached the end of the cable. He checked his dive computer and found that they had gone down to a frightening forty metres. At that depth, they would quickly exhaust the air in their scuba tanks and suffocate.

That was just one of their problems. At forty metres, nitrogen was being absorbed into their blood at an alarming rate. It could bubble out when they surfaced. That condition was called *The Bends* and it was life-threatening. They had to get out and get out fast.

David's hand shot up. The lever that secured the hatch was above his head. He fumbled and found it. The next bit was tricky. He had to work the lever with a finger stuck through a narrow opening in the grill. On the surface it had been easy. Now it refused to budge. He had been in similar situations before. Something had changed and he had to work out what it was.

He sank back and the answer came in a flash. His head was pressing against the hatch and pushing it up. He pulled the hatch down with one

hand and worked the lever with the other. This time it moved. The operation took only a few seconds but seemed to last an eternity.

The hatch rose. He finned out and grabbed Petra. Bubbles should be coming from her mouthpiece and there weren't any. Her face was contorted in fear. She was in a state of shock and had forgotten to breathe out. He thumped her chest. Bubbles flowed. He held her tight and started his ascent.

Anna shot past. There was no problem with her breathing. A stream of bubbles followed her as she rocketed up. David watched her progress as she finned towards the rear of the boat. There was landing platform there. If she reached it in time she would be safe.

She didn't. The sharks were upon her before she got there. The outcome was predictable. David hoped Petra didn't see. One moment the water was clear. The next it exploded in clouds of blood and strips of brightly coloured wetsuit as Anna was torn to pieces.

Their only chance was to make for the other end of the boat. The alternative was to join Anna and be torn to shreds. Hopefully, the sharks would be occupied with her. The same went for Carla and her friends. With any luck they would be watching what the sharks were doing to Anna.

David finned as fast as he dared. Vibrations attract sharks and scuba fins make vibrations. The boat loomed closer. Two small sharks showed interest and he jabbed one with his knife. Both made off. His head touched the boat and he pushed Petra up towards a rubber tyre that was hanging there. She grabbed it and a hand grabbed her. Mario had Petra by the wrist. He pulled her up and she climbed over the guard rail.

'Grab!'

An iron bar was thrust in his direction. David took hold of it and Mario strained at the other end as he heaved himself onto the deck. He arrived just in time. Dino had seen what was happening.

The muscleman left the spectacle at the rear of the boat and ran towards them shouting for Rambo to join him. David took the iron bar from Mario and eyed him as he approached. Dino was armed with a long knife.

The bar was three times that long. If Dino had any sense he would have backed off. He had been humiliated in the Flamingo Palace when he tried to arm wrestle David. He should have known that he didn't stand a chance.

David stayed motionless until the last moment. Then his arm flashed out. The bar hit the knife from Dino's hand and the tip followed through to his throat. Blood squirted. Dino's knees buckled and he collapsed onto the ship's rail. David pushed him over the side.

'Davo ...'

Rambo stopped in his tracks. Moments' earlier he had been bearing down on him with a meat cleaver. Now he wanted to start a conversation. Carla stood behind him with a gun.

David hurled the iron bar at her and threw himself at Rambo. It was all over in a second. Blows rained down on Rambo's chest, smashing ribs and rupturing blood vessels. David hurled him backwards onto Carla, knocking her over.

He yanked her up.

'Don't kill me!'

He squeezed her wrist and the gun fell to the deck. Mario picked it up and David released his hold on Carla. He was overcome by a wave of revulsion. In the space of just a few minutes, three people had died. Anna had been torn to pieces by sharks. Dino and Rambo had succumbed to his blows.

The only good news was that none of them would have suffered any pain. The whole awful business was over so quickly. David watched as Mario pointed the gun at Carla. For a moment, it looked as if he was going to shoot her. Then he replaced the safety catch and stuffed the gun into his pocket.

What was left of Dino was bobbing around in the water. The sharks had got to him. David looked over the side and had a sense of unfinished business. Rambo was lying dead at his feet. It would be fitting if he joined his buddy.

He took hold of Rambo's shoulders and pulled him up. Mario grabbed his waistband and they heaved him over the side. The big muscleman had spent the morning feeding chunks of pig and goat to the sharks. Now he was being fed to them in one whole piece.

David turned away from the sight. He blamed himself. This should never have happened. If he hadn't been so obsessed by sex with Anna, he wouldn't have been so stupid as to get himself into such a situation. There was no such thing as combining business with pleasure. He should have listened to Siphos advice.

It was time to phone Charlie and tell him that he had failed in his mission. He was in a terrible mess. He had fucked up and his mind wasn't working properly. He needed Charlie to tell him what to do.

The Bentley looked out of place parked on a patch of grass beside the beach. Siphos felt out of place too and more than a little nervous. His life had suddenly changed for the worse. The man he knew as Tom had phoned him. He was a friend of Frank and David and he had met him on Frank's boat.

Siphos suspected that none of them was using his real name. All three were special agents sent to look after Petra and Anna. Petra had come close to telling him that. She said David was a friend of her father and wanted to know what really happened to him.

Now something awful had happened to her. His warning hadn't reached David in time. Carla and her boyfriends had tried to kill the two sisters by trapping them in a dive cage. David rescued Petra but Anna

had been killed by the sharks. What happened next wasn't clear but David must have done something to Carla and the boyfriends because he and Mario were now in charge of the boat and making for shore.

Tom had given him the GPS coordinates of the place where they intended to land. Siphon guessed he was using a marine chart and had little idea about roads and access points. After a lot of driving down narrow lanes and over open land he eventually reached the designated area by smashing the lock on a farm gate and driving over a field.

There was no sign of the dive boat. He wondered if he had come to the wrong place then remembered that he had been hurtling along sealed roads at top speeds. The dive boat was a converted trawler battling its way through choppy seas. He took a pair of binoculars from the glovebox and scanned the horizon.

There was no sign of the boat and he was beginning to wonder if he had gone to the wrong place when a shape appeared far out to sea. At first it looked contorted and up-side-down. Then he remembered mirages and decided he was seeing two images, one on top of the other.

His phone rang and he heard David's voice.

'Are you there?'

Siphon read out his GPS coordinates.

'Can you see us?'

'There's a boat coming from the south-west.'

'That's us. Any issues with you?'

'Only if a farmer wants to know what I'm doing in his field.'

'Are you sure there are no hostile forces in your area?'

The military language was chilling.

'I can't see anyone around.'

'Good. We'll be with you soon.'

Siphon heard Mario in the background. He was reassuring Petra, telling her things were under control. Siphon wished they were. His world had been turned upside-down.

Chapter 26

Foix

A cold wind blew down from the mountains. Humphrey didn't let that bother him. He was warmly dressed in a heavy woollen coat that reached below his knees. A woollen scarf protected his neck and he wore a beret that he had bought in London some years earlier. The man in the shop told him that the distinctive French headgear was still popular in the Pyrenees even if it had gone out of fashion in other parts of France.

He looked around. It was rush hour. The narrow streets of the small town of Foix were crowded with people on their way to work. None of

them wore berets or long coats. Scarfs were in but berets and long coats were definitely out. His aim was to blend in and look like one of the locals. That hadn't happened. The only person who looked remotely like him was sitting nearby on a park bench beside a crumpled hat containing a solitary banknote and a scattering of coins.

He rubbed his hands to keep them warm. If things had worked out as expected, he would be sitting in the café, across the road, having breakfast and reading the local newspaper. It had not opened yet. That was something else he had misjudged. Common knowledge said that the French were hooked on coffee and croissants and had them for breakfast. The people who owned the café were clearly ignorant of that basic fact.

To his relief he saw Kirstin. She had gone for her usual early-morning walk. He preferred to lie in bed and wake up gradually. Research had shown that most heart attacks occur within an hour of waking. The message was clear: one should not rush the waking process. The body should not be hurried into unnecessary activity.

Kirstin strode towards him. Something about her expression told him that things had not worked out well for her either.

'I've been waiting for you!'

Humphrey was taken aback by her manner.

'I've been waiting for you, Mother.'

'I told you to go into the café and wait there.'

'It's not yet open.' Humphrey pointed across the street.

'It's shut, Humphrey. There's a sign in the window. That's why I told you to go to the cafe around the corner.'

She grabbed his arm and led him away. Humphrey wished she wouldn't do that. He felt like a small boy again. It wasn't his fault that he was short sighted. He hadn't seen the sign. Whoever wrote it should have made it bigger.

They entered the café and found a small table by the window. Kirstin ordered coffee and croissants and Humphrey took his computer from its case. Wi-Fi reception was surprisingly good and he had no trouble checking his emails.

There was nothing from Charlie nor from Olaf. His daughter, Lizzie, sent him some photographs of a skiing trip that she had been on in Canada and a Chinese contact had found a possible buyer for one of his Ming vases. Apart from that, there was nothing of interest. He pulled a face and shut the computer.

'There's nothing from Olaf.'

'You messaged him yesterday when we arrived.'

'Yes, Mother. He's usually so prompt.'

'Perhaps he's down a hole somewhere.'

'A hole?'

'He's doing that caving thing ... isn't he?'

'He's digitally recording ancient rock art, if that's what you mean. Some of it goes back over thirty thousand years to when the first of our modern ancestors arrived in this part of the world. There were mammoths, rhinos and bison living here. The Palaeolithic artists recorded them for posterity.'

'That was before they hunted them to extinction.'

'We don't know why the animals became extinct, Mother.'

'But they had been around for a long time before our ancestors arrived on the scene and started to paint them.'

'That is true,' Humphrey conceded.

'Smoking gun, Humphrey.'

'They used bows and arrows, Mother.'

'Very well. They shot them with their arrows. The point is that modern humans arrived and the animals vanished.'

'I think it more likely that they caught some nasty diseases that modern humans brought with them from Africa.'

'And the Neanderthals?'

'They probably caught some nasty diseases too. It would have been like when the Europeans arrived in the Americas. Small pox ravaged communities that had no natural resistance to it.'

'So we didn't drive the Neanderthals to extinction by killing them with weapons. We merely introduced them to the odd virus that they'd not met before.'

'That's roughly as I see it. However, we didn't drive the Neanderthals to extinction. They live on.'

'In a cave near here?' Kirstin smiled.

'No, Mother. They live on within us. We interbred with them. The average European is about two percent Neanderthal in those genes that make us human. Some go as high as five percent.'

'Have you had yourself checked out.'

'No. But I intend to. That's something I intend to discuss with Olaf. He's got involved in DNA analysis. He sees it as yet another way of unravelling the past.'

'You two are going to have a lot to talk about when you finally meet up. I hope you haven't forgotten the prime purpose of our mission.'

'Prime purpose?'

'We are investigating the disappearance of a plane carrying Richard de Villiers and twenty-three other people. It vanished over mid-Atlantic. We suspect that Olaf Magnusson sabotaged the plane and converted it into a drone that could be flown by an external operator such as himself. The pilot and crew were unable to regain control and could do nothing to prevent the plane from crashing into the sea.'

'There's no need to remind me of that.'

'I do wonder, Humphrey. You have done nothing but talk about Olaf and his brilliant projects for the past three days. You clearly regard him as a genius and want to join him in his work.

'I want to gain his confidence.'

'He's clearly gained yours. Must I remind you, yet again, that he's already tried to kill you? If Charles hadn't been in that plane you would be dead. You couldn't have bailed out by yourself.'

'If Charlie hadn't been in the plane, Olaf wouldn't have been trying to make it crash, Mother. Get your facts right.'

Kirstin decided to change the subject.

'I'm worried about Charles. His last email was disturbing. He said someone had sabotaged Frank's dive boat and Frank had gone to talk to some mechanics who said they could fix it. Charles thinks he might have been lured into a trap.'

'Yes, Mother. I'm well aware of that and there's nothing we can do about it until we have more information. With so little to go on we could speculate to eternity. We'll just have to wait until Charlie tells us what's going on.'

Chapter 27

Apocalypse

The water kept coming. Frank held his breath and pretended he was drowning. As a younger man he could have kept it up far longer. Most people thought he was in his middle forties. The reality was different. Frank had just passed his sixty-fourth birthday. Like Charlie, he was getting on in years.

The form of interrogation was called *waterboarding*. The CIA used it but there was nothing particularly American about the technique. Interrogators, down through the ages, had used water to extract information from reluctant informants. It could kill. But, if the subject cooperated, he or she could emerge unscarred. At least in body. The scars to the mind might be permanent.

Frank had gone through the ordeal before. Like Charlie, he had been trained as a special operative. Charlie had received his training in Australia. Frank had been trained in Britain. There wasn't much to choose between the two countries. The British learnt a lot from the Germans in the Second World War and passed on their knowledge to the Australians and Americans.

Special operatives could be captured and various things could happen after that. They could be shot, tortured to death or subjected to intense questioning. The people who employed special operatives mourned the loss of a valuable asset when the first two outcomes eventuated but were more concerned about the third.

Operatives could be coerced into providing sensitive information. They could even be turned and made to work for the other side. That was why their trainees were subjected to techniques designed to strengthen their resolve and fight pain.

Frank lay back as more water poured over him. Old memories flashed through his mind. For a moment, he was a twenty-four-year-old recruit in a training camp in North Wales. Everything seemed exciting then. His world was painted in black and white. There were goodies and baddies and he had the good fortune to be born amongst the goodies.

That was a lifetime ago. He struggled to remember the young man he had once been. Charlie's nephew, David, was twenty-four. Frank wondered how he would cope with waterboarding. The people who murdered Richard de Villiers were on to him.

The Bentley sped along the highway. Siphon wore a chauffeur's cap which he had found in the glovebox. He thought it would act as a disguise. David wasn't so sure but didn't argue. Siphon was driving. If the cap helped to steady his nerves that was for the better.

They were heading east along the coast road that ran from Cape Town to Durban. The scenery was spectacular but they weren't in the mood to admire it. Petra sat in a daze beside Siphon. She was in a state of shock and heavily sedated with tranquillisers that David had given her from his medical kit. He was in the rear with Mario and Charlie.

Mario had emerged unscathed from their ordeal. Charlie hadn't. He arrived in his inflatable boat soon after David put through a call to him. Things should have got better after that but they didn't. David blamed himself for what happened.

He should have tied Carla up. Mario had contemplated shooting her. That was unthinkable but it didn't mean they could leave her cowering in a corner as if she was too scared to do anything. Carla wasn't that sort. You couldn't slap her down that easily. Rambo had a gun and Carla knew where he kept it.

She emerged from his cabin clasp the gun at arms' length. Charlie was coming on board at the time. They were off-guard and not paying proper attention to what was happening until a crescendo of bullets tore through the air, ricocheting off the iron deck and burying themselves in dive bags and sacks of offal.

Carla emptied an entire clip in a single burst and was struggling to reload when Mario pounced on her. He snatched the gun away and hurled it towards David. This time they weren't going to take any chances.

David grabbed a length of rope and trussed Carla like a chicken. Mario dragged her to the side and threatened to push her overboard if she did anything stupid. Both of them were hyped-up and didn't immediately see what had happened to Charlie.

He was wearing a wetsuit and it wasn't immediately evident that he had been shot. There was no nasty blood-stained entry wound. Charlie wasn't squirming around and yelling in pain. He was slumped against a bulkhead as if he had suddenly been overwhelmed by fatigue.

David gave him shots of morphine. Under normal circumstances, the next step would be to get him to a hospital in Cape Town. Charlie was adamant that Cape Town was the last place to be. It was far too dangerous. He and Frank had been busted by the people who brought down Richard de Villiers' plane.

They were up against a ruthless group who were bent on world domination. Charlie referred to them as the Cabal. They pursued their aims with murderous determination and eliminated anyone who stood in their way. No one was safe. The Cabal infiltrated governments and the forces of law-and-order.

He spoke in a whisper, giving instructions, choking back blood. They must take him to a hospital in Port Elizabeth and leave him there. After that they must keep going and lose themselves. He would contact them by telephone or email and tell them what to do.

It sounded like the final wish of a dying man. Charlie sat slumped between David and Mario. Siphos was keeping up a fast pace. For long stretches, they exceeded one-hundred-and-thirty kilometres an hour and sometimes reached one-hundred-and-sixty. They would be in Port Elizabeth, within a few hours, if they kept that up.

Then, on the outskirts of Knysna, they were stopped for speeding. Maybe the posh Bentley and Siphos' smart suit created the correct impression. Or it might have been Charlie's face, drained of blood and looking near death. Siphos said they were rushing him to hospital. He had the bends, from diving, and must be got to a recompression chamber as quickly as possible. To David's immense relief, the police officer waved them on.

He sat back and watched the scenery pass by. For a long time, it had looked much the same. Then everything changed. He had read about it in books. Cape Town had a Mediterranean climate. It rained in winter and was dry in summer. Here, it rained all year round. A patch of rainforest had survived the climatic changes that occurred with the passing on the last Ice Age.

Mario disturbed his thoughts.

'There's a herd of pigmy elephants in there.' He pointed to the trees. 'Richard was helping to get their numbers up. The pigmies survived the arrival of the European farmers. Their big cousins were wiped out.'

'There were hippos too,' Siphos said.

'That's right,' Mario agreed.'

'They were still around in the 1830s.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, quite sure. Richard showed me an entry in one of his ancestor's diaries. I worked out that the writer was Petra's great-great-great grandfather.'

Sipho said it with the precision he used in his computing. David was pleased to see that he had relaxed a little. He wasn't driving as fast as before and he wasn't as much on edge. They would arrive later but were less likely to crash on the way.

'The diary recorded a visit to the observatory the British built when they took over the Cape Colony from the Dutch,' Sipho said. 'There was a swamp nearby and the astronomers were having problems with the hippos that lived there. They were invading the observatory gardens and eating the vegetables.'

David was pleased to hear them talking. They had been racing along in silence. Everyone was tensed up. That was not a good way to think clearly. They had to relax a little and get their minds back into gear. They weren't seasoned warriors like Charlie and Frank.

David had seen something of their world. It was terrifying when he entered it and it hadn't improved. Killing people is not a natural way of life. Mario and Sipho were doing their best to cope. Petra was totally overwhelmed. Seeing her sister chewed up by sharks had blown her mind.

He returned his attention to Charlie. His breathing was more regular and he had stopped coughing. Suddenly that changed. Mario said something about a friend who had recorded hundreds of rock paintings in the mountains of the Cape. They included giraffes and other animals that were no longer found in the region.

Charlie grasped Mario's arm.

'What's his name?'

'Olaf.'

'Olaf What?'

The words wheezed from Charlie's lips. His voice was scarcely audible. Mario leant forward to hear him.

'Olaf What?' Charlie repeated.

'Magnusson ... my parents look after him.'

'Can you gain his confidence?'

'I help him to record the paintings.'

'Does he trust you?'

'I think so. He's an odd sort of fellow but interesting. He always comes to see me when I'm with my parents. I don't think he has many friends.'

'David ...'

Charlie's hand reached out.

'You must contact Humphrey. Tell him about Mario. Say he must get him to speak to Olaf ...'

His words died. David felt Charlie's pulse. He still had one but it was very weak. There was little chance that he would help them now or in the future. They would be lucky if they got Charlie to hospital alive.

Chapter 28

A Friend in Need

The Café Noir overlooked Foix Castle. The imposing edifice stood on an equally imposing lump of rock. Humphrey peered over his spectacles and tried to imagine what it was like to live there in the Middle Ages. He had bought a book on Foix in one of the local bookshops. Olaf had failed to put in an appearance and he needed to occupy his time while he waited for him.

Kirstin sat opposite with a sketch pad. She was drawing the castle and had got down its main features. Her main concern was to check on passers-by and see if anyone was spying on them.

Humphrey looked up from his book.

'The people who lived in that castle could best be described as war lords. They controlled the entire area around here. The king of England ran the show further to the north. He was another of them.'

'I'm sure they had more flattering ways of describing themselves.' Kirstin put down her pencil. 'The president of France has a standing army. That doesn't make him a warlord.'

'Things are different now, Mother.'

'Yes,' Kirstin nodded. 'Countries have got much bigger. Europe was once a patchwork of feuding states. I can read too. I do know something about European history.'

'The counts of Foix ruled in the central Pyrenees,' Humphrey did his best to sound knowledgeable. 'There were no big nation states. The King of France and the Emperor of the Germans didn't rule. Many of the barons, who paid them homage, were far more powerful.'

'A bit like today, Humphrey.'

'What do you mean?'

'The world is slipping back into the feudal era. Globalisation has provided a breeding ground for a new wave of barons. Some international companies are more powerful than many of the countries in the United Nations. They don't have a vote in the UN and don't need one. That's what this case is about ... in case you have forgotten.'

Kirstin picked up her pencil and started to draw a woman at the nearby table. Perhaps she knew she was being sketched. Perhaps not. One thing was sure: the lady was trying to hear what they were saying.

They had been speaking in English. Kirstin regretted they had not chosen a more obscure language. Too many people knew English and the

woman appeared to be one of them. She had spoken in French when she ordered her coffee but her accent was Spanish.

Spain was just over the mountains to the south. The woman could be Spanish. Kirstin examined the cut of her jacket and thought it looked South American. People from that part of the world were suspected of having a hand in Richard de Villiers' disappearance.

She was distracted by a sudden noise. The buzzer on Humphrey's phone had sounded. That only happened when an important call was coming through. His face remained deadpan as he flicked the phone open and read the message.

'They've sent the quote for the garage door,' he said.

'Are you going to accept it?' she asked.

'Yes.' Humphrey returned the phone to his pocket. 'I'll speak to them when we get back.'

Any reference to a garage door was a reference to David. Kirstin guessed he had sent a message. They couldn't discuss it with so many people around and they couldn't hurry away as if something important had happened

She turned her attention to her croissant. The woman with the Spanish accent continued to worry her. The croissant needed to be consumed in a leisurely fashion and so did the coffee. She started to sketch a man on a bench outside and Humphrey buried his head in his book. Ten minutes passed and she put down her pencil.

'Humphrey, we need some exercise.'

She returned her sketch pad to her bag and got up to leave. Humphrey paid the bill and joined her outside. It was cold and a brisk walk was in order. He waited until they were well clear of the café before taking the phone from his pocket and handing it to her.

Kirstin read David's message and had difficulty hiding her shock. Charlie had been shot and was in a critical condition when David and Mario dumped him in the emergency wing of a hospital in Port Elizabeth. Charlie was taken away. David and Mario were told to wait for the police to arrive but they made off before that could happen. Right now they were with some of Siphos' friends.

'Are you sure it's from David?'

'Absolutely,' Humphrey nodded. 'He's used all the correct protocols. If someone had tried to fake it, they wouldn't have got it right.'

'He says that Charlie and Frank have been busted?'

'Yes. The Cabal are onto them.'

'The Cabal?'

'It's the name David is using for the people who brought down Richard de Villiers' plane. He thinks they're onto him too. He wants us to arrange a rescue.'

Kirstin continued to read.

'I don't understand this bit about a light plane and someone or something called "*blanket*".

'It's his way of referring to Kate Bromley,' Humphrey said.

'Kate!'

'She's flown for him before.'

Kirstin slowed her pace. No one was following them and she was feeling tired. She remembered Kate Bromley as a vivacious British girl from a dubious aristocratic family. Kate could skim a plane over trees and land on the smallest airstrip under the harshest conditions. She would be just right for the job. But where was she?

Chapter 29

A Friend in Deed

The sun rose and the early morning light shone on a majestic range of mountains. They were higher than those of the Western Cape and even more impressive. David looked out of the window and wished he was there under happier circumstances. He was tired and more than a little apprehensive.

They had arrived after midnight. Siphon roused their hosts from their beds and, despite the late hour and lack of warning, they received a warm welcome. Siphon was treated like a long-lost son and Petra was treated like royalty.

David was uncertain about relationships. The people were Xhosa. More than that he couldn't say. Siphon spoke to them in Xhosa making frequent references to Petra. It was unclear what he said but they evidently got the message that Petra was in great danger and the two white men were protecting her.

An elderly woman kept hugging them in turn and saying "good man". David guessed she was frustrated because she couldn't say more to thank them. Some of the younger people knew more English but said very little. They were members of an extended family and lived in a compound surrounded by a high brushwood fence. The old lady was the matriarch and had her own house. Her sons lived in separate houses with their wives and children.

David fought back tiredness and struggled to stay awake. He drove most of the way after they left East London and entered the ancient tribal homelands of the Xhosa people. At first nothing looked different. The buildings were much the same as those in the Cape and the people wore the same sort of clothes.

That changed when Siphon told him to turn onto a side road. Tar gave way to gravel. The road climbed and the countryside started to look more like the Africa he had imagined. Round houses with thatched roofs

appeared. Small boys drove cattle beside the road and young girls carried plastic water containers on their heads.

David guessed he was seeing life as it was when Siphos was a boy. His world changed when Richard de Villiers paid for him to go to school in Cape Town. It remained much the same for the people he left behind.

Right now, Siphos was sleeping on the floor beside Mario. He had discarded his smart suit and changed into clothes that some sympathetic person had given him. They were too big for his slim build but that didn't matter. Siphos no longer stood out as someone who didn't belong.

He opened an eye and looked at David.

'What's the time?'

'Coming up to eight o'clock.'

Siphos produced a small radio.

'They lent me this. I've tuned in to Durban. It broadcasts in English. The breakfast news hour is coming up.'

The radio spluttered into life. The reception was poor. In the past, David had been struck by how similar breakfast shows were throughout the English speaking world. This one was different.

Social issues received a heavy plug. Sport came next then the real news began. There was more trouble amongst migrant workers in the gold mines. A senior politician had been accused of taking bribes and a hero of the struggle against apartheid had been honoured by having a bridge named after her.

The news ended and was followed a family drama in which a mother argued with her teenage daughters. Siphos switched off the radio.

'There was nothing about Carla,' he said.

'No,' David shook his head.

'They must have found her by now.'

'You can bet your life they have.' Mario sprang to life. 'Manuela would have been waiting for her.'

'Who?' Siphos said.

'Carla's mother.'

Mario threw off his blanket and reached for his shirt.

'Manuela would want to know what happened. They were in it together. They both wanted to kill Petra and Anna.'

Maybe we should have taken her with us,' Siphos said.

'Perhaps ...'

Mario pulled on the shirt.

'Anyway, we didn't. We had enough problems with Charlie. There wasn't room in the car. Imagine what it would have been like to have Carla with us.'

'So we left her tied up ...'

David listened to the two men. He was pleased to have them with him. Both believed in basic human rights and were prepared to put themselves at risk to protect others.

'I want to know what she told them,' Mario said.

'Who?'

'The Cabal. They would have asked all sorts of questions and she'll have loused up. I know her. Carla makes mistakes. She loused up on the boat. She thought I wouldn't know what they were doing. They sent the cage to the bottom while I was changing out of my wetsuit. When I came back on deck they were trying to kill Petra and David.'

'Who will be doing the questioning?' Siphon asked.

'My parents for starters. They'll want to know about me. Why wasn't I tied up like her? Carla doesn't think things through. She'll say the first thing that comes into her stupid head and she'll soon be contradicting herself.'

'Who else will question her?'

'Other senior members of the Cabal. They'll report to Cuthbert Maguire. He'll want to know what's going on.'

'And the police?' Siphon asked.

'They'll try to keep them out of it.'

'So you weren't surprised when there was nothing on the news about it?' You didn't expect to hear anything?'

'No.' Mario reached for his socks. 'But we had to listen and we have to go on listening. We need to know what's going on.'

Siphon clambered to his feet. Unlike Mario he had slept fully dressed. He pulled on a pair of boots and took the keys of the Bentley from his pocket.

He turned to David.

'I must hide the car. There is a big shed near here. I'll put it in there. Then we must leave. But first I must see my wife and daughter. Please come with me.'

The Bentley looked more than a little out of place beside the small house. Siphon's wife had gone to live in his parents' compound when they married. That was how it was done in the old days, when people followed the old religions, and it didn't change when they became Christian.

David felt uneasy. The Bentley always attracted attention. Even in the city people turned to look at it. In a place like this, it would stand out like the proverbial butterfly on a cow's bum. The whole neighbourhood would be talking about them. They should have hidden the car while it was still dark and found another way to visit Siphon's wife.

He stood to the side and felt like an intruder. Siphon's little daughter leapt into her father's arms when they arrived. Now, she was hiding

shyly behind him, fingers to her lips, as if wondering about the strange white man who was with her daddy.

Sipho and his wife embraced and spoke in Xhosa. David noticed faces at the window and felt uncomfortable. They were leaving far too big a trail for the Cabal to follow. The longer they stayed the more dangerous it would be for everyone. He waited for an opportunity to speak and warn them.

'Sipho. Your wife and child must leave and hide somewhere. They can't come with us. That would put them at more risk.'

'We have spoken about that, David.'

'No one must know where they have gone.'

'That's what we have been talking about, David. We know a safe place. There is an old lady. She lives in a very remote area. We have discussed what has to be done.'

They left soon afterwards. David drove and Sipho waved goodbye to his family. He looked like a man who feared he would never see them again.

Kate Bromley shovelled a pile of elephant poo from the driveway and wondered how it had got there. The gates of the safari park should have been locked and made secure. There was also a cattlegrid. It was designed to exclude bovine beasts and other animals with hooves. It hadn't deterred the elephants. One or more of the big beasts was wandering around the manor grounds, eating the vegetables in the kitchen garden and shitting.

She wondered what she was doing there. Living the life of the Lady of the Manor might appeal to some but it didn't appeal to her. It was a job and she had to keep up appearances. TV-producers loved her. She was the sort of exotic creature that appealed to their audiences.

They had developed a symbiotic relationship. It was a term she had learnt from her biology course at university. Living things learnt to live with one another. On the surface, they might have little in common. They might even hate one another. That didn't matter so long as one produced something the other needed to survive.

It could be an ability to poison predators. Some creatures and plants excreted poisonous substances. Others produced nutritious shit. That was the case with the algae that lived in the cells of marine clams. Their excretions kept the clams alive and healthy.

Hers nourished the television channels and kept the visitors flowing into the manor grounds where they paid to see things and bought ice cream. Kate wanted out. There was nothing exciting about being Lady of the Manor.

Boring! Boring! Boring!

The words drummed through her head and she wondered how she had slipped into such a pathetic role. Life must have far more to offer than this. She had just turned twenty-four. The years were slipping by.

Then her phone rang.

'Kate ...'

She heard a woman's voice and cringed. She sounded like one of those concerned persons who were continually pestering her for contributions to a worthy cause. They thought she was made of money. Her inclination was to tell them to piss off. Instead, she adopted her lovely-lady voice.

'With whom am I speaking?'

'This is Kirstin Hansen.'

It was a voice from the past.

'Can you hear me?'

'Yes, Kirstin.'

'Do you remember David Paget?'

It would be difficult to forget him.

'Yes. How is he?'

'David has run into a bit of trouble ...'

Kate listened as Kirstin told her that David was somewhere in southern Africa with a group of people who were on the run and needed to be airlifted out. Kirstin talked about an international mafia-like organisation and referred to it as the Cabal. Kate had not the slightest doubt that such organisations existed.

'I'm a bit short of funds, Kirstin.'

'Humphrey will pay ...'

Kate listened as Kirstin sketched a plan. Would she go in and rescue David? Kate had not the slightest hesitation in agreeing. Her present position was a farce. She was being used. For generations her family had been lords of Bromley Manor but it no longer belonged to them. She was the latest in a long line of Bromleys who pretended to have some claim on the place.

'Can you make yourself available at a moment's notice?'

'Yes, Kirstin.'

Kate began to think of the sort of plane she would like Humphrey to fund. She would have to research landing strips and refuelling points. It was going to be a clandestine operation. That's what made it so exciting ... that and seeing David again.

The track snaked upwards and the air got thinner. It was warm when they left Sipho's friends in the valley far below. Dew covered the ground and the slopes were carpeted in African violets. Now, the only flowers were of the alpine sort and the air was bitterly cold. Sipho led the way and the ponies followed close behind.

At first it was a steady slog. Then the hillside steepened and the track became more difficult. In places, it was so steep that waist-high steps had been cut. The ponies managed these by rising up on their hind legs and propelling themselves forward.

David had been on similar tracks in the Andes. There, people had left the arid coastal planes and gone to live in fertile valleys high in the mountains. There was no shortage of good farming land in southern Africa. He wondered why anyone would leave it. Sipho came up with the answer.

'People fled into these mountains to escape the Zulus,' he said. 'These pony trails are all over Lesotho. When my grandfather was a boy, he used to come up this one. Now people go by road to enter Lesotho.'

'And Lesotho is a separate country?'

'It is not part of The Republic of South Africa. The British conquered land from the Zulus and the white Afrikaners. The Basutos were their enemies and they sought protection from the British.'

It sounded a bit confusing.

'How do the Basutos fit into this?'

'They are the people who live in Lesotho. It is like Wales and the Welsh. It is the same with the Afrikaners. They used to call themselves Boers. Some still do. Boer means farmer in their language.'

'How big is Lesotho?'

'About the same size as Wales. That is what I was taught in school. Both countries are mountainous but the mountains in Lesotho are much higher than those in Wales.'

David figured that Sipho must be right on that score. He had climbed in Wales and the air was never as thin as this. Even the ponies were beginning to puff.

'How high do we get?'

'About three thousand metres.'

David figured he could cope with that.

'And the Zulus never conquered Lesotho?'

'They tried but they failed.'

'I read somewhere about a chief call Shaka.'

'Yes, David. He was the founder of the Zulu nation.'

'When was that?'

'In the nineteenth century. Shaka killed his rivals and became paramount chief. That was when Napoleon made himself emperor of France. Shaka and Napoleon were alike. They invented new ways of killing people.'

David guessed he was getting a biased view. Asking a Xhosa about Shaka Zulu was like asking a Brit or American about Adolf Hitler.

'Shaka's army was a killing machine,' Siphso said.

'Isn't that what war is about?'

'No!' Siphso was adamant.

'So what is it about?'

'Making peace, David.'

That was a novel idea.

'You mean you make war to make peace?'

'You make war to show people that there is a price to pay if they trespass on what is yours, David. You show them there are limits that must not be crossed.'

David glanced over his shoulder. Mario and Petra were following along behind. Earlier, he had tried to give Petra a dose of sedative and she had refused. Mario had supported her. He said that sedatives were like a band aid. You used them when necessary then stopped before you developed a dependence on them.

Petra had taken that to heart. She was pressing on by his side and he was helping her over the difficult bits. Mario did a lot of field work as a biology student and was used to tough conditions. Petra spent a lot of time in libraries and was finding it difficult to cope.

'In the old days, the tribes used to fight over cattle and land,' Siphso continued. 'There were no big battles. The warriors threw spears at one another. Then, after a while, one side would suffer casualties and decide to leave. They were always given a chance to escape. No one wanted unnecessary killing. That leads to reprisals and more killing.'

'And that changed with Shaka?' David said.

'Shaka had his blacksmiths make a different sort of spear. It was short and had a stabbing blade like the Roman legions used. When their enemies threw their spears at them the Zulus didn't throw them back. They charged and killed as many of the other side as they could. Then they went into the villages and enslaved the women and children. All the old people and the bigger boys were killed. Women were taken as wives and small children were brought up as Zulus.'

David didn't doubt that he was hearing a biased account of history. The Xhosas had good reason to hate what had happened. All the same, the main points had to be true. The Zulus created a fighting force so powerful that it could take on the British army and wipe out battalions armed with rifles.

He continued to trudge up the slope, listening to Siphso and glancing back every so often to see how Petra was coping. They would soon be in Lesotho. From what Siphso said, it was a remote place that was surrounded by South Africa but not a part of South Africa. It had a troubled history and many of its people eked out a precarious living from

the land and depended on money sent by relatives working in the South African gold fields. It seemed as good a place as any to hide.

The little mermaid looked happy. The sun was shining and someone had given her a good clean and polish. Louise Magnusson was happy too. She had just received a big bunch of flowers from her adoring son, Olaf. A courier brought them to her door. He said he had fetched them from the airport and it was a special delivery.

'They were picked only yesterday, Mrs Magnusson.' He translated from the label. 'It says to keep them upright or the nectar will run out and they won't smell so nice.'

Louise signed a receipt and took the flowers into her apartment. They were the same as those she had received the last time. That was only a week or so ago. That meant Olaf was back in that place he had been to before.

She consulted the label. It was written in English and another language that was more like Danish. She recognised *Africa* without any difficulty and remembered that Olaf's friend said the flowers came from Cape Town, which was in South Africa.

She wondered about Olaf's friend. He came with his mother and her name was Kirstin. They seemed such nice people but things were missing when they left. One was a woollen hat belonging to Olaf and another was the label on the flowers that he had sent. She wondered if she should warn Olaf about them.

Chapter 31

Retribution

David sat on the stone steps and looked out over the rolling hills. It was autumn and the grass had turned to a golden yellow. Here and there, patches of bracken cut across the landscape. He was reminded of other highly-populated highland areas he had visited. There was a distinct shortage of trees in all of them. Trees rarely survived when people moved in with their cattle and horses.

They were staying in a lodge behind a general store. The lodge was a recent attempt by the owners to branch into tourism. Siphon knew their son. He was at university with him in Cape Town on a scholarship provided by the de Villiers Foundation.

They turned up unannounced, three days ago, and were warmly welcomed. Siphon had to introduce himself. Petra was recognised at once. There was a photograph of her on the living room wall, posing with her father and scholarship holders, including Siphon and the couple's son.

Not surprisingly, the conversation soon got around to Richard de Villiers' disappearance. To David's relief, everyone spoke in English.

Their hosts were Winston and Elizabeth. They were born when Lesotho was called Basutoland and under British rule. White supremacists were in power, over the border, in South Africa and their parents had evidently been keen to stress the British connection.

David explained that Petra was in danger and their presence must be kept secret. To his relief, he had no difficulty getting that point across. Richard de Villiers disappearance had raised a lot of suspicions in the highlands. People had radios and listened to news broadcasts. They formed their own opinions on what was happening.

Elizabeth produced a straw hat and a brightly coloured blanket for Petra. Many people wore blankets over their shoulders like cloaks. The combination helped her blend in and she no longer stood out when she went on walks.

Sipho wore a blanket when he went out and could easily pass as one of the locals until he opened his mouth. He knew no more than a few words of Basuto and spoke English with such a refined voice that no one would think he belonged.

David could hear him with Petra and Mario. They had come back from a walk and were talking about the farmers in the fields. They were practising a primitive form of agriculture by South African standards. There were no mechanical harvesters, which wasn't surprising since the fields were minute.

They were carved into the steep hillside. One side rose up and the other fell away. The bit in the middle was flat enough to grow corn. The crop was now ready for harvest. Old men were cutting it with sickles and young women were tying it into sheafs.

David had seen photographs of people using sickles in Europe. That was back in the days before his grandfather was born. No one used sickles there anymore and no one farmed such small fields.

Sipho arrived by his side.

'They are gathering in the harvest.'

'Yes,' David nodded.

'It is a very laborious process.'

'You can say that again ...'

'The next step is to let the corn ripen in the sun.'

'How long does that take?'

'A few weeks depending on the weather.'

'Then what happens?'

'When it is judged to be ready, the sheaves will be brought out onto the thrashing ground and beaten with flails to release the grain. The straw will then be removed and the grain will be thrown into the air so that the chaff is blown away by the wind.'

Petra and Mario arrived by Sipho's side and added their views to what was going on. They saw it in sociological terms. To David, beating corn

with flails and blowing chaff away with the wind was what you did when you didn't have an alternative.

'They are victims of the system,' Mario said.

'My Uncle Henry says they're lazy,' Petra added.

'There's nothing lazy about them.'

'Nothing,' Petra agreed.

'They are not lazy and their young men are not lazy. That is why they are employed in the mines. Most of the labour comes from outside South Africa.'

'That's because they don't have the same protection as South African citizens,' Petra said. 'They are poorly paid and send most of their money out of the country to support their families. They are treated as badly as the slaves who were taken to America to work on the plantations.'

'Worse,' Mario insisted. 'The slave owners looked after their slaves. They were part of their property ... a capital investment. Foreign labourers are not. There are plenty more where they come from. Their families aren't even compensated if they are killed or injured in an accident.'

'My father always made sure that widows and children were properly looked after.'

'Yes. But your father was an exception. You should see how my family treat their workers in South America. That would make your hair stand on end.'

'Not all mining companies are like that,' Petra tapped Mario's arm. 'Miners are amongst the most highly paid workers in some countries. Mining towns in Australia and Canada record the highest average incomes of any municipality. You should look at the statistics their tax offices provide.'

'I'm not talking about Canada and Australia ...'

David had spent hours listening to them. At first, he thought they were falling out. Then he realised it was the way students get to know one another. They called it debating. Other people called it arguing.

He looked at his watch. It would soon be news time. They always listened to the national broadcasts from Durban and Johannesburg. There wasn't much else to do. They were in limbo until Kate arrived to fly them out.

The weather forecast came on first. It was for the coastal areas and had no bearing on the Lesotho highlands. Then the news bulletin began. Yet another member of a prominent South African family had been killed. David heard the name *de Villiers* and turned up the volume. Mario and Petra hurried to his side.

'Another tragedy has struck the famous mining family ...'

Listeners were reminded of the mysterious disappearance of Richard de Villiers whose plane vanished in mid-Atlantic. David waited to hear that

his daughter, Anna, had been taken by a shark. Instead, he heard the name of Uncle Henry.

The second of the famous de Villiers brothers had died in an accident. Henry de Villiers was driving along the coastal road from his home in Cape Town when he lost control. His wife and daughter were in the car at the time. Friends travelling in a car behind Mr de Villiers witnessed the accident.

Mrs Carmel Mendez-Klein said that the car failed to negotiate a bend and passed through a break in the crash barrier. The road runs along a cliff at that point and is a notorious accident black spot. Mr de Villiers was declared dead upon arrival in hospital together with his wife and daughter Carla.

David turned off the radio.

'What's going on?'

Mario looked stunned.

'Law of the Jungle!'

'What?'

'Don't you remember? That's what Carla said in one of those recordings that Sipho made. She was talking to her mother. Carla said they would have to kill Petra and Anna. We didn't take any notice because that was the screwy way she spoke.'

'But she did mean it.'

'Yes. And she paid the price.'

'What do you mean?' Petra said.

'She was taken out,' Mario said. 'Believe me. I know these people. I know how their minds work. I was brought up with them. They're like a pack of wolves.'

'What people, Mario?'

'The Cabal. My parents, Cuthbert Maguire and the rest of them. They don't just kill outsiders. They kill one another if they break the rules. Carla and her mother tried to kill you and Anna ... that's breaking the rules. Carla would have broken down under questioning. They would have found out what happened.'

'You think they were murdered?'

'They had a death sentence passed on them, Petra. You can bet your life that Olaf Magnusson tampered with their car so that it could be steered by remote control. He would have been following in the second car with my mother.'

Mario turned to David.

'Olaf killed a crooked attorney that way. He modified his car then drove it into a lake and drowned him. The Cabal found out and blackmailed Olaf. I worked that out years ago. Now Olaf is their number-one hit man and my mother is his minder.'

'My people know about the attorney,' David said. 'They think Olaf did the same to Richard's plane.'

'They think Olaf took it over by remote control?'

'Yes. And they want to speak to you. A plane is coming to get us out. I know the pilot. She's very good. There are lots of places around here where she could land.'

Chapter 32

Secret Mission

The leaves were budding and the fruit trees were in flower. Squirrels chased one another amongst the branches, tails trailing behind them. Spring was in the air but it still felt cold. Humphrey plodded along behind Kirstin and tried to keep up with her. His mother was twenty years older than him but looked younger than her sixty-seven years. Humphrey looked older than his forty-seven. People sometimes took them for husband and wife. That was deeply humiliating.

He tried to tell himself that it was a matter of genes. People have different metabolisms. Some can stay fit and healthy on a meagre diet. Others suffer severe deprivation if they restrict their food intake to starvation rations. They need quantity and variety to get the body's essential life-sustaining mechanisms working properly.

Kirstin had insisted that they take an early-morning walk in the park. Humphrey preferred an early-morning breakfast in the Café Noir. Kirstin said the place wasn't safe. The tables were too close together and it was too easy to hear what people were saying. She remained deeply suspicious of a woman who spoke French with a strong Spanish accent and wore clothes cut in the South American style.

They had just received another text message from David. This one reported a highly suspicious accident that had wiped out most of what remained of the de Villiers family. A South American connection seemed likely.

'Mario suspects that his mother was behind the latest fatalities,' Kirstin said. 'She comes from Columbia and speaks with a strong Spanish accent.'

'She could hardly be the same woman, Mother.'

'What same woman?'

'The one in the Café Noir. If Mario is correct, his mother would have been in Cape Town at the time, driving behind Henry de Villiers' car with Olaf. He would have been sitting beside her with a handset, trying to kill Uncle Henry.'

'I'm not suggesting she was Mario's mother,' Kirstin pulled a face. 'I'm just saying that she was listening to what we were saying and we should have been more careful about what we were saying. We were discussing the case in a public place and we were speaking English, which is an

almost universally understood language. Next time, speak in Danish or, better still, Chinese.'

'We are speaking English now, Mother.'

'Yes. But this is not a public place.'

It looked public to Humphrey. There were no notices to say it was private. He was tempted to suggest that the squirrels might be wired up and spying on them but rejected the idea. Kirstin was showing enough irritation already. He decided to get the discussion back on track.

'Do you think Mario guessed right?'

'That his mother used Olaf to kill what remained of Petra's relatives ... is that what you are saying?'

'Yes, Mother. There is a high probability. Mario thinks she did it because a death sentence had been passed on Uncle Henry and his family by the Cabal. That could be correct. Olaf is their hitman and Mario's mum is in charge of him. However, there could be a second reason.'

'What's that?'

'Mario's mum has been trying to bring Mario and Petra together. With the rest of the de Villiers family dead, Petra would be the sole surviving heir to her grandfather's vast mining empire. The combination of the de Villiers and Mendez-Klein fortunes would put them right at the top. No other mining family would equal them.'

'They think in terms of dynasty.'

'They do, Mother. That's what drives them on. They believe they can achieve immortality by founding bigger empires than those that went before. The early Chinese emperors had the same idea. They built big tombs and filled them with terracotta warriors. It didn't work. The masses invaded the tombs, took the weapons from the warriors and used them to rebel against their rulers.'

'And it won't work in this case either,' Kirstin smiled. 'The Mendez-Kleins want to mate their son with Richard de Villiers' only surviving child. From what David says, we may assume that the two young people are repulsed by the idea of empire and personal gain. Petra is dedicated to human rights and Mario wants to save the planet.'

'David thinks they're wet behind the ears.'

'David thinks all university students are wet behind the ears, Humphrey. That's not the point. Mario and Petra are opposed to the Cabal and Mario knows a lot about them. We need to talk to that young man. In particular, we must find out what he knows about Olaf Magnusson.'

'How are you going with Kate Bromley?'

'Kate has found a suitable plane and mapped out a route down to South Africa. She has picked a Cessna. I've said you will finance it.'

Humphrey drew in a deep breath.

'You've said what?'

'I said you would finance the hire of the plane. You made a fortune out of that Ming vase. It's the least you can do. David is at risk. We are obliged to rescue him.'

Kate signed her letter of resignation and wondered if it was the right thing to do. Being Lady of the Manor had advantages as well as disadvantages. She might not own Bromley Abbey but she had access to free-board-and-lodging so long as she went along with the trustees and played their silly games. They needed her. She was a Bromley. No one else could fill her ancestral role. No one else had such good publicity value.

She screwed up the letter and wrote another saying she was going on a secret mission. That would get them excited. Secret missions were the sort of thing the television people loved. The public lapped them up and that was good publicity for Bromley Abbey and the safari park. A suitable video camera and other equipment would, of course, be required to obtain footage of the necessary quality. An advance of five thousand pounds would be in order. They could pay it into her bank account and continue to pay her regular wage while she was away.

They needed to know that she couldn't be taken for granted. She was worth a fortune in advertising. They would have to pay through the nose if they hired a PR-company.

She returned her attention to her maps. Past experience had told her that it is best to mount clandestine operations from places where the authorities are not over strict about regulations. Her contacts in Madagascar had assured her that they could find places in that vast country where suitable people could be found.

Kirstin said Humphrey would put up the money for the hire of a Cessna and fund other expenses. Her mission was to rescue David from somewhere in South Africa and take him and three others to safety somewhere in Europe. The details would be worked out as the operation progressed.

Chapter 33

Compassion

Petra was aghast. The workers had staged a protest at one of the de Villiers mines. They wanted to know what had happened to her father and they wanted to know why Uncle Henry had changed their conditions of employment. That was three days ago when Henry was still alive. True to form, her uncle sent in a security team to disperse the protesters. The outcome was predictable. Shots were fired. Three miners were killed and seven injured. The wife of one lived close to where they were

staying. Petra had gone off to visit her. David was horrified when Siphon told him what had happened.

'Why didn't you stop her?'

'She was greatly distressed.'

David's mind boggled.

'We have come here to hide, Siphon.'

'She wants to console the injured man's wife.'

David felt the need for consolation. Siphon was meant to be looking after Petra and that included stopping her from being stupid. His problem was that he thought of her as a princess. She was Xhosa royalty on her mother's side. That was very apparent when they were with his friends in the lowlands. They never called her Petra. They used another name and spoke it with respect.

As far as David was concerned, Petra de Villiers was a well-meaning, wet-behind-the-ears young lady, studying for a degree, in something-or-other, at a university. The world was full of idealistic young people. His concern was to keep her alive out of respect for her father. He was determined to nail Richard de Villiers' killers and deal with them appropriately.

He focussed his eyes on Siphon.

'When did Petra leave?'

'About half-an-hour ago.'

'Was she alone?'

'Mario went with her.'

That was a plus. Mario had a firm grounding in the facts of life. He knew what happened to people who upset the Cabal. They were eliminated. As a child, he had soaked up that basic truth with his mother's milk.

David knew roughly where Petra had gone. He had ridden up the road with her on horseback. It wasn't unusual for South Africans to go on trekking holidays in Lesotho. People didn't find their presence unusual. They exchanged greetings in the Basuto language. He had learnt some himself.

The meeting started with *Stay Well* and ended with *Go Well*. It was considered rude to pass by without stopping and talking. People who did that were more likely to attract attention than those who fell in with the local customs.

Houses were strung out along the route. Like the buildings of iron-age Europe, most were round. Stone was used for walls and plastered with clay. The conical roofs were thatched. David guessed they were bitterly cold in winter. There was little opportunity to gather firewood. The only obvious fuel was bracken and dried horse droppings. He wasn't surprised that people wore blankets. They were a comfortable and a very effective way of keeping warm.

There was no point in going after Petra. The damage would be done by now. Hopefully, Mario would have stopped her from revealing who she was. She had money with her and could merely have handed a few banknotes over. With any luck, she would come over as a nice South African lady who wanted to help as best she could.

David wasn't going to count on it. Their situation was precarious. The Lesotho highlands were not as cut off from the outside world as he had hoped. Too many people had relatives working in the mines around Johannesburg. Rumours spread like wildfire. You didn't need the internet to get your message across. Word-of-mouth did just as well in tightly-knit communities.

He resolved to speak to Winston. Their host was a tough, intelligent man in his late fifties. He was the sort of person who could assess the situation and give good advice.

Kirstin consulted her email and looked pleased. Humphrey saw the smile on her face and walked across. Her screen was covered in pictures of plants and trees. Maps showed their global distribution and the dates during which they were in flower.

'You appear to have taken up botany, Mother.'

'Up to a point ...'

Kirstin continued to click her mouse.

'I recognise some of those flowers.' Humphrey peered over her shoulder. 'Your cousin, Inge, has them growing in her garden on Bornholm Island.'

'Yes,' Kirstin agreed. 'Perhaps that's where Olaf became contaminated.'

'How does Olaf come into it?'

'You will recall that I souvenired one of his woolly hats when we visited his mother in Copenhagen. I sent it to some of my forensic friends for pollen analysis. This is what they've come up with.'

'You are saying that there is pollen from some of these flowers on his hat?'

'Yes, Humphrey'

'And you think he might have picked it up in Inge's garden?'

'No. I think it possible that he picked it up when visiting his relatives on Bornholm. However, there is a far more likely explanation.'

'What's that?'

'He picked it up here, in the Pyrenees. These mountains have contributed a lot of flowers to the gardens of northern Europe. They like places where it is cold and wet and much of northern Europe is like that. Horticulturalists came here and collected pretty flowers to propagate and sell. Fortunately, they left the ugly ones alone.'

'Why was that fortunate?'

'Because Olaf had pollen from plants that are not found anywhere but here. They have no commercial value so no one tried to raise them anywhere else.'

'So we know that he's been here?'

'Yes, Humphrey. We can gain some comfort from that. I was beginning to think that he had sent us on a wild goose chase. It seems that he was telling the truth when he said he was doing a lot of work here.'

'What about South Africa?'

'Same thing. There are pollens from plants that have been exported all around the world and there are pollens from plants that are only found there.'

'Anything else?'

'There are pollens that are found only the mountains of Columbia. It is fortunate that Olaf is such a grubby fellow. Otherwise, he would have washed the hat and destroyed the evidence.'

Humphrey considered the last point and decided to send his tweed jacket to the dry-cleaners at the first opportunity. The story of his wanderings, over the past six years, would be etched deep in its woollen folds and needed to be erased.

'The Columbia thing is interesting.'

'It is,' Kirstin agreed. 'Mario said his parents are Olaf's principal minders and that he often stays with them in Columbia. The pollens bear witness to that.'

'Young Mario appears to be telling the truth.'

'Yes, Humphrey.' Kirstin switched off her computer. 'Mario is the key to this case. The sooner Kate brings him here the better.'

The landscape below was desolate and brown. Kate had thought of Madagascar as being green: a land of tropical rainforests teeming with lemur monkeys and other creatures that lived nowhere else. Parts of the huge island might be like that but the part they were flying over wasn't.

She had arrived on a commercial flight from Mozambique. Rodriguez met her at the airport. He was not an ideal choice as a business partner. The problem was to find someone who was competent, trustworthy and contemptuous of the law. These qualities rarely come together. Rodriguez possessed the first and the last. The one in the middle could only be relied on if he thought he was going to be amply rewarded.

That meant she had to keep up his interest with the expectation of sex. Rodriguez had cultivated the image of a macho male and she had acquired the image of a femme fatale. Both were phony but that didn't matter. So long as he lusted she could lead him on. The problem was to maintain his passion without letting him get her into bed.

He wasn't her sort of man. David Paget was. He was totally different. David wasn't just handsome and strong. David cared about others and

he wanted to create a better world. They had been on missions together. Kate thought about him as she sat beside Rodriguez. He was taking her to his base on the west coast of the island.

It wasn't clear what he did there. Kate guessed it was illegal. That didn't matter. She was on her way to rescue David and his companions. If it meant sucking up to an arsehole like Rodriguez ... so what?

Chapter 34

Virgin Petra

The smoke from the cooking fires drifted over the valley. It smelt sweet most of the time but when the wind changed it smelt foul. Some people were so poor they were burning other people's garbage to heat their cooking pots. Petra had gone to visit them.

She wanted to meet the wife of one of the miners who had been killed when her uncle Henry's guards fired on protesters. The poor woman wasn't difficult to find. Neighbours were crowding around. Small children clung to her skirt. Petra was overcome with emotion. Mario said she took off her straw hat and sunglasses and shed tears.

He described what happened next.

'They recognised her, David.'

It was David's worse fear.

'They treated her like a saint. Richard has helped the people here. When they saw his daughter it was like those religious services in Columbia. The women there rave over the Virgin Mary. That's how they think about Petra here.'

David was reminded of something Anna had said about her little sister. They were lying together in bed at the time and Anna was joking about the Virgin Petra. She wasn't so far off the mark. Her prediction had come true.

He tried to blot out all thoughts of Anna. His mind spun when he thought about her and the terrible way she died. Mourning Anna was something for the future. Right now he had to contend with the present.

He turned to Mario.

'We have to speak to Winston.'

'Why?'

'He knows what goes on around here and he's tough. So is Elizabeth. They wouldn't have built up their business if they weren't tough. They're into everything. It's not just this store and filling station. They've got trekking lodges and they own trucks.'

'Can we trust them?'

'They know about Petra. They must have guessed that she is in danger. They aren't stupid. We need to speak to them.'

'Just the two of us?' Mario asked.

'No. We'll take Sipho. They know about him and the connection with the de Villiers. It will look odd if we leave him out. They'll wonder how we fit in.'

'What about Petra?'

'She's gone to her room. You can explain to her afterwards.'

The small room at the rear of the store was crammed with books. A TV-set perched in a corner and a computer stood on a desk amongst business ledgers and writing pads. Winston sat at the desk dressed in a waistcoat and wearing an eyeshade that projected over his forehead like the peak of a cap. David recalled that his grandfather used to wear one when working on his papers at night.

Elizabeth showed them into the room. Sipho explained that they had a problem and their hosts agreed. Elizabeth said people were talking about Petra and all sorts of wild stories were circulating. Some went so far as to say she had been murdered along with her father and they were seeing her ghost. David said that Petra was very much alive and they wanted to keep it that way.

Winston examined him critically.

'Did you work for Richard de Villiers?'

David considered the question carefully. His grandfather had taught him never to tell anyone more than they needed to know. Elizabeth and Winston clearly knew a lot already. Their cover had been blown. It was abundantly clear that they were on the run and feared for their safety.

'I work for people who want to find out who killed Richard,' David replied cautiously. 'Sipho and Mario are friends of Petra. They are helping to protect her.'

Winston turned to Elizabeth and nodded. David guessed they had already reached that conclusion.

'The people who killed Richard de Villiers are very dangerous,' David continued. 'You must take down that photograph of Richard in the store and remove anything else that connects you with him.'

'We did that yesterday,' Elizabeth replied.

David felt silly. He should have noticed that the photograph was missing. He glanced at Winston who continued to eye him carefully.

'We need your advice.'

'My advice ...'

'We can't stay here, Winston. They'll be onto us in a flash. These people are clever. They have eyes and ears everywhere.'

'Who are they?'

'People who Richard was investigating. They bribe politicians and union leaders. They exploit workers and rig elections. We call them the Cabal. That's our name for them. Some are South African but most are from

other countries. They're into banking, pharmaceuticals, seed production, mining, television.' David threw out his hands expressively. 'They are taking over the world.'

'Richard was finding out too much about them,' Mario cut in. 'That's why they killed him. His scientists were investigating the pharmaceutical companies. A lot of them are selling drugs with serious side-effects. They make people ill with one drug then sell them another to make them better. It's the same with the big international seed companies. Some of them are selling seeds that don't breed true ...'

'What does that mean?' Elizabeth asked.

'They engineer seeds that produce plants for farmers. The plants are good but they don't produce good seeds for planting. That means the farmers have to keep buying seeds and that puts the producers in a very powerful position. They push up the price and the farmers are forced to get a loan for their next crop. A crooked bank finances it and the producers sell the farmers seeds that have been engineered to fail. The farmers don't have a proper crop to sell so they can't repay the loan and the bank takes their land ...'

Mario carried on. Elizabeth asked more questions and Winston listened intently. David didn't like the way the conversation was going. Mario was saying far too much. At one point, Elizabeth seemed to doubt his word. She said there was nothing wrong with the seed they were selling to the farmers.

That caused a swift response.

'I'm not saying that all seed producers are like that, Elizabeth. I'm talking about the bad ones. Believe me. I know how these people operate. I was born into the Cabal. I have heard them talking. You might think that an agricultural bank and a seed company are different but they're not. They are owned by the same people. Farmers are committing suicide in India because of what these people are doing.'

David wished Mario would shut up. He was saying far more than needed. Elizabeth and Winston didn't need to know that his parents were members of a murderous gang of power-hungry fanatics who were trying to take over the world. That sort of information was dangerous. David guessed that Mario had spent his life hiding the awful truth. Now he was unburdening himself to strangers.

It was totally over-the-top but it had the desired effect. Winston said he had friends who would hide them. They were Zulus and lived in a remote part of KwaZulu Natal. He would arrange for them to leave at once and go back into South Africa by one of the pony trails. If they went by road they might be stopped and asked to show their papers.

There was no tropical jungle but there were lemurs. Kate poked bananas through the bars of their cages and listened as Rodriguez told her how much they were worth. He said they were not just ordinary

lemurs. They were rare lemurs that could be sold at immense profit if they were got to the right place in prime condition.

Prime condition could not be guaranteed if the small creatures were anaesthetised and hidden beneath the false bottoms of packing cases. As an animal lover, he had come up with an alternative means of transport. Instead of smuggling an endangered species out of the Republic of Madagascar, his lemurs would be transported in small planes that were not subjected to unnecessary inspection by wildlife officers.

Kate had never liked Rodriquez. The guy was a creep. Nothing about him hung together. She hated to think about what he would be like in bed. Rodriquez claimed to be Portuguese. That could be technically true. He spoke the language but his English was far better. She guessed that he was a Brit pretending to be someone else.

She remained in limbo. Kirstin was sending her emails but David had failed to contact her. She couldn't do anything to help him if she didn't know where he was.

Humphrey handed over his tweed jacket to the dry-cleaners. It was one of a number of items that he had failed to launder for the past few years. Kirstin had convinced him that he should consign most to the incinerator but could keep the jacket so long as it was purged of the tell-tail information that it had accumulated on its travels.

The precision with which they had plotted Olaf's trips around the world was daunting. He had visited three continents in as many years. One might think that no record had been kept. That would be totally wrong. Minute pollen grains had recorded Olaf's wanderings in detail. Humphrey was determined to avoid that happening to him.

His phone vibrated in his pocket. A series of long-and-short pulses tickled his leg. He had programmed it to send messages in Morse code. Right now the phone was telling him that a call was coming in from one of the sources that he had designated as important.

'Merci Bien!'

Humphrey grabbed the receipt from the startled shop assistant and made for the door. He had been waiting for this call for days and was determined not to miss it. The phone started speaking before he got it to his ear. He recognized Olaf's distinctive voice.

'Hi. Are you there?'

He spoke in Danish.

'I'm in town right now,' Humphrey replied in the same language.

'Sorry I couldn't get back to you earlier,' Olaf continued. 'I was called away. You know how it is in my work. There's always another priceless treasure to be recorded before some Vandal with a bulldozer destroys it. This one was in Italy. Anyway, I'm back now and I'd like to meet up. There's a little place called the Café Noir. Do you know it?'

'Mother and I have had breakfast there.'

'I can't manage breakfast. Perhaps a little later ... eleven say ... tomorrow. Is that okay?'

'11 am at the Café Noir would be fine.'

'Good. Bring your mother.'

'I'll do that.'

'Bye ...'

The phone went dead. Humphrey noted that names had not been used and Olaf had stuck to Danish. He guessed that his recent mission had not been to Italy and had nothing to do with recording priceless treasures before they were bulldozed into the ground. Olaf had gone to South Africa to kill Henry de Villiers and his family.

Chapter 35

Zulu

David had always wanted to see the Africa that his grandfather had visited as a young man. He had photographs of men wearing leopard-skins and carrying spears. Girls with bare breasts and grass skirts stood beside them. David thought old Africa had died. It certainly wasn't to be found in the cities. The nearest he had come to it was in rural slums where people lived in round houses and struggled to make a living.

To his surprise, old Africa was not completely dead. There were people who had pride in their ancient culture. He sat, cross-legged on a cowhide, in a Zulu kraal, and took in the scene. Beer was being served by girls in grass skirts. The beer wasn't to his taste but the girls were.

Everything about the young ladies was stunning. Their skirts were made from lengths of grass, entwined into slender tassels held together with coloured beads. They hung down from a woven belt and swayed seductively as the girls swept forward with their bowls. Small beads decorated their headbands. Bigger beads hung about their necks and swung out from between their breasts when they bent down to fill the glasses.

David took the performance in his stride. Siphso was clearly embarrassed by the display of so much naked female flesh. Mario was enthusiastic at first then shrank back and pretended to stare into space when he noticed the look of extreme disapproval on Petra's face.

She was neatly dressed in a high-necked blouse and a long skirt that Elizabeth had given her as a parting gift. The outfit was more than a bit severe. David was reminded of old films about schoolmarmes in old-fashioned schools in the American Midwest. The skirt and blouse might be appropriate in some situations but definitely not here.

Petra's disdain for Zulu customs didn't go unnoticed. The girls identified Mario as her man and went out of their way to flaunt themselves in front of him. Their hips swayed and they showed more

than a bit of leg when they danced forward to top up his glass. David caught tantalising glimpses of what lay below their swinging tassels. The young ladies evidently had an aversion to underwear. Mario could not have failed to notice that small detail.

The girls smiled and the men exchanged glances. There was something conspiratorial about the way they nudged one another and grinned. David guessed they were plotting something and wasn't surprised when one of them got up and wandered off.

He was wearing a leather kilt when he left. He returned totally naked, apart from a straw hat and neatly-woven penis sheath. Petra riveted her eyes on the ground and shook. The girls giggled and the men roared with laughter.

If they knew of Petra's connection with Xhosa royalty, they either didn't care or they were going out of their way to insult her. David watched with a sense of foreboding. Their first day in a Zulu kraal wasn't going well.

He was aware that the Zulus were very different from the Xhosas and Basutos. You didn't have to be a student of human behaviour to work that one out. The Xhosas and the Basutos were a far gentler people. The Zulus were far more forthright. David felt an immediate affinity with them.

The same could not be said for Siphon and Petra. They were ill at ease from the start. Part of the difficulty was tribal but it went much further than that. There was a severe clash of temperaments. Siphon and Petra were intellectual types. The display of masculine virility and feminine allure turned them off.

David thought of Petra's big sister and how she would have handled the situation. Anna would have revelled in it. A naked man with a penis sheath would have set her off. Anna would have cracked one joke after another and everyone would have loved her.

He struggled to get Anna out of his mind. She had distracted him when she was alive and she was distracting him now. Her horrible death continued to haunt him. He had to stop thinking about her. He had a mission to perform and he couldn't do that properly if his mind was on other things.

He had to keep their hosts on side long enough for Kate to arrive and fly them out. He got on well with them even if they had no time for Siphon and Petra. They were Zulu traditionalists. David had come across people like them in America.

The American West was won in the late eighteen-hundreds. That wasn't so long ago. David remembered his American grandfather talking about people, he knew, who were alive when Custer fought his last battle against the Sioux at Little Bighorn. The same went for the Zulus. They were fighting the British at about the same time.

David could imagine what it was like. White men in red uniforms, armed with rifles, fighting black men with spears. He pictured the two

sides coming together. Then he was brought back to reality by the sound of a truck.

Keeping the past alive was one thing. Earning a living was another. His hosts made their living from trucking. That was the connection with Winston. One of his buddies was a guy who went under the name of Big John.

Winston didn't think in terms of tribe. He was Basuto and Big John was Zulu. They were good buddies and that was part of the relationship. The other was politics. Neither liked the way things were going.

Winston provided a guide to take them down the pony trails into South Africa and Big John picked them up on the other side. After that it was a tedious drive through the night. Big John drove and David sat in the passenger seat beside him. Petra and the others lay on mattresses in the rear.

David got in very little sleep. At one point, they stopped and Big John said he had been driving for twelve hours without a break. He slumped on the wheel and they exchanged places. His only concern was that David should not make a wrong turn and get lost.

The midmorning crowd at the Café Noir were totally different from the smartly-dressed breakfast bunch who munched through their croissants, gulped down their coffee and glanced at the newspaper headlines before dashing off to work. The clientele, at 11 am, was mainly mums with babies. No one looked as if they were in a hurry to go anywhere.

There was, however, one familiar face. The woman who spoke bad French with a strong Spanish accent arrived shortly after them. Kirstin was onto her in a flash.

'She's here again, Humphrey.'

'Yes, Mother.'

'She usually comes for breakfast.'

Kirstin peered over her coffee.

'Have you noticed that she's wearing a hearing aid?'

'Lots of people wear hearing aids.'

'Yes. But she keeps fiddling with hers.'

'If you are worried about her speak in Danish or French, Mother. Hers is appalling. I doubt if she can do much more than order a coffee and cream bun.'

'I am speaking Danish.'

'Yes, Mother.'

Humphrey continued to read his newspaper.

Kirstin glanced at her watch.

'When did Olaf say he would be here?'

'Eleven o'clock.'

'It's twenty-past. Are you sure you've got the right place?'

'I suppose so ...'

'Suppose so?'

'He was speaking Danish.'

'What's that got to do with it?'

'He translated it into Danish ... called it the Black Coffee.'

'And you took that to mean Café Noir.'

'That's what black coffee is in French.'

'Didn't it occur to you that he could have been inviting us to drink black coffee with him? I hope you've not screwed this whole thing up. We've spent the best part of a week waiting for him to put in an appearance and now this has happened.'

A movement caught Kirstin's eye. A man was gesturing at them. He stood beside an old-fashioned urinal of the sort that was once common in France but now rarely seen. At first she thought he was adjusting his clothing. Then she wondered if he was doing something rude. Finally, she decided that he was trying to attract Humphrey's attention.

He was overweight and about the same age as Humphrey. It struck her that they looked very much alike. Both had chubby faces and sandy-coloured hair. Humphrey wore his short and the gesticulating man wore his long. It protruded from beneath his woolly hat.

That was the giveaway. It was identical to the one she had souvenired from Louise Magnusson's apartment. Olaf Magnusson was hiding behind the urinal. Kirstin figured he had chosen that position because they could see him but he couldn't be seen by the woman with the Spanish accent.

She prodded Humphrey's arm.

'It's time for a wee-wee.'

'What was that?'

'Olaf has arrived. He's standing beside a place where no woman is allowed to go. I'll deal with the bill. You go out there and speak to him before he decides to go away.'

Kirstin settled the bill and went outside. Humphrey was talking to the strange person. She watched from a distance and followed the pair to a car park. They walked from row to row. She guessed that Olaf couldn't find his car. Eventually, the lights on a small Renault flashed. She joined them and was ushered into a rear seat.

The Renault was a hire car. Kirstin noticed that Olaf was having trouble finding the gears. Words poured from him as he tried to explain why he wasn't driving his own car and why he had not gone into the café. He spoke in Danish and kept up a nervous chatter.

'She keeps following me.'

'The woman in the suit?'

'Yes. I can't shake the bitch off. She's a journalist. She wants to know about our latest project and that's simply not on. We have to keep the location secret until it is properly secured.'

'You mean the cave paintings?'

'Yes. That's the only way to protect them. They are priceless gems from the past. They go back over thirty-thousand years ...'

Kirstin decided not to tell Olaf that the woman in the suit had been following them for days. She didn't believe his explanation about her and she didn't believe his explanation about the hire car. He said his car had been involved in an accident but was very hazy about the details. Humphrey regarded Olaf as a mathematical genius. That could be true but he was a very poor liar.

He eventually got around to the purpose of the meeting. If Olaf was to be believed, Humphrey possessed the right mathematical insights to help him in his work. He was recording paintings that went back to the earliest days of cave art in Europe. He would take Humphrey to see them. They would enter by a secret back entrance so as not to give the location away. Kirstin resolved to speak to Humphrey about the hazards of embarking on an underground mission with a mass murderer.

The lemurs liked Mozambique. Their new cage was spacious and they were dashing around it enthusiastically. Kate wasn't so happy. David was little more than an hours' flying time away. He had given his precise coordinates and sent a photograph of a small airstrip where she could land. It looked perfect. The only fly in the ointment was Rodriguez. The bastard had flown off. Someone had offered him a lucrative contract and the sod had taken it. Rodriguez said he would be back in a few days. Kate wasn't prepared to wait that long. There were other men with planes. She would tempt them with her charms and do whatever was required to rescue David.

Chapter 36

Inkosi

David helped Big John rotate the tyres on his truck. Earlier, he had welded a broken spar back in place. His hosts were greatly impressed by his skills. He was getting along fine with them. There was a workshop behind the kraal and it was fitted out with lathes and other gear needed to keep old trucks running. Big John said they never bought anything new. Most came from the mines and they got them cheap.

Everyone spoke English. David asked them to teach him some Zulu. His first word was *kraal*. That referred to the place where he was staying. It was built in the old style and totally different from the modern buildings nearby. David guessed it was a sort of community centre and tourist attraction rolled into one.

The kraal was protected by a high outer fence. The buildings were shaped like inverted baskets and made by weaving tightly twisted straw around flexible poles that were set in the ground and pulled together at

the top. The main building was huge and could accommodate well over a hundred people.

Everything was scrupulously clean. The floors had a smooth, almost mirror-like surface. Big John said they were made by combining cow dung with dirt from crushed termite mounds. The mixture set like concrete, repelled insects and took a good polish.

Kraal was easy to say but his next word caused problems. It was *inkosi*. David took a while to work out that the bit at the front had to be sounded through the nose. Then you opened your mouth to say the rest. Inkosi meant chief and they were staying with one so it was important to address him properly and with due respect.

They had been introduced to the great man when they arrived and would be meeting him for a special ceremony later in the day. The inkosi was an impressive figure in his late eighties, perhaps even older. He stood tall and upright and wore the leopard-skin headband that only chiefs were allowed to wear.

David figured that he would have been born in about nineteen-fifteen. That was thirty-six years after the Zulus' stunning victory over the British at the battle of Isandlwana. Young warriors who took part would have been in their fifties when the inkosi was a child. Someone like him would have grown up listening to their stories.

David was thrilled by the prospect of speaking to someone who had heard accounts of the great battle at first hand. History was beginning to come to life. But, first, he must practice his Zulu.

The guys said he was coming on well. That was reassuring. He needed to learn enough to let the inkosi know that he really was interested in Zulu culture and history. He also needed to cement relations with his hosts.

Big John knew they were on the run and he must have told the inkosi. David had listened to the two talking. He couldn't understand what they said but he recognised Richard de Villiers' name when it came up and he had no trouble understanding their rendering of airplane and America. There were enough English words for him to know that they regarded Richard highly even if his daughter had failed to charm them.

He decided to speak to Petra and Siphon. They had gone to alternative accommodation in a modern building outside the kraal. No one had asked him if he wanted to leave the kraal and sleep in a house with windows and walls made of brick. He and Mario had been accepted but Petra and Siphon hadn't.

David blamed himself for not speaking to them about the appalling impression they were making. They were being aloof. They weren't fitting in and they were making no attempt to fit in. He had even heard Petra whisper to Siphon that she couldn't wait to get out of the place. If he had heard it others would too.

He had failed as a leader. Organising was one thing. Leading was another. Petra and Siphon weren't coping. It was not their scene. Urgent

action was needed before they slipped even further into their shells and alienated everyone around them.

He glanced at his watch. It was five o'clock on a pleasant autumn evening. Cape Town was much colder at that time of the year. It was further south and cooled by the cold waters of the Southern Ocean. KwaZulu was in the subtropics and warmed by the Indian Ocean. The air was warm, the birds were singing and students were coming back from school.

A girl in a neat uniform came into the kraal. She waved and smiled. David wondered why the young lady was showing such interest in him. Then he recognised her face and remembered the pendula breasts that swung out so seductively when she filled his glass. It had never occurred to him that he was lusting after a schoolgirl. There was still a lot to be learnt about the people and the place he was in.

Petra brought him up to steam.

'They are fanatics, David.'

'They seem alright to me.'

'That's because you can't understand what they are saying.'

'And you do?'

'Yes, David.'

'I thought you couldn't speak Zulu.'

'I know enough. Zulu and Xhosa are related languages. If you know one, it's not so difficult to understand enough of the other to know what's going on.'

'They have been saying nice things about your father.'

'How do you know?'

'Big John and the inkosi ... I've heard them talking. You don't have to speak Zulu to know that they think he is a great man.'

'They think my father is dead, David.'

'Yes. They think he was murdered. That's why they are hiding us. They are putting themselves at risk and we need to show that we are grateful for what they are doing.'

'I appreciate that, David.'

'You are not showing it, Petra.'

'You don't understand,' Petra wrung her hands. 'These people are pagans. You have no idea of what goes on here. They believe in voodoo and all sorts of obscene practices.'

'What sort of practices?'

'Genital mutilation ... for one.'

'How do you know?'

'Everyone does ... it is common knowledge.'

David had learnt to treat bold assertions with suspicion.

'You surely saw that obscene man,' Petra continued.

'You mean the one with the straw hat?'

'That was a voodoo hat, David. It is meant to give the wearer special masculine powers. He was exposing himself in front of those young girls. That was disgusting. And that other thing ... that's another of their voodoo charms.'

'You mean the penis sheath?'

'Yes. That thing.'

'I thought it was for protection against long grass.'

'Long grass?'

'Yes. Big John said that, in the old days, men used to go around naked apart from a straw hat to protect the head from the sun and a sheath to protect the delicate parts of the body from long grass. Some of it is very sharp so a man wandering around without his kilt needs to wear one.'

'He did it to embarrass me, David.'

'And he succeeded, Petra.'

He waited for the point to sink in.

'Think what your sister would have done in your place. Anna would have laughed the whole thing off. She is much cleverer than you think. The crazy way she behaved was for cover. It was to hide what she was really doing. Your father sent her to South America to spy on your Uncle Henry and other people.'

'Is that what she told you?'

'Yes. Her only mistake was to think that Carla and her mother couldn't be taken seriously when they said they were going to kill you.'

Petra looked stunned then tears flowed down her face.

'I should have thought better of her,' she sobbed. 'Now it's too late. I can't say sorry to her now.'

'You can do what she would want you to do,' David said. 'Anna was very impressed by what you did on Cuthbert Maguire's yacht. You didn't like the people there but you knew you must get them on side. She said you must have thought the whole thing through. By the time you left you had them eating out of your hand.'

Petra stopped sobbing and wiped her eyes.

'What do you want me to do?'

'There's a ceremony in the kraal tonight. Mario and I will be there. I think you and Siphon should come too.'

'What sort of ceremony?'

'An initiation ceremony. Some boys have just completed warrior training. As far as I know it will not involve any genital mutilation. But, the lads might have to strip out of their jeans because they are going to be presented with some traditional warrior gear. Try not to look shocked if you see more than you should.'

There was no genital mutilation and the boys were wearing leather jockstraps so Petra couldn't complain on that score. She might have disapproved of the way the girls raved over this small item of clothing and got excited by the display of stomping and chest thumping when the boys performed their war dance. If she did she didn't show it. Anna would have been pleased by the way her little sister behaved.

She greeted the inkosi in Zulu then apologised for her limited command of the language and changed to English. David listened as she explained that she had been tired and distraught when she arrived and regretted if she had appeared rude.

The inkosi said he had been deeply shocked to learn of her terrible ordeal. Her father's disappearance and the horrible death of her sister were more than flesh and blood could bear. Others had not been told but that was no excuse for their behaviour. The incident with the naked man was disgraceful. He was deeply shocked when he heard about it and had immediately arranged more suitable accommodation for her and Siphos. The two young men were left in the kraal because they clearly enjoyed being there.

David felt seriously stupid. He had jumped to all the wrong conclusions. The inkosi was a very different sort of person from the one he had imagined. The old man was more genteel than warlike. He spoke excellent English and was deeply embarrassed by his failings as a host. Petra had not been cast out. Nothing could be further from the truth.

He wondered about the old man's background. He spoke of working in Europe and said he knew Nelson Mandela. The kraal was one of his retirement projects. He believed that people of his age had priceless knowledge to pass on to future generations. It could be written down but the message would be lost if people did not experience something of the life of their ancestors. That's what the kraal was about.

He sat on a shield. David and Mario sat beside him on cowhides. Petra sat on a stool and Siphos squatted beside her. Petra had arrived barefoot with a Basuto blanket draped over her shoulders. That was David's idea and it totally changed her appearance. She fitted in much better now.

It soon became clear that the inkosi had identified David as the leader of their party. He wanted to know more about him and he was very good at asking questions. David wondered if he had once been a lawyer.

'Who are you working for?'

That was a difficult one. David tried not to give too much information away. He had to convince the inkosi that he was genuinely concerned for Petra's safety and wanted to track down her father's killers. The more he evaded the penetrating questions the more the old man seemed to take him seriously.

The questioning finally ended. The inkosi sat back on his shield and accepted a bowl of weak beer from one of the girls. David decided it was his turn to ask questions. He wanted know more about the Zulu's warrior

past. The boys were putting on a great performance and the girls were lapping it up.

The ground shook when the young warriors raised their feet and brought them crashing down. There were fifteen of them. What would it be like if there were fifteen thousand? He imagined himself, in a red British uniform, facing a highly disciplined force of Zulu warriors advancing on his position in tight formation. He turned to the inkosi.

'Were the war dances done before a battle?'

The old man beckoned him closer.

'Yes, David. It is important to place your forces into the correct psychological frame of mind before engaging the opposing forces. I imagine that someone, such as you, would have no difficulty understanding that.'

David didn't. He knew you had to psych up your troops before a battle and scare the shit out of the enemy. The Zulus were very good at that. But, what about their opponents?

The inkosi supplied the answer.

'The British once had war dances and battle cries. I have made a careful study of their history. I believe that *Hooray* is a distant echo of an Anglo-Saxon battle cry. It was probably pronounced *Oowa* and chanted as the warriors advanced behind a wall of shields. They wore armour. Their descendants wore red coats and carried rifles instead of swords.'

'And they didn't shout Hooray to frighten the enemy?'

'No, David. They used drums and bagpipes. The British fought with rifles that could bring down an opponent at over a thousand paces. Think about that, David. They needed tight discipline. Their men were trained to pull triggers and stand their ground. That is totally different from how we fought.'

'My great-great-grandfather was with the British forces in South Africa. He wrote about the Zulu Wars.' David tried to rephrase that. 'I mean the wars when the British were fighting you.'

The inkosi seemed amused.

'David. There is no nation that respects us more than the British. We slaughtered fifteen hundred of their best fighting men at Isandlwana and they think we are the greatest people on this earth. They have organisations. They call them companies. They dress in the uniforms of regiments from the past and refight their battles. We have had them here, in KwaZulu, to refight Isandlwana and other battles. Some of my people have taken part.'

'When you were a boy, did you know anyone who fought at Isandlwana?' David asked. 'My grandfather fought the Japanese in the Pacific during the Second World War. He couldn't stop talking about it when I was a kid.'

'My grandfather was at Isandlwana, David. I was bought up on stories of that battle. British historians had their version. More recently the two have come together.'

'What were you told?'

'The British were encamped in a relatively secure position and the Zulu regiments attacked them. My grandfather was nineteen. He was out on the left wing. Our forces numbered twenty thousand and they advanced at a steady trot. Not surprisingly, the bullets took their toll. As I said, the British soldiers could kill a man at well over a thousand paces. Think what that means when you are armed with a stabbing spear and have a cowhide shield for protection.

You have to keep going. Each step brings you nearer to your enemy. Your companions fall and you close ranks. You know that their deaths will be in vain if you cannot reach the enemy and bring your blade into action.'

'I heard that they had a special formation.'

'Yes,' the old man nodded. 'It has various names in English. The one I use is *Head-and-Horns*. Our generals thought of an advancing army as a charging bull. They placed their older, more-experienced warriors at the centre. They were the *Head*. The younger warriors were at the wings. They were the *Horns*.'

The old man moved closer.

'Have you ever seen a bull charge?'

David shook his head.

'They come forward at a steady trot and conserve their energy until the last moment. Our generals did the same. They waited until their forces were within striking distance then gave the order to charge. The older warriors quickened their pace and the head of the formation surged forward. The young warriors broke into a sprint and the horns spread out in an encircling movement.'

'That could have been unnerving.'

'Yes, David. But the British soldiers held their ground. They didn't panic. They kept firing and the result might have been different if their officers had not made a serious mistake. The normal practice was to have the men standing shoulder-to-shoulder. For some reason, they ordered them to advance and spread out. That caused gaps in their line. Our army had special units that dashed ahead of the main body. One of them penetrated the British line and the battle was soon over ...'

The inkosi continued to deliver his speech. David guessed he had given it many times before. He did his best to listen. The party was getting wild. The din was deafening. Mario was still with him but Petra and Sipho had left.

Men with beer bellies trooped in. They were dressed as warriors but looked more like truck drivers who had spent a dreary day on the road and were looking for a bit of excitement. A man, wearing a bone

necklace, walked amongst them with a bowl of smoking leaves. David smelt marihuana and figured everyone would soon be on a high.

He looked around. The war dancing was falling apart. Boys and girls were forming pairs. The thrusting and surging of the dance were giving way to something much more explicit. One of the girls lost her grass skirt. She responded by ripping the kilt off one of the boys. His leather jockstrap followed.

He was glad that Petra was not there. Someone had warned her off and that someone was, almost certainly, Big John. He saw him striding towards them through the smoke. David wondered if he would be told it was time to leave. But his attention was focussed on the inkosi.

Big John crouched down and spoke to him in Zulu. The old man seemed to resent the intrusion. After a short exchange, Big John took his arm and helped him to his feet. David watched them leave the kraal. He guessed the inkosi was being taken off to bed. He had a distinguished title but he wasn't running the show. The inkosi was more like a mascot than a chief.

Chapter 37

Plaisance

Humphrey insisted on driving. They hired a car in Foix and headed east. Their rendezvous with Olaf was in the mountains directly to the south. Humphrey took a circuitous route. He said they were pretending to be tourists so they should get in a bit of touring. Kirstin watched the countryside flash by and wished Humphrey would pay more attention to the road and less to the scenery.

It was magnificent. Deep gorges, towering cliffs and lots of opportunities for an accident. The signs of ancient habitation were everywhere. Over the years, a huge amount of effort had gone into piling one stone upon another. Impressive fortifications ran along ridges. Stone bridges spanned raging torrents. Towers poked up around every corner.

Humphrey left the main highway and followed a tourist bus along a road that snaked up the hillside and ended beside an ancient building surrounded by a high wall. The view was stunning. Needle-shaped peaks poked up on one side. Snow-capped mountains dominated the horizon on another. Thickly-wooded slopes rolled away to the north.

Kirstin poked her head out of the car window and looked around. A poster on a wall advertised a recital of medieval music. People were streaming out of the bus and going inside. She turned to Humphrey.

'You've not brought me here to listen to music?'

'No, Mother. I've brought you here to see this place.'

'It's just another castle, Humphrey.' Kirstin closed the window. 'The Pyrenees are full of them.'

'Yes, Mother.'

'What's special about this one?'

'It's not a castle.'

'It's got a high enough wall.'

'That doesn't make it a castle.'

'So what's the wall for?'

'To keep the riffraff out.'

'Riffraff?'

'Yes, Mother. I am referring to the lower classes. When you belong to the ruling classes you don't want every Tom, Dick and Harry poking their noses into what you are doing. This place is a *plaisance*. It's where the super-rich went on holidays and did pleasant things together.'

'Humphrey.' Kirstin removed a tissue from her handbag. 'I have not come all this way for a history lesson. We are up against a dangerous group of people that you refer to as the Cabal. Since we have made their acquaintance, they have murdered a plane-load of people in mid-Atlantic, thrown an old man off a balcony in London and arranged for a young woman to be eaten by sharks in South Africa.' Kirstin blew her nose. 'And ... I almost forgot. They killed three other members of the young lady's family in a car crash.'

'I am acutely aware of that.'

'So why have you brought me to this *plaisance* thing?'

'I think the Cabal have a modern version near here.'

'What makes you think that?'

'The pollen on Olaf's woolly hat.'

'That came from a number of places, Humphrey.'

'Most came from here.'

'There were also pollens from Columbia and South Africa.'

'Yes. But they represent just a few months of the year when the plants are in flower. The pollens from the Pyrenees cover all four seasons. This is where Olaf is based.'

'That doesn't mean the Cabal has a base here.'

'Olaf is their number-one hitman, Mother. They need to keep a tight hold on him. They can't have him wandering off on his own.'

'Olaf is here because he is recording rock art.'

'Yes, Mother. The Cabal has to keep him occupied when he's not killing people for them.'

'So they made their base here where there is rock art for him to record? Is that what you are saying?'

'No, Mother. It doesn't work like that. Olaf is here because the Cabal has a base here. I have chosen to call it a *plaisance* because of the way these people operate. It is the sort of place where people like Cuthbert

Maguire go when they are not cruising on their yachts or staying in penthouse suites in Manhattan. People like Cuthbert are on the move all the time. The main difference between them and the medieval barons is that they travel on aircraft and not on horses. Otherwise, not much has changed.'

'And it's just a coincidence that it's near Olaf's work?'

'It's near his work because they found this project for him. It doesn't matter where you go. There will always be some priceless gems from the past for Olaf to investigate.'

'Very well,' Kirstin nodded. 'I take your point. Have you any idea where this *plaisance* might be?'

'No. But I mean to find out. Olaf knows where it is. We shall be meeting him in a few hours.'

'You seem very relaxed.'

'I am, Mother.'

'Humphrey. You amaze me. You have just described Louise Magnusson's darling son as the Cabal's chief assassin. Doesn't that worry you?'

'Why should it?'

'We are about to enter an underground chamber with him. Have you brought your gun?'

Humphrey shook his head.

'That is very lax of you.'

'No, Mother. I just don't want to be arrested when I'm boarding a plane. You may have noticed that the civil aviation authorities carry out very thorough searches these days.'

'Not as thorough as you think.' Kirstin tapped her shoulder. 'I've brought mine and I shall use it if necessary.'

The entrance to Olaf's cave was not as Kirstin had expected. He had given them the GPS coordinates of where to go and the car's navigation system took them to a building beside an airstrip. Humphrey pulled up in front and reached for his phone. Before he had time to use it, the door of the building opened and Olaf appeared.

'Come in Humph. I'm glad you could make it.'

He spoke in English with a distinct American accent.

'I'll introduce you to the team. They've been wanting to meet you.'

That sounded sinister. Kirstin wondered what Al Capone said to his victims before he introduced them to his firing squad. She eased her gun from under her armpit and followed the two men inside. Olaf was ignoring her. Under normal circumstances she would have been offended. These were not normal circumstances.

Al Capone favoured garages for his executions and left the walls pockmarked by bullet holes. Kirstin peered inside and didn't see any.

The walls were made of plasterboard and lined with tables stacked with computing equipment. Two young men rose as they entered. Olaf gestured towards Humphrey.

'Guys. This is Professor Hansen.'

They stepped forward and shook hands. One was called Ian. He spoke with a Scottish accent. The other's name was Roger. He spoke with a French accent and pronounced his name in the French way.

'We're going to show Humph the galleries,' Olaf announced. 'Then you can tell him about your side of the operation. Get his views on those tricky algorithms. We need someone who can look at them from an entirely different angle.'

Olaf ushered Humphrey towards a flight of stairs. Ian and Roger followed. Kirstin tagged on behind. She was aware that Olaf lacked more than a few social graces but hadn't expected to be totally ignored.

The stairs led to a passage cut through the bedrock. Lights flickered at the far end and they entered a large chamber. Suddenly, the air felt cold. Kirstin looked around. There were no bullet marks. The rock was in pristine condition and covered with marvelous paintings. She had visited the caves in the Ardeche region. Their prehistoric rock art was world famous. These looked even better. There were paintings of mammoths, woolly rhinos and other extinct animals. Herds of long-horned cattle competed with reindeer and horses. They looked totally prehistoric and genuine, apart from one vital detail.

They were still being painted. A man was crouched beneath a rocky overhang applying the final touches to the antlers of a reindeer. An oil lamp flickered beside him.

Olaf pointed in his direction.

'This is Carlos. He is one of our artists in residence. He specialises in reindeer and cattle.'

Ian turned to Kirstin and grinned.

'He'll paint you a Monet or Renoir if you ask him. He's wanted for forgery. We're hiding him here.'

'Don't listen to that stupid clown, Senora.' Carlos straightened himself up. 'The idiot has no appreciation of art. If it were left to him, a machine would apply the pigment to the rock. Senor Magnusson knows that the final work must be done by a true artist.'

'That's right,' Ian laughed. 'By a forger ...'

They continued to joke. Kirstin eased her gun back under her armpit. Olaf was a strange bird but the people working for him seemed totally normal. She couldn't imagine any of them killing people.

'The original galleries are a kilometre from here.' Olaf explained. 'Our aim is to create an exact replica. They have survived for thirty-six-thousand years. They are a priceless window into a vanished world and it is our duty to protect them for posterity. Entry to the original galleries is

restricted to persons such as ourselves and our incursions are strictly monitored. What you see here is for the general public.'

Olaf turned to Kirstin as if suddenly aware of her presence.

'These galleries will be part of a visitors centre. There will be a main building with educational displays and other exhibits. It will lead through to where we are standing. A lot remains to be done.'

'Are you making an exact copy?' Humphrey asked.

'We are working with high-definition laser scans. They are accurate to the nearest millimetre in all three dimensions ...'

Kirstin listened as Olaf chattered on. He claimed the work was being held up by computing difficulties and he needed Humphrey's help. Humphrey nodded and agreed with everything. Kirstin wondered what was really going on in her son's mind.

Kate fed another banana to the lemurs and wondered about their health problems. They were an endangered species. That could mean they occupied a restricted habitat and had a restricted diet. Bananas might not be part of their regular food intake. At any rate, they were suffering stomach upsets. She cursed Rodriguez. They had entered into a business relationship and he had reneged when he got a more lucrative offer.

The guy was a total arsehole.

The words ran through her mind but did nothing to improve her situation. David was just over the border in South Africa. She needed a plane to get him out. The idea of hijacking one belonging to Rodriguez's mates was totally out. She wouldn't stand a chance. The guys were into gun running. Anyone who messed with them got the chop.

Kate threw the last of the bananas to the lemurs and got up. She had to reassess her situation. She was stuck on an isolated airstrip with no roads. Supplies were delivered by air or sea. A thought entered her head. Perhaps she could steal a boat.

Chapter 38

War Council

The kraal had been turned upside down. David had been to some wild parties. This one beat the lot. Most of the girls left when they saw the inkosi go. Some stayed and were joined by older women. Items of clothing lay around amongst fallen shields and sleeping bodies. Some were lost during the war dancing. Others were discarded by the exhausted warriors.

David had watched the festivities from the door. That was the only place where he could see what was going on and avoid the clouds of marihuana smoke sweeping through the building. Some of the men

found female companions. The rest devoted their energy to war dances which soon developed into mock battles. They fought with sticks instead of spears. Massed warriors hurled themselves at one another. It wasn't difficult to imagine what the British faced at Isandlwana.

The onslaught would have been overwhelming. The inkosi said the warriors were hyped up on drugs and one was related to marijuana. That didn't help their coordination but it got them into a state of mind where they stopped worrying about pain and being killed. Their only concern was to wipe out the enemy.

David sat, cross-legged, amongst the debris and figured that he was the only person, in the entire kraal, who wasn't suffering from a severe hangover. If they were suddenly attacked, he couldn't expect much help from his Zulu hosts.

He picked up a spear and examined the blade. The inkosi said the Zulu blacksmiths smelted iron in small furnaces and beat out the blades with hammers. This one looked as if it had been made from scrap metal in the truck workshop. Otherwise, it appeared to be totally authentic and deadly.

He turned his attention to the shields. They were made of stiff cowhide. If the war dances were anything to go by, shields were used for pushing and shoving as well as deflecting blows.

The only effective armour was the front part of the kilt. It hung down like an apron and was made from coin-sized patches of leather sewn closely together. The rear was of much softer leather. Strings of cow tails were worn on the upper arms and below the knees. They gave the warriors their striking appearance.

David wondered how he would have fared as a Zulu warrior. Their way of fighting wasn't much different from the martial arts he practiced. Like him, they had to get in close and deliver decisive blows. But there was one big difference. The Zulus fought as a team. He fought as a lone warrior.

Footsteps told him that someone with shoes was approaching. He looked up and saw Big John. He was dressed in his work clothes and holding a book.

'David. I have a present for you.'

He sat down and held up the book.

'The inkosi asked me to give you this. It is a history of KwaZulu. He wrote it when he was a professor in England.'

'A professor?'

'Yes. He came back ten years ago. That was after we had majority rule. The white government locked up Nelson Mandela and a lot of our other leaders. The inkosi escaped. So did President Mbeki. He went to a university in London.'

Big John handed the book to David.

'It is one of those learned books,' he smiled. 'I don't know why the inkosi wrote it like that. I have read Nelson Mandela's book. It is far easier.'

'It's how university professors write,' David said. 'They don't want to sound like other people. They want to sound important.'

Big John considered the point.

'He wouldn't have liked what happened last night.'

'No,' David nodded. 'It's a good thing you moved him on.'

'Petra wouldn't have liked it ...'

'That's right. She has very strict ideas on how girls should behave. She thinks they should stay virgins until they marry.'

'That's what we think,' Big John said.

'You've got to be joking,' David laughed.

'No. We have strict rules.'

'You could have fooled me.' David rocked back on his haunches. 'I saw what was going on last night. No one sent me off to spend the night somewhere else. I was here all the time. I saw what was happening and they weren't just holding hands.'

Big John maintained a straight face.

'*Uku-hlobonga* is allowed.'

'What's that?'

'Sex without entry.'

'There was more than that.'

'Are you sure?'

'They were doing it behind the fence.'

'Will you give evidence?'

'Why should I?'

'Because, if entry happens, the man must give a bull to the girl's family. If she becomes pregnant then more bulls are required.'

David wondered if that piece of Zulu cultural history was recorded in the inkosi's learned book.

'What happens with you?' Big John asked.

That was a good question. David thought about how things worked in his own society. The nearest he could come to a young warriors' initiation ceremony was schoolies week back home in Australia. Tens of thousands of young people flocked to tourist resorts to celebrate the end of their school years. A concerned older generation laid down rules of behaviour. One lot preached total abstinence. Another distributed free condoms and preached the virtues of safe sex.

He was about to answer Big Johns' question when a flurry of activity caused him to look up. The inkosi was striding towards the kraal. He was wearing a tweed jacket and matching trousers and looked like a university professor who had got out of bed in a hurry and failed to do up all his buttons.

Petra and Siphon were with him. Their expressions were tense. David wondered if they had heard about the violation of *Uku-hlobonga* and were coming to express their profound displeasure at what had happened. It soon became apparent that something far more serious was at stake.

Petra took Siphon's arm and hurried towards them.

'David. We don't know what to do.'

She pointed to a computer in Siphon's hand.'

'It's awful ... just so awful!'

Her face was distraught. Tears flowed down her cheeks. She shrieked incoherently and slumbering figures began to stir. Men, who had shown every sign of being stoned out of their minds, sat up and began to listen.

'That poor little girl ...'

Petra was in a state of hysteria. David stopped listening and turned to Siphon, hoping to get some sense out of him. Siphon struggled for words and the inkosi intervened.

'Show him what is on your computer.'

Siphon sank to his knees and placed the computer on a shield. His hands trembled and he had difficulty turning it on and typing in the commands. Eventually, the screen came to life. David leant over and saw a woman's face. He recognised Siphon's wife and heard a child screaming. Siphon collapsed onto the ground and Petra tried to comfort him.

'They are torturing the child,' the inkosi said.

David looked at the screen. The images were nauseating. The lovely woman and her beautiful daughter were being treated like worthless trash. He had been with them only a few days earlier. His mind felt as if it was ready to explode. He steadied himself.

'How did you get it?'

'Siphon used my computer to access his email,' the inkosi said. 'It was the first time he had been able. That is the last one.'

'The last what?'

'The last email. They are sending one a day. Each time they do more terrible things to the child. They are threatening to kill her.'

'Who is sending the emails?'

'The people who captured them.'

'Yes. I guessed that. What do they want?'

'You! David!'

'Me?'

'They want to know where you are. They say they will release Siphon's wife and child when he tells them.'

'Then they will kill them,' David peered at the screen.

'What do you mean?'

'When they get what they want, Siphon's family will be no more use to them. They will kill them and they will kill Siphon if they find him. That's

what these people do. They don't take chances. They kill everyone who gets in their way. They killed Richard de Villiers and they killed his brother. They will kill Petra if they think she is a risk.'

David ran out of words. His audience had stopped listening to him. They were listening to Siphó's wife as she sobbed. She spoke in English. The men knew enough to know what was happening and it made them very angry.

A giant of a man stepped forward. David recognised him from the night before. Big John called him the *umnumzana*. David figured that meant commander or something similar.

'We free them, brother.'

He placed a hand on Siphó's shoulder.

'That place.' He pointed to the screen. 'You know it?'

'It is my aunt's house.'

'Where that?'

'In the Eastern Cape.'

'We go there. We make plan.'

The *umnumzana* turned to the inkosi and spoke in Zulu. David heard his name and guessed that the old man wanted him as a member of a war council. The two men seemed to argue. Big John intervened and a compromise seemed to have been reached.

They left the main building and went to one of the small basket-shaped huts in the kraal. The inkosi called them his beehives. David guessed he was referring to the old-fashioned sort made of straw.

A shield was produced for the inkosi to sit on. Another was handed to David and a third to Big John. The *umnumzana* sat on the forth. The inkosi led the proceedings. Big John produced a leopard-skin headband for him to wear. He put it on but it did little to change his appearance. He still looked like an aged university professor who was hopelessly out of his depth in what he was doing.

He struggled to hold the meeting together. Big John had to come to his aid to prevent the *umnumzana* from leaving. He didn't like the use of English and resented David's presence. The big man sat on his shield, grunting, as the inkosi explained that David had been assigned to look after Petra and could tell them about the people who were holding Siphó's family captive.'

David nodded respectfully and turned to the *umnumzana*, hoping to win his confidence.'

'They don't speak Xhosa,' he said.

'Why you say that?'

'Because they forced Siphó's wife to speak to him in English. They wanted to know what she was saying. That tells us that none of them are Xhosa or speak any language like it.'

'Where you think they from?'

'Anywhere that provides hired killers ...'

The umnumzana listened intently as David told him about the sort of people employed by the Cabal and how they were likely to fight. Big John had to translate the odd word but most went across smoothly. Then the inkosi asked what should be done.

David launched forth, unaware of the fury building up beside him. The umnumzana was happy to be briefed on the opposing force. He didn't expect to be told what came next. His breathing quickened as David ticked off points on his fingers.

'One, we should send an elite force against them. Two, it should be armed with automatic weapons and arrive before nightfall. Three, it should be divided into two units. Four, one of these units will be assigned to the rescue of the mother and child. The other will ...'

A roar from the umnumzana stopped him in his tracks.

'We have a saying in Zulu. I tell you what it is.'

The big man reached towards him.

'Don't teach your grandfather how to fart!'

'I see you last night. You look at girls and I think you like little boy who want girls but not had one. What you know about fighting?'

David returned his stare.

'As much as I know about girls.'

The umnumzana smiled and changed his stance. David knew what would follow. He had seen the move the night before. It was a playful way of starting a wrestling match. The big man's palm touched his arm and David delivered the counter stroke. His reactions were much faster than the older man. The umnumzana lost balance and David's hand hovered over him, ready to strike a deadly blow.

'Okay. Okay, David ...'

He had made his point. No more was required. The situation was the reverse of the one in the Flamingo bar. Dino was out to humiliate him. The umnumzana wanted to test him. David had no doubt that he had passed the test.

'You good fighter, David.'

The umnumzana shook his hand and grinned at him.

'Do you want me to tell you what I would do?' David asked. 'It's just my ideas. I gave them because the inkosi asked. He is your chief. I did it out of respect.'

He glanced at the old man. The inkosi sat on his shield and wore the leopard-skin headband of a chief. But he still looked like a retired university professor. David guessed he had chaired a few faculty meetings that got a bit out of hand. He was prepared to bet that none involved anything as rough as this.

University people talked about *culture shock*. David had met the term all over the world. It was what happened when people from one culture met people from another. He had suffered culture shock when he went to university. He couldn't hack it and got out. The people there called him

a dropout. For them, he was one of the fallen. They couldn't understand that he didn't drop out ... he bailed out.

The inkosi belonged to the same culture as Petra and Sipho. David belonged to the same culture as Big John and the umnumzana. They understood one another. It wasn't necessary to speak the same language. They knew from the way the others behaved that they were warriors like themselves.

Big John tapped his arm.

'That second unit ...'

'Which one?'

'You want us to divide our force.'

'That's just an idea ...'

This time the discussion got off to a much better start. Big John translated for the umnumzana. They sat on their shields and worked out how many men would be needed and what weapons they should carry. David was amazed by the variety available.

Southern Africa was awash with firearms after the struggle against colonial rule and the civil wars that followed. The Americans and Russians poured in arms to bolster their allies. More were supplied by mining companies and others. David guessed that the Cabal was amongst them. The thought of fighting the Cabal with its own weapons was appealing.

Chapter 39

Cry for Help

Humphrey put on a face mask. Olaf said it served two purposes. Firstly, it was to protect the rock paintings from any nasty microbes that he might breathe over them. Secondly, it was to protect him from any nasty microbes that might have taken up residence in the cave since it was sealed, by a rock fall, about twenty thousand years ago.

It would be just the two of them. Kirstin had been told to go off and do something else. Olaf said he could get permission for just one person to accompany him into the cave. Since they were sneaking in by a back entrance that explanation seemed a bit weak.

They entered through a steel door and made their way along raised walkways. Olaf explained that they had been put there so that archaeologists could get to work without disturbing the cave floor. He directed his flashlight ahead and pointed to a set of footprints beneath a hanging rock.

A frieze of stampeding cattle had been painted on it. Dark marks indicated where the artist had held a burning torch. Olaf said that bits of charcoal had been dated to about twenty-five thousand years ago and other evidence indicated that the paintings were roughly that age.

Humphrey thought of Carlos. He had been painting reindeer under a similar overhang in the replica gallery that was being made for visitors. Carlos wore shoes. If the footprints were anything to go by the original artists worked barefoot.

It was like slipping back in time. A scene from the remote past had been captured and preserved under a thin layer of the stuff that stalagmites are made of. It had dripped down from the roof over countless years and covered everything that got in its way, including the footprints.

Olaf kept up a continual chatter. He knew a lot about the cave paintings and was clearly dedicated to his work as a conservator. Humphrey shared his enthusiasm. Olaf's contribution to world culture and history was outstanding. Unfortunately, that was only part of the story. It was easy to forget that he was in the company of a cold-blooded serial killer.

He comforted himself with the thought that the man used high-tech gadgets to eliminate his victims. Olaf was unlikely to draw a gun and shoot him through the head. And he didn't seem to be in a homicidal mood. Olaf seemed far more interested in talking about his work than killing anyone.

He listened as Olaf explained that recent evidence indicated what the ancient artists would have looked like. Their ancestors trekked out of Africa and made their way through the Middle East into Europe. The journey took thousands of years and, on the way, their descendants acquired physical characteristics that enabled them to cope with the harsh European climate.

Being hairy and having a light-coloured skin helped. Olaf said forensic experts, working with his team, had made a very life-like model based on skeletal evidence. It showed a person with features that were neither fully African nor European but somewhere in between. The model would be exhibited in the visitors centre.

Suddenly, his mood changed. It was as if a switch had clicked and propelled his mind down a different pathway.

'Charles Paget.'

Humphrey was jolted out of his complacency.

'Who?'

'Paget. You were with him after that conference in Rome. You delivered your Alpha-Delta paper. You must remember. You had to bail out of that plane.'

Humphrey decided it was pointless to pretend that a lapse of memory had caused him to forget such an unforgettable experience.

'You mean Charlie Paget?'

'Yes. How well do you know him?'

'We met at the conference. He offered to fly me back to London. I thought it was too good an opportunity to miss. I'd have a marvellous trip and save a bit of money.'

'He called himself Hanbury-Brown.'

'Who did?'

'Paget. That is the name he used at the conference.'

Humphrey felt stupid. Charlie never used his correct name. He couldn't remember what he went by at the conference. It certainly wasn't Paget. It could have been Hanbury-Brown.

Olaf stared at him.

'Humph. I need your help.'

That came as a blow.

'I know who you are, Humph.'

That was even more intimidating.

'You are the only person who can help me.'

Olaf poured out his angst. He was trapped in an unbearable situation. People were making him do things he didn't want to do. He lapsed into Danish. Humphrey recognised the Bornholm accent. Olaf was a little boy again, knowing he had been naughty and wanting to be understood.

A distant echo caused him to stop.

'Humph. Someone's coming.'

He turned off his flashlight and grabbed Humphrey's hand.

'Follow me ...'

Suddenly it was pitch dark. Not the slightest scrap of light illuminated the scene. Humphrey stumbled along, tripping over steps and crashing against the walls of the cave. Blood flowed from a cut on his forehead and ran into his eyes. They reached the steel door. Olaf threw it open and they tumbled through into the light of day.

Kirstin stitched the wound. Humphrey said she should have given him something to deaden the pain. She said that wasn't necessary and accused him of being a sissy. It was the same when he was small. If his mother was to be believed, other boys thought nothing of having needles stuck in them. That was total nonsense but he could never get her to see things his way.

'A little bit of pain is good for you.'

'Yes, Mother.'

'I'm glad you agree.'

'How could I do otherwise ...'

Humphrey winced as the stitches were pulled together.

'You lost a bit of blood.'

'Yes, Mother. That upset Olaf.'

'I didn't think he was the sort.'

'He wasn't worried about me. He was worried about what my blood might have done to his paintings. He grabbed a jar of cleaning fluid and was back through that door before I had a chance to look at myself in a mirror.'

'That's interesting.'

'Yes. Olaf wasn't worried about being seen in the cave. He was worried about being seen with me. He didn't sneak back there in the dark. He had his flashlight on before he was through the door.'

'Olaf tells the truth part of the time.'

'Yes. And his lies are very obvious.'

'Peter Pan ...'

'Peter Who?'

'Pan ... he was a character in a book I didn't let you read. Peter was a little boy who failed to grow up.'

'Did he go around killing people?'

Kirstin thought for a while.

'I think he killed pirates but I could be wrong.'

Humphrey waited for Kirstin to tie the stitches. They were back in the small guest house where they were staying. He had returned before her and done his best to stick himself together with band aids.

'That looks much better.'

Kirstin stepped back and removed her rubber gloves.

'Now, perhaps, I can tell you what I discovered.'

She placed the gloves in a disposable bag and reached for her camera. Humphrey noticed that it was fitted with its telescopic lens. Both were of top quality. Kirstin switched on the camera and brought up an image on the display screen.

'Take a look at that.'

'Very impressive, Mother.'

'I used a polaroid filter to cut down the reflection in the car window. We can further enhance the image on the computer.'

'I don't think that will be necessary.'

'You recognise the lady ...'

'Yes, Mother. Senora Mendez-Klein.'

'Mario's mother.'

'Precisely.'

Kirstin flicked through the images and came to one with Olaf. He was approaching the car and the senora was shouting at him through the window. She switched on the sound and turned up the volume.

'She's speaking Spanish.'

'Yes, Humphrey. Did you get what she said?'

'No. There's something wrong with the recording.'

'There's nothing wrong with the recording.' Kirstin pulled a face.
'There's something wrong with your limited vocabulary. The senora was seeking information from Olaf.'

'May I enquire what?'

'Where the fuck have you been? What the fuck have you been doing? Why the fuck did it take you so long?'

'Charmingly put, Mother.'

'Thank you, Humphrey. We now know something of the relationship between the two.'

'Charlie thinks that the senora is Olaf's minder.'

'Jailer would be closer to the point,' Kirstin switched off the camera.
'Do you remember how Charlie's informants caught them on security cameras at Cape Town international airport? Olaf strayed out of the VIP lounge and went into the departure area. The senora and her husband escorted him back.'

'How did you come to take those admirable photographs? I thought you were going for a drive in the country. You said there were some minor roads you wanted to explore.'

'Well, Humphrey, you should know by now that when you are told to do one thing you should do the exact opposite. Olaf wanted me out of the way while he took you for a quiet chat underground. That told me there were things he didn't want me to see.'

'So you hung around?'

'I wandered back to the main building and bumped into some charming young men I had met before. Ian and Roger invited me to stay for coffee and we had a heart-to-heart chat.'

'Heart-to-heart?'

'Yes Humphrey. They are unhappy in their work and want to know if you can help them find another job. I said I'd talk to you about it.'

'What makes them unhappy?'

'The work environment. They knew, from the start, that they were going to work for a recluse who was widely regarded as a genius and a bit of a screwball. The project sounded interesting and they were prepared to put up with some odd behaviour. But the odd behaviour didn't just come from Olaf. There is something distinctly spooky about the whole affair.'

'Spooky?'

'It's as if Olaf is a patient in a psychiatric hospital. He is required to take pills and his movements are continually monitored. On occasions, he goes missing and that starts a panic. Roger said that the people looking after him have Spanish accents. He speaks Spanish and thinks they are from South America.'

'What else did Roger say?'

'Every evening, at precisely 4pm, a woman comes for him. They call her the duchess because of her arrogant behaviour. Olaf leaves

immediately and gets into her car. One day, Roger followed them. They took the main road south for about fifteen kilometres then turned off down a minor road. He didn't bother to go any further. The only building of any significance is at the far end. It's an old castle that was extensively renovated a few years ago. It is perched on a high bluff and has sweeping views towards Foix.'

'Sounds a bit like a plaisance.'

'Yes, Humphrey. I am prepared to believe that the Cabal have a base up there in the mountains. It is almost certainly where they keep Olaf.'

'So you agree that I was right?'

'I would call it a base rather than a plaisance.'

'A highly luxurious base.'

'I don't care whether it is luxurious or not.' Kirstin went to the window. 'You can see it from here. I had a look at it with my binoculars. Tomorrow, when it's light, I'll show you. It's just the sort of place for Mario to meet Olaf. We have to get the two together. Mario claims to have Olaf's confidence. With his help, we can crack this case.'

Chapter 40

Restless Night

The men formed up beside the trucks. It was late afternoon and they had a long drive ahead of them. Big John and the umnumzana checked them out. They were armed with AK-47s and dressed like truck drivers. David watched from a distance. They were in the yard where the trucks were kept and the big gates were shut. Big John said enough people knew what was planned and he didn't want any more to know.

None of the men was allowed to drink beer and marijuana was definitely out. David was pleased to see that times had changed. The Zulu warriors, who fought the British at Isandlwana, were tanked up when they went into battle. Big John and the umnumzana were determined that theirs would be sober when they carried out their missions.

They would be travelling in two trucks. One would go to the house where Siphos wife and daughter were held. The other would head for a deserted farm in the Xhosa heartlands. Siphos said it was abandoned a year ago when the owners moved to Cape Town. David hoped no squatters had moved in. If they had, they would be in for a nasty surprise.

Siphos was going to travel in the second truck with a computer the inkosi had given him. When he reached the farm he would reply to the email from the people who were holding his wife and daughter captive. He would tell them that he had only just managed to get to a computer. It belonged to David Paget who was holding him captive together with

Petra de Villiers and Mario Mendez-Klein. A plane was about to arrive and fly them out.

Timing was vital. David figured that the Cabal would have a rapid-reaction force on standby, ready to leave at a moments notice. It had to be eliminated before any attempt was made to rescue Siphos wife and child or it would continue to pose a serious threat. He watched as the men boarded their trucks with their weapons. Siphos followed. The umnumzana clambered in beside him and the trucks left.

Big John and David returned to the kraal and settled down for a long wait. The trucks would make good progress while they were on the main road leading south from Durban but, when they left it, the going would get difficult.

Siphos had chosen a remote place for his wife and child to hide. The farm was in a similar location, high on a mountain. Siphos knew the people who once lived there. He had picked it because they had access to the internet despite their remote location.

The trucks would be travelling on dirt roads when they left the main highway. Then there would be no roads and they would have to make their way over rough ground in the dark. The men who were going to rescue Siphos wife and child would have to take extreme care to avoid being seen.

David lay on his mat and tried to get some sleep. If all went well, he would have a long day ahead of him. Jane said she would get a plane, one way or another. His plan was to fly out with Siphos and his family as soon as the trucks returned with them.

Towards midnight, one of Big Johns two phones rang and a voice spoke in English. The first truck had reached the house where Siphos wife and child were held. Lights were on and they could see a black woman and three white men. The woman looked distraught and the men were mocking her.

Big John said they must lie low and do nothing until they received further orders. The enemy had a special force standing by, ready to spring into action. It must be eliminated or it would be used against them.

An hour passed and there was still no news from Siphos and the umnumzana, in the second truck. Big John had made repeated attempts to reach them but his calls were never answered. He said he didnt know the area. They could be out of contact or something more serious might have happened.

David began to reassess the situation. Their first force was in place. That was the one that really mattered. He wondered if they should be told to mount their rescue operation immediately. The Cabals rapid-reaction force could be a figment of his imagination ... it might not exist.

He was turning that thought over in his mind when the second phone rang and he heard the umnumzanas gruff voice. He spoke in Zulu and

Big John translated. The second truck had reached the farm and it was deserted apart from a few goats.

David asked if he could speak to Siphó. After some arguing the umnumzana agreed and he heard Siphó's anxious voice.

'How is my family, David?'

'The men have surrounded the house and they are waiting for the order to go in and rescue them.'

'That means I can send the email?'

'Yes. And don't forget your GPS coordinates.'

'They are already included, David.'

'Okay. Go ahead ... transmit!'

A few seconds passed and he heard Siphó again.

'The email has been successfully sent.'

'Good. Now return the phone to the umnumzana. Say I must speak to him.'

A gruff voice assailed his ears.

'What you want, David?'

'Can the truck be seen from the air?'

'No. It hidden from air and it hidden from road. You think they come by helicopter. I come by road. Perhaps they come by road. It make no difference. My men kill them.'

The phone went dead. David lay back expecting another long wait. Nothing had happened quickly before and there was no reason to expect it to happen quickly now. It could take a long time. The Cabal might not be as smart as he thought. Then, to his surprise, the second phone rang and he heard the umnumzana's voice again.

'You right, David. They come by helicopter.'

He reverted to Zulu and Big John did a running translation. A helicopter was racing towards the farm. Someone identified it as a Black Hawk. Experience had taught David to distrust descriptions of aircraft: they were usually wrong.

One thing was clear. The chopper was big and its intentions were hostile. Ropes were dropped and armed men poured out. The umnumzana shouted an order. Gunfire followed and Big John took the phone from his ear.

After a few seconds, the din died down and David heard the umnumzana's voice again. Big John's expression remained tense. There was a lot of discussion. Finally, he relaxed and David gathered that the operation was a success.

Minutes later, the second phone rang and the smile on Big John's face broadened. Siphó's wife and child were safe. The Cabal's forces didn't know what hit them. They had been wiped out.

Kate stole a glance at Rodriguez. He was back and lusting after her. His plane was parked outside, tanked up with fuel and ready to leave at a moment's notice. Her aim was to get him tanked up with booze.

The big bastard kept the ignition keys in the pocket of his trousers. Somehow, she would get them off him. If necessary, she would go to bed with him.

David had sent a message. He had run into a bit of bother but that had been resolved. As soon as he was ready to be evacuated he would send her the GPS coordinates of the landing site.

Chapter 41

Zulu Dawn

A faint glow appeared in the east. David had travelled the world and seen many sunrises. Few could rival those of South Africa. In most countries, mist and cloud obscured the early morning scene. Here, the air was crystal clear and the distant hills stood out sharply against the brightening sky. David narrowed his eyes as a point of light appeared and the blood-red disc of the sun rose to herald a new day.

He remembered an artist's impression of sunrise at Isandlwana on the fateful day when fifteen-hundred British soldiers met their deaths at the hands of the Zulus. The sun was blood-red then. The artist made that point when he painted sunrise and he made it again when he painted the bloodied corpses of red-coated soldiers, lying in heaps, slaughtered by half-naked warriors armed with stabbing spears.

A lot had changed since then. The men sent to rescue Sipho's family were armed with automatic weapons and wore flak jackets. They shot up the Cabal's forces and were now on their way back to the kraal. The action lasted just a few minutes. The guns stopped firing. The phones went dead and David tried to get in some sleep. But deep sleep never came and he still felt tired.

The same could not be said of Big John. He had spent the night awake and showed no signs of slowing down. David watched as he made his way around the kraal, checking his men. Some were on guard. Others were lying on their sleeping mats with their weapons beside them.

The big man had an amazing ability to stay awake. David had seen him chewing leaves. He guessed they had narcotic properties and were similar to the pills armies give their combat troops. The drugs tell the body to ignore the signs of fatigue. They work until the body runs out of fuel and collapses under the strain.

David never relied on drugs. He believed in the power of mind-over-matter. That worked most of the time but could do nothing to correct his

faulty eyesight. Laser surgery wasn't an option and the only alternative was to wear hard contact lenses.

They gave him something like twenty-twenty vision when they were in place. Right now, he was wearing spectacles and his eyesight was rat shit. He had to get the lenses in or he would be useless in a combat situation ... and that was on the cards.

He tipped his head back and squirted fluid from a small container into each eye. That was the first part of the process. Protein collects behind the eyelids during sleep and must be removed. He wiped his eyes, cleaned the first of the lenses and slipped it into place. The process was slow and couldn't be hurried.

It was a ridiculous situation. No special forces unit would accept him into its ranks. He would be more of a liability than an asset.

'David. I have not seen you with your glasses.'

Big John strode towards him as David slipped the second lens into place. He looked up and blinked.

'I wear contact lenses ...'

'They no good for fighting.'

David couldn't fault that.

'I try not to fight,' he said.

'You try not to fight?'

Big John burst out laughing.

'That's right. I don't like fighting.'

'Man.' Big John placed a hand on his shoulder. 'I saw you with the umnumzana. When you pulled him over and your hand went up ... that was something. I have never seen him look so scared. He knew you could kill him if you want.'

'You don't need good eyesight for close fighting ...'

'What do you need, David?'

'You must be a mind reader.'

'How you do that?'

'You watch your opponent. It's the same with driving. You watch other motorists and you know what they are going to do by the way they drive. I saw the umnumzana warming up. I knew what he was going to do before he did. When you get good, you learn to give false signals and you learn how to detect them ...'

Big John glanced at the AK-47 at David's feet.

'You know how to handle a gun. I saw you check yours out. You made sure the clip went in smoothly and you checked each of the rounds.'

'That's what you have to do.'

'And you tell me you don't like fighting.'

'I try not to but if there is no choice then that's what I do.'

'Are you good with a gun?'

'When I have my lenses in.'

'And if the wind blows dust in your eyes?'

'Then my eyes hurt like crazy and I'm fucked.'

'How do you stop that?'

'I wear swimming goggles.'

'Do you have any?'

'One of the girls gave me a pair.'

'Let us hope they will not be needed.'

'Yes,' David nodded.

'That helicopter ...' Big John said.

'You mean the one that attacked the farmhouse?'

'Yes. It got away.'

'Shit!' David pulled a face.

'They killed the men on the ground but the helicopter got away,' Big John continued. 'It will fly back to its base and tell the people what happened.'

'Too right!' David agreed.'

'Do you think they will find out where we are?'

'There is a serious risk.'

'If they find Petra de Villiers here that will be bad.'

'Very bad.' David reached for his phone. 'I'll put through another call to my friend ... tell her that things could get very serious and we need to be got out of here as soon as possible.'

The little lemurs reached for their bananas. Kate hoped Rodriquez wouldn't forget to feed them. The sod was lying on his back in a drunken stupor and she had the keys to his plane. David had phoned to say he had to leave urgently. Lives were at risk and he couldn't hang around any longer.

She considered her options and was left with only one. Stealing a plane from the gunrunners was suicidal and stealing a boat from the local fishermen didn't make sense. Nothing short of a full-blown femme fatale act would save the day. Unfortunately, that meant going to bed with a man she detested.

When it came, the ordeal was even more disgusting than she had imagined. She did her best to switch off when he was doing it and get him to swig rum when he wasn't. Rodriquez's capacity for alcohol and sex was phenomenal. But he couldn't keep it up. His passion remained strong but the rum took its toll. His final revolting act was to vomit over her and collapse onto the floor.

The keys to the plane were attached to his belt. She took it and every item of clothing she could find. If Rodriquez was going to come after her he would have to do it in the nude.

Uhuru

The truck turned off the highway. David stood beside Petra and Mario and watched it speed towards them, throwing up dust. The umnumzana had phoned to say he was about to arrive. Siphó's wife and daughter were safe but greatly distressed. The mother had been repeatedly raped and the child subjected to terrible abuse.

Petra listened with a stony face. David expected her to burst into tears as one nauseating detail followed another. But she remained calm and waited for the truck to stop.

It pulled up beside them and a woman was helped from the rear. David recognised Siphó's wife. She clasped her child and stumbled towards them as her feet touched the ground. Petra and Mario dashed forward and she collapsed into Petra's arms.

Someone produced a chair and Petra helped her to it. The child's face was contorted in fear. Marks showed where cigarettes had burnt her small body. Petra stroked her hand and spoke in Xhosa. The child's features eased and she began to relax.

Mario joined David and the armed men who had climbed down from the truck. Men, who had previously mocked Petra, craned their necks to hear what she was saying. She mixed compassion with fury, alternating between Xhosa and English, turning back-and-forth between the mother and her wider audience.

Her voice was gentle when she spoke Xhosa and strident when she spoke English. David had rarely witnessed such a performance. Petra sounded like a tribal princess one moment and modern politician the next.

She thanked the men for risking their lives to rescue a poor mother and her child. The monsters who held them captive were mercenaries employed by the people who murdered her father. A new sort of colonialism was threatening the world. This time it was not based on race. Evil forces were grabbing the reins of power and destroying the achievements of democracy and freedom.

'Uhuru!'

Her voice rang out. David was surprised that so much sound could come from such a fragile frame. Petra echoed the famous cry for freedom of Nelson Mandela and other African leaders.

The men joined in.

'Uhuru ... Uhuru ... Uhuru!'

Their cries echoed in David's ear. A remarkable transformation had taken place. Petra was no longer the fastidious young woman who spoke in studied sentences and was offended by bad language. There was fire in her belly. She was out to change the world.

He knew how she felt. Petra had gone through adversity and emerged as a far stronger person. His mind slipped back to the warm waters of Australia's Great Barrier Reef. Blood enveloped him. He had gone through something similar but it would have been worse for her. Petra had suffered the anxieties of her father's disappearance. Seeing her sister torn to pieces and eaten, before her eyes, would have been a final blow.

There are limits to what the mind can take. Events overwhelm its defences and it retreats into its shell. Without help, it can remain trapped. A girl called Rebecca helped him escape. He guessed that Mario had helped Petra.

The outcome is called *rebirth*. A new person emerges, based on the old but stronger. You learn to see things in a new light and face up to the harsh realities of life. In Petra's case the transformation was striking.

Big John prodded David's arm.

'Man. That is something I did not expect to see.'

'You mean ... Petra?'

'She has changed.'

'Yes,' David agreed.

'You remember the penis sheath?'

'She didn't like that.'

'No,' Big John shook his head. 'She ran away. The inkosi gave her a room in his house. Now she is talking to the same man like he is a great hero ...'

David resisted the temptation to crack a joke about penis sheaths and when they should be worn. The unnumzana had stopped listening to Petra and was hurrying across.

He spoke in Zulu. David couldn't understand a word but the men's body language said something was seriously wrong. Big John turned to him.

'The unnumzana thinks they were followed.'

'Why does he think that?'

'Mrs Maduna was very upset when they got her and the little girl into the lorry. It was a long time before she spoke about the men who had raped her. Then she said they came on motorbikes and there were four of them: three white men and a black man. We killed three ...'

'One got away.'

'Yes, David. One escaped. The unnumzana thinks he went after them. They saw his headlight. Then, when it was light, a car passed the bike. It dropped back and the car stayed behind. They shook it off by going up a rough road. They think it tried to follow but couldn't.'

David reached for his phone. Kate had messaged him earlier to say that she had a plane and was ready to leave. It was now a matter of timing. Sipho was with the second lorry. If all went well he would be with them shortly.

The tree was huge. Kate figured there was enough room below its spreading branches to accommodate the plane and lots of cover above. Rodriguez and his mates wouldn't find her there. She touched down and taxied towards it. A giraffe ran out and vanished into the scrub. She reached the spot where it had been standing, turned off the engine and glanced around.

The giraffe had been scared off but not all animals were frightened so easily. A troop of baboons came out of the bushes and ambled towards her, led by a big male who brought back unpleasant memories of Rodriguez.

The ugly brute halted beside the cockpit and stared up at her expectantly. Kate guessed that he expected to be fed. The South African border was only a short distance away. But it wasn't a normal border. There was a sort of no-man's-land between the two countries. It had existed for a long time and was now a famous wildlife park.

People weren't allowed to live there but wild animals could. In theory, they followed the lives of their ancestors. Some did. They munched on grass and leaves. Others gathered around the cars of tourists and lived on chocolate bars and other handouts.

The baboons weren't intimidated by her presence. Some tourists travelled by plane and they evidently regarded her as one of them. She was on their patch and they expected her to play according to the rules. That meant they had to be fed.

Kate ignored them until the big male grabbed one of the wings and flexed it up and down. Prominent signs told humans to stay away from sensitive parts of the aircraft. Baboons can't read and have no respect for private property. Kate reached for the ignition switch. The propellers turned and the animal got the message.

He made off followed by the rest of the troop. Kate glanced at her watch. David was half-an-hour away, waiting for someone called Siphon. When she got his message she would leave immediately.

The helicopter came in low, skimming over the trees. They heard it long before they saw it. Big John handed his binoculars to David.

'What do you think it is?'

'I don't know. But it could carry a lot of men. I think we should get out of here. This place isn't safe.'

Big John turned and shouted in Zulu. Men ran from the kraal. David joined them. The kraal was indefensible against modern weapons. He reached the protection of a brick wall and crouched behind it. His AK-47 hung from a shoulder strap.

Big John crouched down beside him.

'I've told the men not to fire unless I give the order. They might be tourists.'

'Who?'

'The people in the plane. We make money from tourists. They go to the reserve and see the animals then they come and see us. The inkosi got money from the government to build the kraal. The women sing and we do war dances.'

'Does the government know about these?'

David tapped his AK-47.

'They are for self-defence.'

Big John spoke in the melodic voice he used when he was cracking a joke. David returned his attention to the sky. The helicopter had completed a sweep over the kraal and neighbouring buildings. He saw it clearly as it headed back towards them.

He turned to Big John.

'It doesn't look military.'

'No. And it doesn't look tourist.'

'Why not tourist?'

'They have their names on the sides. The big company is *Air Safaris*. In the morning, they come down low and hover over the kraal so that the tourists can take photographs. In the afternoon, when we are open, they land and the tourists go inside to see the men working at the forge and the women making baskets.'

'The chopper was more interested in the houses.'

'No, David. It was more interested in the trucks.'

'How do you know? We had our heads down.'

'The sound of the engine, David. We couldn't see them but we could hear them. Air Safaris lands at the sheds. They bring in spare parts for the trucks. It sounded the same but they didn't land. They came into the yard and hovered.'

'Are you sure?'

'Everything rattled. You cannot mistake it.'

'Why the trucks?'

'The motorcyclist, David. Remember the truck with Siphos wife. It was followed by a motorbike. She thinks he was one of the men who raped her. He came up close like he wanted to pass but he didn't. That made our people very suspicious.'

'He was trying to read the rego number?'

'That would not be necessary. Our trucks have our company name on them. He would have to go close to read it and the helicopter would have to go down low.'

'It looks like they've found us.'

'Yes, David.'

'What do you think we should do?'

'Leave as soon as possible. We can look after Siphon and his family. Don't wait for him. Leave with Petra and Mario and take them far away from here.'

Chapter 43

Countdown

Kate's phone rang. David sounded anxious. He thought the kraal would come under attack and was on his way to a different pick-up point. He gave the new GPS coordinates. He said it wasn't a proper landing strip but would be good enough, according to someone called Big John. Kate consulted her map and figured she could be there in under half-an-hour. She hoped Big John's assessment of the situation was reliable.

She checked the plane. An assault rifle and a box of hand grenades lay on the seat beside her. The aircraft had been modified so that it could be used against game wardens and others who threatened the viability of Rodriguez's business. Gunports had been inserted and there was a chute for grenades.

Kate eyed the line of baboons in front of her. They had returned and were blocking her path. She switched on the engines and the smaller members of the troop fled. The big male held his ground to the last moment and received a blow from one of her wheels. Seconds later she was airborne.

The truck bounced up the rough track. Big John said it widened at the top and was straight enough for a small plane to land and take off. David hoped he was right. He had known cases when planes had landed and been unable to get back into the air.

He wondered how much Big John knew about planes. There could be no doubt that he knew a lot about trucks. Right now he was driving. The track was steep and deeply rutted. Fallen stones and branches added to the difficulty. Wherever possible, he avoided them or smashed through. Valuable time was lost when they had to stop to clear the way.

The rendezvous with Kate was in ten minutes. David crouched in the rear of the truck with two of Big John's men. Mario and Petra huddled behind them. A third man sat in the cabin up front.

Apart from Mario, all of the men were heavily armed. David had an AK-47. The man beside him had a grenade launcher and his companion had a sniper's rifle.

'Chopper!'

Mario yelled in his ear.

'Where?'

'Up there!'

Mario pointed and David craned his neck. The road was overhung by trees. There were occasional patches of sky. Then a glint in the leaves told him something was overhead. A moment later, a helicopter appeared.

Big John stopped the truck.

'Helicopter!'

David ran to his side.

'I think it's the same one.'

'Phone your friend. Tell her not to come.'

'No.' David shook his head. 'She doesn't have enough fuel.'

Big John stared down at him. 'What do you want to do?'

'Shoot it down before they have a chance attack.'

'It might be tourists, David.'

'Then why is it following us?'

'We don't know it is following us.'

'Okay. You tell me what we do?'

'We keep going, David. If they don't get hostile we don't get hostile. If they do get hostile then we blast them away.'

Kate flew low over the trees. She had seen other planes flying low and guessed they were safari planes taking tourists to see animals in the game reserves. Apart from zebras, she hadn't seen any. The sun was high so that wasn't surprising. Zebras and people are amongst the few mammals that wander around in the heat of the day. Zebras belong to the horse family and, like humans, sweat to stay cool. Most other mammals don't sweat and have to hang out their tongues and pant.

Her phone rang and she heard David.

'Kate. The helicopter is back and it's following us.'

'Shoot it down, David.'

'Big John won't let me.'

'Why?'

'He thinks it might be carrying tourists.'

'What do you think?'

'He could be right. We'll have to see what happens. If they get hostile, we'll blast them away. They won't stand a chance. The chopper is not military. It's not armoured.'

'Is your truck armoured?'

'No. It usually carries grain.'

'Then make sure they don't blast you away.'

'I don't think they'll try. They probably want to free Mario and Petra. If Siphos's right, they think I'm holding them captive.'

'Are you sure?'

'I'm not sure of anything, Kate.'

'What do you want me to do?'
'Come in low like you are a safari plane.'
'I'm already doing that, David.'
'How long before you reach us.'
'About ten minutes.'
'We'll keep a look out for you.'

The truck left the shelter of the trees. There was clear sky above. David looked for the helicopter but couldn't see it. Moments earlier, it was directly overhead. Now it was gone. He guessed it had swooped down to avoid being seen.

The two Zulus beside him spoke no English. Big John had briefed them on what to do. David decided not to interfere. His attempts at sign language had caused confusion. He figured it was best to let them get on with what they were doing. Right now, they were caressing their weapons and looking in all directions.

The truck reached the top of the rise and sped up. David stood on the tail flap and peered ahead. A half-decent stretch of road stretched before them. It looked as if Big John had picked a good spot for Kate to land. He glanced at his watch. She should have arrived but there was no sign of her.

'Chopper!'

Mario saw it first. The helicopter had appeared from below. It came from a direction they had not expected and the speed of its arrival was impressive. Within seconds it was hovering over the road behind them. Ropes dropped from its belly and three armed men slid down.

David didn't wait for Big John to give an order. He opened fire and the Zulus followed with their weapons. The three men dropped to the ground and the helicopter sped off.

Kate didn't see what happened. She was playing at being a safari plane when the gunfire broke out. It rang in her ears and she saw a helicopter rise out of the trees and make off as if the hounds of hell were after it.

She wasn't surprised that it wanted to get well clear of the action. The chopper wasn't designed for a shooting match. It was the sort that picked up rich people from VIP lounges at international airports and ferried them to expensive holiday homes.

A brutal shoot-out was underway. She concluded that the people in the truck were on her side and the people in the helicopter weren't. That might seem a trivial observation but it wasn't when you had to decide who to kill and who to rescue.

She glanced at the hand grenades on the seat beside her. They were useful for catching fish and throwing at people on the ground. It was

difficult to see how they could be used against a helicopter. The same went for the assault rifle. In the early days of the First World War, pilots shot at one another with hand guns. Those days had passed.

She returned her attention to the truck. It was speeding down the road towards a spot where it widened and straightened out. Her phone rang.

'Kate ...'

David's voice crackled in her ear.

'We are going to stop where you can turn ...'

She struggled to hear him.

'Fly on and come back towards us. We'll give you covering fire if that's needed.'

Kate figured that David wanted her to land on the road ahead and come back down it towards the truck. She watched as the truck skidded to a halt, throwing up clouds of dust. There was no sign of the helicopter. It had either fled or was hiding, ready to attack.

She cast a critical eye at the road. It was straight and there was no sign of potholes, wild animals or anything else that could cause a catastrophe. But the surface didn't look firm. Long stretches were covered in sand or something similar. She identified a section as suitable for touchdown.

That part of the operation went smoothly. The next wasn't so easy. The transition from firm to soft was abrupt. She had met something similar in Australia. There it was called bulldust. The powdery substance made landing and take-off difficult. She ploughed through it and came to a halt in front of the truck.

Four figures raced towards her. David was in front, followed by a coffee-coloured woman, a small white man and a huge black man. She guessed she was seeing Petra, Mario and Big John.

She threw open the cabin doors and jumped down ready to take on passengers. Big John was the first to arrive. He carried two guns. Kate assumed he was coming with them and wondered how his additional weight would affect the plane. Then, it became apparent that he intended to stay behind and the second gun was for her.

He thrust it in her hand.

'My men will provide covering fire at take-off. After that you will be on your own. You will need this if the helicopter comes after you.'

'What do you mean?'

'David says you can handle a gun.'

'Not when I'm flying.'

'Mario will fly the plane.'

Big John pushed Mario into the cockpit.

'Hang on!' Kate grabbed Mario's foot. 'This is my plane. You can't just take it over.'

Mario stared down at her.

'I don't know how to fire a gun.'

'That doesn't mean you can fly.'

'I've been flying since I was ten.'

Kate's blood boiled. 'You can't get a licence at ten.'

'You don't need one if you have a father like mine,' Mario yelled back. 'He makes the rules where we live. He has the police and the politicians in his pocket.'

'You fire the gun and I'll fly the plane.'

'No. I've already said I don't know how to fire a gun.'

'You mean your daddy didn't teach you?'

'I don't like guns.'

'Sod, you ...'

Kate yanked at his leg.

David intervened.

'No Kate. It's best this way. I trust Mario. If he says he can fly the plane then I believe him. I trust you to fire a gun because I've seen you in action. We need two guns. One on each side of the plane. We don't know where that helicopter might come from.'

Kate took the point.

'Okay.'

She held out her hand and took some spare ammunition clips from Big John then walked around to the other side of the plane and climbed into the seat next to Mario.

'I'll sit here.' She gave Mario a reassuring look. 'Then, if you get shot, I'll be able to take over the controls.'

Big John moved to the side and Mario took the plane forward. Kate watched him critically as he taxied along the road and reached the firm stretch where she had landed. The guy was either good or he was copying her.

Mario revved the engine. The plane lurched forward and they were soon airborne. Kate decided he was good. All the same, he was such an insignificant little fellow, she felt justified in her initial impression ... even if it was wrong.

The helicopter appeared almost immediately. It rose out of the trees and followed them. Kate's trigger finger itched. The chopper was on her side and wouldn't stand a chance. The crew probably thought they were safe. They didn't know her plane had been modified for combat. There was no need to throw open the door. She could fire through the gun ports that Rodriguez had cut in the sides.

She held her fire. David had told her not to do anything until he gave the order. That was hard to take. Her plane had been commandeered and she'd been given a gun in exchange. To make matters worse, she'd been told she couldn't use it until David said she could.

Kate wasn't going to argue. She and David understood one another. In a different situation, she would be giving the orders and he would be doing what she said. He had been correct about Mario. The little guy knew how to fly a plane and he was making all the correct moves.

They were wearing headsets. She listened as Mario asked David for instructions. He couldn't shake off the helicopter. Neither of them wanted to confront it. They hoped it would break off pursuit. Mario thought it would be forced to turn back through lack of fuel.

'That's nonsense,' Kate broke into their conversation. 'I know those planes and I know this one. I'll make a bet that chopper has been fitted with extra fuel tanks. That's what the rich sods do to them. We'll run out of gas first.'

'It's not being aggressive,' Mario tried to argue.

'Of course, it's not!' Petra cut him short. 'It's not being aggressive because they want to free us. Siphon told them that we had been captured by David.'

'What do you think we should do?'

'Shoot them down!'

Petra undid her seatbelt.

'Come onto my side, David.'

She wriggled across and pulled him into her place.

Kate opened her gun port.

'I'll fire first ...'

She emptied her clip in a single burst and was fitting another when the door of the helicopter flew open. A man with a gun appeared. David brought him down with a single shot. Moments later, the helicopter burst into flames.

Chapter 44

Chateau Montbec

The setting sun shone on the battlements of the old castle. Kirstin rested her arm on the window ledge and peered through her binoculars. She was inclined to agree with Humphrey. The crenulations did, indeed, look more decorative than functional. He said the imposing building dated from the early fifteen-hundreds and could not have withstood a bombardment by the big cannons of the day.

'By that time, the military classes were excavating big holes and putting squat castles inside them,' he said. 'They weren't building multi-story dwellings and perching them on the edges of cliffs ... it's a plaisance.'

'If you say so, Humphrey.'

'You don't sound totally convinced, Mother.'

'Couldn't it just be a posh residence?'

'Same thing ...'

'No Humphrey. You made it clear that a plaisance was a holiday resort for very rich people. It was a medieval version of that place David went to in South Africa.'

'You mean the Flamingo?'

'Yes. The place frequented by members of the Cabal.'

'Well. It looks like they have an even more exclusive place here in the Pyrenees. It's called Chateau Montbec. Olaf has told me all about it.'

Humphrey pulled off his coat and sat down. He had just returned from another meeting with Olaf. This time, they had caught a series of buses and been driven around.

'Mario's parents are currently in residence,' he continued. 'They control Olaf and appear to be running the place.'

'Did he admit to killing people for them?'

'He came close on a number of occasions but could never quite bring himself to tell the whole story.'

'I assume you were speaking Danish.'

'We were.'

'And was anyone showing interest in you?'

'No.'

'Where does this get us?'

'We need to find a way to bring Mario here. Olaf says his parents have been talking about him. He claims to have rigged up a listening device.'

'You mean he's bugged them?'

'That's what he says.'

'And what are they saying about their son?'

'They believe that Mario and Petra de Villiers have been kidnapped by Charles' Paget's nephew, David.'

'So they fell for that one?'

'I don't know,' Humphrey shrugged. 'It's difficult to tell with Olaf. He is a very strange fellow.'

'No one will deny that, Humphrey.'

'I never know if he is supplying me with information or pumping me for information. I suspect it's a bit of both but I can't be sure. One moment, I think he is about to come clean. The next, he is devious again.'

'What sort of information has he supplied?'

'He thinks we are working for Charlie.'

'We had guessed that much.'

'Yes. But Olaf hadn't told us.'

'What else did he say?'

'Mario's parents evidently think Charlie is alive.'

Kirstin looked relieved.

'They know about the Zulus,' Humphrey continued. 'They think they work for Charlie and he sent them in to help David.'

'But that's not true.'

'No. That's what they think. Olaf says the Zulus shot up a helicopter and rescued some of David's friends.'

'Have you made contact with David?'

'I've emailed him but he's not replied. We need to work out what's going on and decide what to do next.'

Chapter 45

Maputo

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to sail round the Cape of Good Hope and they were the first to establish a colony on the east coast of Africa. They called it Mozambique and it kept that name after independence. But the new rulers changed the Portuguese name of the capital to Maputo. Kate agreed that Maputo was a good place to land and get lost.

Unfortunately, they couldn't just turn up at a regular airport. Doing that would be like sailing into a regular harbour in a pirate ship flying the Jolly Roger. Rodriguez plane would come under suspicion the moment it put down.

An alternative landing spot was needed and that wasn't going to be as easy to find as when they were deep in the African bush. Maputo was a major city. It sprawled into the neighbouring countryside. There were farms and villages everywhere.

Mario followed the main highway into the city. It was choked with traffic including private buses. He knew them from previous visits. They were old and dilapidated. Many were converted vans and trucks. Some started life as buses and had seen better days elsewhere. There were no regular bus stops. People waved the buses down from the side of the road.

He figured they could be the answer to his prayers. He had to dispose of the plane and find a way to get into the centre of the city. The big problem was to find somewhere to land. There were few open spaces. The fields were small and the only vacant land was being used as garbage dumps. Those that weren't swampy were swarming with people.

One spot looked vaguely possible. It was close to the road. There was little garbage and no sign of people. Mario turned to Kate and pointed.

'How about down there?'

She craned her neck.

'You mean that swamp?'

'It's not a swamp.'

'A lot of it is.'

'But, not all of it.'

'What about the trees?'

'I've thought about them.'

'It's very tight. You'll have to dump her down.'

'We could fly on if you think it's too difficult,' Mario pointed to the fuel gauge. 'There's still a load of gas on board. We could try somewhere else.'

'No, Mario.' Kate shook her head. 'It's getting late. Do it now while there is still light.'

She sat back. Mario sensed that she thought her mission was over. David seemed to be thinking along similar lines. He had spent the flight talking to Petra, telling her what to do next.

His hands tightened on the joystick.

'Okay! We are going down.'

He lowered the undercarriage and reduced height. The big problem was to come in low without hitting anything. That meant he had to reduce speed without stalling too soon. Dumping in a swamp was one thing. Dumping in trees was another.

The last of the trees passed beneath the wheels.

'Get into the brace position!'

He throttled back. The plane stalled and plummeted down. Mario held his breath as it landed with a thump. Mud sprayed in all directions, covering the windscreen and obscuring his vision. He could see little of what was happening and do nothing about it.

The plane snaked over the flooded ground, narrowly avoided a wrecked car, hit a submerged log and emerged onto dry land, scattering piles of garbage before coming to rest against a mound of coconut shells.

'Everybody out!'

Mario smelt petrol and yelled at the top of his voice. He glanced around. Petra and David were fine but Kate hadn't been so lucky. Her face was contorted in pain and she was struggling to get her seatbelt undone. He released it and threw open the cabin door.

David pulled Kate out. They grabbed their few belongings and struggled over the broken ground. She limped. He carried his bag with one hand and pulled her along with the other. Mario and Petra walked ahead with the rest of the luggage.

They reached the highway and stood beside it. Buses had looked plentiful from the air. From the ground, there didn't seem to be so many. A few passed but none stopped when they tried to wave them down.

Kate looked anxiously towards the plane.

'It's only a matter of time.'

'What is?' David asked.

'It's going to catch fire.'

'Then we'd better get well clear before it does.' David took her arm. 'If we hang around here we could be implicated. People will start asking questions.'

She limped beside him as best she could. Petra struggled along behind them with their bags. She was worried that scavengers would rush in and try to strip the plane of valuables. That's what happened in Africa. Poor people died when they tried to salvage the castoffs of an affluent society.

To her relief, an ancient bus appeared. She put down the bags and dashed into the road, waving. Mario watched in horror as the bus skidded to a halt. He recalled that a similar system operated in Cape Town and was exceedingly dangerous.

He ran to join her. Men were clinging to the side of the vehicle. Little boys were riding on the roof. A man got out to make room for Petra. Kate grabbed the side of the bus. Another man got out and she was pulled inside. It was all over in seconds.

Mario hung on beside David. Boards had been welded on for people to stand on. He stood on one and wrapped his arms around the handholds. Things were falling into place. He and Petra had shown that they weren't pathetic rich kids who couldn't handle difficult situations. They had taken control and knew what had to be done.

At an early age, he had been sickened by his relatives and the people who hung about them. For some reason, he had not taken to their rapacious ways. Everything about his family and their friends repulsed him. Now he was in a position to act. With Petra by his side he would put an end to all of them.

A hand reached down and tapped his head. Mario looked up and saw a small face peering down at him. The kid was travelling on the roof with other boys. He pointed and yelled. At first, Mario thought he was speaking an African language. Then he recognised the Portuguese word for fire.

Flames were rising above the trees. For a moment, it looked as if they would die down. Then there was a blinding flash, followed by a might roar and a series of explosions as Rodriguez's hand grenades went off.

The hotel was midrange. Mario said that if they went for one of the expensive places in town the Cabal would quickly track them down. There weren't many posh hotels and the appearance of four scruffily-dressed tourists, with bulging bankcards, would soon attract attention.

Kate couldn't fault that. His next observation also made sense. They should avoid low dives like those Rodriguez used. The answer was to go for a midrange establishment that catered for the needs of respectable locals and tourists on a modest budget.

They ended up in place full of priests and nuns who had gathered for a noble-minded convention on something or other. Kate didn't know what

it was. They spoke Portuguese. She spoke Spanish and had difficulty making herself understood.

Mario didn't. His Portuguese was perfect. He rattled away, extolling the name of Lord Jesus and crossing himself at every opportunity. Petra nodded piously and the nuns lapped it up.

Kate wasn't convinced by the performance. She had seen this sort of display before. Mario and Petra were born politicians. They had their priorities. She guessed Jesus didn't feature highly in any of them.

She glanced across the table at David. The evening meal was over and coffee had been served. He had drunk his and was fiddling with the laptop computer the inkosi had given them, trying to access messages. Earlier, the reception had been poor. Now, it had improved.

His eyes lit up and he typed away. Kate guessed he was entering the codes that would unscramble Humphrey's messages. David was good at remembering strings of numbers and letters. Other people wrote them down. He said that was dangerous and should never be done.

He beckoned to her.

'There's something here from Humph.'

She went to the other side of the table. The room was poorly lit and Humphrey's message stared her in the face. He had been speaking to Olaf.

'My God!'

She turned to Mario.

'Humph knows about the chopper.'

Mario left the nuns and hurried across.

Kate pointed to the screen.

'We shot it down six hours ago and Humph already knows.'

'Olaf told him,' Mario said.

'Yes.'

'Then it's not amazing.' Mario peered over her shoulder. 'Olaf is the Cabal's spymaster. He doesn't just kill people for them. Olaf runs their cyber network and he provides them with information.'

David handed his phone to Mario

'Humph thinks that Olaf is preparing to defect. All it needs is a prod from someone like you and he will come over to our side. He wants you to phone your parents, tell them that you have escaped and need to be got out.'

Mario stared at the phone.

'What's the matter?' Kate asked.

'I need to think this through.'

'You mean you don't want to do it?'

'Yes. But give me a chance to think about it.'

'There's nothing to think about, Mario.' Kate glared at him. 'Humph has told us what to do. All that remains is to go ahead and do it. You

need to get back home and talk to Olaf. David and I need to get out of here and hide.'

'What about Petra?'

'She goes with you, of course.'

Kate watched as Mario fumbled with the phone. It looked as if he would continue to hesitate. She got ready to give him another prod and was about to speak when he pushed up a number and a dialling tone sounded. It went on for a while then a voice answered in Spanish. Mario replied in English.

'Father. It's me ...'

There was something very old-fashioned about the way they spoke. Kate listened as Mario described how he and Petra had been dragged off a dive boat and taken into captivity. He said they were hauled through remote parts of southern Africa and suffered terrible hardships before being loaded onto a plane by David Paget and a ferocious female pilot who shot down a helicopter during the flight. She flew on to Maputo and crashed the plane when she tried to land beside the highway. She and David were trapped in their seats. He and Petra managed to escape before the plane burst into flames.

'Where are you?' his father asked.

'In a hotel.'

'Where is it?'

'In the centre of town.'

'What's its name?'

'Hotel Liberdade.'

'Stay there. We'll come and fetch you.'

The phone went dead. The speed with which the call was over was stunning. Mario's father was speaking as if he was just around the corner and about to jump into a car and fetch them.

'Where is the Hotel Liberdade?' Kate asked.

'I don't know,' Mario shrugged. 'I made up the name.'

David strode forward.

'Right. We've got to act fast. Phone for a taxi. If there is a Hotel Liberdade, go there. If there isn't, find another hotel and call your father from there. Tell him you made a mistake and give him the name of the new place.'

A mad rush into the city followed. The taxi driver didn't know about a Hotel Liberdade and found another, which was suitably posh. Mario produced a bankcard and they signed in using their real names. A porter showed them to their room and Mario phoned his father. He said he had got the hotel name wrong and gave the new name. His father told him to stay put.

Minutes later their phone rang and he heard Cuthbert Maguire's rasping voice. He announced that he was coming up from Cape Town, in his private jet, to collect them. They would then fly on to Europe, where Mario would be reunited with his parents. They must be ready to leave at a moment's notice.

Mario's blood ran cold. Cuthbert rationed his time sparingly. If he was showing a personal interest in them then it wasn't out of compassion. Cuthbert was highly suspicious of them. There could be no other explanation.

He cursed himself for having given into Kate. If she hadn't pestered him he would have thought the whole thing through before phoning his father. Instead, he had been forced to think on his feet and had made some stupid mistakes. His story wouldn't stand up to examination.

He shouldn't have lied about the hotel and he shouldn't have said that Kate and David were trapped in a burning plane. They were standing beside him at the time. If Cuthbert sent in a team of investigators they would soon pick holes in his story.

He and Petra would be subjected to intense questioning. They would have to make sure they told the same story. If they weren't careful they would suffer the same fate as Carla. She thought she could outwit the Cabal and paid the ultimate price.

Chapter 46

Turning Point

Kirstin rested her arm on the window ledge and adjusted focus. Humphrey had been using her binoculars. She wondered why he was so hopelessly short-sighted. All of her family had perfect eyesight so it must have come in on his father's side. But she knew so little about them she couldn't be sure.

A helicopter had just passed overhead. Humphrey claimed to know something about it. She watched as it made for the chateau and hovered above the tower.

'It looks like it's preparing to land,' Humphrey said.

'Yes, Mother. There's a helicopter pad up there.'

'Do you think it's them?'

'They should be arriving about now. Cuthbert Maguire sent his private jet to Maputo to pick them up.'

Kirstin put down the binoculars.

'How do you know?'

'Olaf. He's a font of information.'

'What else did he tell you?'

'Mario phoned his mum and dad at the chateau. He told them that he and Petra had given David the slip. He said they took a taxi into the

centre of Maputo and booked in to one of the top hotels. Mario's dad put through a phone call to Cuthbert Maguire and ... Vum!

'Vum? Humphrey?'

'Well, whatever noise Cuthbert's jet makes. It arrived within hours and whisked them away.'

'What happens now?'

'Olaf will arrange a meeting.'

'With whom?'

'Us, Mother. It's a turning point in history.'

'Really? Humphrey?'

'Do you remember the sealed train that carried Lenin back to Russia from Germany during the First World War? It was a cunning move by the Kaiser to bring down the Tsar's government and knock Russia out of the war.'

'And you see yourself in a similar role to the Kaiser?'

'I see Mario and Petra as a means of bringing down the Cabal. They have the knowledge and determination strike a blow for freedom.'

'Sort of upper-class revolutionaries?'

'You could put it that way.'

'Let's hope you are right, Humphrey.'

Kirstin picked up the binoculars and returned her attention to the chateau.

Chapter 47

Eagles Nest

A cold wind blew in Petra's face. Ten hours ago, she had been basking beneath a tropical sky. Now, she was huddled against a castle wall, grasping Mario's hand and trying to keep warm. Mist swirled around them. Water dripped from an overhanging balustrade. The sky was clear in one direction and totally bleak in the other.

Chateau Montbec was perched on a precipice. Towering mountains dominated one side. Rolling hills fell away on the other. Mario said that, on a clear day, you could see as far as the great medieval city of Carcassonne. That's what had given the castle such great strategic importance in the past.

The present owners called it the Eagle's Nest after Adolf Hitler's famous mountain retreat in Bavaria. Adolf went to his by car and entered a lift that took him up to his nest. The Cabal flew to theirs in private jets that put down at Toulouse international airport. Helicopters took over from there and landed on the castle tower.

They had flown to Toulouse in Cuthbert's private jet. He picked them up in Maputo and whisked them away before they knew what was

happening. The great man gave them no more than a nod of recognition when they boarded the plane and spent the entire trip in his personal cabin. It was the same on the helicopter. Hardly a word had passed between them.

They landed on the castle tower and Cuthbert left the helicopter beneath a shield of umbrellas. Petra was reminded of medieval emperors, leaving their carriages beneath a canopy of heraldic banners. Cuthbert's umbrellas bore the logos of his TV-channels. There wasn't much difference.

She and Mario were left in the rain while Cuthbert's luggage was taken down a spiral staircase to somewhere warm below. Petra felt more like a prisoner than an honoured guest.

Carmel Mendez-Klein had never been an affectionate mother. Mario noticed that at an early age. She fussed over her spaniels more than she fussed over him. Perhaps that was because the spaniels couldn't answer back and ask awkward questions. Mario was in a mood to ask awkward questions.

He had been separated from Petra and taken to his family's quarters in the castle. His room was much as he had left it. The Green Peace posters were still on the walls and his microscope was still on his desk, gathering dust.

The door of his dressing room hung open. He went inside and hunted through his clothes. They would be dining in the Great Hall and he needed to look smart. Senior members of the Cabal were gathering for a special meeting.

That explained why Cuthbert had picked them up at Maputo in his private jet. He was about to leave Cape Town and fly to France. That was what all the rush was about. It wasn't a special trip just for them. But it was one hell of a coincidence.

Special meetings of the Cabal were held for special reasons. Mario suspected that the present meeting had something to do with Richard de Villiers' disappearance. The Cabal knew that Charlie was on to them and they knew about David. He had told his father that he and Petra had been taken prisoner by David. That would lead to a lot of questions.

Mario felt the need for extreme caution. He had stuffed up badly when he phoned his father. Petra had spoken to him about it. If the Cabal sent a team of investigators to Maputo they would uncover holes in his story. They might even locate David and Kate. Mario hoped they had vanished into a secret place where they couldn't be found.

His mother would, no doubt, grill him on what happened during the eight days since Anna's death. Mario decided that the best form of defence was attack. He would demand to know why he and Petra had been left shivering on top of the tower while bags and boxes were taken

below, and he would want to know why he had been separated from Petra.

Chapter 48

Dinner

Petra took a shower and tried to look her best. She desperately wanted to speak to Mario. He had been whisked away. His formidable mother pounced on him when they reached the bottom of the staircase. She was reminded of a dog grabbing a rabbit. Mario was plucked away before she knew what was happening.

Moments later, hands reached out to take her away. They led her down steep steps and along narrow passages. There were so many twists and turns she had no idea where she was going. All she knew was that she was underground and everything looked very old.

Then, suddenly, she was back on the surface again. They passed through a door and everything looked more modern. It wasn't entirely modern but, at least, it was no longer medieval. The décor was in the grand colonial style, popular when the British and others were carving out empires.

She was reminded of the Victoria Falls Hotel and Cecil Rhodes' grand mansion in Cape Town. The Cabal evidently had a deep nostalgia for the days of empire. Men in colonial uniforms stood ready to open doors for her. Women in frilled aprons and black skirts showed her to her room.

Petra was suspicious of all of them. There were different sorts of servants and it was difficult to tell them apart. It was also difficult to tell who were servants and who were not. Prime ministers could be turned into servants if the correct pressure was applied. Cuthbert Maguire had demonstrated that. He summoned prime ministers to his presence and gave them orders. They went out of fear he would instruct his newspapers and TV-channels to turn against them.

The same went for brilliant inventors like Olaf Magnusson. He was the Cabal's chief spymaster and executioner. He had been pressured into working for them. Mario figured that he was their greatest asset and greatest danger. He likened Olaf to the early cannons. They gave their handlers immense firepower but had a tendency to blow up in their faces.

Petra sifted through the assortment of garments that had been placed at her disposal. There were so many she would have no difficulty finding something suitable. After a bad start, she was being treated as an honoured guest.

In an hour, someone would arrive to help her with her hair. In the meantime, she would soak in a hot bath and try to get some heat back into her body. She was tired and needed sleep but that was out of the question. Cuthbert Maguire was holding a dinner party and her presence was required.

Mario sat on one side of his parents and Petra sat on the other. The Great Hall was crowded. He had never seen it so full. A mighty gathering of the Cabal was in progress. Members had flown in from all over the world and were seated according to ancient tradition.

The hall was in the grand baronial style. The floor at one end was raised and a long table ran from one side to the other. It was the so-called *high table*. Senior members sat there. Others took their meals below in the main body of the hall.

In theory, all members of the Cabal were equal. The same principle operated in medieval times. In those days the king was first amongst equals and his top barons were second and so on down the line. Just how far down the line was indicated by seating arrangements.

Mario's parents sat immediately below the high table. They were high up but still had a way to go. It amused Mario to think that if he and Petra combined their family fortunes they might, one day, dine at high table. That was what his mother wanted and it wasn't going to happen for a variety of reasons.

He glanced across at Petra. Tonight she looked stunning. She usually looked a mess. That was because she didn't want to stand out as a privileged rich kid at university. She wanted to look like the other students. Unfortunately, she had chosen a particularly scruffy sort of student as a role model.

Someone had worked wonders with her hair and she was wearing a fabulous dress. His mother complimented her. Mario didn't often agree with his mother but he did this time. They exchanged smiles.

He hoped Petra had stuck to the agreed script. It was vital that they tell the same story. They had worked out a plausible account of what happened and had rehearsed it over and over again. David had asked penetrating question, trying to get them to contradict one another. He had warned that an investigator would do that.

So far, the only person to question him was his mother and her questions were about Petra. She was obsessed by the idea that they were passionately in love and their traumatic experiences had cemented a bond between them. She had even indicated that she could arrange for them to spend the night together.

Mario sat back and stared into space. That was his defence in situations like this. The people here regarded him as a nerd. That was their way of saying he was a harmless creep who didn't know how the real world worked.

They were mistaken. They thought he was obsessed by primitive lifeforms that lived in swamps and other dark places. That was only part of it. He was also obsessed by people like them. He had grown up in their company and wanted to know what made them tick. With that knowledge he would be in a better position to exterminate them.

Modern science had developed ingenious ways of eradicating dangerous pests. The mosquito was one. Highly selective sprays targeted them and left other insects unharmed. Something similar was needed for the Cabal.

The dinner ended, the plates were cleared away and a gong sounded. That was the signal for the servants to leave the hall. When the last had gone, the doors were secured and talk on the lower tables ceased. All eyes turned to the high table. The Cabal had a Grand Master and Cuthbert Maguire occupied that prestigious position. He rose to deliver his speech.

Mario had heard it before. It was about leading families and how the rest of humanity needed them to survive. If Cuthbert was to be believed, a few families had nurtured the rise of human civilisation. Revolutionaries might overthrow the old order but they could not rule. They needed people to run the show.

The old families were soon back. All they had to do was put on new clothes and shout the right slogans. In their old clothes they were hunted down as oppressors of the people. In the uniform of the people's revolutionary army they were greeted as saviours.

Smiles appeared on Chinese faces in the hall. Mario recalled his father saying that China had been saved by billionaires who rose to the top and took control of the country's governing party. They continued to call it communist and that made everyone happy.

Mario had heard it all before and was beginning to lose interest when Cuthbert spoke about the reason for the present meeting. Their group was facing a challenge. Meddlesome people were inquiring into their affairs. Stern action had been taken to overcome the threat and more was needed. That was something they would be discussing during the next few days.

Then came the big surprise. Carla was a hero. She shot Charles Paget when he and his nephew, David, abducted Petra de Villiers and Mario Mendez-Klein. Carla later died with her parents in a tragic car accident. Their deaths were deeply mourned.

Cuthbert recounted how Petra and Mario suffered innumerable hardships as they were dragged through southern Africa by a band of desperados organised by Sipho Maduna, an associate of the Pagets. Maduna claimed to be a close relative of Petra's mother: that was a total fabrication.

The good news was that Petra and Mario had escaped their captors and were in the hall. Cuthbert called on them to stand. Mario took Petra's hand and they rose to thunderous applause. Cuthbert recalled that he was about to fly out of Cape Town when he heard that the pair were in Maputo. They almost didn't make it. In the confusion, following a plane crash, Mario gave the wrong location. Fortunately, he realised his mistake and made a second telephone call.

Mario's mind numbed. Nothing was as he had imagined and it took a while for the full significance to sink in. He had always thought of Cuthbert Maguire as invincible. The great man was so thorough in everything he did. This time he had stuffed in a big way. Someone was feeding Cuthbert false information and it wasn't difficult to guess who that person was.

Chapter 49

Olaf's Den

Petra heard a tap on her door. Dinner was over and she was preparing for bed. She guessed it was a servant coming to see if the room was in order. Instead, she heard a familiar voice.

'Hullo. It's me.'

Petra opened the door and Carmel Mendez-Klein sneaked in. Mario's mother reminded her of a schoolgirl up to some naughty tricks, in a school dormitory, when the teachers weren't looking.

'There are secret passages,' she said.

'Where?'

'Here in the castle. They were used for all sort of secret things in past and they still are.'

Petra guessed that Carmel hadn't come to give her a history lesson. There had to be some other reason for her visit.

'People want to see one another,' she continued.

Petra wished the silly woman would come to the point.

'One of the passages lead to Mario's room.'

Petra got the message. Carmel thought she was yearning to spend the night in her son's arms. She wanted to see Mario but not for that reason. They were intent of wiping out the Cabal. That's why they had come to the castle and that was what they intended to do.

'Mario has amigo ...'

Carmel fed in one seductive detail after another.

'He take you to him. His name is Olaf. Mario perhaps tell you about Olaf. He is living with us for very long time. He know the passages ...'

The schoolgirl chatter continued. Petra wondered if Carmel had ever grown up. She decided to go along with her silly game.

'Could I go down one of those passages?'

Carmel seemed pleased to have got the message across.

'Olaf take you,' she smiled.'

'How do I find him?'

'You don't. He come to you.'

A panel on the wall moved. It had looked secure a moment earlier. Now it was sliding to the side. Mario had described what Olaf looked like. Petra decided that if anyone else appeared she would scream and make a dash for the door.

That wasn't necessary. The person who emerged from behind the panel could be none other than the brilliant inventor, turned assassin. His long fair hair was tied in a ponytail and he wore a woolly hat. The face beneath was boyish. The rest of him was overweight and middle-aged.

'Hi. I'm Olaf.'

He turned and headed back the way he had come without saying another word. Petra followed and the panel returned to its original position.

'Mind your head.'

Olaf flicked his torch and she saw pipes and electric cables. Carmel had talked about secret passages. This was more like a service area for the adjoining rooms. Spy holes peeped into them. Mario said Olaf was the Cabal's chief spy. He seemed to have a special interest in what went on in bedrooms and bathrooms. They turned a corner and ancient stonework appeared. Mario was waiting there. He grasped her arm.

'Olaf is going to take us to his den.'

The den turned out to be a snug little room in the castle tower. A narrow spiral staircase led there. Olaf squeezed up sideways. Petra and Mario followed behind. She looked around. A small window provided a view to the north. Lights of a town shone in the distance. Olaf said it was called Foix and two of Charles Paget's agents were based there. They would be meeting them soon.

According to Olaf, they were a mother-and-son team, known as the Hansens. The son, Humphrey, was rumoured to be Charles Paget's son. Olaf said he had checked that out and it didn't compute. Humphrey's mother, Kirstin, didn't meet Charles until after Humphrey was born ... but they had been lovers.

Petra listened with growing alarm. Everyone was related. It was sounding more and more like a family affair. The old man, Steven Mason, was a close friend of her grandfather. David was Charles Paget's nephew and Kirstin Hansen had been Charles Paget's lover.

What sort of team was this? They had just dined with some of the world's most powerful people. Was Olaf planning to set Humphrey and Kirstin Hansen against them? They might be Charles Paget's agents. What good was that? He was probably dead. He certainly looked near death when they dumped him in the emergency wing of a hospital eight days ago.

Olaf had a vague notion that the Hansens could set some international law enforcement agency against the Cabal. He could supply the evidence to convict them. Petra was unable to hold her tongue.

'Why haven't you done that already, Olaf?'

'Done what?'

'Given the information to the Hansens.'

'I wasn't sure it was a good idea.'

'No. It's not a good idea, Olaf.' Petra glared at him. 'The Cabal will sabotage the investigation before it gets started. There is already one underway. That's why they are here. People are asking difficult questions about the disappearance of Flight-145. They intend to shut them up before they discover anything that is really incriminating.'

'There is an investigation,' Olaf agreed.

'And they want to sabotage it.'

'Perhaps ...'

'Not *perhaps*, Olaf.'

Petra leant forward like a prosecutor in a court case.

'They want to sabotage the investigation just like you sabotaged my father's plane ... isn't that right?'

Olaf looked stunned.

'Yes,' he wheezed.

Petra pointed a finger at him.

'Do you want to make amends?'

'Yes,' he sobbed.

Tears rolled down Olaf's cheeks.

'There is only one way.'

'What's that, Petra?'

'*Do to them as they would do others.*'

'I don't understand.'

'Drone them, Olaf!'

'You mean make their plane crash?'

'Yes.'

'I've thought of that and it won't work.'

'You did it to my father's plane.'

'But that was just one plane. They have their own planes. I can't make them all crash. It only works if they are all together.'

Mario strode forward.

'They are all together now.'

Olaf stared at him.

'But they are not in a plane.'

'No, Olaf. They are here in this castle. All of the senior members of the Cabal are here. Now is the time to act. We won't get another chance.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'Blast them away.'

'How?'

'With explosives!' Mario pointed out of the window. 'You are using them to blast out the galleries for the tourist centre. There's enough gelignite down there to destroy the castle ten times over.'

'But it's stored in a secure area.'

'We'll find a way to get in.'

'Then what do we do?'

'Bring it up here in one of the delivery trucks. I've driven them. We can park in the tunnel beside the kitchens. It's directly below the Great Hall. The best time is 10 pm when the staff are leaving. Security is slack then. Cuthbert and his friends will still be there. They won't leave until well after midnight. You can detonate it when the staff are well clear and we won't be killing innocent people.'

Chapter 50

Cats and Mice

Humphrey paced up and down with his hands behind his back. He always did that when he was thinking. Kirstin had tried to break him of the habit. He reminded her of an annoying Australian judge who went around the world hosting TV-programs and moralising on other people's problems.

'Stop doing that, Humphrey.'

'Stop what? Mother?'

'You know what. Can't you sit still and think?'

'Only in my meditation pose.'

'That makes you look ridiculous.'

'As you say, Mother.'

'What is on your mind?'

'Something is happening up there at the castle. Helicopters have been coming in from the direction of Toulouse. Petra and Mario will have been on one of them. We need to know what's going on. Olaf should have phoned by now. He was expecting them.'

'Perhaps we should go and look for him.'

'Perhaps we should, Mother. On the other hand ... perhaps not. You have always said that Olaf is a devious fellow. We could be walking into a trap.'

'I thought you regarded Olaf as a little-boy-lost.'

'That doesn't stop him from being devious.'

'And homicidal ...'

'That's the worrying point. He was in a homicidal mood yesterday. I'd not seen him like that before. It was more than a bit revealing. He had a robotic cat.'

'And what was he doing with it?'

'Catching mice.'

'Were the mice robotic?'

'No. They were real. Ian said Olaf buys them from a shop in town and kills them for sport. He wears headgear and lunges around with his hands as if they are claws. The cat follows his movements.'

'What's so odd about that, Humphrey? Olaf is an inventor. He has to try out his invention.'

'It was the way he tried it out. He was foaming at the mouth. Ian said he gets hyped up like that before he goes off on one of his secret missions. Ian's had enough. He wants out and so does Roger.'

'And you think Olaf was hyping himself up?'

'It looked very much like that.'

'Then that's all the more reason to go and see him.'

'Will you take your gun?'

'Yes, Humphrey. Mummy will take her gun. She'll make sure nothing nasty happens to you.'

Mario glanced at his watch. It was just after 5 pm. They had ample time to break into the strongroom and load the explosives into the van. There was no need to go so fast. Olaf was driving as if every second counted.

He was half-normal when they left the castle. He showed his pass to the security guards and they waved them on. After that, his condition deteriorated sharply. He sped up and started to skid around corners. Right now, he was hunched over the wheel, swinging his body from side to side and making grunting noises. His tongue poked out and saliva dripped from his chin.

Mario had seen him like that before. On those memorable occasions, he was playing with his robot cars. His behaviour had been disturbing then. Now it was distinctly scary. Olaf was driving a real vehicle and he and Petra were crammed in beside him.

They reached the bottom of the mountain, the road straightened and Olaf started to calm down. There was a wet patch on his jacket, where he had dribbled, but his tongue was no longer poking out and he had stopped grunting.

The tunnel with the explosives was inside the perimeter fence of the Cabal's airfield. Olaf used his remote to open the gate. It clanged shut behind them and he drove to the building where he worked with his assistants, Ian and Roger.

They stopped and he opened the cabin door.

'Kill or be killed.'

They were the first words he had spoken since they left the castle. Mario expected him to say more but he didn't. Olaf stumbled from the van and wandered off, leaving the engine running. Mario yanked on the parking break, as the vehicle rolled forward, and switched off the engine.

Petra turned to him.

'He's totally mad.'

'Yes. He gets like that.'

'Did you hear what he said?'

'Kill or be killed?'

'Yes, Mario. It's what Carla said when we were in the shark cage. Before she and Dino were about to send us to the bottom.'

Mario thought for a moment.

'And not the only time. She said it when she was with her mother at the Flamingo. When they were planning to kill us.'

'That's where Olaf got it from,' Petra said. 'Olaf would have heard her. He would have planted bugs in the rooms. He probably had cameras too. He has spyholes into the bedrooms back at the castle.'

'Yes,' Mario grinned. 'Olaf is a spymaster and a Peeping Tom. That's what he does when he's not killing people.'

'And he spies on members of the Cabal. That's the point I'm making, Mario. He spies on them and he feeds them lies when it suits him. Cuthbert believed all that stuff about us being kidnapped by David and he believed Carla was some sort of hero who tried to stop David. That's what Olaf told him.'

'Yes. I'd worked that out.'

'So who told Olaf to kill Carla and her parents?'

'His minder, Petra.'

'You mean your mother?'

'Yes. She wants you as a future daughter-in-law. That means she must eliminate anyone who is trying to eliminate you. My mother doesn't let anyone stand in her way. I sometimes wonder how many people she has told Olaf to kill.'

Mario's head dropped. Tears flooded his eyes and he began to shake. Petra had never seen him in such a state. He was usually so strong. Her hands went out to comfort him.

'What's the matter?'

'I knew my parents were murderers. I worked that out years ago but I never thought it would come to this. They killed your father and your uncle's family. Now I am planning to kill them and fifty other people. I know how David felt when he killed Dino and Rambo. I thought he would go on and kill Carla but he just slumped onto the deck. I picked up her gun and I almost killed her myself. Then I found I just couldn't bring myself to pull the trigger.'

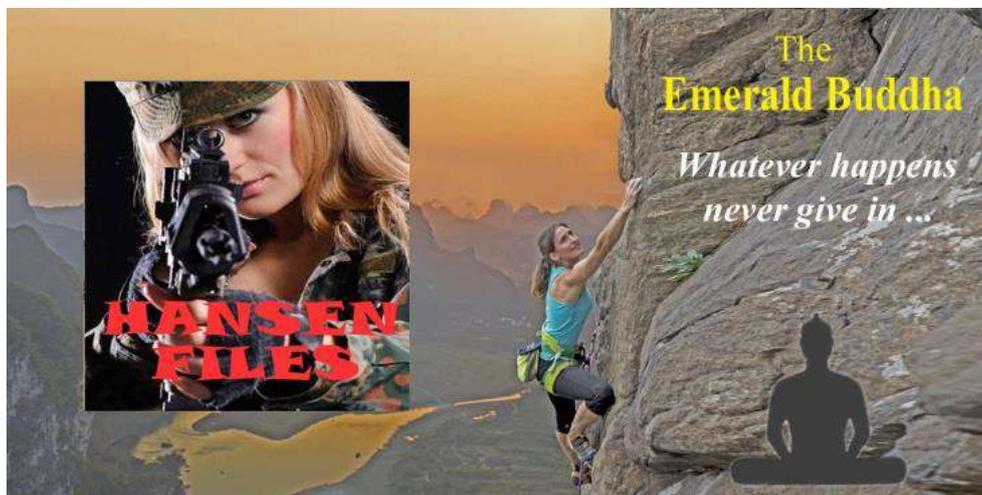
'Are you saying you don't want to go on with this?'

'No.' Mario took in a deep breath. 'David said he didn't like violence but sometimes it was the only way. It was the only way on the boat and it was the only way when we shot down the helicopter.'

'And it's the only way now?'

'We have no choice, Petra. If we don't destroy the Cabal our friends will die. Siphon and the others will be hunted down and killed. When you weigh things in the balance you have to decide which is the more important. Are you going to protect decent, ordinary people or will you do nothing because you are related to some of the people who want to murder them?'

OTHER BOOKS IN THE SERIES



The Invisible Drone is Book 5 in the Hansen Files Series. *The Emerald Buddha* is Book 4. To receive a **FREE COPY**: <http://eepurl.com/bQYShb>

Chapter 51

Bullseye

Humphrey fiddled with his computer and grew increasingly impatient. There were no new messages from Olaf. They were sitting in a car on top of a small hill, overlooking the Cabal's airfield. They had gone there hoping to see some sign of him. So far, nothing had happened. No one was there. He switched off the computer.

'We are wasting our time, Mother. We might just as well go back and watch television. It would be no more ridiculous than this. It's the weekend and it's getting dark. They've all packed up.'

'Not entirely ...'

Kirstin reached for her binoculars.

'There's a white van down there. It's just turned off the highway. I'll get a better view in a moment when it's gone past the trees.'

Humphrey sat back and waited. They had only one pair of binoculars and Kirstin was using them. She insisted that his eyesight was so bad they would be wasted on him. He squinted into the distance and saw the van stop in front of the main gate then drive on.

'It's going to Olaf's workshop,' Kirstin said.

'Probably delivering something.'

'No, it's not. Olaf's just got out.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. He's left the door open.'

'Oh. My God.'

'Now what?'

'The van rolled forward and someone stopped it ... a young man ... he leant across. I think I know who he is ... and he's with somebody.'

'Who do you think he is?'

'Mario Mendez-Klein.'

'And the other person?'

'I can't see.'

Kirstin moved forward to get a better view and Humphrey glanced back down the road. For a long time, nothing seemed to be happening. Now, it was all happening at once. He tapped Kirstin's arm.

'They've got company.'

'Where?'

'Back the way. A car was following them. It's pulled over onto the grass and stopped behind a bush.'

Kirstin refocused her binoculars.

'She's hiding from them.'

'She?'

'There's a woman in the car.'

'Do we know who she is?'

'Yes. The lady who speaks bad French with a Spanish accent and wears clothes cut in the South American style. She has a habit of turning up in the Café Noir when we are there.'

Mario moved into the drivers seat and turned on the engine. He wasn't going to wait for Olaf to reappear. There was work to be done and it

might take a long time. He had to get into the tunnel and break into the strongroom where the explosives were kept.

A locked gate was the first obstacle. He used bolt cutters to remove the padlock and chain holding it shut then drove to the entrance of the tunnel, where he was confronted by a steel door.

The door was strongly built but the lock was welded in place as if it was a later addition. An edge grinder, from the castle workshop, cut through the weld in a few minutes. He pushed the door open and drove the van inside.

The strongroom lay ahead. He had examined it on a number of occasions and wondered how it had passed inspection. There was something appallingly lax about sighting a room with explosives next to a store stacked with tools that could be used to break into it.

He entered the store and turned on the lights. He had helped the mining engineers carve out the galleries for the visitors centre and had used their equipment. It wasn't necessary to be big and tough to operate the rock drills. Skill was what mattered. You had to know what you were doing and do it properly.

The hinges of the strongroom door were set in concrete. It was a lot harder than rock but not so hard that it wouldn't yield to the drills. Mario kitted himself and Petra out with safety gear and sent her off to shelter in an alcove

The drills were mounted on wheels and worked by compressors. He connected one up and wheeled it to the strongroom door. What followed was tedious and very noisy.

Petra could feel the vibrations and wondered about the noise they were making. Mario said the whole area was deserted at night. She hoped he was right.

Hours passed and nothing happened. Then a figure appeared. To her relief, it was Olaf. He entered the circle of light where Mario was working and shuffled towards him. Mario turned off the drill and removed his earmuffs and facemask.

'I'm almost there, Olaf.'

Olaf nodded but didn't say anything. Petra watched as he retreated into a corner and started to wave his arms around as if conducting an imaginary orchestra. She was reminded of his behaviour in the van and wondered if he was going through the movements needed to steer drones and kill people with them.

Suddenly, it was all over. Mario sprang back and the door broke away at the hinges. It didn't open fully but there was enough room for them to get inside and remove boxes of explosives. They waited for the dust to clear and began loading them into the van.

Kirstin adjusted her binoculars. If the man in the van was Mario Mendez-Klein then he was a very different person from the mild-natured

young fellow she had been told to expect. Within minutes of arriving at the airfield, he had forced his way through a locked gate and opened a door with some sort of hand tool.

That was one part of the evening's entertainment. The other was provided by the woman from the Café Noir. She left her car and took up a position on a grassy knoll where she could see what was going on. Kirstin guessed that her binoculars were equipped with night scopes, like her own.

A spy, spying on a spy.

It was a classical situation. She had lectured on it when she was supervising recruits in George Paget's counter espionage department. Top spies spied on other spies and she was doing that now. The other woman didn't know she was being watched.

Her attention was on Olaf who was spending most of his time wandering back-and-forth between his workshop and a plane that was standing nearby. He kept it up for hours. Finally, he seemed to have finished whatever he was doing and headed towards the tunnel.

The woman left the grassy knoll and stumbled off down the slope, peering through her binoculars and bumping into things. Kirstin had been in similar situations. People who equipped operatives didn't always supply the correct gear. They should have given the lady a pair of night-seeing goggles and they hadn't. Kirstin wished she'd had the foresight to bring a pair for herself.

She tapped Humphrey's arm.

'Time to go!'

Mario stepped forward with another box of explosives and placed it in the rear of the van. Olaf added a box of detonators and closed the door.

'That's enough.'

'I thought you needed more.'

'No,' Olaf shook his head. 'That's enough. I've modified one of the planes. We'll use that instead of the van.'

'You mean fly it like a drone?'

'Yes. I'll aim at the Great Hall. The rose window will be my target. We won't need much explosive. I'll wipe out Cuthbert Maguire and the rest of his gang in one big hit.'

'That what you think, Olaf Magnusson.'

A powerful light lit his face and a voice rang out.

Mario turned and saw a woman with a gun.

'I've been watching you.' She flicked her flashlight. 'Some people have been taken in by your lies and Carmel Mendez-Klein is one of them. I see you have her little boy with you.'

Mario recognised the voice. The lady's name was Jane and she came from California. When she spoke to his parents she used Spanish. When she spoke to Olaf she used English.

He shielded his eyes from the glare and saw two more figures. One was a fat male and the other a slim female. Jane seemed to be unaware of their presence. She continued to harangue Olaf as the woman advanced with slow gliding steps ... arms outstretched.

'Drop your weapon!'

Jane froze.

'Do I hear Kirstin Hansen?'

'Yes. You do!'

A bullet ricocheted above their heads.

'Now. Drop it!'

Jane's gun fell to ground.

'Move away!'

The fat man directed her to the wall.

Mario guessed that the newcomers were the secret agents employed by Charlie. He moved closer to Olaf.

'Are they the Hansens?'

'Yes,' Olaf nodded.

'We don't want anything to do with them.'

'No,' Olaf agreed.

Mario signalled to Petra to get into the van. She slipped round to the passenger side and Olaf followed. Mario got into the drivers seat and turned the ignition key. The engine purred into life and the lights came on. Angry shouts followed as he accelerated away.

Humphrey watched the van disappear. They were in an odd predicament. The people they were meant to protect had deserted them and it was far from clear what their next move should be. He glanced at Kirstin and Jane who were standing with bewildered looks on their faces. Jane was the first to speak.

'I think we should see what's happening.'

Kirstin scowled at her.

'You won't try anything silly.'

'Certainly not! We are professionals, Kirstin. We know how to behave. You will shoot me if I don't follow the rules.'

'And so will Humphrey. Don't forget that. My son is not as stupid as he looks.'

Humphrey decided not to challenge that remark. Kirstin had a way with words even if he didn't always agree with them.

'I've got some guys outside,' Jane said.

'What sort of guys?' Kirstin asked.

'Heavies ...'

'You mean the sort that come in with guns blazing?'

'Yes. And we don't want that to happen.'

Kirstin shone her flashlight in Jane's face.

'If any of these gentlemen put in an appearance, I expect you to convince them that we are on the same side. If you don't ... I'll fill you with bullets.'

'The same side?'

'Olaf Magnusson is a mass murderer with a long history of killing people. He is evidently in league with Mario Mendez-Klein and Petra de Villiers. The three are determined to wipe out your employers. In all probability they will succeed. You and your colleagues will then be without a job. Humphrey and I are in the same position. Our charges have abandoned us.'

Olaf pointed to a plane and Mario pulled up beside it. He recognised the aircraft as belonging to Cuthbert Maguire and wondered if Olaf had chosen it for that reason. There was something appealing about using one of Cuthbert's planes to wipe out the Cabal.

He helped Olaf load boxes of explosives on board and placed detonators amongst them. The detonators were of the percussion sort that go off upon impact. Olaf checked the load and turned to him.

He held out a hand.

'Goodbye, Mario.'

His face was composed and his voice was level and unhurried. He appeared far saner than Mario had ever seen him.

'Goodbye, Olaf.'

Mario shook his hand.

'Please turn the van's headlights back on. It will make it easier for take-off.'

'I'll do that, Olaf.'

Mario returned to the van and switched on the headlights. He guessed what would happen next. Olaf wasn't going to fly the plane as a drone. He would be in it when it reached its destination.

'He's going to kill himself,' Petra said.

'Yes,' Mario nodded. 'It's probably for the best. He seemed almost normal just now. There was no dribbling at the mouth. He knew what had to be done and how to do it.'

'He's left us this'

Petra held up an electronic device.

'It's his remote,' Mario said.

'His remote?'

'He uses it to open the gates.'

They watched as the plane sped down the runway and took off. Mario turned off the headlights and waited for his eyes to become accustomed to the dark. There was a new moon and just enough light to see by. They could sneak out the back way and get well clear of Jane and the Hansens.

They reached the airfield as the plane took off. Humphrey saw it race down the runway, illuminated in the headlights of the van. He guessed Mario was driving. The headlights went out and the van continued down the runway towards the back gate, which opened automatically when the van reached it.

He returned his attention to the plane. It had completed a circuit and was heading towards the castle. The ancient building was floodlit and stood out majestically on its pinnacle of rock. As he watched, a dark shape appeared in front of the main tower. He saw it silhouetted against the famous rose window at the end of the Great Hall. Moments later, the hall erupted in flames.

Humphrey had watched demolition teams at work. Top operators could bring down a building and leave surrounding structures unscathed. Olaf had done that. The Great Hall had caved in. The occupants would be dead but people in other parts of the castle would have escaped injury.

He threw out his arms.

'Surgical strike!'

The women ignored him. Neither seemed to appreciate the brilliance of Olaf's achievement. Jane turned to Kirstin.

'Can I have my phone please?'

'What do you want it for?'

'My heavies will arrive soon.'

'What about them?'

'They can't get in. Olaf has immobilised the gate. I'll tell them not to break it down. They can wait there. I'll walk across and join them.'

Kirstin handed her the phone.

'And I'll give you this.'

Jane took a card from her pocket.

'It's got my email on it. Could you put in a good word for me with Charles Paget? I'll send him my résumé if he's interested. Tell him I speak Spanish and French. Jane Smith is my professional name. I have other noms de guerre.'

Kirstin watched her leave. Years of experience told her that the case was over. They had done as much as they could. She turned to Humphrey.

'Time to go.'

'Yes, Mother. I suggest we leave by the back gate. Mario left it open. Perhaps he was thinking of us.'

Epilogue

David flicked through the TV-channels. Yet another Islamic terrorist group was claiming credit for the outrage. A hall, packed with some of the world's richest people, was totally destroyed when a suicide bomber flew a plane into it. Pictures showed investigators sifting through the rubble. An interview followed. Mario Mendez-Klein said his parents were amongst the fifty-four people who died in the incident. He and his friend, Ms Petra de Villiers, were returning from a visit to Foix when they saw the hall in flames. Mr Mendez-Klien said he hoped those responsible for the terrible crime would be brought to justice.

David turned off the television.

'They're a smart pair ... Mario and Petra.'

'What do you think they'll do now?' Kate asked.

'Take a long rest and get to know one another better.'

'Like us?'

'Yep.' David reached for his beer.

'How long can we keep it up?' Kate asked.

'Until Charlie's bankcard runs out.'

'Do you think he is still alive?'

'Dunno,' David shrugged. 'He's been through worse. Charlie is a great survivor.'

OTHER BOOKS IN THE SERIES



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