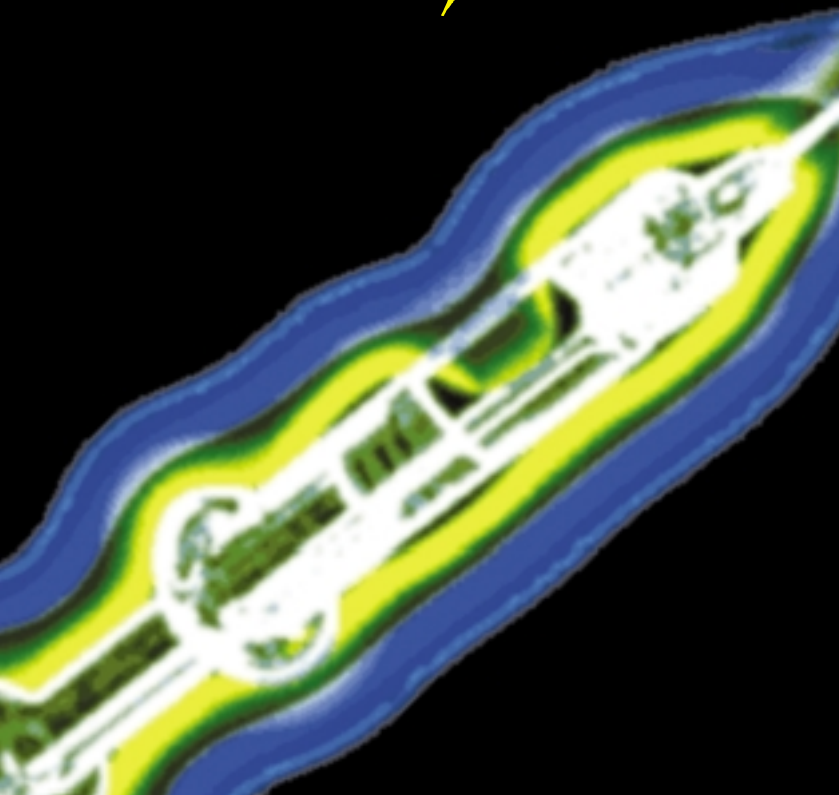


Your World Is About To Change

CLIVE WRIGHT

COLD GHOST



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For Gonzo

Prologue

February, Democratic Republic of Congo.

The year after next.

Of the three men grouped in the shade of the porch, the only one not visibly shuddering was the colonel. Sweat poured from the faces and necks of Sylvester and Carl, who shared the second of the four concrete steps, and the cords in Carl's neck stood out as though he was suffering cold-turkey, coming down with a tremendous crash from some terrible hallucinogenic experience. His arms were crossed over his belly, but that didn't seem to stifle the shaking very much. Sweat stains from his arms had joined with those from his chest, turning his khaki shirt a yellow the colour of English mustard. He was a large man, but at that moment he resembled nothing more than a lost and regretful

teenager, back several hours early from his first alcohol binge at the older kid's all-nighter.

Sylvester was coping surprisingly better, for he was a much smaller man - all wiry and packed close - a package wrapped too tightly, straining at the seams. He too was drenched and shivering, but appeared to be in a lot less pain, at least as far as the man with the rifle could ascertain, and he intended to get no closer. He could feel his hands trembling on the stock of the rifle, and he had to will himself to hold it level. Will himself unafraid.

The colonel's shirt was dry. There was no trace of sweat on him whatsoever, which should have been impossible in the suffocating heat. They had all suffered in the heat of the last five months - the sun never letting up - bullying the moisture from their bodies. It had made them tense and irritable at times, but none of them had succumbed to sunstroke, or been driven crazy with the heat. No, that had been something else. Something else entirely.

'Stay still, Andrew.'

It had been the rifleman's voice, though he himself hardly recognised it as such. The colonel did as he was told, after standing and making himself more comfortable by leaning against the doorframe. The rifleman didn't know whether he was simply fidgeting or planning something a little

more desperate. He suspected the latter, because he believed the colonel could have stayed in one position for hours on end, perhaps days - the man had the patience of a rock.

They'd been there for a little under two hours. The rifleman had the advantage of the shade from the acacia tree that looked as though it had erupted from the patchy scrub of ground that made up the front yard, and to which Carl had hooked one end of his hammock in those optimistic early days. The hammock was still there, its other end tied to the back of one of the Landrovers. It swayed softly over his head, though there was barely a breath of wind. He was sitting, pondering and simultaneously fighting down his growing dread, his back against solid, stone-like roots. He knew he was going to run.

He was going to run because he couldn't kill them. He suspected that they knew this. No, he was certain that they did. At least the colonel must - the rifle belonged to him, and he was looking too relaxed. Relaxed was not the man's usual demeanour. Quite the opposite, in fact. He couldn't kill them for any number of reasons. First, and most practically, there was only one bullet in the rifle. He supposed he could have asked them to stand in a neat row for him, allowing him to pass the bullet through each of their yielding skulls in turn, but

even if they took his request seriously, which he doubted, how could he rely on the bullet travelling cleanly through, without being deflected by bone or gristle. He could hardly rely on his compatriots' co-operation, and he wouldn't have blamed them. He'd have hardly co-operated with something so outlandish either. He'd never killed anyone before, and really didn't think he had it in him: that was reason number two. Lastly, these people were his friends, even now. They'd been together for too long. So he was going to run. But if he couldn't kill them, then at the very least he could slow them down a little.

The rifleman eyed the colonel. There was no malice in his stare, not as such. It was a look made more from a questioning fear. The look asked too many unanswerable questions at once. Why did you do it? Why did you deceive us all? What were you thinking? Who did you think you were trying to help? Why did you have to fuck up everything? Why did you need to fuck up the whole world? And, moreover, how in hell am I supposed to stop you?

He was sweating too much - it wasn't just the heat. The stock of the rifle felt slippery in his grip as he raised himself to his feet. The time for action had arrived. Any action. His head was swimming. He shook it and his vision blurred momentarily

before clearing. There was sudden movement in the doorway, and he swung the rifle up once more, his nausea forgotten.

Just Carl, leaning over, looking ready to vomit. The rifleman moved cautiously around the front of the nearest Landrover, tethered to the trunk of the tree, as though it might have grown restless and wandered off to find more luscious grazing elsewhere. Both the Landrovers were old Series Three models, discontinued long since, yet common enough to pick up for next to nothing anywhere on this boiling continent. They were inconspicuous, reliable, and easy to maintain. Easy to disable, too. He unsnapped one of the bonnet catches and then, moving crab-like around the front of the vehicle, facing the door of the Nissen Hut all the while, he fumbled the second catch open. Holding the rifle with one hand was tricky enough, but there was worse to come. He raised the lid of the bonnet high enough for the stay to snap into position, and glanced inside, locating the distributor cap on the side of the engine easily enough. It was fastened in place by two metal clips, which he unsnapped, all the while watching the colonel's unmoving, unnerving features. He was working blind, but the work was simple enough. He twisted off the cap, dropped it, and then grasped hold of the rotor arm housed beneath,

which fell into his hand after a little tugging and levering. He dropped it into his trouser pocket, where it jangled against his keys.

He paced to the other Landrover, not hurrying for fear of overlooking anything in his haste, but not dawdling either. He shoved the large briefcase from the driving seat over to the passenger side, and climbed in. It was a moment of vulnerability, and he fully expected the colonel to launch whatever surprise he had been cooking up, so he was relieved when no such thing happened. He lowered the rifle into the passenger footwell. Still no movement from the three men. What were they waiting for? He felt sure that they knew he had no intention of shooting them. They *must* know that, surely? You don't spend eight intimate months with someone without getting to know them inside out. Perhaps the two on the steps were still coming through, but that needn't have stopped the colonel. If anyone could prevent him driving away right now, it would be him. But the colonel didn't move: simply regarded him coolly, a tiny smile threatening to crack the thin straight line marking his lips, although it did not manifest itself fully. The rifleman started the engine, dropped the Landrover into first, and swung the wheel hard around. As he began to move, so did they.

He accelerated in a sweeping arc, first toward

them and then pulling away, bouncing over the ruts and scrub of the courtyard and out onto what passed for a road. If he expected the group to move quickly, he was disappointed. The colonel turned slowly on his heels and disappeared into the relative cool of the Nissen hut. The remaining two followed equally slowly, though their movements were less sure and their eyes seemed fixed on something distant and unknowable. Watching their movements, the rifleman was reminded somehow of marionettes. He turned his eyes from the wing-mirror and concentrated on the road ahead.

It was twilight when he stopped driving. He'd covered seventy miles in a little over three hours, which was exceptional going considering the terrain over which the majority of his journey had taken place had been far worse than any dirt-track he'd ever known. He didn't feel that seventy miles was nearly enough. However, it would have to suffice for now.

His bladder was ready to burst, and he relieved himself in the open. When he'd finished, he heaved out the heavy briefcase from the passenger seat. He placed it reverently on the cooling bonnet, unsnapped the latches, and opened it up. From the briefcase he extracted and set up a satellite phone, unfurled the receiving dish, joined the two with a thick wire. He dialled in, punching in the requisite

codes while adjusting the dish. After what seemed an age he could hear the line ringing at the other end, and then the answerphone cut in. He left a brief message, then opened his laptop and dialled into another number, a short wait before the “message sent” alert appeared on his screen, and then he unplugged and repacked the equipment carefully. Then he climbed back into the driver’s seat and resumed his journey. Dusk was slowly shifting into dark, and fatigue was beginning to gnaw at him. He couldn’t recall his last meal either, come to that. He’d gained a little time over the three men he’d left behind but not, of course, enough. There is never enough time, he thought. Never enough time for any of us. And there was the final reason he found himself incapable of murder: that even death would not have been an end, would not have been enough. Even dead, the threat lingered. It lingered in their blood. Their busy, roiling, cursed blood.

He’d been back on the road for quite some time before he even noticed the tears he’d shed.

PART ONE

WARNING

One

The television was still glowing, and it took Kathy a moment to focus on the screen and bring the picture to life. An underfed woman in a leotard was jumping up and down and breathlessly encouraging the watching nation to join her. Kathy groped for the remote control at the side of the sofa on which she had slept and, scrabbling over the buttons with her fingertips, managed to switch the thing off.

She yawned briefly, swallowed it, and swung her legs off the sofa, rubbing at her right arm as she did so, which was suffering from pins and needles where she had slept on it. Her jeans had become uncomfortable and the black sweatshirt she was wearing was wrinkled and stretched. Her underwear had twisted and ridden up, and she felt like a badly-packed suitcase. As soon as her faculties returned, she would get up and run a bath. Or

perhaps put the kettle on first. Or maybe whip up a little breakfast. She reached for the remote and switched the television back on. The woman in the leotard, presumably too tired to continue, had been replaced by a short man in a snug suit who stood in front of a map of Great Britain which was largely obscured by cloud-shaped symbols.

Kathy fell back into the cushions, trying mentally to shake off some of the feelings of sloth that had somehow come to dominate her life over the past few months. She felt lacklustre and drained, tired almost continually. Her doctor had diagnosed a mild depression, and subsequently prescribed anti-depressants; he being a practitioner of the old school: if you're remotely unsure, chuck a pill at it. Each morning, religiously, she would pop one of the little purple and green capsules out of its casing and drop it delicately into the wastebasket by her bedside cabinet. Some mornings she would intone 'Say aah' in the manner of a dentist as she dropped the tiny messenger of joy into the waiting maw of the by-now deliriously happy wastebasket. Let the quacks believe as they chose: a chemically induced happiness was no happiness at all in her opinion.

Her ailing moods were one of the reasons she had taken the week off. The other reason was less substantial. The past few weeks and months had

seen her moods slip away from loneliness and depression and into a more forbidding anxiety. Forbidding in that it was essentially groundless. The ever increasing lucidity of her dreams confounded her. She'd been waking lately from nightmares in which she had placed Ian in yet another hopeless, desperate death-trap, only to slip into sleep once again to repeat the exercise in even more gruesome, unwarranted detail. She dreamed as though she wished him harm. As the frequency of his calls diminished, so her dreams became more persistent. They had spoken every other day at first, and then it had been once a week, then twice a month. It had been three weeks since the last call. As soon as he had mentioned a small delay her heart had dropped into the pit of her stomach, and the rest of the conversation, for all the notice she took of it, needn't have happened at all. She had caught the excitement in his tone, and it had told her all she felt she needed to know. Work came first, Kathy McCleane came second. As though he had been reading her thoughts, Ian had said,

‘I will keep my promise, Kathy, I swear it. When this is over we'll get married and do all the things rich, retired couples do...’

‘Whatever they may be.’ She had been intentionally curt with him.

It washed straight over him. ‘Yes, whatever

they may be. Trust me, I'll be back before you know it. Won't be much more than a couple of weeks now.'

'Promise me.'

'I'll do my best, that I can promise.'

And then nothing for three weeks. The previous Monday she had spent her birthday alone. He hadn't sent a card. She had been too miserable to bother going out, even though she considered visiting her mother, where she knew she'd have been more than welcome, or going out with Paul, whom she'd known since college, and who counted as the brother she'd never had. But she'd been in no mood for their sympathy and the company she chose that evening – the insipidly glowing box in the corner of the living-room – was in no condition to provide it either.

She relinquished the sofa finally, deserting the pitiful companionship of the television, and made her way to the kitchen. Tea and buttered toast, that would have to do. She had neither the energy nor the inclination to prepare anything more complicated. While the kettle boiled, she shrugged out of her sleep-bedraggled clothes and dumped them unceremoniously into the linen-basket in the bathroom. Turning to the sink, she splashed cold water onto her face and then picked up her toothbrush. The toothpaste's heavily-manufactured

mint flavour proved a sharper introduction to the morning than either the leotard-woman or the man in the bad suit. ‘Congratulations Kath,’ she muttered through a mouthful of foam. ‘When brushing your teeth becomes the highlight of the day, you know you’re in trouble.’

When she looked at herself in the mirror, her mouth distorted by the toothbrush, and with white paste-spittle on her cheeks and on her chin, she appeared rabid. The effect was enhanced by the wildness of her hair, which was sticking up and out at every angle after its restless battle with the cushions throughout the night. Its usual serene waves had been replaced by far choppiest waters: had become rapids before the storm of the waterfall. Her pale blue eyes stared bloodshot back at her. She spat, rinsed, spat again. She grinned broadly at the mess grinning back at her.

‘When you get to the bottom, girl, there’s only one way to go – and that’s sideways.’

It had been one of Paul’s favourite expressions at college, but she’d have bet that he’d lifted it from one of his comedy videos. He had a seemingly inexhaustible supply of the things, and on more than one occasion she’d had to shut him up, and warn him that if he carried on in this vein he’d be in danger of turning into a walking cliché, forever repeating stolen remarks and phrases.

In the hallway, near the front door, on the low table which stood next to the palm, the tiny red light on the telephone flashed on and off, repeating its signal over and over, as faithful and ignorant as a retriever.

Dressed once more: clean blue jeans, denim shirt, trainers; Kath took up her post in the living-room, munching toast and gazing at the screen in the corner, ignoring the mug of tea cooling at her feet. Her chewing slowed and she struggled to swallow as the image on the screen blurred, and the newscaster became at first a shadow, and then less than a shadow. Something rippled, but she couldn't tell if it was the screen flickering or her eyes watering. She'd been prone to the odd unexpected outbreak of tears lately. She dropped the remains of her toast when Ian's ghost shimmered momentarily into the shadow-space where the newscaster had been. She could see his features clearly enough, but it seemed she was able to see through him at the same time, as if he were transparent, or close to. His eyes were staring out at her: wide, accusatory.

With a start, she snapped her head back, and her right foot sent the mug cartwheeling away, brown liquid spraying out over the cream-coloured carpet.

Kathy let out a low groan, no more than a guttural hissing breath, as she rolled herself quickly

forward off the sofa, and tried to snatch the mug up before any more damage was done. Quick as she was, it was too late. The mug was empty and the tea was already soaking its way into the carpet.

‘Shit.’ Kathy swore under her breath. She glanced back at the television and was only half relieved to see the newscaster back in his familiar place. Now that she’d been forced into action, her mood seemed to lift of its own volition. On her way back from the kitchen, a cold, damp cloth in her hand, she noticed the message-light, and had to force herself on into the living-room, to take care of the stain first.

As she scrubbed briskly, and for the most part ineffectively, at the stain, she tried to imagine who might have called her. Even though a call from Ian was long overdue, she scarcely believed it could be him. Ian was a stickler – no, scratch that – had used to be a stickler for routine. Until recently, that is. He’d always been aware of the hour or two time difference, and besides had made a point of only calling her in the evening, her time. Mind you, she’d no idea how long she’d slept last night. It seemed to be a longer period with each day that passed. When did she hit the sack last night? Good question. She couldn’t remember much of the evening, so it must have been pretty early, even by her standards. He wouldn’t have called before she’d

woken, would he? No, what would have been the point of that?

It must have been Paul. At this thought, she smiled – even though Paul lived in the same country, no more than twenty minutes from her, in fact, he was possibly less aware of the time than her fiancé in Africa. Apart from Ian or Paul, she could think of no-one else who would likely choose the middle of the night to call her. Her circle of acquaintances was not a large one, and she was happy to keep it that way. Her mother certainly wouldn't have called anytime before the afternoon, and it was extremely unlikely to be Daniel Johannsen, her Danish employer (probably soon to be ex-employer if she continued to take so much unwarranted time off). No, it had to have been Paul, and she suddenly began to dread just listening to the message.

She'd been seeing an awful lot of Paul since Ian had been away, and occasionally she'd felt a tiny twinge of guilt. She knew this was a ridiculous feeling to have, especially as they'd seen no less of each other, probably more of each other in fact, when Ian himself had been around. She mused on the two men. As boys they'd grown up on the same street, been to the same schools, and shared almost everything. Kathy had met them both at college, where she had at first been amused, and then

charmed, by their inseparability. The three of them gelled quickly, not least because of her shared interest with Paul in the Arts. Ian had more concrete interests, though his love of numbers came as much from the heart as did Paul's love of Art. It was the boys differences as much as their common interests, Kathy quickly came to realise, that bound them so closely together. At times she felt envious of their intimacy – envious of the obvious yet invisible bond between them that she could never either fully understand or be privy to. If Ian or Paul had the slightest idea of the way Kathy felt she stood outside looking in at certain times, they were at least generous enough not to show it, and the trio inevitably grew close in a short period of time. When, in their second year, Ian had started dating an overly-pretty first-year blonde, Paul and Kathy had at first welcomed the transition from trio to quartet, even though the newcomer – Christina 'Call me Chris, I hate Tina' had been unjustly wary of Kathy's relationship with Ian. The situation resolved itself nicely three months later at the Christmas party where, the morning after, Kathy woke in a familiar room, though not her own. The alien lumps in the duvet next to her had proven to be Paul, but then she had deduced that much already from the Gauguin print on the back of the door and from the interestingly messy desk and

overflowing wastebasket in the corner.

Lunch that day had been at first mildly uncomfortable. Paul and Kathy finally enlightened Ian as to the new state of affairs between them, and he had been delighted, and behaved as though he had seen this coming for a very long time, and was only too happy to be proved correct. 'I hate Tina' mellowed significantly when she arrived some time later and Ian allowed the penny to drop ever so gently. For Chris' part, she was only too happy to be part of a 'proper' quartet now, and for once was wise enough to keep her opinion to herself.

Kathy had been rubbing the cloth across the carpet with more force than she realised. It suddenly rolled out from under her bunched fist, and she scraped her knuckles painfully against the carpet, friction burns turning three of her knuckles instantly red. She sat back on her haunches, licked her knuckles, and blew on them to cool them down. On her way to the phone, she tossed the cloth all the way from the kitchen doorway to the sink where, rather than landing with a neat little plop in the bowl, it chose to drape itself over the front of the cupboard doors, before dropping onto the floor. Kathy didn't even notice, intent as she was on the flashing message-light. She leaned over the little black plastic machine, and pressed the button marked PLAY.

And listened with growing horror as the world she knew dropped away from her like a stone.

Two

Paul Scaife woke to the sound of the insistently jangling phone. His sheets argued against the idea, tangling his arms and legs as he tried to roll out of bed. He was inclined to agree with the sheets actually, but the phone had gone on for far longer than the ten rings Paul normally allowed before answering, so he came to the reluctant decision that it was a reasonably important call. He struggled out of the sheets and emerged naked into the bright morning glare of his studio flat, pausing only to scrape the sole of his foot painfully on one of the protruding slats of the accursed futon and to mentally swear at Ana, before limping over to the corner table on which the telephone squatted. The chrome and glass monstrosity stood hideously out of place in the airy, pine and ash-wooded theme of his flat.

‘Yeah?’ Always just “yeah”. He never answered

with his name or number. If someone called him, he liked to presume that they knew who they were calling and why.

‘Paul?’

‘Kath. Hi.’ Her singular enquiry and the tiny wobble in her tone gave up a wealth of information that immediately disturbed him. She was worried about something. More than that. Something serious. Well, Paul could do serious when really pressed.

‘Paul, it’s...’ Another pause.

‘I’m listening Kath. Tell Uncle Paul what the problem is.’ He mentally kicked himself. Serious. Yeah, right.

‘Well, I... I don’t really...’ She trailed off again.

‘Do you want me to come over? Talk face to face if it’s easier?’

‘No, it’s... hold on a sec.’

Paul could picture her. In his mind’s eye he could see her covering the mouthpiece with her palms and slowly drawing in two or three deep breaths. He knew her routine. She would compose herself, counting slowly with her eyes shut, and then allowing the strong part of Kathy to take the helm.

‘Look Paul, can you get away for a few days?’

‘Well, er...’

‘I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important. You

know that.'

'Sure. I know that. I can. Of course I can. I don't have another assignment pinned down yet.'

'Assignment? That a new code word for your bimbos?'

'They're not... Jesus, forget it. When are we leaving and where are we going?'

'I'll be at your place in about an hour. Could you be ready by then?'

'Okay. But where...'

'Wales.'

'Wales? Wow, how glamorous. I'll not bother with my trunks then. How long are we going to be away?'

'Truthfully, I'm not a hundred per cent sure, but it shouldn't be any longer than a few days. A week at most.'

'Why, Kath? What's going on?'

'I'll tell you when I get there. It's kind of hard to explain, especially over the phone.'

'Sounds a little paranoid to me, girl. MI5 on your case again?'

'Funny boy. Just pack. I'll see you in an hour.'

'This table has *got* to go.'

'What?'

'Nothing. I'm packing. See ya.' He dropped the receiver back into its cradle, and then lifted the whole set off the table and placed it on the floor

next to the lately-becoming-irritating table, which he picked up and then placed in the centre of the studio – a lonely right-angled triangle of chrome and glass – an island of low taste. Paul stood back and surveyed the offending article, his hands on his hips and his head slightly cocked.

‘Right.’ He spat the word out, but the resolve he’d hoped would appear along with the decision was nowhere in evidence. He’d simply have to act without it. Despite himself, he’d let Kathy climb beneath his skin with as much ease as though he were a comfortable old sweater she’d thrown aside only the day before. He had no resolve to steel. So resolution would have to wait. Hell, it had been waiting thirty years, so he could hardly expect it to show up at a single snap of his fingers. He trudged off to the bathroom, and the vigorous refreshment of his prized power-shower, with the thought in mind that where he was going he’d be lucky to get a tin bath and lukewarm, murky water for the best part of the coming week. Still, he’d known worse.

Three

‘We may not have transport, but we still have communications.’

‘We can hardly call for a taxi.’

‘I was thinking more along the lines of a delivery of spares.’

The evening had cooled considerably, but the air in the cabin was still humid. The three men seemed not to notice either the humidity or the cold, however. Outside, the sun had finished with the day and a large moon hung low in the sky. The muted, distant cries of animals, though carried for miles in the still air, seemed to peter out and die at the doorstep of the cabin, as though it were surrounded by thicker, somehow sound-proof air. Animals and birds padded and flew through the forests surrounding the outpost, but in the enclosing courtyard not a living thing moved. The remaining Landrover squatted, tethered to its

hammock-leash, reduced to redundancy. It was to this problem the three of them now addressed themselves.

‘Why didn’t we stop him when we had the chance?’ asked Sylvester.

‘He wouldn’t have used the rifle,’ added Carl. ‘Not on us.’

‘Agreed. He wouldn’t have.’ The colonel joined them at the table, depositing a glass of water in front of each of them as he sat. ‘But we could no more take a life than could he.’

‘It never had to come to that,’ said Carl. ‘We could have stopped him from leaving without any bloodshed. The very least we could have done was stop him disabling the Landrover.’

‘True enough,’ the colonel replied. ‘But then neither of you were in a fit state for any action at the time.’

‘Even so...’

‘Even so, yes, I could have stopped him. As to why I didn’t, well, I’m not one hundred per cent certain. Only that it goes a little deeper than Ian versus the rest of us. Remember who financed this project, after all. Without him, we’d have been exactly nowhere.’

‘So you felt we owed him something?’ Sylvester spoke bitterly. ‘Even after his betrayal?’

‘It was a choice, Sly, not a betrayal. Just an

ordinary, rational, human decision that he made.'

'An emotional decision.'

'He also decided not to kill *us*, remember?'

'Stranded here?' Sylvester choked. 'He may as well have pulled the trigger.'

'Where do you think he's gone?' Carl moved to lighten the subject, and Sylvester's darkening mood.

'Not to any of the authorities, if that's what you mean. There wouldn't be much point, would there?'

'All the evidence will have been destroyed by then. That what you mean?'

'That, and the very implausibility of anything he might say being taken seriously. No, he's only got one place he can go.'

'Home?'

'Home.'

Sylvester toyed with his glass. 'Bringing us back to our more immediate problem, what are we going to do now?'

'I can't speak for the two of you,' the colonel replied, 'but I would most certainly like to see Ian again. I feel he may come round to our way of thinking if only I could get the chance to sit down with him and work this through. And besides, I think this whole thing should be done properly. Ian was there at the beginning, and I should like to see

him there at the end as well. It's only fitting.'

'So we go after him.'

'This isn't a gangster movie, Sly. Ian may be on the run, but I don't think he even knows what he's running from.'

'How could he?' asked Carl.

'Which is why I think it's important to catch up to him. By the time I do, perhaps he'll have had a chance to calm down and think things through.'

'There's another possibility,' Sylvester said in low, growling tones. Carl raised his eyebrows enquiringly, but the colonel looked at him squarely and asked,

'Such as?'

'We might simply be giving him time to find a way to fight back.'

'Ian?' The colonel lost himself in thought for a moment. 'Very doubtful. A longshot at best. We've been cosseted together too long. I could not for a second see Ian as either an enemy or a threat. I can't see him as anything other than the friend he has always been to us.'

'A friend who turned on us all at the last,' said Sylvester.

'You made your choice, Sly, and Ian made his. You feel this nonsensical betrayal only because you were the one so opposed to the final stage of this project. You feel betrayed because Ian argued the

pros against your cons. Now he's up and run off, you yourself feel emotionally as well as physically stranded.' The colonel slowed his pace, trying to measure the depth of Sylvester's sense of betrayal from his stress-lined face. 'And I don't remotely blame you. But time cannot be undone, and we must go on, because there is no way back now. No, what I suggest is that we stick to our original itinerary from here on in. I'll get in touch with you when the time comes.'

Sylvester looked as close to tears as the colonel had seen any man, but he knew that he would not, could not, cry. That was behind him also.

The chill air that the African night brought to their attention through the open cabin-door raised no goose-bumps, nor produced any shivers. The temperature had dropped rapidly, and the cool stickiness of the air announced the storms that were undoubtedly on the way. The rainy season had only just started, but the colonel knew what was coming, and secretly welcomed it – it would at least remove from Sylvester's mind any problem other than the one at hand. From his past, the colonel dredged up the memory of a Texan colleague, who had once described the monsoons to him as "like a horse pissing on a flat rock," which he considered an eminently suitable description of the rains he could feel coming. It would be a hard

trail out of here, he knew, but one which the three of them were more than well-equipped to deal with. He needed some space away from Sylvester and Carl – a little time to put his plans in some sort of order. The relative solitude of his quarters would have to suffice for the time being.

‘I suggest we retire for the evening. We’ll make a fresh start with clearer heads come the morning.’

‘I’m not feeling remotely tired,’ said Sylvester, ‘and I know that you don’t either. Why should we postpone any longer?’

‘You’d like us to march straight off into the night?’

‘What’s stopping us, exactly?’

‘How about we compromise?’ the colonel felt a tiny vestige of frustration, but it disappeared quickly enough. ‘I would like a little time alone to get one or two things straight in my mind, and to prepare for the trek. I’m assuming we’re agreed that we’re not going to call on any outside assistance, so we all have to prepare, if only mentally, for a couple of days slog before we reach any civilisation. We’ll set off at first light – I trust that will be soon enough for the pair of you?’

The night passed swiftly for all of them. Only Carl appeared to manage any sleep, even though his mind was reluctant to join in the same dormancy as

his body. Sylvester spent the night first pacing his room, and then walking around outside, as though practising for the walk to come. The colonel gave up any idea of sleep, and spent the time writing in his journal. This tome, which he'd kept regularly since his teenage years, was the colonel's only real treasure. His whole life, it seemed to him, could be found in these volumes. Here were his parents, his college education, his career and his ex-wife, the Texan beauty Jo-Beth, and her Texas-sized appetite for life, for love and, more desperately, for alcohol. Here were the plans and dreams of his teenage self – some of them realised and others still-born. Here was his transition to adulthood and maturity, and the army career it had brought. Here was the fast-track through the military ranks culminating in the posting at USAMRIID, where his specialist knowledge of level-four hot agents had placed him in one of the most revered, and feared, positions, along with a tiny handful of other scientists, both military and civilian. Here was the death of his father, who had struggled with Alzheimer's for nigh on ten years. That death hit the colonel harder than he could ever have imagined, and far harder for some reason than that of his mother's, who had passed away fourteen years previously. Here was the germination of his plan, and the lengths he'd gone to in order to secure the right people, not to

mention the necessary capital. Here lived ream upon ream of copious notes and diagrams he'd spent year upon year outlining, and here lay the last seventeen months – painstakingly laid out – the discoveries, the setbacks, the many and varied experiments and their cause and effect upon the next. Here lay London, and the move to Africa. Here was M4, and Cecily, and their fates. And here also was his need to find a fitting ending to his own story. There was no future for his past; and his future, so far as he could divine, held no place for this catalogue of memories. This was, he believed, to be the last entry of his ongoing autobiography, and he wished to make something special of it. After tonight, he somehow felt, there would be no need for this written history. After tonight, the whole planet would hold his life in its collective memory.

Sylvester continued to pace around the outside of the huts, which had struck him as hideously barrack-like when he had first arrived, although he could see now a certain stark beauty in their simplicity. As he walked he lost himself in his recent memories. They flooded through him, for what he hoped would be the last time. He was impatient to be away from here. Away from the tragedies he'd gladly leave behind and off into the revelations of their tomorrows. He envied Carl his

easy-going manner and acceptance of fate, and secretly knew that his anger with Ian had been rooted more in their similarities than in their differences. But he was cursed lifelong, it would seem, with impetuosity. He had made his decision that way, even with all due regard to the consequences, yet only the day before had been arguing against that very decision with Ian, who had proven more cautious, perhaps inevitably so, than had he.

He passed by the colonel's window for the umpteenth time that night, and glanced in. He could see the colonel hunched over his desk, lit by his little gas-powered lamp, scribbling furiously in his diary. Sylvester had never kept a diary himself, even when, as a child, it had seemed that every Christmas would bring him a new book of blank sheaves that were destined to remain that way for the forthcoming year. He'd never been much for writing anything down – the complete opposite of the colonel, who couldn't pass water without logging it down immediately afterwards. There was no chance at all that the colonel could have heard his silent, inward chuckle, yet he had stiffened slightly and stopped writing, so that Sylvester knew the colonel was somehow aware of him. He broke his gaze from the man's back and continued his patrol.

Carl watched the shadowy figure of Sylvester pass by his window. For all that he feigned sleep, he was no more capable of it than were the others. His mind raced agitatedly along paths he had trodden well in the last few months. Sylvester's thin apparition disappeared from view, and Carl sank back further into his pillows, though he knew no real reward lay there. He folded his massive arms behind his head and craned his neck to look at the ceiling. He'd been cramped in these tiny quarters for five months now, and it had taken him very little time to outgrow the restraining metrics of them. But then Carl outgrew everything he encountered, whether it be a room, a career, or yet another failed relationship. Carl was simply bigger than life, and far bigger than his own life. His surroundings had always struggled to contain him. The air itself changed density when his presence invaded a room. In his contemplative torpor he could feel the colonel hard at work on his beloved diary, and could hear Sylvester retreading his over-trodden path around the barracks. He felt a kinship with Sylvester but would have been hard pushed to say why. Only that, as Sylvester was the very antithesis of him – white, moneyed, spoilt, and given to rashness – so he felt they had an invisible bond of brotherhood, obviously more so now, since the decision. But even before then, there had been

that spark of something unspoken between them: of something that would fit where only chalk could fit cheese. Carl knew Sylvester pretty much inside-out, and was not remotely surprised at the younger man's inclination to go walkabout on the eve of their departure. He knew also what the colonel would undoubtedly be doing – writing in that accursed journal of his – trying to make sense of something which essentially had no sense. But let the colonel have his folly – he had been the one to instigate the decision – had forced it upon them all – and if he was now suffering from any doubt then let him try futilely to work through it in his own way. The colonel had his journal, Sylvester his agitated pacing; but Carl would come to acceptance of the decision in his own manner – his usual manner – which was to let all of life's many decisions wash up against him and break their foamy outlines against the solid rock of his being.

He was looking forward to the following day's journey. It would give them all a chance to settle into their new roles and to plan the future with some precision. He knew that Sylvester had not really considered future events much beyond finding Ian and settling whatever score he so obviously felt, but the colonel must have analysed the time ahead in far greater detail, as was his natural wont. For Carl's part, he would be happy to

go with whatever flow proved agreeable for the time being. There was plenty of time to work out an agenda of his own at a later date. These thoughts should have settled his mind and allowed him the sleep he felt he deserved, but his mind was having none of it. He was not used to over-analysing any given situation, but he could not stop his incredibly active mind from spinning off into the more obscure dimensions of their collective predicament. And the more he analysed, the less clear their position became. He tried desperately to force his old way of thinking to the forefront of his mind, but it proved fruitless: the old ways were more than gone – they were relics of a past that could now never be recaptured.

The morning caught none of them by surprise. Each man had been awake most of the night, yet seemed to suffer little or no ill effects from the loss of sleep. They had gathered before dawn in the kitchen, and sipped coffee together in silence.

During the night, Sylvester had spent some time carting several large cans of petrol into the huts. The colonel now waved his hands in their direction and peered enquiringly at him.

‘I presumed we’d be leaving nothing behind.’ Sylvester spoke without raising his voice above a whisper. He dragged his eyes from the colonel, returning them to the mug in his hands.

‘Yes. Exactly so,’ the colonel replied distractedly. ‘Was that simply a lucky guess on your part? A leap of intuition?’

Sylvester gazed up at the colonel from his chair. ‘I hope so,’ he said.

The colonel made a humph sound, snorted out through his nose and throat, but refrained from any further comment. Carl drained the rest of his coffee and grimaced slightly. ‘Must be losing my taste for it.’ He stared at the other two men for a moment. ‘Well?’

‘No time like the present,’ said Sylvester.

The colonel said nothing, but finished his coffee quickly and then threw the mug into the sink. It wouldn’t be needed again. Carl stood, grabbed up one of the jerry-cans as though it weighed no more than a milk-bottle, and heaved himself through the rear door. The colonel heard the slam of the trap-door followed by the thudding rings of Carl’s boots on the metal ladder.

‘That’s downstairs taken care of, then. Where do you want to start, Sly?’

Sylvester struggled another of the cans up into a two-handed grip and waddled awkwardly after Carl. He side-stepped the yawning square gap in the floor and made his way through to the private quarters at the rear of the building. The colonel had an uneasy feeling that Sylvester would be paying

special attention to Ian's lately-deserted rooms. With a grunt, he lifted another of the jerry-cans and made his way out of the front door and into the yard. He unscrewed the cap and slowly made his way around the large hut, splashing petrol against the walls and walkways as he did so, until he had come full circle, arriving once more at the front door as Sylvester emerged. Carl joined them less than a minute later.

In the yard, no more than twenty feet from the door, lay each man's rucksack, containing only those very few treasures that none of them could bear to part with. 'Would you care to do the honours?' Carl tossed a box of matches to the colonel, who caught them adeptly, before striking one and flicking it through the open door.

The petrol-soaked floor caught quickly, the flames exploding in a greedy frenzy, desperate to devour. The fire raced through the ground floor of the building, leaping the gap to the basement level and entering each of the men's quarters simultaneously. The thin layers of paint on each door bubbled in the heat, before catching and turning to runny soot. The colonel's collection of books first curled, and then turned themselves inside-out, finally bursting into instantly-crumbling flame. Ian's wooden trunk, carefully stored beneath his desk against the wall until very

recently, when it had been dragged out into the centre of the room and had its lock kicked into pieces, was set upon by the flames like a predator finding an easy kill. His photograph album, the pictorial history of Paul and Kathy and himself, was first pawed at, and then mauled, and then finally torn apart by the merciless, ravenously hungry flames.

The rooms of Sylvester and Carl fared no better. The wood-slatted beds made easy targets, the mattresses melting through their own springs. Shelving crumbled, the desk-lamps toppled as the desks upon which they rested keeled to the floor, legs breaking into ebony ash. Windows exploded outward into the yard and surrounding scrub. The light-bulbs hanging overhead popped and their plastic-coated wires dripped and fizzed.

Long before the fire had made it through the floor-hatch into the lower level, the three men had turned their back on the camp and struck eastward. By the time the outer walls collapsed in on themselves they had covered three miles. Forty minutes in real-time, but a fraction of that in fire-time. As the flames finally found their way to the basement, and the source of fresh nourishment, the men had reached the crest of the nearest hill. They started down the far side without a backward glance, while behind them the orange glow grew

briefly brighter, before fading along with all things
past.

Four

He'd been walking on the edge of exhaustion for the last hour. The temptation to stop and curl up in sleep was overwhelming, but even though the road seemed to stretch endlessly ahead of him there was enough light in the moon and stars to see by, and the knowledge of civilisation, or semi-civilisation at some point along this journey drove him onward. The comforting weight of the rifle in his hand warmed him against the unknowable out of sight: of animals or bandits or whatever other monsters that sprang forth in his imagination. The water-satchel over his shoulder was no longer heavy, and he guarded what remained with jealous little sips.

Perhaps he should have stopped driving when night had fallen, but he could not shake off the urgency he had felt. Fear had fogged his concentration, and he had been lucky to survive the

plunge into the ditch that had forced him out on foot. The Landrover fared well enough, and still ran, but without either winch or anchor to tie it to, it may as well have been parked on the moon.

His imagination played havoc with his senses, and the surrounding darkness proved fertile ground for his fears. Everywhere he looked he saw the colonel, or Carl or Sylvester, tracking him at the periphery of his vision. His former friends had taken on a far more sinister countenance in the gloom, and with each step his spirits sagged into the welcoming embrace of his dark and surely inevitable fate. He entertained thoughts of laying a trap for them at some point along the road or in the town he knew to be not that much further ahead. At least he hoped he knew. He could not be wholly sure of the distance left to travel, nor even of the distance he had covered thus far. It would be beyond his sense of irony to die this close to either the danger behind or the salvation that surely lay ahead.

His confused scheming plagued him, but it had at least the positive effect of pushing to the back of his mind all thoughts of rest, and he ploughed doggedly onward. He forced himself to think of Kathy, the light at the end of this dark journey, but he found it impossible to focus on her. He knew her every feature intimately, her frowns

and smiles, her hair and the smell of her, yet for the first time since distance had separated them he could not feel her as a tangible presence. She had been at his side every waking moment as inspiration and muse, as comforter and tormentor, and yet now he felt her invisible presence slipping away from him, as insubstantial as the darkness surrounding him, and as impossible to picture. His loss was immeasurable and irreplaceable, and filled him with both desperation and new courage. A fresh strength revived his flagging limbs, and though his gait changed but little, it seemed to him to be relentless and unstoppable. He was going to make it all the way home. No microscopic forgotten death awaited him on this road. Nothing could touch him save the glowing reward at the end of this journey. Her image swam away from him still, but the ideal of her remained firm in his mind. He coursed and sailed blindly through every conceivable aspect of their now-inevitable reunion, playing each scene in his head like a story already done and simply waiting to be told. The taking up of her hand, her welcoming embrace and warm kisses, the smile at her lips when she answered his proposal. Futures mapped themselves at his dust-stirring feet, and they were none of them unattractive or unattainable.

And then his thoughts simply stopped.

Blankly. Wiped clean. His mind now a white space where even a mote of dust would have felt unwelcome. The firelight he saw ahead filled his mind like the sun. No star had ever shone brighter. The unattainable was within his reach, and his stumbling footsteps redoubled their speed, so that when he broke into the circle of the camp he was practically running. He came to an abrupt halt in the centre of the circle and stared wildly around him, scaring the handful of nebulous, gauzy faces surrounding him, his mind was white with a relief approaching ecstasy. And when he passed out in a dead faint it was with a longing to fall, and to keep falling; into a warm, embracing, rescuing depth.

Five

Paul hadn't needed to peer through the security spy-hole in his door when the bell rang. He'd known it would be Kathy, and he'd peered anyway. Except the hallway was empty. Puzzled, he snapped the catch back and swung the door wide.

'What *are* you doing?' He addressed the back pockets of Kathy's jeans.

She was bent double, rummaging around in an oversize handbag. It was more of a hold-all really, but then Prada-style impracticality had never impressed Kathy. She straightened up with a telephone in her hands.

'I don't get it.'

'Message from Ian. Are you going to let me in? Hmm?'

He stood aside as Kathy swept past him, straight to the chrome monstrosity in the centre of the room, on which she unceremoniously plonked

the phone.

‘Plug socket?’

With an inward sigh, Paul swept up the hold-all Kathy had left in the hallway and let the door swing back into its frame.

‘Under the window. There,’ he pointed.

‘Nice table. New?’

‘You like it?’

‘Well...’

‘You want it?’

‘Er... no.’

‘Me neither.’

‘Ah. That’s what you meant on the phone earlier. You’re easily distracted, Paul. Anyone ever tell you that?’

‘I seem to recall it being one of your favourite topics. Right up there along with my idleness and potential infidelity. Coffee?’

‘That would be nice.’

While Paul busied himself in the kitchen, Kathy plugged in the phone and then settled herself on the wide windowsill. From where she sat, the River Thames was just visible through the light morning rain. She swept her eyes around the interior of the flat. It looked comfortable, if a little Spartan, and too obviously furnished around the needs of a single man. The masculine feel was evident in almost everything – from the imitation

open fireplace to the overly-elaborate entertainment centre. Two of the walls were almost entirely covered with black-and-white photographs, which she recognised as Paul's favourite examples of his own work. Amongst the close-ups of intricate architecture and portraits of many ethnic, mostly elderly, characters, his portrait of Kathy, taken in a Soho coffee shop – her head bent forward over a cappuccino which she cupped with both hands, steam obscuring her features – seemed at the same time distinctly out of place and yet right at home there. “Comfortably incongruous” seemed to sum up both Paul and his surroundings. Then he arrived with the coffee, and Kathy slid gently back into the present.

To Paul, Kathy seemed distant somehow, even melancholy. Seeing her in his window stirred memories he was certain he did not want activated once more. The rain outside softened her edges, and paled the red in her hair. She appeared horribly fragile all of a sudden, and he couldn't reconcile that with the storm of the girl he'd known for so many years. Her slender, pale hands reached up for the mug he was proffering, and a smile broke across her face when she lifted it and inhaled the aroma.

‘The message?’ he prompted.

‘Yeah. Okay. Coffee first.’

She seemed altogether too hesitant, but Paul

was in no hurry, and he did not want to rush her. He changed tack. 'He's still in Africa, I take it?'

'Still there, yes. For the time being at least.'

'When did you last hear from him?'

'A little over three weeks ago.'

'Doesn't sound like him at all.' And it really wasn't like Ian. Mister Reliable. Captain Steadfast. Even in their university days, when four years of hedonism was traditionally only interrupted by brief bursts of all-night study and all-day examinations, you could have set your watch by Ian Ashbury.

'He even missed my birthday.'

'Whoa.' Paul took a step back. 'Is he ever gonna pay for that. He'd better bring something special back with him.' He grinned widely. 'Like your very own dictatorship.'

Kathy smiled up at him. Paul's particular brand of irreverence was working to cheer her up, whether she liked it or not.

'Go on, play it,' she said finally.

Paul strode over to the answer-phone and blinked down at it for a few moments. He was nervous suddenly, and had no idea why. 'Isn't this supposed to have a little cassette in it, or something?'

'It's digital, doesn't need a cassette. Just press the play button.'

He did so, and the voice of Ian Ashbury immediately filled the room.

‘Kathy. I...’ A pause. ‘I haven’t got too much time to try to explain this and... and anyway, I’m not sure I can over the phone. Something went wrong. Something important.’ Another pause. ‘Shit. I’m not making much sense. Look, I need you to get away from London. Go to Aunt Edie’s. The air’s good. I’ll meet you there in a few days.’ More dead air. ‘Take the laptop. I’ll mail you my diary. You might... it might explain a little. I’ll come as fast as I can. I love you. Now do as you’re told.’

That was all. The silence that followed pressed down on them both like a physical weight. Kathy was staring into her coffee, and Paul got the impression she was struggling to hold back her tears. The machine gave a little click, which Paul presumed indicated that it had finished its task.

‘Brief. To the point. Much more like the Ian I know.’ Paul grinned his best grin, but Kathy seemed to be having none of it. She continued to gaze blankly out at the rain. Paul pressed on, regardless. ‘I didn’t know you had an Aunt Edie. Is she the one we’re going to Wales to see?’

‘Yeah. Kind of,’ she answered.

Paul felt it was time to stop pressing.

‘Are you ready?’ She looked up at him expectantly, failing to hide what Paul at first took

to be impatience, and then realised was frustration, mixed with more than a little fear. The look on her face made him want to hold her: to comfort her and assure her that everything was going to be just fine, but that would mean a confrontation that he was certain he was not ready for, let alone Kathy.

‘Nearly. Just got to grab a couple of bits. Two minutes.’

Kathy packed her answerphone back into her bag and took the now empty coffee mugs back into the kitchen while Paul fussed and busied himself in the bathroom, emerging only when he was good and ready. In his subconscious, Paul knew that he was trying to slow the pace down significantly. He’d never been wholly comfortable living at Kathy’s speed. It was far too frenetic for him. For her part, he knew, she believed Paul’s existence trundled along at a snail’s pace. A very old, asthmatic snail at that.

‘Ready,’ he finally announced.

‘Possibly a new record for you. Not quite half an hour.’

‘Okay, okay. Point taken.’ He hefted two large hold-alls and followed her out of the flat.

Six

He handled the coffee carefully, as though it might wriggle, snake-like, away out of his grasp. The petite woman studied him warily. She sat splay-footed on a large rock, forking bacon and beans into her mouth from a metallic plate. He forced out a tired smile, to show how harmless he was, but he might as well have smiled at the rock on which she perched. He unlocked his eyes from hers and finished his coffee in uneasy silence.

‘Coffee okay?’ The voice came from behind him, and he twisted around in time to see two men emerge from the roadside brush. They were both tall, lean men, and could have been cast from the same physical mould, but their poise and garb gave lie to any relation. Tom introduced himself, and Ian found himself liking the man immediately. He was South African, his accent diluted by an English education. A great wide smile broke out over his

entire face as he extended a hand out to Ian. His blonde mop shook as he nodded his head in the direction of his companion. 'And that there's Jex. J.E.X. Crazy name for a crazy fella.'

Jex gave him a little half-smile and nod, which seemed to be all he could manage for the time being. Where Tom was fair, Jex was dark, and that appeared to hold for his clothes and demeanour also. Tom struck him as the epitome of the Marlboro Man, dressed head to foot in khaki and looking very much the part of the safari guide, which Ian presumed him to be. But with this presumption he could make neither head nor tail of the roles of the other two. Jex looked younger than his years, and paid no deference to the heat by covering himself in a black Iron Maiden Tee-shirt, black jeans and black boots. Gail, on the other hand, could have stepped straight from a holiday resort. Shorts, bikini-top, and a sarong slung round her tanned waist. The only jarring note were the immaculate trainers. How any material, least of all footwear, could stay un-dusted in this country was a mystery to him.

'And you got Gail here. Our merciless leader and tyrant of the trails.'

Ian smiled at the practised introductions, before palming them off with one of only a few lies he had ever told. 'I'm Ian, first-rate anthropologist

and second-rate Landrover driver. I lost mine in a ditch last night God only knows how many miles back.'

'You're lucky to be alive, then. Night-driving? On *these* so-called roads?'

'Uh-huh. Stupid, I know, but I've got a very important appointment to keep.' Not really a lie either, that one, he thought.

'We've got a winch, we could get you going again.' Jex showed his human side.

'Not in the state I left it in, I'm afraid.' Another lie.

'There's a mechanic in Kundasa,' said Tom.

'Exactly where I'm headed. If you can get me there, I'll gladly make it worth your while.'

'Don't worry about that mate, this is a sponsored venture. Forty miles out of our way isn't going to hurt anyone.'

'It'll lose us a day's walk,' said Gail, who then turned instantly sheepish under a glare from both Tom and Jex. While the two men clattered their equipment back into the vehicle, she rummaged about and appeared with a tin of white emulsion paint. She prised the lid off with a screwdriver and then painted a great X on the rock where she had been sitting. She looked at Ian, and finally donned a smile for him. 'Gail woz 'ere.'

Forty minutes later they were on their way to

Kundasa. Tom handled the wheel of the enormous Discovery with an adroitness that left Ian envious, and as Tom threw the four-wheel drive into corners and tiny rutted tracks he filled Ian in on the details of their venture.

Gail was a walker, as simple as that. At seventeen, she had walked from Land's End to John O'Groats, and raised more than seven thousand pounds for the Multiple Sclerosis Society in the process. Two years later she had taken a year out of college and crossed the United States from East coast to West. This feat had not gone unnoticed, and the moment she popped out the other end of college, the venture through Africa had begun in earnest. Many months of preparation in England, attending corporate lunches and presenting new and interesting ways to write off taxes to her favourite charity, had paid off in this extended sponsored walk. She was to cross the continent North to South, wearing brand-name trainers, drinking brand-name water. The brands paid for the Discovery and a back-up team, of which Tom had been a member since day one, being joined in Yola, on the Nigerian border, by Jex, who replaced the unmissed and still-bitter original third party.

'And the graffiti back there?'

'So I know where to start from,' returned Gail. 'The emulsion will disappear after a few days rain,

if that was what you were concerned about.'

Last thing on my mind right now, thought Ian, though this remained unvoiced. The remainder of the journey passed in relative silence, broken only occasionally by Gail, who probed Ian gently and unsuccessfully on his offered occupation. When they at last reached Kundasa, Tom dropped him outside the mechanic's garage, and they arranged to meet up in the only legal bar in town, which also happened to be in the only actual hotel. Ian waited and waved the Landrover out of sight round a corner, then walked quickly away from the mechanic's.

On the next street he quickly located the tiny surgery. The only clue to its purpose was the small, half-hidden plaque on the wall next to the door. He grabbed the handle and stepped through into the comparative coolness of the reception room.

'Mr. Ashbury.' The girl's eyes lit up on seeing him, and she came quickly around the edge of the counter, rushing up to him and grasping both his outstretched hands, planting kisses on either side of his face.

'It's good to see you too, Elise.' He dropped her hands and asked, 'Henry not here?'

'Not until the morning.' She looked up at him disappointedly. 'You didn't come to see me then?'

He returned her flirtatious smile. 'Of course I

came to see you. You know there's no-one else I dream about.'

'Except the girl who wears your ring.' She grinned broadly and made her way slowly back to the counter. 'So there's nothing I can do for you?'

'Not unless you have a plane.' He watched her jaw drop open, before she caught herself.

'You're leaving?'

He looked for words and failed. How could he possibly explain? Even he wasn't a hundred per cent sure of why he was running, or even from what. And there was no chance whatsoever of explaining it to Elise. She'd think him insane.

They'd met three months earlier, when Ian had come to them for a replenishment of some standard, non-prescription drugs for his team's occasional maladies: headaches and upset stomachs for the most part, and as there was no drugstore in Kundasa, the surgery doubled as a replacement. From the outset, there had been a strong mutual attraction between Ian and Elise, who was the only full-time employee of the clinic.

The clinic itself was run by Henry White, who serviced three other outlying townships, which he flitted between in his four-seater, twin-engine Cessna. He made it into Kundasa usually twice a week, using a makeshift strip of land on the outskirts, from which Elise usually collected him.

For Henry, she was the single most valuable asset at his little surgery. She was a local girl, brought up and educated in Kundasa itself and, although Henry's knowledge of the majority of local languages was reasonably polished, she proved an invaluable interpreter as well as a very able nurse. There was an obvious bonus also, as although Henry had been seeing to the township's ails for almost twenty years now, the local population could not yet bring themselves to trust him fully. Considering the past behaviour of his race, Henry didn't entirely blame them, but this was a ravine being patiently bridged by Elise. The only tiny drawback, it seemed to Henry, was that Elise was so damned attractive. Nowhere else on his travels had he had to treat so many grazed knees, skinned knuckles and phantom stomach-aches among the young male population of the town. She appeared to have eyes for no man, however, and Henry was therefore doubly surprised at the behaviour of his nurse when Ian had first arrived. Her usual grace had deserted her, and her heretofore latent clumsy-gene had suddenly gone into overdrive. Coffees were spilt on a variety of visitors, and previously easily-gripped items became transformed into grease-slicked, sentient, vengeful pieces of flying metal and crockery. Her actions around Ian had reduced her to the status of a fumbling, inept

teenager, and it did not go unnoticed by Ian. He had done what he thought was best by pretending it did not exist, this thing between them, but the more he ignored it, the stronger the bond seemed to become, and over the ensuing months the situation had progressed to two-way traffic, and their flirting had intensified. There was no advance beyond flirting, however, as his memory of Kathy, and the image of her waving him off at Heathrow, was a vision he did not wish to relinquish.

‘What kind of trouble are you in?’ she asked from the safety of her counter.

Ian gazed at her, unable to form a straight thought, let alone an answer. Weariness seemed to overtake him once more, and he wanted nothing on earth more than to sink down into someone’s welcoming arms and just let go. Just let it all go. But something held him back.

‘I don’t know, Elise. I really don’t know.’

He seemed a different man, she thought. He was a broken thing suddenly, and Elise’s every nursing instinct washed quickly into her, and she felt only the urgent need to protect him, to make his demons go away.

‘What about the other guys?’ She knew he’d been part of a team, though she knew little else.

‘The other guys. Jesus.’ He was suddenly anxious. He could be putting her in danger simply

by association. His head-start had been a good one, but there was no measuring the resourcefulness of his new enemies – as he now regarded them. ‘They just might *be* the problem.’

An hour later he was at the front desk of Siddi’s – Kundasa’s only hotel. No-one seemed to know quite how the hotel had got its name, but myths, as myths tend to do in smaller towns, abounded of an Afrikaaner or Englishman who had dragged the town into existence from its mud-hut roots. There was exactly no physical proof of their existence whatsoever, and the myth was perpetuated solely on the tongues of the few drink-sodden whites as were left in Kundasa. The hotel was run by John and Yasmin N’Gobo, who’d been there a mere four years and who were also, they held proudly, the first black owners of the establishment. Ian’s transaction was completed swiftly, partly because every one of the rooms was not only identical, but also identically empty. Having bagged his stop for the night, he went in search of the bar, which proved an easy find. Remarkably, none of the cross-country trekkers were there, and finding himself the sole occupant of the bar, Ian swallowed his bottled beer quickly and went in search of Jan.

Jan De Voers was a true Boer. Descendant of

the original Dutch settlers and a bore by nature as well as name. It was his much-considered opinion that the blacks had been far better off before the demise of apartheid, and that there was a damn good reason Mandela had been locked up in the first place, his release being unfathomable to Jan. Ian had once been amazed that Jan had survived this long with the same attitude, which was rarely, if ever, kept to himself. But now he was long past being surprised by Jan, who was not only tolerated by the local community but actually welcomed by most, if only as an example to their children of what life could hold in store for them should they stray too far from the right path.

But there was one thing Jan was extremely useful for. He was a procurer. Even here, in a place God deemed too hot and dusty to visit that often, Jan could find you next to anything. And Ian found him at Stefan's. Stefan's bar did not officially exist, and its patronage grew only through word-of-mouth. A white-washed door set in a white-washed wall gave at Ian's easy touch, and he descended the few steps down into the cool interior. It was the coldest place in town, where temperatures rarely crept above twenty-eight or nine degrees. There were two working fridges, of which the owner was justly proud and even, set on a table toward the back, that miracle of the twentieth century, a

television. How many of the hidden bar's accoutrements had been gleaned for Stefan by Jan, Ian would have found impossible to name, suffice it to say that here Jan's credit was always good. It was a narrow place and, being practically the basement of the house above, very low-ceilinged. Ian stooped his way along most of it, took two proffered bottles of beer from Stefan – cold bottled beer being the establishment's sole service – and crunched himself into a chair facing Jan, who greeted him without removing his gaze from the television set.

'Long time, Mr. Ashbury. What can I do for you?'

Ian hated him. Hated every detail of him. Twisted, lazy fucking bigot. Hated the sight of his overweight frame straining at the seams of his khaki short-sleeved shirt and matching shorts. Hated his receding mop of pale-ginger hair over jowls that threatened to melt into his chest at every word uttered. Hated the simple fact that this man was tolerated, let alone even liked by some. And hated the fact, above all else, that he had need of his services now.

He placed the sacrifice in front of the ugly Afrikaaner and sat back in his chair to take a pull on his own bottle. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and answered, 'I need one or two things.'

‘Such as?’ Jan’s eyes never left the television. He was watching a particularly exciting re-run of “The A-Team.”

‘Shells. For a Ruger.’

‘Not a problem. How many.’

‘Twenty.’ Ian stared intently at the Afrikaaner, whose face had not twitched so much as a single muscle. ‘Fifty’, he revised.

‘Fine.’

‘And a sidearm. A good one.’

The Afrikaaner’s eyes broke contact with the television for the first time, and they met Ian’s with the same suspicion one would a cobra.

‘Nobody hunts with a handgun, Mr. Ashbury. Nothing *to* hunt.’

Ian’s gaze remained impassive. He was not going to let this single-minded prick anywhere near his reasoning – the price might just treble.

‘Well, you ain’t hunting food.’ Jan applied a little more pressure.

Ian remained silent. Of every argument he could think of to convince Jan to supply him with a handgun, there were none that would not simply arouse the man’s curiosity further. He applied to the man’s baser instincts, which Jan carried comfortably close to the surface.

‘How much?’

‘A thousand.’ Jan’s eyes remained locked on

his own. 'Forty for the shells.'

'A thousand.' Ian struggled to return the man's unwavering stare. 'You *are* joking, I assume?'

'I see a seller's market here, Mr. Ashbury. Correct me if I'm wrong.'

'That's still an awful lot of money.'

'Firstly,' Jan fixed him with a glare, 'I see a man who's in a hurry. I see he's got something to hide, and maybe an enemy or two. I also see a man with plenty of money and no-one else he can turn to. That about sum it up, *Mr. fuckin' Ashbury?*'

The feeling of hatred was all too apparently mutual, and there was nothing Ian could, or wanted, to do about it. The Boer was welcome to his money.

'A thousand and forty. I'll get you the money. When can you get me the items?'

'Items? Don't fart around with lawyer-speak, Ashbury. I'll bring the gun and the ammunition to your hotel room two hours from now. What's the room number?'

Ian told him, and then got up and left immediately, his beer unfinished, no further pleasantries exchanged. He felt sullied somehow simply being in close proximity to this nightmare Afrikaaner.

There was precious little to do in Kundasa, and he fled back to the hotel and straight to his

room on the first floor. There he tried to force time to pass more quickly, but it moved with leaden steps. He broke down and cleaned the rifle, which had been wrapped, though not particularly well-concealed, in his jacket. Small, oily wads of hotel toilet-paper littered the floor around the wastebasket, where he had thrown them with only half-hearted attempts at accuracy. When he was satisfied, he reloaded his single shell and slid the rifle under the bed. He would have welcomed the chance of a nap, but sleep eluded him, and he stood instead at the window, his eyes rarely leaving the road into town from which he'd come that morning. He reckoned he had three days – two at worst guess – before they got here. That was more than enough. Come the morning, if he could not persuade Henry to fly him straight out of here, perhaps he could bribe him, or if the worst came to pass, and Henry proved incorruptible, hijack him. It was a grim thought, and one which Ian did not want to spend too much time trying to analyse. One way or another, he figured, by mid-morning tomorrow Kundasa would be nothing more than a receding memory.

A hammering on the door snapped Ian from his reverie. Time was finally moving at a speed which suited him. He opened the door to the Afrikaner, who thudded his way into the room

without a word. He approached the bed and dropped two boxes onto it.

‘Shells,’ He pointed at the first box. ‘Fifty. Bullets, box of fifty,’ indicating the second. From an inside pocket he pulled out about the smallest handgun Ian could ever recall seeing. It was bigger than a Derringer, though not by much. Dirty Harry wouldn’t have been seen dead with it, he thought.

‘Beretta point two-two. Good for stopping just about anyone close up. It ain’t a sniper rifle, and it ain’t a rhino-stopper, but anywhere around ten or fifteen feet away, your target will stop in its tracks. Best of all, it doesn’t ruin the line of your suit. Just stick it in your pocket and Presto! Invisible.’

He held the gun up to Ian, but before letting the other man have it, he turned it over in the palm of his hand and pointed to the tiny lever on the side. ‘Safety catch. Forward on, backward off. Never, never leave it off while it’s in your pocket. Might sound obvious, but I’ve known smarter men than you lose their bollocks. Not pretty. Used one before?’

‘No.’

‘Point and squeeze very gently. Don’t pull on the trigger ‘cause you’ll go high. Just squeeze, it’s a hair-trigger, and there’s no recoil to speak of. Try it.’

‘Try it?’

‘It’s not loaded.’

Ian studied the tiny weapon. After the comforting weight and authority of the rifle, the pistol felt about as dangerous as a paperweight. Jan showed him how to thumb the safety on and off quickly, and Ian dry-fired it twice, the gun making happy little snap-noises each time. Ian was shown how to load it, and then he dropped it onto the bed among the boxes. Satisfied, he handed the Afrikaaner a roll of notes he’d separated out earlier, and waited patiently while Jan counted through them, occasionally holding a note up to the light. Ian thought the Boer might have a promising future behind a till. The money must have been hot in Jan’s pocket, for Ian noticed the sweat he had broken into. The signs of his alcohol dependency were obvious to even the most untrained eye, and Ian knew that he would be off to Stefan’s for a little celebratory drink or nine. He almost – not quite but almost – felt a little sympathy for the Afrikaaner, but this feeling fled at the thought of the insane profit the man had just made out of Ian’s own plight.

Seven

‘We’ll never make it in that,’ said Paul, as they descended the last steps to the underground garage and his eyes fell on her two-door Mini Mayfair. Two large suitcases took up the entirety of the back seat.

‘I was hoping we could use that monster of yours. You still have the Range Rover?’

‘Yeah. You’d better park in my space while we’re gone. Don’t want the resident’s association up in arms.’

Less than ten minutes later both of Kathy’s cases were loaded into the Range Rover along with Paul’s luggage, her Mini luxuriated in the first covered parking space it had ever known, and they were easing their way through the perpetual London traffic, away from Docklands, heading into the city, seeking the start of the motorway and their journey west.

Along with her suitcases and hold-all, Kathy

had two further pieces of baggage. The first a fabric briefcase, which looked to Paul like it should contain a laptop computer and the second... Well, the contents of the second item he had no need to guess at. He could see the pair of white mice perfectly well through the bars of their cage.

Those parts of the journey through London not occupied by silence were filled with inconsequential chit-chat. Driving in the capital was a test of nerves and concentration at the best of times, and neither of them felt inclined to the slightest distraction until they had put the city firmly at their backs. Kathy had an open copy of the A-Z propped on her knee, although the journey to the head of the M4 was hardly a long one. They averaged somewhere around five to ten miles an hour, with each successive jam fuelling Paul's irritation, while Kathy struggled to navigate what conversation there was away from his frustrated ranting and into calmer waters. Eventually, they broke surface in the slowly swelling rush of the motorway. Paul visibly relaxed, and Kathy put the book back in the glove compartment.

'Still a country boy at heart, aren't you?' Kathy teased him gently.

'Oh, I don't know. I mean, I love the city, don't get me wrong. It's got all the excitement, and all the energy, but sometimes,' he paused, groping for

the words. ‘Sometimes it feels like too much energy, and all of it directionless.’ He glanced quickly at her. ‘Do you know what I mean?’

‘Like something pent up and ready to explode?’

‘Kind of. Life seems to get dragged away from you here. The faster you move, the further away everything seems to get.’

‘You can get that anywhere. It’s simply the days vanishing more quickly the older you get.’

‘No, it’s more than that. I always get a feeling of relief whenever I leave London. Like all the tension just slides away from me. I can actually feel my neck and shoulders unknotting.’

‘So why do you stay?’

‘The work, naturally. I couldn’t get by anywhere else.’

‘Seriously?’

‘Seriously. Unless you happen to be in the top ten or twenty most wanted photographers, you’ve got to keep your name on the surface constantly. In Stickville, I’d be forgotten in an second. Less than a second.’

Kathy found that difficult to believe, but held her silence. Paul, like many in his profession, had himself a good agent – one who’d do the remembering for him, who’d plug him at every opportunity. The real reason Paul still lived in

London was the imaginary kudos – the remnants of his boyhood yearning for the bright lights.

‘Also,’ he went on, ‘London’s gotta be the first port of call for any wannabe model. There’s no better place to start.’

Kathy’s tone changed. She allowed a sarcastic note in as she said, ‘I knew it. There’s the real reason. You’d be so lost without your regular supply of bimbos, wouldn’t you? I wonder how you’d survive without the dress-dropping little dollies? I wonder *if* you’d survive?’

‘It’s not *all* like that. The majority of my shoots are fashion. You know, clothes and the like?’

‘And that brings us to the lovely Ana, does it not?’

‘Hardly, she’s an interior designer, she’s never modelled.’

‘Not for want of trying on your part, I’m sure.’

‘You’re unbelievable.’ Although horribly close to the truth, he had to admit. And that had always been the problem, hadn’t it? The fact that she knew him as well as, perhaps even better than, he himself. Paul was a natural born liar. He believed it to be pathological – a knee-jerk reaction to any prying question, particularly when the questioner was female. But then Kathy had been the one to point this out to him all those years before. ‘Partly right, okay?’ he conceded.

She grinned, mentally tossed a coin and decided to let him off lightly. ‘Was she responsible for the chrome thing?’

‘Yeah.’ It was Paul’s turn to crack a smile. ‘You’d never guess her occupation from a little clue like that, would you?’

No, she agreed silently. Interior decoration was about the last thing Kathy would have pegged her for. Ana was about five foot ten – a couple of inches taller than Kathy – skinny as a whip, and with looks typical of her native Sweden, all blonde locks and blue eyes. She was prime model material, and Kathy would have been extremely surprised had Paul not tried to tempt her in front of a lens. Still, if their tastes differed in the slightest, she did not see how Ana could survive much longer in their relationship. Kathy knew Paul’s dim view of the table – not to mention the dim view he took of anyone who tried to impose their own tastes on his domestic realm – and she’d seen him cast them loose for lesser transgressions. Not that it was her business any longer, she reminded herself. It was still entertaining to wind him up now and again though, if only to watch him squirm.

They were ensconced snugly between two enormous lorries in the slow lane, and Kathy wondered if he had always been this cautious on the roads. It was verging on the dangerously boring.

Road-spray coated the windscreen with dirty water, the tarmac beneath their wheels whispered wetly by, and Kathy felt the urge to doze – to just nod off there and then, if her mind would only slow down to the same speed as her body. It was simply not going to happen, though. Her thoughts raced frantically, and it felt like a million things occurring at once, though there was really only one thing on her mind.

‘Right,’ said Paul. ‘Wales is about three or four hours away. So now would be a very good time to get all forthcoming with the information, capice?’

Kathy was silent for a moment, pondering just how much she really knew before answering, ‘I wish I knew even half as much as you suspect. The truth is I have absolutely no idea what we’re supposed to be running from. I’m beginning to hope that I didn’t know Ian as well as I thought I did, and that this turns out to be a completely unnecessary trip.’

‘Something did occur to me, as a matter of fact.’

‘Such as?’

‘Well, I’m only speculating, you understand, but what if he simply wants to meet up with you and celebrate the end of whatever it is he’s been up to?’

‘Nobody, Paul, with the possible exception of your good self, is that cruel and twisted.’

‘Well, a surprise trip, you know?’ He was floundering.

‘Trés romantic. Scare the crap out of me first? What a novel idea.’

‘I’ll admit it doesn’t sound exactly like Ian’s sense of humour.’

‘That wasn’t a sense of humour. That was exactly what it sounded like. It was a warning.’ Kathy paused, and then seemed to collect herself. ‘Besides, you know as well as I do that he never had a sense of humour.’

‘Not for want of trying, Kath. He didn’t exactly relish always being the last to cross the punchline.’

‘He wasn’t always last.’

Paul was momentarily lost, but then managed to dredge something up from memory. ‘Oh yes. I’d nearly forgotten about our darling Chrissy.’

‘How, exactly?’

‘Not easy, I have to admit. The therapy helps.’ They passed a signpost for Reading. ‘Good job Betjemen never visited this place.’ He threw the remark casually, but she failed to catch it, and continued to stare out of the side window. ‘Slough might have come in for some competition,’ he added under his breath.

‘We’re going to catch the A4 somewhere soon.’

‘Change of plan? No more Wales? Say it ain’t

so.'

'Only a slight change. We're going to stop and see Penny first.'

'Penny?'

'A real Aunt, unlike Edie,' Kathy began to explain. 'My Dad's sister. Proper old spinster type. Mad as a Custard Cream. You'll love her.'

'Should I have brought a camera?'

'She wouldn't look out of place on your wall of fame, it has to be said.'

'This is more than a social visit, is it not?'

'Yes. We've got to have access to a phone. There isn't one in the cottage.'

'It all sounds horribly primitive, if you don't mind my saying.'

'It's really not, don't worry,' Kathy managed a reassuring tone. 'All mod cons bar the communications.'

'Call me slow, but you might want to take this opportunity to tell me all about your non-existent Aunt Edie.'

'Oh, she existed all right. She just wasn't related to me, not by blood at any rate, but a very close friend of the family, and I always called her Auntie. I think she must have enjoyed that. When she died, she left me the cottage. I don't think she had any relations of her own.'

Paul looked disappointed. 'Well, that's taken

all the sinister out of it.'

'If it's adventure you're after, Scooby-Doo, I'm sorry to have to let you down like this.'

'Petrol.'

'Huh? Oh, sure.' Her responses slowed to match the speed of the car as they pulled off the main road.

'You hungry?' he asked, indicating the Happy Chef restaurant that lurked colourfully at the far end of the drab car park. There had been no let up in the rain for the entirety of their journey thus far, and the restaurant managed the enviable trick of appearing inviting against the noise and dirt of the main road. With the petrol tank once more replenished, they parked the Range Rover and then parked themselves in a corner booth as far away from the front door as was humanly possible.

Paul scrutinised her closely throughout the indifferent meal. It had been a number of years since they had shared a table – at least on their own, rather than with their respective partners. He liked to think that he was comfortable with their relationship, and for all their sakes he had put the majority of his memories a long, long way behind him. It didn't stop them crowding to the front of his mind now. Uninvited and less than welcome they clamoured for his attention. So naturally familiar to him - the way she held her cutlery, lifted

the cup to her lips, crumpled the paper napkin at the end of the meal. Even the way she chewed. Tiny, insignificant things that meant so little individually but when taken as a whole seemed to capture the essence of her perfectly.

They had stayed together all the way through their University years and then, a few months after graduating, at the time of Paul's first foreign assignment, they had fallen apart with a speed that had shocked them both. They stayed in touch, naturally enough. In fact, it would have been next to impossible not to have done, what with Ian's constant presence in both their lives. He and Chris had gone their separate ways long before finishing University and, although he appeared to have a partner in tow most of the time, liked to proclaim himself happily single. If it had not been for Paul's constant pressuring, Kathy and Ian would likely never have discovered each other, as though their close proximity to each other had an inversely proportionate affect on the likelihood of their mutual attraction. The new arrangement seemed to suit everyone perfectly. Ian and Kathy found that the attraction they felt grew swiftly into love and respect for one another. Paul still had his two best friends, and seemed content to waltz from bimbo to bimbo, as Kathy would have it. Human relations, naturally enough, were hardly likely to be

pigeonholed so simply. While Paul appeared content to treat Kathy as the kid sister he never had there was always, lurking hidden in the depths of his mind, the question: what if?

He hated his mind for its trickery at times like this. He felt like the worst kind of voyeur, as if his thoughts themselves regarded Kathy, or simply the image of her, as prey to be feasted upon, and picked over at their leisure. Perhaps there was something in the argument that men and women could never be simply friends, and that the sexual element was constantly present, lying just beneath the surface, ready to snare the unsuspecting. Well, perhaps. This was hardly the time nor the place for the question to be thrown up for discussion, however. This was neither the time nor place for anything other than putting some distance between themselves and...

And what exactly?

Eight

Gail and Jex were noisily sucking cool beers straight from the bottle when Ian joined them in Siddi's Bar. He brought his own to the table and sat with them.

'No Tom?'

'He's at the mechanic's,' Jex informed him.

'Trouble with the Landie?'

'None whatsoever. He just loves tinkering about with it. Found himself a kindred spirit up the road too, sounds like.'

'There's a slate here for all of you. All you can eat and all you can drink for as long as you want to stay. And I'd also like to pay for your rooms.'

At the mention of the rooms, Gail interjected, 'That's really very nice of you, Ian, but it's a bit much. Besides, we've already paid for our accommodation. And you have no idea the amount of beer these boys can pack away, particularly free

beer.'

'I would've fried out there, Gail. If it hadn't been for you guys, well, I don't know. You literally saved my life. A few bob on booze and food won't even come close to repaying what I owe you.'

Jex said 'Lucky us. We rescued Rockefeller.'

Ian cracked a smile and began to relax for the first time in days.

'So where'd you get a name like Jex?'

'Short for Jeremy. Better than being called Jez. I hated that at school.'

They slipped into easy conversation and the afternoon slid quietly by, Jex destroying three or four bottles to each that Ian took. He was perhaps still not as wholly prepared to relax as he assumed, and this did not go unnoticed by Gail, who supped as infrequently as he did. Tom finally joined them around six, and when the news of free nourishment had sunk in, he applied himself to the bar with a relish that made Jex seem cautious. Ian made excuses and turned down their invite to join them for dinner. He'd already made that promise to someone else, he explained. Gail followed him out of the door and caught him on the hotel steps.

'I appreciate the free beer, Ian, but your debt isn't even halfway paid.'

He turned back to face her. She was not a tall woman, but three steps advantage gave her an air of

dominance.

‘What’s going on? Really going on? You owe us that much.’

He stayed where he was for a moment, then climbed the steps to her. They deserved something, that was certainly true. But they couldn’t have the whole truth. That much was unthinkable.

‘I want you and your team to leave here by midday tomorrow at the latest. And do not take the road you found me on. Go in the opposite direction.’ He realised he was frightening her, but he’d rather have them all scared and out of the way than ignorant and in it. ‘There are three men on their way here. They’re coming from the same place I did, and I *really* do not want you to meet them.’

‘How soon?’ was all she could think to ask.

‘Three days. I hope. Perhaps as little as two. Get a long way from here, and stay away.’

‘I can’t just forget about my walk.’

‘It’ll keep. The rock will still be there a week or two from now.’

‘A week or two?’ She was crestfallen. ‘Have you any idea what I’ve had to go through just to get permission to walk across this bloody country? Another war could break out any time now. This may be the only chance I’ll get.’

‘Please,’ he pleaded with her, ‘these men are

extremely dangerous.'

'What about you?' she asked. 'How are you getting out of here?'

'I've got another idea.'

He turned his back on her and left without another word. It was certainly possible that he may have been able to convince the rest of her team and ridden out with them in their Landrover, but the ride he had planned in the morning was a great deal faster and had the added advantage when it came to crossing borders of being several thousand feet in the air. The last thing he needed now was to be slowed down by a border guard, however slick or efficient they may have been. He only hoped that Gail would take his advice to heart, and that she could convince the others that the delay was necessary. From what he knew of Jex, he didn't think that that one would have to be arm-twisted too hard into taking an extended break from the trek, but Tom was another matter entirely. He tried to tell himself that it was no longer his problem, that he had warned them and that was all he really could have done. It didn't ease his conscience one iota however, and it was with heavy, guilty steps that he trod his way across the town.

Nine

He met Elise waiting outside the surgery. She'd finished locking up and his delay with Gail had made him a couple of minutes late.

'I thought perhaps you had forgotten me.'

'Never.' She looked stunning, and Ian, who had heard a handful of Henry's tales of malingering amongst the local men, could fully understand their plight. The white, clinical outfit against her dark coffee skin made Ian feel literally hungry. Her hair was cropped close to her scalp, which served only to direct his gaze to her eyes: a wide, welcoming nut-brown. He spun on his toes and guided her arm through his in the manner, he thought with a smile, of Fred and Ginger off to paint the town any number of fantastic hues.

'Where to tonight, my sweet. Nothing but the finest wines in the finest establishments,' he joked, knowing full well there was a choice of exactly one

establishment, and that the last time Siddi's had been described as fine had been with a shrug of acceptance.

'My place,' she surprised him. And when she registered his surprise she went on. 'Better food than Siddi's. Better wine than Siddi's.'

'And far better company,' he interrupted. 'Although I always thought you lived at the clinic.'

'Ha. Mister Funny.'

'Candlelit, I trust? Flowers? All the intimacies?' Even as he made light of it, Elise could easily determine the doubt in him. It was in his voice, and in the tension of his arm.

'You're perfectly safe with me Ian, as is your honour and that of she-who-waits-at-home. I am not a known corruptor of men.' She grinned widely and wickedly at this last and felt him relax under her touch and her words.

He had no expectations about her flat, yet was still pleasantly surprised by what he found. It was light and airy, sparsely furnished but plentifully populated with flora, and immaculately clean. And of all the miracles he least expected to see in the middle of this dust and heat, here was one that all but left him speechless.

The fish-tank was obviously her pride and joy. Five feet wide and three feet deep, it stood on a low, wooden plinth opposite her sofa. Tiny fish glittered

and darted and seemed to reflect the light like a shoal of diamonds. Here and there larger fish moved with majestic languor around a few large, strategically-placed rocks. It was the most beautiful thing Ian had seen for a very long time. Elise was justifiably proud of it, and stood next to him while she pointed out the different types of fish.

‘And hopefully,’ she said. ‘Yes, here you are, Alfie. I named him after the Michael Caine character. He’s a rogue, but he’s always in hiding.’

The blue-and-yellow Angel fish glided out from behind a rock and practically took his breath away. It dominated the tank with the beauty of its presence, and the tiny glitter-fish scattered before it as though ashamed by their own tawdry appearance. Ian felt himself to be in Heaven. An angel before him and another at his side.

‘How?’ was all he could manage to utter out in a breath.

‘Henry brings them in from Kinshasa. I usually get some quite tatty specimens, but with a little TLC they tend to thrive here.’

‘But it must have taken...’

‘Years, yes. Henry got me the tank more than three years ago, after some serious hint-dropping. I was nagging him for a little bowl and a couple of goldfish, but Henry, well, you know...’

Ian did know. Henry had played the rôle of

father to her since she had been nine years old, and had been orphaned – a subject she'd skirted around deftly whenever it had been raised. Ian had long since given up the idea of getting any more information from her on that subject, and since it really was none of his business, had long since given up any notion to pry.

She left him gazing into the rainbow therapy of the tank, and while she made busy, productive noises in the tiny, spotless kitchen, he sank onto the sofa and let reverie overtake him.

When he draped his jacket over the back of a chair, Elise pretended not to notice the dull metallic thud of the gun in his pocket, and although she knew exactly what the sound represented, she was uncertain of the reason behind it.

Over dinner they discussed little. Ian allowing Elise to detail the difficulties of keeping tropical fish and only interrupting to make complimentary grunts about the meal which, as Elise explained, was Kudu steak, plentiful hereabouts, and reminiscent to Ian's palate of venison. It was with a very satisfied sigh that he dropped his cutlery onto his polished plate at the end of the meal. When she had finished, he gripped both plates and made to stand, only to be put firmly back into his place once more. He was her guest, he was informed sharply,

and no guest of hers would ever wash a plate. Every precedent that Mama had ever set would be violated. Suitably chastised, he allowed her to continue her pampering, and tried not to feel too useless in the meantime.

Sat out on her slowly crumbling balcony, amongst more plant-life which Ian correctly surmised to have been placed to hide the peeling, whitewashed walls, they watched the sun concede gracefully to the night. If there was only one remarkable thing about Africa it was this, Ian thought, the incomprehensibly enormous scale of the sky. Since his arrival he had found in Africa a dozen things a day to surprise or delight his previously limited experiences, but this one thing would remain indelibly etched on his memory. The sheer size of the sky.

‘Thank you, Elise, for a perfect evening.’

She returned his smile over the rim of her wineglass, but said nothing. And that single smile seemed to dissipate the remainder of his fears. He felt them drop away from him as a physical weight.

Time flowed past. Words did not. In perfect silence they accepted the nightfall. Ian felt for the first time a twinge of regret that their relationship could not, must not, progress beyond this moment. And then he felt obliged to resent himself for even considering resenting his other life – his Kathy-life.

Recurring thoughts of her while he saw himself on the brink of infidelity eventually goaded him into action, and he rose to leave. She stopped him with a glance.

‘I’ve made up the spare room for you.’

He paused for a moment too long. ‘I have one at the hotel. I’d best...’

‘There is danger there,’ she stopped him quickly, perhaps too quickly. ‘There is none here.’

‘I didn’t know you even had a spare room,’ he said with a grin.

‘It’s quite small, and I once considered making a study out of it, but that idea died a long time ago. I don’t think I’ll ever use it for much other than to throw boxes in,’ she replied wistfully, before adding more practically, ‘I’ve set down my old single mattress on the floor, and a pillow. It isn’t much, but you should be comfortable enough.’ Her eyes gave away her curiosity, but she was not willing to delve into territory that did not concern her. For the majority of her life she had been keeping others at arm’s length, never letting anyone too close to her own past, and she now felt obligated to apply the same rules here. She would not pry, merely protect where she could.

She showed him to his room, and he noted with amusement that she had not misled him in the slightest as to the comfort of his accommodation.

He'd not slept on a mattress on the floor since the half-forgotten and long distant days spent in a shared house when he was still a student. He made a conscious decision there and then to spend the time before sleep claimed him to reminisce as hard as he could. The spartan surroundings should certainly aid recall, he thought.

There was a single sheet and nothing else draped carefully over the mattress. Anything else would have been not only uncomfortable but near-suicidal in this kind of heat. He stripped and slid naked beneath its coolness. Lying stretched on the mattress he set about wiggling his toes in anticipation of the memories he was about to invoke. And as he called up the first, in as much lucid detail as he could muster, so his body, in direct confrontation with his mind, gave the order to drop anchor, and his busy thoughts were dragged quickly along in its wake to sleep.

At first he hardly registered her presence, but as she slid in beside him on the narrow mattress she placed a finger to his lips and he waited, startled, half-afraid and immediately, self-consciously half-aroused, for her next move. Her next move, it was apparent, would startle him even further.

She whispered to him, all the while without moving her finger from his lips. 'Please. Don't say a word. Don't say anything.'

She drew the finger from his lips down to his chin and then his neck. Her lips replaced her fingertips as she pressed them against his mouth. He responded to her touch as though in a dream, his body coming alive to hers, and his mind gently smothering his doubts, as she now smothered his body with her heat. The taste of her in his mouth aroused a passion in him born not only of desire but also fear. And then, as if on a hidden signal, he was in her and she surrounded him, his defences finished, surrendered.

And now she attacked him with a barely-concealed fury of passion. Her hands on his chest, robbing him of breath. His head forced back into the pillow as she rocked above him. He had never borne witness to such intensity, and to be so close to her now was to stand on the brink of the volcano. Her fire was unquenchable, yet he dared not try to douse it.

In a swift, unthought movement he was in control of her now, her body moving, writhing beneath him. She brought up her hips to encircle him further, and he pressed his mouth to her breasts, seeking succour. Her frenzy began to subside as his slower rhythm overcame her own. In a trance she found her peak, and stiffened, suddenly aware of each molecule of her body, before descending the other side. And he followed her

moments later, sinking into her; into a clear, mindless chasm.

They dozed. And woke. Talked softly and dozed again. Around them the night was perfectly still, and they were no more than a troubled eddy in the massive darkness.

The dawn light that washed slowly, whitely into the room revealed them in each others arms, a desperate clinging that neither of them wished to relinquish. But appetite overcame them, and this time their lovemaking was slower-paced; a stroll through and with each other, the race already run and won by them both. Slick with their own spent and escaping energy, they finally broke their embrace.

‘I’d never seen your tan-line before,’ she giggled softly into his ear. ‘I shall name you “Little White-Arse”. It’s a tradition, you know.’

He grinned broadly. ‘And a fine tradition it is too. Now, as for your name...’

‘Not a chance, don’t even think about it.’

‘Hardly the fairest tradition I’ve ever heard of.’ He raised himself to his elbows.

‘My tradition, so my rules.’

He rolled to look at her. To study her and fix firmly in his mind the essence and memory of her.

‘Come with me,’ he said.

‘I knew you’d say that.’ She rolled herself

upright and stepped off the bed, her nakedness arousing him anew. She left the room that way, unclad and silent.

He fell back into the mattress, unsure of what he'd said or done wrong. His thoughts fled to Kathy and his all-too-recent betrayal of her. He was morally stymied, he knew. He loved Kathy – simple fact. Was he also in love, or falling in love with, Elise? Could he love two women? The answer was of course a simple no. In all the world's history his situation had only ever led to the ruin of one or all of the parties concerned. And who was he to buck odds like that? Resigned, he rolled off the mattress and grabbed up his clothes.

She was waiting for him in the front room. A pot of coffee stood on a low, ornate table in the centre of the room, within easy reach of the sofa where she sat, dressed in her nurse's whites. He took the mug she offered him, and perched himself on the edge of the seat.

'I meant it, you know.' He spoke to break the weighty silence. 'You really should come with me.'

She took his hand and spoke without raising her eyes to his. 'I've dreaded you leaving, Ian, even more than I dreaded your reaction last night. But I can't go with you. It's impossible.'

'I don't see why...'

'Of course you don't.' And now her eyes lifted

and flashed at him a look filled with both anger and determination. 'How can I possibly leave what I've struggled so long to build here? This is my place, and I'm among my own people. I don't know where you're going, or what you think you can achieve by running away, but I'll tell you this one thing,' she paused, and then said sadly, 'a running man will always be alone.' Her eyes brimmed, but no tear fell.

'Be that as it may, Elise, you simply can't stay here and pretend nothing has happened. It's too dangerous. At the very least I want you to get away from here for a short while.'

'I've met one of your friends before now, Ian. What makes them so dangerous now?'

'It's impossible to explain now, there's too little time, and besides...' he trailed off, unsure of how to continue.

'Besides what?' She had no intention of letting him off that easily.

'Besides which you wouldn't believe a word of it.'

She considered this, and seemed almost ready to accept the fact that he was going to offer no explanation. But then decided she hadn't finished with him after all. She had the sudden suspicion that he was going to try to force her onto the arriving plane. That *she* would be the one leaving

and not him. ‘Are you going to try to stop them? Is that why you’re carrying a gun?’

He gave her a surprised look. He *was* surprised. But he hid it quickly enough. ‘No. If I had any chance of killing them it’s long since past. And I couldn’t even if I wanted to. I don’t have the heart it takes to be a killer.’

‘Then why the gun?’ She refilled her mug from the pot on the table, sounding for all the world like this was a conversation she had every day.

‘It’s for you.’

‘Me?’ She stopped pouring. This wasn’t even remotely funny.

‘I somehow knew I couldn’t convince you to come with me. Just hold onto it. I shouldn’t think for a second you’ll need it.’

‘It’s not me they’re after, right?’ she half-joked.

‘Right. I don’t expect them to even stop here, but they just might. If they come looking for you, trying to trace me, just stay hidden. If you *do* get found, don’t fuck about with them. That gun’s a last resort, and I hope to God you don’t have to use it, but it may save your life if it should come to that.’

‘You’re beginning to scare me now.’

‘That’s the idea.’ He stood and bent over her, taking her head in both his hands and raising her face to his. ‘I want you so scared that you’ll be safe.’

‘I don’t know how to use a gun.’
‘I’ll show you.’

Ten

The tiny Cessna landed with a couple of minor bounces that made Ian's stomach lurch just to watch it arrive. He wasn't altogether comfortable on anything smaller than a Jumbo, and even then he usually felt the need for a little Dutch courage before stepping onto one. He was flat sober now though, and his mouth was parched in trepidation. Elise stood at his side and watched the plane taxi along the rough strip to a halt about sixty feet from them. The engine revved briefly and then rattled to a halt.

Henry White, at five and a half feet tall and weighing a little above seventeen stone, nevertheless presented a formidable figure. He unleashed a broad, confident smile upon them both and stuck out his hand for Ian. They shook and Ian stepped back while Elise planted a kiss on each of the older man's rubicund cheeks. Ian hadn't been

close enough to catch the other man's powerful breath – he hadn't needed to. Henry White was clearly drunk.

Ian helped Elise unload what few medical supplies Henry had garnered on his travels, while the obese pilot sat slumped and sweating in the shade of the airstrip's single unmanned shack. When they had finished loading her car – a battered and extremely dusty old Renault – the three of them climbed in and headed for Siddi's at the insistence of Henry. He was dry as dust, he claimed.

Over the next two hours, Ian watched in growing horror as the doctor grew steadily more drunk. Henry had listened to what little of the story Ian was willing to impart, and had finally agreed to fly him out – at a price, naturally enough. Ian had agreed to the exorbitant cost almost too eagerly in his hurry to put some distance between Henry and the bar. But try as he might, his new-found pilot was as determined to get even more drunk as was Ian to remain sober for the first time on any flight. His terror sunk claws into him, refusing to be uprooted.

'He flies better this way Ian, believe me.' Elise tried to set his mind at ease, and naturally failed.

'She's right, Ian,' offered Henry. 'You'll get a far smoother ride when I've got a couple inside me.'

A *couple*, thought Ian in exasperation. He'd already seen the third glass of beer disappear beneath the onslaught of the fourth and fifth, and Henry showed no sign of slowing down.

'Besides, you wouldn't get me up in one of those things sober. Bloody death-traps.' He let fly an enormous guffaw of laughter at the sight of Ian's horrified expression.

He left the two of them, his beauty and her drunken beast, and made enquiries at the front desk about Gail and her team. They had left early that morning, he was told.

'Did you see which direction they took?'

He was answered only with a shrug, John's hands raised palm upwards to his shoulders as he shook his head.

'Never mind, it's not important,' Ian lied with ease, and returned to the bar. He hoped to God that Gail had taken his warning seriously – he thought she must have, and then tried to put them out of his mind. He had more important matters to attend, such as ensuring the safety of Elise and of somehow getting Henry airborne.

Eleven

The colonel stopped jogging at the sight of the Landrover. He motioned to Carl and Sylvester, and gestured at the wreck. They approached it together at an easy amble, and were only partially surprised to find the driver's seat empty.

'He was extremely lucky there,' Carl pointed out helpfully.

'It would have been a shame to lose him like that,' added Sylvester, 'and so soon. Do you think he could have made the rest of the journey on foot?'

'Not a chance,' said the colonel. 'Not with the amount of water he'd need, and burning it off so fast.'

'Found the sat-phone,' Carl's voice echoed out from the passenger side, where he'd slipped and slid his way into the gully to pull open the door. 'He totalled it.'

'Of course he did,' the colonel replied softly.

‘He could hardly have carried it, now could he?’

When they’d cleared the first hill outside of the encampment, the colonel had suggested they speed the pace up a little, stretch themselves for a while at least. Sylvester and Carl had readily agreed, and they had all opened out into a comfortable jog. Now, some seven or more hours later, finding the remains of Ian’s Landrover in the gully, the only man showing any sign of exertion was Carl, whose forehead was a little shiny with sweat, but that, mused the colonel, had been his almost constant appearance for the last five months anyhow.

Each of them had started the journey with the absolute minimum requisites – the clothes they stood up in, their passports, and a canister of water apiece. Nearly sixty miles further, and each man still had water to spare; even Carl, whose prior consumption of the life-giving liquid had been a source of amusement to them, in that other life.

‘What do you think?’ Sylvester addressed his question automatically to the colonel.

‘Impossible to tell right now. Ground’s too hard to make out any tracks, but I think it’s safe to assume he walked out on foot. Out here there aren’t many other options so, considering the distance he’d already covered, he must have ditched here in the middle of last night. There’s no way of knowing how long he may have been unconscious for, or even

if he *was* unconscious. So,' he paused briefly, and stooped to gather up a handful of road-dust. 'Let's assume he remained conscious, took a few minutes to smash up the sat-phone, and then lit out. We won't catch up to him today, unless he's suffered some injury. As for his water, I suspect he'd have finished that some time back.' He ground the dust between large, calloused hands and let it trickle through his fingers. A light breeze scattered it around his feet. 'Rain's not far off now.' There was still not a cloud to be seen.

Twelve

It was into this open blue sky that the little Cessna now sped. Henry at the controls, by all appearances sober, though that was far from the truth. Ian sat, knuckles gripped whitely on his knees, in the passenger seat.

His farewells to Elise could not have gone more disastrously wrong. He had practically broken down and begged her to come with him, and she had eventually fled in angry tears, trying not to hate him for going back on his promise. She had wanted no regret, no resentment. In her heart, she only half-believed in any of Ian's foretold dangers, though her head reminded her to take at least a little more notice of her surroundings for the next week or so. She felt prepared and unafraid, perhaps exactly the opposite result of what Ian had been trying to achieve, but that could not be helped. She

simply could not run with him. She had nowhere to run to nor anything she feared to run from.

He regretted his behaviour now, several thousand feet too late, and yet still believed that he could have convinced her had he shaped his argument in a better fashion. Around him the tiny plane shuddered as its wayward pilot put it into a gently banking turn. Inwardly, Ian matched the aircraft shudder for shudder. The fat man at his side was sweating profusely, though this was no sign of fear, rather his natural torrential state. He handled the Cessna like a parent would an unruly child, coaxing and cursing it in equal measure. But his hands at the controls remained as gentle and as delicate as those of a concert pianist. When they had once more levelled out, Ian allowed a little of his fear to slip from him.

‘You handled Elise extremely badly Ian, but then I think you already know that,’ Henry said, dropping the plane into auto-pilot and relaxing back into his seat.

‘Yes, I’m well aware of that, thanks,’ Ian replied. ‘But I leave her in your capable hands now, old man.’

‘Ha.’ He emitted a snort. ‘As long as she remains in the capable hands of Mama, rather than my less-trustworthy own, she’ll be safe as houses.’

‘Are there many of you left, Henry? Flying

doctors, I mean.'

'Ah. A change of tack,' Henry grinned wryly across at him. 'From what scent are you trying to throw me, I wonder?'

Ian enjoyed the older man's language. As far as Henry was concerned, why employ only one word when so many existed to be commanded, conjured up at will.

'No scent, Henry. Simply curious, that's all.'

'None whatsoever, to be honest. Flying doctors are commonly associated with Australia, and with good reason. The whole landscape is different, whereas over here there are surprisingly few places to put even a little four-seater like this on the ground. I'm not so much a flying doctor, rather a doctor who happens to fly. Actually, you'd be more surprised at the number of doctors who'd rather pay to have their flying done for them.'

'Chauffeurs?'

'Of a sort,' he paused. 'Over here you can employ a black pilot for less than half the price of a white one. Same training, same experience, very different cost. So much for the death of apartheid, eh?'

'You're not kidding?'

'I wouldn't kid you. It remains the same all over. From labourers to computer programmers, the black dollar is about half the white, give or take a

little.'

'And doctor's wages?'

'Not quite. The rates of pay are more comparable, but then there are many, many more black doctors in the African hospital system than white. The whites tend to stick to their own high-paying private patients, of whom very few are black, naturally.'

'And you've never been tempted down that road?' Ian asked, knowing full well that he and his team were perhaps the only whites to have crossed Henry's professional path in a great number of years.

'You think Mama would stand for that kind of behaviour? She calls me her pet white, you know that?'

Ian smirked despite himself. 'No, that I didn't know.'

Mary Mgumbe, or Mama to her family and close friends, had been with Henry for more years than either cared to count. She was a large woman, whose frame was only eclipsed by her personality, which was warm, bubbly, and occasionally overwhelmingly raucous. She had turned down Henry's offer of marriage many years ago, and he had never dared bring the subject up again. She liked to joke that she was his "Kundasa wife", inferring that many more were waiting in line in

the wings, though anybody who got to know Henry would soon realise the esteem in which he held her. For him, there could not possibly be anyone else. She had stood firm by him when he had brought the nine-year old Elise home from the General Hospital, and their adoption of the skinny, overwrought child had been largely her idea. Elise had been the first to call her Mama, in half-sleep during one long, restless night in her childhood, and Mary had felt her stomach clutch. The name had stuck thereafter, at Mary's insistence.

She had told Henry at the time of his proposal, 'I ain't a white now, nor do I ever wanna be a White,' and had then dispelled Henry's initial shock and despondency with her enormous grin and welcoming, enveloping arms.

'I admire your principals, Henry, but a man has to eat, and also provide for his family. I can't see you doing that on a Doctor's wage.'

'It's easier than you think,' the big man replied. 'The plane is the only real overhead I've got, and that's taken care of by a mix of governments – an arrangement through various consuls. Besides, money is hardly a driving factor in my life.'

This, thought Ian, was an easy enough thing to say, yet that much harder in practice that Ian believed it near-impossible. Or was it simply that

Henry had dismissed the single most important element in Ian's career as a mere triviality?

'It's not just my flying you're afraid of, is it Ian?'

Henry's question had caught him all but unawares, and Ian needed a moment or two to recuperate.

'No,' he eventually answered.

'Something to do with your studies, out there in the wilderness?'

'Something like that.'

The overweight, profusely sweating pilot took a deep intake of breath, gathering himself, it seemed, for the answer to his next question. 'Is Elise safe, Ian? That's all I really want to know.'

'She's as safe as I could leave her, Henry.'

'That's not much of an answer.'

'It's all the answer I have,' said Ian sharply, and then added a small, guilty, 'sorry.'

Henry considered his next question with care, allowing a lengthy and uncomfortable silence to develop between the two of them. 'What went wrong out there?'

Ian turned in his seat and met Henry's eyes, his own fear heightened by that which he saw there.

'We discovered too much, Henry. We took it too far.'

Thirteen

The house that Penny McCleane liked to call home was a seriously run-down affair in one of the few less-respectable neighbourhoods to which Bath could lay claim. Two storeys of red-brick terrace in need of a paint-job and re-pointing and no doubt countless smaller tasks on the inside. The house reminded Kathy of a child's teddy-bear. It was worn and scuffed and tatty-looking, yet somehow undeniably welcoming. The woman who answered the door was, to Paul's eye, a striking antidote to her surroundings. She belonged in a palace. Her fluid grace made her surroundings seem even harsher, and more unrelentingly drab than they really were. The dirty air shied away from her presence. She dropped the scrawny cat she had been holding to the ground and held out her arms to embrace Kathy. After a short time, Penny let her go and stepped back.

‘And who might this be?’ she enquired, glancing meaningfully at Paul, who grinned toothily and extended his hand.

‘Paul Scaife. I’m an old school-friend of Kathy’s’. He found the old woman’s grip surprisingly strong. Her dry, warm hands pulled him through the front door and into a house that he knew would take him a long time to forget.

‘Are you allergic, Paul?’

The first thing that struck him was the smell. It wasn’t unpleasant, but it *was* animal – lots of them.

‘Allergic?’

‘To cats.’

‘No. No, not at all. I love cats.’

‘Really? How lovely. You’ve certainly come to the right house, in that case. Come in, come in, come in.’

As Penny turned back into the house, Kathy brushed past him. ‘Cat lover? You? Since when?’

‘Since I met the Princess here, naturally.’

‘Creep,’ she hissed, and followed Penny into the depths of the house, leaving him floundering at the door.

He made himself as comfortable as he could in the cramped living-room while Kathy was in the kitchen with Penny, ostensibly brewing tea, and less ostensibly putting a tiny distance between the

two of them, so that Kathy might satisfy her Aunt's curiosity.

He'd been sat on the sofa for less than a minute when he caught Penny staring at him. It was an innocently curious look, and he could feel no enmity in it whatsoever. He raised his hand in a half-wave, which she returned quickly before vanishing again. He got up from the sofa, which felt suddenly less comfortable, and paced about the room, unconsciously shying clear of the kitchen door, staying out of eyeshot. The room, probably the whole house, was crammed with Penny's life. A life in the shape of photographs and trinkets, memories and memorabilia. There were nearly two dozen framed photographs on the upright piano which stood against one wall, and these drew him magnetically.

He picked his way among them, mentally tiptoeing through the memories of strangers. Here a girl of twelve standing chest-high to a striking figure in a RAF uniform. Possibly Penny with her father, he thought, though it was impossible to tell, the years having erased any clue. Here a picture of two women dressed like hippies, standing in a field amongst many similar flower-children. A festival, obviously enough. Perhaps even Woodstock, and he thought he might ask the Princess about it later. And here a more recent photograph. In this one of

the women was obviously Penny, dressed formally, the background a function of some kind, maybe a wedding, or even some kind of award ceremony, it was impossible to tell. Her companion in this shot could have been the same one pictured at the festival, but her shoulder-length blonde waves had been cut drastically short, and her soft features replaced by a particular hardness, especially around the eyes.

He continued through the photographs, the professional in him unconsciously tutting at the poor lighting in one and applauding the accidentally efficient framing of another. The further he pried, however, the more his criticism receded, and he found himself drawn into her life, intrigued by what he saw and what the snapshots led him to assume. There was no wedding photograph, for one thing. Every woman of Penny's age would have had a wedding photograph, and Penny was too handsome a catch to have remained a spinster all her life. Yet, with the evidence now in front of him, Paul suspected that she had never taken the plunge herself. He hadn't looked earlier, but he suspected now that Penny bore no ring of betrothal. A more obvious suspicion seeped slowly into him, and he ran his fingers and his mind over the previously studied pictures. And then he realised he'd found Penny's life-partner. The close-

cropped blonde woman. The second hippie in the festival photograph. Another very handsome woman, he noted, and wondered who she might have been. They certainly made a striking couple.

‘A photographer, eh? How racy.’ Penny cornered the younger woman.

‘He photographs furniture,’ Kathy replied, a little too acidly.

Penny ignored her. ‘Handsome fella,’ she half-mumbled, staring at him through the kitchen door. Apparently she’d made him uncomfortable, and she returned his little wave and turned back into the kitchen.

‘Is he a friend of wotsisnames?’

‘Ian. As you well know. Yes, he’s a friend of Ian’s, and a friend of mine, too. Emphasis on the “friend”.’

‘And where is Ian? Still gallivanting around abroad?’

‘Africa.’

‘Nice for some.’

‘He’s working, Aunt Pen. If anyone’s got a right to a gallivant or two, it’s him. He works very hard.’ She struggled to keep the petulance from her voice.

‘I’m sure he does, dear.’ Smug sounding, before she called out in a sing-song, ‘sugar for you,

Paul?’

‘No, he doesn’t.’ Kathy replied for him.

Penny said nothing. Her archly raised eyebrows spoke volumes as she grabbed two steaming mugs and swept out of the kitchen. Kathy drew an inward, exasperated sigh and followed in her wake.

Paul held out both hands for his mug and clasped it gratefully. He threw Penny a curious look when he noticed the half-naked picture of a girl wrapped around his drink.

‘She gets dressed again when the mug cools down.’ Penny’s eyes glinted mischievously. She carried on with scarcely a pause. ‘You’ll stay for dinner of course, won’t you?’

‘Well, we’ve already...’

‘We’d love to,’ Paul interrupted. ‘If it’s not too much trouble.’

Kathy shot him a look of pure irritation. But the decision had been taken out of her hands, and she resigned herself to it with as much inner grace as she could muster. At the very least, she thought, it would make a change from her usual diet of TV dinners or canned Ravioli.

‘May I use your phone line, Aunt Pen?’

‘Promise me you’re not calling Africa.’

‘No, Auntie. I’ve just got to get my e-mail. It’s only a local call, and it shouldn’t take more than a

minute or two.'

Penny waved her silent with a tiny show of irritation. 'Yes, yes dear. I know what e-mail is. I'm not *completely* behind the times, you know.'

'Sorry.' Kathy looked a little abashed. But then Penny seemed to have that effect on her pretty much no matter what she tried to say or do. 'You don't happen to have a printer I could use as well, do you?'

Penny looked condescendingly at her, eyebrows raised this time in mock disbelief. 'I'll tell you what,' she began, 'you just write down your address and password and I'll sort it out for you after dinner. Agreed?'

'Sure.'

Penny had left for the kitchen before the affirmation had made it to Kathy's lips, taking for granted her agreement in the matter. For the next hour and a half, Penny busied herself out of sight, interrupted occasionally by one of the legion of cats which made less of a nuisance of themselves than their number suggested. Kathy and Paul took turns fussing over the latest arrivals – two snow-white kittens with outsize magnets on their collars. The magnets enabled the cats to come and go as they pleased, but the kittens seemed to find all sorts of new and interesting uses for them, such as trailing clutches of spoons or forks from pillar to post, and

Paul had to rescue his car keys on one occasion, as they were dragged bouncing across the carpet behind one of the puffballed creatures.

Dinner came and went, and early evening settled over them, Penny claspng an enormous glass of port and regaling Paul with assorted tales from her glory days. He couldn't seem to get enough of them, and pressed her constantly for greater details.

Kathy felt too aware of how much time was passing, and when Penny suggested they stay overnight she was surprised to find herself readily agreeing. Resistance is futile, she mimicked in her head.

'About that email?' she asked.

'Already got it, dear. I'm printing it out now.'

'But how?'

'Webmail, sweetie. All you need is a name and password and you can access your mail from anywhere in the world. Very straightforward, really.'

'Since when did you become such a technogeek?'

'I like to keep up. You can have the print-out in the morning. I assume you're on the way to the cottage?'

'You assume correctly. Was that just a wild guess?'

‘Hardly. A cottage with no phone line. That’s the main reason for your visit, I take it?’

‘One of them, admittedly. But then I do get guilty when I think of the number of times I could have stopped to visit, but we always drove straight on to the cottage.’

‘You don’t need to feel guilty on Ian’s behalf. I know he’s the one who’d rather not stop here.’

‘Well...’

‘Well?’

‘Well, you do rather tend to intimidate the man.’ And also me, when it comes right down to it. Kathy left this last unspoken.

‘Intimidate him? Little old me?’ She laughed heartily, abruptly. ‘His wires are extremely easy to pull, that I’ll admit.’

Paul grinned with some private amusement. ‘That much has never changed,’ he said.

‘Aunt Penny doesn’t need your encouragement, either.’

Paul looked at his feet.

‘I don’t really dislike the boy that much, Kathy. It’s just that sometimes he can be so...’

‘So what, Aunt Penny?’

‘Well,’ she searched for the word. ‘So wet, I suppose.’

‘Wet?’

A muffled guffaw from Paul. A spiky, hurt

look from Kathy which effectively stifled him.

‘Oh come on, Kath,’ Paul began to defend himself. ‘Ian can be...’

‘Enough. The pair of you. No more slagging off Kathy’s fiancé. Subject closed.’

Paul clammed up abruptly. Penny grinned widely and mischievously, but dutifully changed subjects.

‘Are you one for the great outdoors, Paul? Or would you consider yourself solely a townie?’

Paul thought he could see where this was leading, and although he understood that Penny knew about the existence of the cottage, he wondered how much Kathy would be comfortable giving away. Then he mentally checked himself. The simple fact that he knew next to nothing about it himself made him a reasonably safe keeper of secrets.

‘I’ve always been a country boy, but the nature of my work keeps me in the city.’

‘Photographing furniture?’

‘Furniture? Ah.’ What on earth had Kathy been telling her? ‘Only occasionally furniture. Mostly fashion, and very rarely some glamour work when I’m desperate for cash.’

‘It must be nice to have your hobby as your living.’

‘The two meet rarely, truth be told. Fashion

and glamour are as far removed from my real interests as the sun from the moon. Architecture and portrait studies are what really drive me, but there's very little living to be made from that. Unless you're called Lichfield, of course.'

'You've brought your equipment with you, I assume? You're going to love the cottage. Quaint rustic architecture amidst all that dramatic scenery. Simply love it.'

'You've been to the cottage? I was under the impression that it was their little secret.' He sloshed his whisky as he gestured lazily toward Kathy.

'Ah, I see.'

Paul didn't, and proved so with an inquisitive raising of eyebrows.

'No secret really. Edie wanted to leave the place to me in her will, but I convinced her to leave it to someone more deserving. I would have found the place depressing without her, and besides, Edie had no family of her own, and loved Kathy easily as much as I do.'

'There really is, sorry, *was* an Aunt Edie?'

'She's told you nothing, has she?' Penny looked accusingly at Kathy, who assumed an air of innocence.

'I was under the impression that Edie was a work of fiction.'

‘Honestly, Kathy. Are you really that ashamed of me?’

‘Of course not,’ Kathy blurted out in reply. ‘It’s simply not his business, is it? I could never be ashamed of you.’

‘But you would have mentioned me on the way here. You would have talked about my husband, or lack of one. You would have gossiped a little if you had not, unconsciously, been afraid of making Paul here uncomfortable with me.’

‘I can’t argue as professionally as you, Aunt Pen. I never have been able to, but I have never, ever been ashamed of you. You take these things too far sometimes.’

‘Yes, I do. You’re quite right.’ Penny gave her a twinkling smile. ‘Edie, Paul, was what I had in lieu of a husband. She was my grace, my light, my life. We were together since college, inseparable. Until three years ago. She just couldn’t give up her ciggies.’

‘My father was the same. Not a pleasant way to go,’ Paul said sadly.

‘I don’t suppose there really is a pleasant way to go. But I have a mind full of wonderful memories of her, not to mention a crate’s worth of photographs, which both comfort me an awful lot more than the thought of that empty cottage. We caused quite a stir in our heyday, I can tell you.’

‘I can easily imagine,’ he said softly. ‘But didn’t you suffer much discrimination?’

‘Funnily enough, we rarely received the kind of abuse usually reserved for single-sex couples. I think it was probably due to the openness with which we conducted ourselves. That, and the fact that we were breaking no law. There weren’t, I suppose, that many people who could get away with leading an openly homosexual life in those days. Look at poor Mister Wilde, for example. A tiny bit before my time though, I’ll admit.’

‘Yet you said you were breaking no law? I was under the impression that Oscar Wilde was slung in Reading gaol for exactly that reason.’

‘Because he was a man. One rule for you lot, one rule for us.’

‘How did that work?’

‘It was all thanks to Queen Victoria.’

A brief pause, before Paul said, ‘still don’t get it.’

‘When homosexuality first came to her attention, she was as appalled as your average hetero, and she agreed to pass a law against homosexuality between males, no matter their age or standing, but when it was brought to her attention that it was not only men who suffered from this “malady”, but women also, she simply did not believe it. She couldn’t see the point, and

therefore passed no law against it, effectively legalising lesbianism.'

'Are you sure she didn't do it on purpose?'

'I'm not even a hundred per cent sure of those facts, but it makes a good story, and that's what counts.'

Evening passed into nightfall, and a slow procession of cats made their way from their hidden daytime corners and out into the dark. Paul watched them as they left in sporadic groups of twos and threes, and some alone. He could see no common element to link them. Siamese, tabby, chinchilla. There a night-black, a snow-white, a mixture of the two.

'You have an awful lot of cats.'

'They cost a bloody fortune in food and vet bills, but Edie and I could never resist the latest offerings from the rescue centres.'

'I can't see that you'd have much time for anything else. They must take all day to take care of.'

'Not at all. A cat is a most self-sufficient creature. Feed and forget them. And when I go away, I have a very helpful little au-pair who looks in on them.' She paused thoughtfully for a moment, and then looked around to recharge their glasses. 'So how come you've been invited to the little hideaway, Paul?'

He looked helplessly at Kathy, unsure of whether to answer. She waited for Penny to refill his glass before taking the initiative.

‘Ian called this morning. He wanted to meet me there.’

‘Well, that explains absolutely nothing, Kathy. Thank you.’

‘It wasn’t your standard Ian message. I think he’s in some kind of trouble, and I thought Paul might be able to help.’

‘And how might our Paul help?’ Penny leaned forward and gave him a friendly pat on the knee.

‘I didn’t really want to face this alone.’

‘That sounds like an enormous amount of trouble. Did he not give you any more details?’

‘Not really. I think he expects us to find the answers we need in his diary.’

‘Which is what I’m printing for you now, I presume?’

‘It is. You presume correctly.’ Kathy went on to describe the basis of Ian’s message.

‘Curiouser and curiouser,’ said Penny. ‘But that’s enough for tonight, I think, it’s past my bedtime. I’ve made up a couple of rooms.’ She addressed this to Paul. ‘Kathy will show you the way.’

She plunked down her empty glass, kissed Kathy on the way past and bade Paul goodnight.

They looked at each other in silence for a long while after that. Eventually Kathy broke it.

‘Shall we?’

‘I suppose we should. How long do you think tomorrow’s journey will be?’

‘Three to four hours, I imagine.’

‘I feel like I’m embarking on a Nancy Drew mystery.’

‘I always preferred the Famous Five, myself.’

Later, alone in Penny’s study on a fold-out camp-bed, he tried desperately to wrestle his mind to sleep, but his mind was having none of it.

The multitude of cats prowled outside.

Kathy’s mind raced every bit as furiously as Paul’s.

Penny was the only one who got all her sleep that night.

Fourteen

The Landrover was kicking up a healthy cloud of dust behind it, as Jex careered along the return path to Gail's marked rock. She had taken Ian seriously enough the previous night, but something inside her, some unknown doubt, had prevented her from discussing their conversation with the others. In the cold light of day, when her judgement appeared to her to be sound and solid, she had come to her own decision. Had she warned the guys they would no doubt now be scurrying for the shelter of a further, larger township, and her walk would have been postponed indefinitely as their discussion went around and around like a Catherine Wheel. She was impatient to continue her journey, and to this end had taken the decision into her own hands. She knew she could rely on Tom, even had she repeated Ian's warning to him. He seemed afraid of nothing. Jex, on the other hand, was an unknown

quantity, and may have abandoned them entirely had he been enlightened to any potential danger. It would have been extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, to find a replacement driver at such short notice and in such a remote backwater as Kundasa. No, it was better this way. If there was any truth whatsoever in Ian's warning, Gail still believed that they were unlikely to encounter the men reportedly chasing him, and if in any case they should, her team was ensconced snugly and safely inside an enormous, moving metal cage. They need not even slow down. The more Gail considered their options, the more her confidence grew. A single cloud appeared in the sky above them, as if willed there.

They arrived at the rock some twenty minutes after the colonel. He had at first been intrigued by the large white X, and the three of them had postulated its existence briefly, before Sylvester had spotted the distant dust-cloud and alerted them. They broke for the bushes lining the gully side of the road and waited, the colonel hardly daring to believe his luck when the Landrover lurched to a halt beside the marked rock.

He watched the team step down from the outsize vehicle, and waited patiently to see what came next. Carl lay next to him in the dirt beneath the bushes, flat on his stomach, staring intently at

the Landrover and its curious occupants. Beside him lay Sylvester, on his back with his hands behind his head, to all intents enjoying a mentally-drawn day at the beach. To the colonel's surprise, the three safari-goers appeared to be setting up breakfast. He watched as the first man, the dark-haired one, arranged his pans and plates around him and then, on an unseen signal, the others strode off into the bush to locate, presumably, firewood. Now would be a good time to act, while they were separated, yet something held him. A fascination crept over him. The lepidopterist captivated by the glowing flight of his soon-to-be-prey. A hand on Carl's arm was enough to signal the man to be patient. He didn't trouble Sylvester, who seemed lost in a reverie of the no longer cloudless sky.

Jex, to the constant amusement of Tom, was proving to be a procurer of some skill, even though this was his first visit to Africa. Jex prided himself on his ability to fit in practically anywhere with ease, and this pride was only swollen on the occasions when he managed to surprise the others with his latest prizes. And today he had excelled himself, having gotten up particularly early and cajoled the hotel manager into providing for them an unparalleled breakfast spread. He deliberately took his time with the cooking of it, anticipating every grunt of appreciation from Tom and waiting

expectantly for Gail to salivate. He actually expected to *hear* her mouth water.

‘Smells good,’ a new voice said, startling him.

Jex whirled around in surprise, but recovered quickly enough as his shocked senses took in this dusty apparition that had appeared from nowhere.

‘Andrew,’ said the dusty man, extending a hand. ‘Andrew Marten. Sorry if I made you jump. Wasn’t expecting to see anyone at all much before Kundasa, to be honest.’ He smiled a wide smile, and noted the tension visibly leaving Jex’s shoulders.

‘No, no. Sorry. It’s just that I was expecting someone else.’ He shrugged out a smile and grasped the stranger’s hand. ‘I’m Jex. Shouldn’t have been that surprised, really. This road’s getting to be a regular Piccadilly Circus.’

‘I take it I’m not your first encounter today, then?’

There was something behind the visitor’s apparently innocent enquiry, but Jex could not have put his finger on it had he tried. The man’s appearance was dishevelled enough to have suggested a lifetime spent on this road, but his gestures, his composure and his welcoming eyes dispelled any lingering suspicion Jex held.

‘The first today, yes.’ He found himself becoming increasingly at ease with the man. ‘But

we picked up another guy night before last. He'd crashed his Landie.'

'He was okay? Not hurt at all?' The visitor asked eagerly. A fraction too eagerly.

'No, he seemed all right. A little shaken maybe, but mostly fine.'

'Ah, thank goodness. That must have been Ian.'

'You know him?'

'We've been very worried about him. He was supposed to get in touch, let us know if he'd got the supplies we sent him out for.'

'He didn't mention you at all,' said Jex, and as the words fell from his lips his own suspicion was rearroused. Why *had* Ian made no mention whatsoever of either his task or his colleagues? Or perhaps he had, of course. Simply not within Jex's earshot. 'We dropped him outside the mechanic's. I'm surprised he didn't call you then, or even from the hotel.'

'Oh, he may have...' The colonel waved away the subject, and stepped closer in to Jex. 'Phone's old and unreliable anyway, on the few days it chooses to work at all.'

'You hungry? We've got plenty to spare.'

'That's very kind of you. Thanks.'

The colonel moved around him, as if to take a seat, moving out of his line of sight. Behind him

then, and one extremely strong hand clamped over his mouth. The colonel's other hand pressing the needle into his neck in one invisibly swift movement. As Jex's eyes rolled up into his skull, the colonel laid him gently on the ground alongside his cookware. Then he went over to the marked rock and sat down on it to wait.

Tom was the first to see him sitting there, and he put a hand on Gail's arm, slowed his own pace. Gail looked up ahead, immediately tense, fear replacing tension when she saw Jex's prone body. Was he possibly asleep? Just as possibly dead.

Tom started forward, but before he could break into a run, Gail grabbed at his arm. 'Wait,' she said.

'What the fuck?'

'There's more of them. Ian said there were three of them.'

'Ian?'

'He warned me about three men. Told me that we should get away from Kundasa. It's Ian they're after.'

'What about Jex?' His anger reflected in his raised voice, and the man on the rock swivelled around to gaze at them, though he made no other move.

'I don't know. I don't want to go up there.'

Tom looked at her closely. She was petrified, rooted to the ground. He hadn't the faintest idea what sort of trouble she'd managed to get them into, but he knew that his only course of action was forward. If Jex needed help, if Jex *could* be helped, then that was what Tom would have to do. 'I don't want you going up there either.' He spoke in a determined growl. 'Wait right here.'

'They're dangerous, Tom.'

'*I'm* dangerous, Gail.' He shook off her grip. 'Stay here.' He moved to meet the stranger, the danger, head on. He half-wanted to reassure Gail, to tell her not to worry, but he left the thought unvoiced. She would worry anyway, regardless of anything he said, and perhaps it was better that way – if the outcome of this encounter went against him, then he'd rather have her worried. Worried enough to run like hell at least, and Tom knew she could really run when she put her mind to it – she'd beaten him in more than one friendly race. Besides, knowing that she was worried simply drove up his anxiety, and therefore his adrenalin, to a point where his own doubts vanished. The adrenalin drove a new, frightening strength into him, and the sight of Jex helpless on the ground served to keep it at a strident pitch. His focus seemed to relax, and swell into this new strength. It was a feeling he was not unused to, this hardly being the first, and

undoubtedly not the last, fight of a life spent fighting for every inch of the man he'd become.

The colonel rose at his approach, turning as if to greet an old friend. A smile played about his lips, his posture was relaxed, welcoming. And he was taken completely by surprise when Tom's punch landed squarely on his chin. The colonel dropped stone-like to his backside, the heels of his boots kicking up tiny puffs of dust as his legs shot out from beneath him. Tom loomed heavily above him, the muscles in his arms and neck bunched and tight, a look of scarcely-concealed fury in his eyes.

'What happened to my friend, shithead?' Tom forced out between clenched teeth. The words an animal snarl.

'He's fine, truthfully.' The colonel rubbed his chin, not looking nearly as afraid as Tom would have liked. 'He'll wake up soon.'

'What did you do to him?'

The question went unanswered. From behind the Landrover Carl and Sylvester made their unspectacular entrance. Their appearance naturally did not go unnoticed by Tom, who took a step back from where the colonel sat and waited, wary.

'No Ian, I take it?' Sylvester addressed the colonel, who had drawn his legs up but remained sitting. Tom noticed that the younger man had not enquired after the colonel's health, which seemed

odd, after the punch he'd taken.

'These good people dropped him in Kundasa.'

'Perhaps they'll extend us the same courtesy,'
Sylvester said, without a trace of a smile.

'After,' said the colonel.

Sylvester raised his head and met Tom's gaze.
'You like a fight then, do you?'

Tom gave nothing in reply. He was not fool enough to underestimate this wiry little man, but he didn't think he'd have nearly as much trouble with this one as with the mountainous black man in the background of his vision. Still, Tom had beaten bigger before today. He stood his ground as Sylvester advanced.

As his opponent stepped into range, Tom raised both bunched fists. This was enough misdirection, and as Sylvester raised his own fists, Tom snapped out a vicious, lightning-fast kick to his groin. Unbelievably, his kick was turned aside by Sylvester's knee, who promptly followed through open-handed to send Tom sprawling. He regained his feet quickly, spinning for Sylvester, and lashed out another kick, this time for the man's temple. Which should have been enough to finish any opponent had he connected, but Sylvester had ducked and reappeared on Tom's blind side, giving him a push in the back which, although gentle, caught him horrendously off-balance, and sent him

staggering once more. Tom's confidence vanished faster than steam. Worse, he felt the nagging pull of fear, which he vaguely recognised as something he'd long ago left far behind.

"He's quicker than a snake." The thought flashed into Tom's mind with similar speed, and he unconsciously switched from attack to defence. If his actions were so swiftly and easily repelled, then his only possible chance lay in reaction. He took a couple of backward steps before settling into an easy, relaxed stance, somewhat mimicking Sylvester's own, who for some reason decided to oblige him and moved in for the attack.

'Got a little something for you,' Sylvester sneer-grinned.

Tom saw the silver flash in the other man's hand, and at first took it to be a knife. As his opponent stepped in, however, he saw the weapon clearly. A hypodermic needle. Was that what had happened to Jex? The thought of that needle anywhere near him appalled Tom. Though needles by themselves held no fear for him, this was only because he was more used to their being wielded by a smiling, reassuring nurse rather than the homicidal little madman who was now coming straight at him, grinning like a lantern. What was in the hypodermic? Could be just about anything. Central Africa led the world when it came to

disease and contagion. The Kinshasa Road, or The AIDS Highway as it was colloquially known, was only a few hundred miles hence. It couldn't be AIDS, thought Tom, if the contents of that or a similar hypo had lain Jex unconscious or dead in an instant. Other options presented themselves in his mind and were crossed out an instant later. Ebola, malaria, yellow-fever, flu. The only certainty he held onto was the fact that he absolutely, positively did not want to find out first hand. Sylvester lunged.

His first clumsy movement, and Tom responded with savage proficiency, grasping Sylvester's wrist at first lightly, and then using their shared momentum to whip his arm downwards and out in a wide arc, bringing Sylvester crashing to his knees with his arm pointing skyward behind him. Tom stepped over the kneeling man's legs, continuing the same smooth movement, and twisting his arm beyond the point of no return. He heard a cracking noise, like a stepped-on twig. Felt it beneath his grip. Watched Sylvester's fingers slacken and drop the hypodermic into the dust. He dropped the arm, its wrist broken and useless. Stepped away from his kneeling, beaten opponent, and faced his remaining audience of two.

'How about you, fatso?' Tom jibed at Carl.
'You wanna go around?'

He was not in the habit of taunting anyone who stood over a head taller and weighed half as much again as he did, but he felt today warranted some special merit as his shittiest day to date, and was now deep in the mood for some dark celebration.

Carl remained silent, standing with his hands in his pockets, at the far side of the campfire, where Jex's hard-won breakfast remained unprepared. The colonel had his back against the painted-kiss rock, his eyes trained with amusement not on Tom, but on Sylvester.

Tom looked sideways, as the wiry man got slowly to his feet. He was clutching his broken wrist fiercely, as if he were afraid it might detach. Sylvester began to massage his wrist, grinding his fingers deep into the flesh of his arm, a slight grimace on his face. He raised the wrist in front of him, turning it back and forth to the accompaniment of tiny crackling noises which made Tom blanch. What he was witnessing should have been impossible. He couldn't begin to imagine the amount of pain that Sylvester appeared to simply shrug off. The broken wrist was able now to move of its own accord, and Sylvester dropped the other hand to his side. He flexed his wrist back and forth, rotated it left and right, flexed his fingers and thumb and then curled and uncurled them into

a fist and back. He glanced at the colonel with raised eyebrows as if to say “How about that?” The colonel responded with a flat smile and a nodding head, suitably impressed. Nowhere near as impressed as Tom, however.

‘What the fuck?’ Wide-eyed, he backed slowly away from Sylvester. Backed as far as the Landrover, which was when he decided he needed an advantage. He dashed around to the far side of the Landrover, yanked open the rear passenger door and scrabbled wildly around for any kind of weapon. He surely had only seconds before... there! He grabbed his prize and wheeled around. Sylvester hadn’t followed him, nor had Carl moved to block his exit. They were exactly where he’d left them, all eyes on him, mocking, amused. He was about to change that. A mix of fear, anger and adrenalin coursed through him, and he came around the front of the Landrover, hefting the tire-iron, its flat weight comforting in his hands, ready to finish the job this time.

‘Let’s see you fix a broken fuckin’ head.’

He swung the iron at Sylvester, who leapt backward out of range. His swing had been wild anyway, a warning shot. His next would be no warning. There was cold, bloody murder in his heart now. An alien, brutal lack of feeling. A numbness. He could see no other way of escape. He

had to get both Jex and Gail out of the way of these monsters, and the only way to do that was to go through them. Which was exactly what he now planned to do.

What happened next he found unfathomable. Sylvester seemed to go limp, the next second tensing, head thrown back, arms out, eyes shut, as though electrified. He seemed to swell before Tom's eyes. His outward size didn't change – he simply seemed to fill up somehow. Sylvester was shuddering with the effect of whatever was happening to him, and at the last moment, when he seemed swollen to bursting point, it all suddenly stopped. He drew in an enormous draught of air. Then snapped his eyes up at Tom, his face otherwise expressionless.

When Sylvester came at him this time, Tom may as well have been fighting smoke. He got in one good swing, at least in his opinion, before the tire-iron was ripped from his grasp. A blur of motion, a sudden pain in his temple, and then blackness devouring him. He couldn't be sure of the final sensation before he succumbed to the dark. It felt like a bee-sting, or perhaps a pinprick.

Gail saw Tom crumple and watched the wiry man who bent over him. She was rooted to the spot, only her fear confirming what her eyes took to be real. The wiry man was treating Tom gently now,

easing him onto his back, and propping his head on something Gail couldn't make out, so he looked as though he were sleeping. Could he be only sleeping? And if so, why? Why hadn't they simply killed him? They seemed only too capable of that, certainly. She stiffened as she felt their eyes upon her.

The three of them held her gaze steadily, peering at her as though she were some sort of curiosity in a shop window. She felt herself begin to tremble. The huge black man started toward her. She turned and ran.

More famed for her walking rather than her running, Gail nevertheless turned in a good speed. She'd not yet met a man who could catch her in a race, though admittedly she tended not to meet that many sprinters in her line of work. She had quite some stamina, though, that had never been in any doubt. But no plan yet, simply headlong flight. She glanced over her shoulder and wasn't surprised to see her pursuer dropping back already. She hoped to gain enough ground in her sprint to allow her to settle into a steady jog, which she could keep up damn near all day.

Her circumstance and surroundings would work against her, though. In the past she'd successfully completed three marathons – twice in London and once, a favourite memory, in New

York. There was a world of difference however, between pacing yourself comfortably in the middle of a pack of a thousand or more runners, in the relative coolness of the Northern Hemisphere, with water and glucose energy drinks on demand and the emergency services keeping an ever-watchful eye on the competitors, and running full-tilt through the African bush with the sun rising higher, soon to be scorching, and an enormous psychopath lumbering along in your wake. She needed a viable plan, and fast.

The boots weren't helping either. As comfortable as they were for hiking twenty miles a day, she would have given almost anything for a simple pair of low trainers. She thudded through the scrubby grass, arms and legs pumping adrenalin, glanced behind again. Hard to say, but she didn't think she'd made any ground at all since she'd last looked back. He was pacing her, yet he looked to be loping along in a gentle trot. She put her head down and willed her body to move faster. She had to give herself the space and time to think. Had to.

Gail angled for the road, a hundred yards to her right. At least the ground there, though hardly perfect, would be less treacherous underfoot. She'd make better time, and she'd have a better chance, though admittedly a damned slim one, of being

spotted, or even rescued, by any passing travellers.

That's your whole plan? She cursed herself for a fool. Fool to have come back here. Fool not to have taken Ian at his word. Double-cursed-blasted-bloody fool for getting Tom and Jex into this mess, perhaps even getting them dead. Hot tears started into the corners of her eyes. She met the road, pounded out into the middle of it, glanced back once more. He was right there.

Not ten yards behind her, closing rapidly. Oh, that wasn't possible, surely. Please don't let it be possible. Her breathing became harsh and laboured suddenly, and she fought to choke down sobs of terror. She could hear him now: could make out his easily-measured pace, the sound of his footfalls surely too relaxed, like those of someone out for a gentle jog. The tears really started to flow then. Her vision became blurred and she missed a step, stumbling forward, momentum carrying her onwards, angling out, arms stretched in front of her, beginning to fall.

One immense arm around her waist, lifting her bodily from the ground, sweeping her literally off her feet and into the air. A second arm now taking her weight at the knees, she was hoisted child-like into the massive embrace of her pursuer. She looked up into the black man's calm, untroubled eyes.

He hadn't even broken into a sweat. Gail wriggled about in his grip like a petulant child, and was rewarded only with soothing, shushing clucks from her unlikely father-figure.

'What are you going to do to me?' Her question was no more than a whisper.

'You'll be fine, you'll see,' he shushed her once more.

'What about Tom?' She desperately wanted to believe him. Needed to believe that everything would turn out fine. How could she trust any of them though, after all that she'd witnessed, all that they'd suffered?

'Both of your friends will be fine also.' Carl felt like adding "trust me," but couldn't really see the point of that. In truth, the only reason that he'd set off after Gail had been lack of choice. The colonel's impatience or Sylvester's quick temper would simply have made a mess of this encounter. Carl knew exactly where his skills lay. He was a champion pacifier, and he firmly believed in debate before action. He would reason with the young lady on the way back, make her see their point of view, make a willing supplicant of her. He couldn't envisage a single problem with that. The power of reason, he firmly believed, was an unstoppable force in its own right.

Of course, reason is usually meted out by the

power with the biggest stick, and when Gail began to kick and scream and tried several times to sink her teeth into him, he decided to postpone their chat. He lifted her into the air, draping her over one shoulder in a fireman's lift, her arms flailing the vast landscape of his back. With his free hand, he dug into a pocket for his hypodermic. He uncapped it with his teeth and, without breaking stride, plunged the needle into the flesh of Gail's buttocks and depressed the plunger. She yowled magnificently, redoubling her attack on him briefly before sinking gently away into darkness. It took Carl less than ten minutes to return to the camp, by which time he was convinced he could hear tiny snores following behind him.

The six of them proved a tight squeeze in the Landrover, but they made very good time into Kundasa, where they headed straight for Siddi's. The colonel kept John N'Gobo busy, allowing Sylvester to slip behind the counter and apply his needle to the hotelier's neck. Carl they left babysitting the Landrover out front. Once Mister N'Gobo was safely and comfortably settled in his own back office, they set about transferring the walking team to the upstairs rooms, where they could recuperate for a few more hours. There was no sign of the hotelier's wife, and the colonel presumed

her to be shopping or out visiting friends somewhere. There was no rush; she would turn up at some point.

Once they had reassembled in the tiny lobby, the colonel took polite charge. The immediate plan, he explained, was to locate Ian without unsettling the locals in the process, and to this end he managed to persuade Carl and Sylvester (who only managed weak resistance to the idea) to wait in the bar while he did the detective work.

His first stop was the surgery, which he found deserted. As an only occasional visitor to Kundasa, he had no idea whether or not to be surprised, immediately decided against it, and made his way to Stef's bar.

He strolled quite nonchalantly through the gloom of the narrow room, raising not a single eyebrow from the handful of customers as he grabbed a proffered bottle of beer from Stef and continued through to the back room. He found Jan sitting exactly where Ian had left him twenty-four hours previously. He took the same chair opposite the slovenly Afrikaaner.

'I'm looking for a friend of mine, Jan. A gentleman I believe you'd know.'

'And I look like Philip fucking Marlowe, do I?'

'His name's Ian.'

‘Like I said,’ the fat Boer switched his eyes back to the television. The price of his slightest attention was the customary beer, and even this little formality had been overlooked by this unwelcome stranger.

‘So,’ the colonel leaned forward, arms on the table in front of him, ‘you’ve not seen him recently? Like in the last day or two?’

Jan tore his eyes away from the television and allowed them free reign to burrow away angrily at the figure opposite. They didn’t like what they saw. The older man with all his intruding questions hardly looked dangerous to him, but there was something about him, a hardness in the man’s eyes, perhaps, that made Jan uneasy. He wanted the man gone, the sooner the better.

‘I’ve got nothing to say to you.’ Jan kept his voice hard, uncompromising. ‘I don’t know your friend. I don’t know where he is,’ he paused momentarily, ‘and I’d appreciate you leavin’ me alone now.’ He dropped his eyes from the flat reflection of the stranger’s.

The colonel’s hand snaked out, and wrapped itself around Jan’s meaty fist. The Boer jumped, shocked, and would have pushed up out of his seat if he could have, but the colonel’s grip was a vice and it was tightening quickly, sending arrows of pain shooting up Jan’s captive arm. He could feel

the pressure of his knuckles grinding against one another.

‘Motherf...aah.’ Jan breathed out between gritted teeth. He balled his free hand into an enormous fist, with the intention of smashing it into the face of his tormentor, but the pressure in his hand intensified suddenly. An unbelievable heat shot through his hand and arm, and he felt a crack which may have been his little finger breaking, but he couldn’t be sure. Didn’t want to be sure. His hand felt like a ball of liquid fire, nothing solid left in it at all. He slumped where he sat and looked at the colonel with pleading in his eyes. The gaze he met was not normal, barely human at all.

There was no anger, nor even pleasure, in the colonel’s eyes. He stared at Jan blankly, waiting patiently for the man to succumb. He didn’t have to wait long.

‘He was here yesterday,’ Jan croaked out, and felt the pressure in his hand ease immediately. He pulled on his arm, but the colonel wasn’t yet ready to free him.

‘What did he want with you, Jan?’ The colonel’s voice was soft, coaxing.

‘Ammunition.’

‘For a rifle?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Anything else?’

‘Pistol.’

‘A pistol.’ It wasn’t a question. The colonel seemed simply to be taking the information on board, turning it over. ‘He say why he needed these items?’

‘Didn’t ask,’ Jan grunted. Feeling was starting to return to his numbed appendage, and with it a hot, throbbing pain.

‘Of course you didn’t,’ the colonel said tenderly. He spoke to Jan now as though to a wayward child. ‘And where will I find him now, Jan?’

‘The hotel, I think. That’s where I delivered the stuff.’

‘That’s much better, Jan. You see how helpful you can be when you put your mind to it?’

The Boer winced. ‘Bastard. You broke my fucking hand.’

‘Don’t worry,’ the colonel said gently, ‘I’ll give you something to take away the pain.’ He met Jan’s rabbit-scared eyes. ‘All of the pain, I promise,’ he uttered, patting the big man’s ravaged hand.

‘He was here yesterday, according to the register. I checked out the room, but it looks like he didn’t bother spending the night here,’ Carl informed the colonel when he arrived in Siddi’s bar. He had been waiting with Sylvester, who had been

struggling through a bottle of lager for nearly an hour, making little headway.

‘The only thing my body is crying out for is water.’

‘So have some water,’ the colonel replied helpfully.

‘I’ve already had well over a litre of water. What I’d really like, right now, is this beer.’

‘What’s the matter with it?’

‘I don’t think there’s anything the matter with it. I think there’s something the matter with me.’

‘I doubt that very much.’

‘Every time I take a sip, I just feel like puking,’ Sylvester moaned. In his opinion it was his inalienable human right to enjoy a beer without feeling instantly sick.

‘Your body trying to tell you something, do you think?’

‘Telling me I’m never going to have any fun again, is that it?’

‘Well,’ the colonel answered thoughtfully, ‘perhaps not the fun you’re used to.’

Siddi’s bar was typically empty, the three of them making up the sole clientele of the place. Their road-dusty appearance fitted perfectly with their drab surroundings. The colonel joined them at the table, stretching out his legs luxuriantly, and uttering a tiny sigh of contentment. Sylvester

regarded him with a tiny trace of disgust.

‘I don’t see how you can be so self-satisfied. I’m sitting here with a broken beer-gland, and all you can do is look smug. Do you have any idea whatsoever how irritating that is?’

‘You’re just going to have to let it go, Sly. I don’t think your body is going to let you hurt it anymore.’

‘It’s not the body I mind so much, Andrew. It’s the non-stop flaming tick-tock in my brain. It won’t shut up. I can’t stop it racing about. It’s bloody irritating, frankly. A beer or two to slow the pace down. Surely that’s not too much to ask?’

‘I don’t know,’ Carl chipped in with his slow drawl. ‘It’s like finally having the time to put your house in order. No more questions all the time. Just a world full of answers.’ He glanced up at the pair of them. Andrew interested, and Sylvester looking startled. Perhaps he had a right to look startled. Carl, although always lucid and pertinent, rarely let slip more than one short sentence at a time. He grinned at them broadly, unleashing the pearly smile that had seen more than one woman fall devastatingly hard. ‘And the answers don’t seem to stop coming. For the first time in my life I feel motiveless.’

‘How do you mean, motiveless? The goals we’ve set are motive enough, surely?’ the colonel

asked. For one whose entire life had been mapped out by goals, achievable and otherwise, Carl's outburst seemed nonsensical.

'Not the same thing, really.' His slow words beginning to speed up a little – a hint of agitation stirred them into life. 'Goals and objectives can be achieved now with so little effort, so little time or manpower, that the motive, the struggle to answer the questions thrown up along the way, is lost. Any real challenge now seems elusive.'

'It's taken all the fun out of it, in other words,' said Sylvester, clutching his bottle of beer tightly on the table, but not raising it to his lips.

'You need your unanswered questions the way Sly needs his beer. Or at least you think you do.' The colonel got up from the table in one sudden movement. He paced quickly to the bar, slipped behind it, bending low and searching for something. When he returned to the table it was with three bottles of spring water. He twisted off the caps and set the bottles on the table. 'Give your body a break, Sly. Try listening to it. Really listening.' He raised one of the bottles to his mouth and took a good long pull, filling his cheeks and throat with the liquid of life. 'You can taste the molecules themselves. You can tell the hydrogen from the oxygen. When water tastes like this, what need do you really have of beer anymore?'

‘It doesn’t stop the ticking.’

‘That you’ll get used to. As for you with all your answers, here’s a question or two for you.’ He glanced meaningfully at Carl. ‘Why us? Why now, at this moment in time? What made us get so lucky? What are we heading for? And by that last I don’t mean the four of us.’ He spread his arms wide, as if to embrace all humanity, ‘I mean *all* of us.’

Carl rolled his eyes and, addressing Sylvester, said, ‘here we are at the dawn of a new humanity, and Mister Marten here tries to fob us off with an epithet or two.’ He narrowed his eyes, his speech quickening along with his heartbeat. ‘The only question left is a moral one, colonel. Do I, or we, have any real right?’

‘Yup,’ Sylvester agreed. He launched the beer bottle over one shoulder. It arced casually through the air, losing not a drop, before it crashed into the mirror behind the bar, shards of glass splintering down to the floor, scattering minuscule reflections of light into the murky air. ‘Actions and reactions. Consequences.’ The memory of a conversation on a fishing-trip with Ian. Possibly the root of his bitterness: his anti to Ian’s pro, and their roles now reversed. ‘More answers simply means less choices. We have no choice now. No choice but to continue what we have already started. Hell, if we all ceased to exist right this minute there’d still be Gail and

Tom and Jex.'

'And Jan,' said the colonel.

'The Boer? The fat one?' asked Sylvester. 'You sure that was wise?'

'It's like we've already discussed. We cannot allow ourselves to discriminate.'

'Sure, I know. It's just... I don't know. He always made me uncomfortable.'

'I think there will be a whole lot more discomfort before this is over.'

'If it's ever gonna be over,' interjected Carl. 'It's a mammoth task we've undertaken, that's for sure.'

The three men were silent for a time, each seemingly lost in their own reverie. When Sylvester finally broke the silence, it was to ask, 'What about Ian? Where do you think he's got himself to?'

'He'll be heading home, to Kathy,' the colonel answered.

'He had to get out of here somehow. Kundasa is not exactly listed on any major bus routes.'

'He may have got hold of some other transport. Though I'm damned if I know where or how.'

'The doctor,' Carl broke in. 'He flies in and out. Fastest exit you could make.' He studied the frowns on the other men's faces. 'It's what I'd do,' he added with a shrug.

‘There’s an airfield here?’ Sylvester asked.

‘Gotta be something.’

‘Hmm. How about we go visit the surgery again. If Ian’s chosen to fly out with the doctor, then there’s a slim chance he’s still in the neighbourhood.’

They studied the colonel, nodded, and stood up from the table as one.

‘Let’s get on with it,’ Sylvester said, leading the way to the door.

Fifteen

Penny watched the tail-lights redden as Paul braked at the end of her street, and gave them a final little wave as they turned onto the main road. A brace of felines, one tabby and one tortoiseshell, eyed her as she made her return trip from the gate. She brushed past the two tiny observers, and they followed her back into the house, snaking in and out of her ankles.

Upstairs, in her study, Ian's diary was still open on her computer screen. Penny unwrapped a new ream of paper and dumped almost half of it into the feed tray of her printer. She set the printout running once more, before returning to the kitchen for her breakfast and the horde's daily meal.

When Penny had dropped the package in her lap that morning, Kathy had been surprised at the weight of it. Ian had never been much of a one for writing everything down, but that seemed to have

changed over the past eight months. His diary must have run to well over a hundred pages, nearer two hundred, she thought. Kathy had stowed the package in the back of Paul's car, alongside the mousecage. Penny had been amused and slightly intrigued by the two little white mice.

'How thoughtful. You brought some cat toys.'

'You can be quite cruel, Aunt Penny, can't you?'

'I think it's terribly sweet of you, dear. Not many people are thoughtful enough to take their mice on holiday.'

Kathy pulled a wry face. 'Hardly a holiday.'

'Whichever. I'm sure you and Paul will have a good time up there. Attractive fellow.'

'Enough, Aunt Penny.' An exasperated look from Kathy. 'You really are incorrigible.'

'And you're very sweet for noticing. Now get in the car and don't keep your young man waiting any longer.'

'He's *not* my young man.'

'Whichever.' Penny waved her away with a hand.

'It's whatever, not whichever. Honestly, if you must speak like a teenager, and an American one at that, you really should try to get the lingo right.'

'Too much Buffy, I'm afraid.'

Kathy had pulled open the car door, and now

stopped short, brought herself back up to lean on the roof. ‘Too much what?’

‘Buffy the Vampire Slayer, dear. I’m quite the addict.’

Kathy shook her head. ‘We’ll look in on you on our way back. Okay?’

‘Whichever,’ said Penny, grinning mischievously.

With a final exasperated wag of her hand, Kathy slumped into the passenger seat and let Paul take her away from her lunatic relative.

Once her animals were sated, and Penny herself had gorged on two meagre slices of toast and the compulsory cup of tea, she wandered back to the study. The printout was still running, probably less than halfway finished. She grabbed the finished sheaf of papers and made her way back to the living-room, where she had an enormous wing-back leather chair placed near the window, where the light was best for reading.

She settled herself into the chair, papers on her lap, cuppa within easy reach. Penny started to read.

Sixteen

The surgery was still closed when they arrived. Sylvester peered through the grubby windows and reported no signs of life inside.

‘What do we do? Come back later?’

‘Locate the nurse. She’s local, and the chances are she’s already been contacted by Ian.’

‘Can you remember her name?’

‘I never knew it. We’ll just have to ask around.’

On the street outside Stef’s bar, two men sat at a table, playing the world’s slowest game of chess in between tugs of beer and tall stories. Carl approached them alone. Despite his imposing enormity, Carl had by far the most approachable manner, and therefore the greatest chance of quick results. He meandered up to the two men, who were lounging back in their seats, their game temporarily forgotten. Both looked to be in their

sixties or thereabouts, but to Carl the white man appeared to wear his years far less comfortably than his companion. The white man's eyes were rheumy and bloodshot, offsetting the redness of his drinker's nose. His black companion, however, still held a twinkle of youth around his eyes and mouth, as if he was constantly on the verge of hearing the best punchline of his life. Carl found himself somehow envying the old black man. He looked up into Carl's smiling face, 'What can we do for you, son?'

'I was looking for the doctor, but he appears to be out.'

'Always seems to be closed, that one. The nurse wasn't there?'

'No. Whole place was locked up.' Carl grinned his effortlessly pleasing smile. 'Don't suppose you can tell me where to find her?'

'Emergency, is it?'

Carl couldn't tell if the old man was suspicious or not. He certainly didn't look it. Just passing the time in the commonly unhurried manner that was the norm in the non-existent hustle and bustle of Kundasa. 'Not yet, no. But I don't want to push my luck, you know?'

The old man scrutinised him gently, any hint of suspicion vanishing from his features like an early mist. 'Well, I heard the doctor coming in this

morning, so Elise probably went to meet him. I'd have thought they'd both be back by now.' Distracted by a sudden thought, the old man bent forward to the table in front of him and shifted his Bishop a couple of places. With a grunt, he leaned back again in his chair, ignoring the suddenly anxious movements of his red-nosed friend, who now bent over the board with renewed interest.

'Mind you, if she's not at the surgery by now, you should be able to find her at home. Second floor of the most ugly building in the next street. Tell her Alby says hello.'

'Sure. And thanks.'

'Don't mention it.'

Carl sauntered slowly away, his pace increasing only slightly when he reached the corner around which Sylvester and the colonel waited.

'Got her?'

'Got her.'

They made their way across the dusty street to the two-storey building where their quarry waited.

She'd seen them coming. From her kitchen window she could see them cross the street to her building. She watched the tops of their heads disappear in through the front door. A mild panic set in. There was no way out of her flat bar the front door, and that would lead her straight in to their

arms. She glanced around wildly, her eyes falling on the pistol Ian had left for her. But that was crazy thinking, surely? Dangerous as Ian had warned her they might be, she could scarcely imagine anything more absurd than three killers stalking Kundasa in broad daylight. And coming for her? Surely not possible. Not outside of a Stephen King shocker, at least. She grabbed the pistol up, checked the safety, and tucked it into the waistband of her jeans, against her spine.

There was no spy-hole in her door, and she could only imagine the three of them on the stairs outside, as she listened to their approaching footsteps. Only one chance, she thought. She'd have to embrace the notion of attack as the best form of defence, try and catch them off-balance at the very least. She slipped her right hand behind her, resting it on the butt of the pistol, her thumb on the lever of the safety-catch. With a sense of timing that surprised even her, she swung the door wide even as the colonel's hand was raised to knock.

He was alone on the landing, a salesman's smile in his eyes and on his lips, his companions presumably guarding the bottom of the stairs. Just one against one then, she thought, and reckoned her odds had improved slightly.

'Elise, I'm a friend of Ian's. I'd like...'

She snapped the gun up in front of his face

before he got any further, and wagged it beckoningly. 'In,' was all she said.

The colonel did as he was bid. 'You're in no danger whatsoever from me, I can assure you,' he said placidly.

'I can see that.' The gun remained unwavering at his face. She slammed the door shut behind him, and would have locked it, had the door ever possessed such a luxury.

'He told me you'd be coming.'

'So I see. But honestly, the pistol is hardly necessary. I just need to see Ian.'

'You're too late.'

'He left already?'

'Uh-huh.'

'With the doctor, I take it?'

'Yes. That make a difference?'

'Not really. I'll catch up with him sooner or later.'

'What the fuck is going on?' Her gaze was pure steel, even though her insides felt like jelly. 'You mind telling me that?'

'To tell you may take a lifetime, Elise.' He took a step closer, his forehead pressed against the muzzle of her gun. 'Better to show you, I think.'

She saw the needle in his hand, and instinctively jumped backward, upsetting the table-lamp at the side of the sofa. She levelled the

gun at his head again, thumbing back the hammer as Ian had shown her. 'Fucker,' she spat.

'No.' The colonel raised his arm, as though to ward off a blow.

She continued to lift the gun, until it arced above the colonel's head and was pointed at the ceiling. The arc continued, and she bent her arm to bring the gun tightly up underneath her own chin. The look in her eyes was one of mild surprise. The colonel's face reflected nothing but horror.

Without a moment's hesitation, Elise squeezed the trigger. The explosive report of the pistol deafened the colonel temporarily. He could hear nothing, but he saw it all. The top of Elise's scalp seemed to lift off in a bloody fountain. Red and grey matter arced out above her in a thick, gritty spray, and her body collapsed slowly in front of him, as though her legs had been kicked out from beneath her.

'No,' the colonel breathed again. His voice came out as little more than a whimper this time. A tiny breath of fear and regret.

The door practically left its hinges, banging back against the wall as Carl flew in, Sylvester hard on his heels.

'What in Christ's name have you done?' Carl was staring shocked at the scene before him. The white upholstery speckled with red-black droplets.

The pool of darkening blood spreading out beneath her head, where it lay canted at an obscene angle against the sofa. Her legs were twisted beneath her flattened body. Bright sunshine flooded the room, illuminating everything, and only serving to make the scene that much more grotesque.

Sylvester grabbed the colonel's shoulders, spinning the man around to face his accusing eyes.

'What happened? What...' he began.

The colonel held up a hand. 'Not what you think, Sly. I didn't pull the trigger.'

'Suicide?' from Carl.

'In a way, yes.' The colonel slumped down then, resting himself on the arm of the nearest chair. For the first time in days he looked weary, even drawn. 'Still my fault, though. I told her to do it.'

'Told her? Just like that?'

'No. No, not just like anything. I just kind of thought it at her. Didn't mean to. It all happened too quickly. Like I wasn't in control of my thoughts. Sent the thought out before I could stop myself.'

'What are you saying, man?' Carl again.

A moment of composure from the colonel before he replied. 'I'm saying that it wasn't my thoughts. I mean, I saw them happening, but I was like an outsider. I got the image, the potential

future, and then it simply happened. It came true.'

'It defended itself, didn't it?'

'Yes.' A shout, rather than an answer. 'Yes. It defended itself.'

'We've gotta go now. Right now.' This time it was Sylvester's urgent voice, and he sounded terrified enough to wake all but the sleepest dead. 'We're stuck in the middle of a fucking murder scene, and all you can do is discuss the fuckin' details. It's time to leave. I mean right fuckin' now. C'mon.'

He grabbed at the colonel's sleeve, like a nagging child just aching to get onto the dodgems before the next passenger change. Carl was away, apart from them, apart from everything. A murder scene was something new and unwanted to his senses, and he had no idea how to react. Sylvester, on the other hand, took immediate action. It was up to him now. Everything was up to him. The colonel offered no resistance to his sleeve-tugging, and Sylvester practically whirled him out of the door. Carl refused to come out of his daze, yet allowed Sylvester to manhandle him out onto the stairs in the colonel's wake.

'C'mon, c'mon,' Sylvester kept muttering under his breath, rounding his charges up and guiding them down the stairs like the persistent sheepdog he was. There was no police force in

Kundasa to speak of, only an occasional visit, too sparse to be called regular, by one or two men from Kinshasa, nearly two hundred miles away. But still, a single loud gunshot in this tiny place had exactly zero chance of going unnoticed, and whatever defence systems as Kundasa possessed would take no time at all to react to it. Time was of the absolute essence here, Sylvester knew, and they had exactly none of it left.

Down the stairs. Fast as possible, and out into the street. Deserted, thank Christ. The three of them half-walked, half-ran back to the relative safety of their bolt-hole at Siddi's.

In his private quarters behind reception, John N'Gobo slept on, undisturbed by dreams. His wife had not yet returned from whatever errands she had been running, and the three men took the opportunity to arrange their necessarily hasty departure. They made their way upstairs to where they had left their charges sleeping peacefully. The colonel slipped into Gail's room.

'Go check on Tom.' Carl said to Sylvester, before entering Jex's room.

Sylvester did as he was bade, only too glad that both Carl and the colonel seemed to have snapped out of their despondent funk. His mind was more at ease now that he wasn't the only one capable of

making a decision. He slid into Tom's room, eyes flicking everywhere at once, warily taking in the entire scene. The last thing he wanted was a rematch with Tom. He had no advantage now.

To his immense relief, Tom was sleeping soundly. Sylvester potted about the room for a short time, before finding himself a seat by the window, and settling himself there for a well-deserved few minutes break. He could hear Carl's low tones through the thin wall, making reassuring noises. It had been around an hour since they had left Tom, and he would probably be coming round soon. Sylvester wished to be gone by then. He got up from his chair and approached the bed.

Tom's pulse was good. Strong and steady beneath Sylvester's fingertips, perhaps a little quicker than was natural in sleep, but then this was hardly the most natural sleep. Sylvester dropped Tom's arm gently to his side and exited the room on cat's feet.

Carl was sitting on the edge of Jex's bed when Sylvester entered the room. The enormous and imposing bulk that was Carl was chatting in a soothing, reassuring manner to a groggy, shivering Jex. The lights in the room were off, the curtains drawn, and the sunlight that managed to filter through lent the room a soft, dream-like ambience. Sylvester was reminded of his childhood for some

unfathomable reason. Perhaps it was the way Carl addressed Jex, in much the same way his own father had sat on the edge of his bed and spoken to him softly, all those lifetimes ago. Or perhaps it was the seemingly perfect stillness of the scene. Sylvester used to view his childhood as little more than a series of static scenes such as these, golden-washed. Even these memories were changing now, enhanced almost hourly with an increasing clarity.

‘How are you feeling now?’ Carl’s voice, like honey poured over chocolate.

‘Like... shit. Can’t. Stop shivering. So cold.’

Sylvester sympathised. He’d hated this part.

‘And hot.’

Yeah. Almost exactly like the flu. It hurt like hell at first, what with the hot and cold sweats, and the feeling that you daren’t move a muscle, for fear of it being the last movement you were ever capable of making. But give it a while, kid. Live through this part. Then you’ll know heaven. Sylvester drew into himself, searching, not finding, losing track of the emotion or feeling he so desperately sought. Or is it hell you’ll know? Perhaps neither. Perhaps, like me, you’ll simply become all too familiar with limbo.

‘It’ll pass, don’t worry.’ Carl’s honey-soft voice again, though this time Sylvester was only half-certain that the reassurance had been addressed to

Jex and not himself.

Jex seemed to notice him for the first time. Unsurprising, as Sylvester had been hovering at the doorway, unsure as to whether he should breach the scene ahead of him or not. He nursed some half-formed fear that should he do so he would find himself transported back to the land of his childhood, that the man on the edge of the bed was nothing more or less than his father in disguise, beckoning him back to the past.

‘He telling the truth?’

It took Sylvester a moment to realise the question was even meant for him, let alone to form a reply. But finally, form one he did.

‘Sure. It passes. I’ve been there.’

‘Figured.’

‘It gets better, believe me.’ He wished he’d sounded at least a tiny bit comforting, but Carl seemed to have cornered that particular market today.

‘I was thinking we could take young Jex here with us. He could bring the Landrover back for his team.’

Carl’s observation snapped Sylvester out of his dream-world, and he stepped into the room. ‘Fine idea. What about the other two?’

‘If we can get one of them compos mentis before we leave, they can take care of each other.’

Leastways till Jex gets back. You think that'll work okay?'

'Yeah. Happy with that.' Sylvester looked not remotely happy with anything. 'The colonel with Gail?'

'Uh-huh. Don't expect she's come round yet. How was Tom, while we're on the subject?'

'Sleeping like the proverbial baby.'

'How long's it been?'

'Around an hour, maybe less.'

'Think it's always that way? Same time for everyone, I mean?'

'Hard to tell, really. It may vary. You think it matters?'

'I'm not sure.'

Sylvester watched with interest as Carl seemed to lose himself in this latest thought. Jex was sitting up now, arms around his midriff, looking ready to puke. Sylvester felt for him, he really did.

'What I mean is,' and here Carl paused, looking at Sylvester as a dying man looks at his nurse for reassurance, 'will they *all* wake up?'

Sylvester looked at his feet. There was no answer to that one. Only a feeling of hope.

'Elise was bad enough, man. That's all I'm saying. I don't want to have to witness that kind of shit again. Like ever again.'

'We've just gotta be more careful. Watch what

we're doing.'

'And watch what we're thinking?'

'Yeah. That too.'

'Can I have some water?' Jex interrupted. He sounded pitiful.

'I'll get it,' said Carl. 'What do you think, Sly? Ready to leave in about ten minutes, thereabouts?'

'Fine. I'll go see how the colonel's getting on.'

Seventeen

The sun had plodded past its zenith by the time Paul had heaved the Landrover into the last short leg of their journey. The only real clue to the sun's whereabouts was the clock on the dashboard, as the clouds above managed to conceal all, occasionally spitting at them, as if reluctant yet to release their gargantuan store of water.

The M4 motorway had given way first to A-roads, and then their tributaries, the B-roads, though to Paul's mind they rated no higher than F's. The last tiny town, consisting of little more than two streets, a small river no better than a stream, and an area of swampland where the annual bog-snorkelling championships were held, was behind them now. The higher into the Black Mountains they ascended, the higher Paul's spirits rose. At the boggy bottom of the valley, Paul's mood could have used a snorkel of its own, but now,

rising above and leaving behind that low valley mentality, he managed to pick himself up dramatically.

This may be just the thing his city-nurtured soul needed. A spell in the harsh and unforgiving territory of the countryside, where the arm was mightier than the lens. The next week or so would rejuvenate him faster and better than any health club or detox centre. The six-pack he only recently mourned would return like an absent friend. His pallor would disappear to be replaced with that healthy outdoor glow you could read about in some of London's "Just-For-Men" health magazines. He mentally pictured himself as a 21st Century Grizzly Adams, and he thought he could feel his stubble grow just that touch more wiry as they neared their destination. The coming days would see him splitting logs and repairing wooden things. The image was still a little unclear, but it would come, he knew. And for some reason as yet unclear to him he would be accompanied on his vividly-imagined walks through hill-top woods, and across crags and other manly terrain by a border collie, appropriately named "Wolf", or somesuch. Getting hold of the collie was obviously the first hurdle. Oh yes, and a roll-neck woolly jumper.

'It's here. Turn here,' and then, 'Jesus Christ,' as Paul stamped too heavily on the brake, shaken

out of his daydreams.

He swung the Landrover into the tiny rutted track, which looked as though this vehicle was its first, unwelcome visitor of the industrial age. The only evidence of the track's existence were the two deep, parallel ruts which were separated by knee-high grass and surrounded by two hedgerows which had obviously longed desperately for each other over the years, so arduously did they try to bridge the gap through which Paul now tried to force the Landrover. He slowed to a crawl, the better to seek out all of the rutted track's more interesting features, and they ambled along the lane gently, and sometimes not so gently, gaining headway as though fighting for it.

It was worth the fight. The hedge-hidden track finally gave up its prize. It opened out onto the yard at the front of Edie's cottage. It was a sprawling, two-storey whitewashed building, with large windows, a huge wooden front door and a chimney which promised an open hearth beneath. There was also a barn off to the right of the main house, huge, dark and potentially forbidding. At just to one side of the front door, to Paul's amusement and inner satisfaction, stood a huge knuckle of wood, patently ancient, torn from the body of some enormous and legendary oak, ready for chopping. The grizzly in him managed to stop

just short of roaring with pleasure.

‘Well, what do you think?’

Kathy’s voice gently diluted the setting before him, but nothing in the world would have removed its magic. He had stepped back an entire century, and it was one of the most ideal, romantic places he had ever seen.

‘S’perfect,’ was the most he could manage.

Kathy looked at him, her brow wrinkled with a mixture of concern and confusion. He must be horrified, she thought. Probably wondering how on earth a peaceful, law-abiding city-dweller ended up in a place like this. She also considered it very gallant of him to try to spare her feelings at a time like this. But wait until he sees inside, her mind comforted her. He’s in for a pleasant surprise.

‘C’mon, perk up. Let me show you around.’

‘Sure.’ Paul drew the Landrover round to the front of the cottage, and they jumped out. He made his way round to the back of the vehicle, and was already opening the tailgate when Kathy called out to him.

‘Leave all that. We’ve got plenty of time for unpacking. Come and have a look round with me.’

Paul didn’t need a further invitation. He left the keys hanging in the back door of the Landrover and joined Kathy at the huge wooden front door. From her pocket, Kathy pulled what seemed to

Paul to be an unnecessarily large bunch of keys. As she fussed and fiddled through them he realised that there were, in fact, only a small percentage of keys to sundry colourful objects on the rings she was wielding. Looking at the state of her keyring and all the various paraphernalia it held, he was only thankful that he would never be called upon to root through her handbag.

The oak yielded, and they stepped inside. Kathy reached around the large door, and snapped the lights on. It was still broad daylight outside the house and the place was well lit by that alone.

Kathy pre-empted him. 'Just checking. The electricity is always paid well in advance. Ian always makes sure of that.'

Paul had moved past her into the middle of the room, his eyes widening as he took in each new feature.

'But it doesn't hurt to check.' She left the lights on, and followed him into the heart of the room.

Paul turned in a slow circle, his mind classifying and pigeonholing each item of furniture into the various catalogues from which he knew they'd arrived. Here a table from Ikea. There a lamp from Ocean. He recognised just about every item he had spent the last eight years photographing for a living. He was surrounded, it seemed, by the

detritus of what Ana would have called Heaven. For Paul, other descriptive terms sprung to mind.

‘A little over-the-top, you think?’

Paul tried to answer her question. Really tried. But the words failed him. A fake sheepskin in front of the open hearth tried to remind him. The white leather suite joined in the chorus. The almost-Tiffany lamps in the alcove muttered their assent, and the Bang and Olufsen upright entertainment centre tried to bully him into speech.

But he found none. His supposed worries about spending a long weekend with nothing but an open hearth for cooking and a tin bath to wash in were exactly that: supposed. In reality, it had been the stuff of dreams. A couple of days of discomfort that would have fuelled near-endless dinner party small-talk. But *this*? This was a nightmare. Everywhere he looked stood yet another testament to the luxury he was expected to endure over the coming days. He could have had all this in London. Why cross practically the entire country for this? Where was the challenge his soul cried out for?

Kathy showed him the remote control for the electrically-operated curtains. He could have wept.

‘You’re going to tell me next the fire runs on self-chopping wood.’

‘What are you on, Paul? I swear. I drag you to

a cottage that's the last word in luxury, and you have the gall to stand there with a face like thunder. What's missing, for God's sake?' Kathy thrashed around for something *she* could have complained about, and there was exactly nothing. 'You're worried about the kitchen, is that it? Let me show you the kitchen.'

He knew it would be immaculate. Somewhere deep inside him, Paul knew it would be perfect. So when Kathy showed him around the spotlessly beautiful kitchen, complete with stainless steel work-surfaces and matching accessories, the look of anti-consumerist horror on his face was taken for awe by Kathy.

Oh come *on!* Where were the hardships?

'Don't you like it?' Kathy was perplexed.

'What's not to like?' Paul answered in a low, non-committal tone. He turned round twice in the centre of the space-age kitchen. 'What's not to like?' he asked again, giving Kathy a wide smile, his arms spread out crucifix-like as he spun around. 'It's gorgeous, Kath. It's nothing like I expected.' He pinned her with a gaze. 'When you told me about the lack of facilities in this place, I was thinking it was probably no more than a shack. But this... This.'

'Yeah, it's none too shabby. But you still have to chop your own wood if you want a real fire.' She

shrugged.

‘Well, that’s something, at least.’

She shot him a quizzical look.

Paul looked at his feet. ‘I was expecting something a little more challenging, you know? Something to tell your grandchildren about.’

‘Or a tale of hardship for your bourgeois friends around the dinner table?’

How long had she been reading his mind? And wasn’t there something he could do about it? Surely that was illegal?

Kathy fought back her giggles. ‘Did you take yourself for some modern-day Robinson Crusoe? Is that it?’

He kept his gaze firmly on his feet. It was all he could do to stop his bottom lip from poking out in a pout.

‘You were thinking you’d be Tom Sawyer, off on the last great American adventure, didn’t you?’

Paul stuck his hands in his pockets, and shuffled his feet. This was a game he did not want to play, no matter how much she baited him.

‘Tarzan, even? I can see the temptation there, mind. Does that make me Jane?’

‘That’s not what I...’

‘Grizzly Adams.’ She jabbed one finger at him and placed a finger from her other hand on the tip of her nose.

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake.’

‘I got you, didn’t I?’

He let Kathy get her little victory dance out of her system, gave her his best withering look, and marched outside to the car. When he returned a few minutes later with a couple of their bags, she had apparently had enough of her celebratory jig and was now busying herself about the kitchen, waiting for the kettle to boil.

‘Bedrooms?’ he asked, in a low, resigned voice.

She showed him upstairs to the guest bedroom. At least this was a little more to his liking. Evidently, she and Ian were counting on only rare visits from anyone, and very little effort had been expended on the second bedroom. Paul presumed, by the amount of junk in there, that they were using it more as a storage room – a place to sling their empty boxes and the like. She swept a couple of boxes from the double bed and tossed them into a corner, where they made their home on top of an ancient, leather couch.

‘This a little more like it, Grizzly?’ she smirked.

‘Yes. Okay. Joke’s over.’

‘Come on, now. How could you not have known? You didn’t really expect Ian not to surround himself with his little creature comforts. He doesn’t do camping.’

He heaved one of the bags onto the bed. 'It's nice, Kath, okay? This one's yours.'

She took the second bag from him and led the way back downstairs, pausing only to hurl her luggage through the open door of the master bedroom.

Unloading the remainder of their luggage took Paul very little time, and as he grabbed the last item, the cage that housed Mickey and Minnie, Kathy joined him in the living-room with a coffee mug in each hand.

'Just stick them on the floor there.' She pointed to the right of the hearth. Plonking the steaming mugs on the table in front of the sofa, Kathy trotted up the stairs to her room, returning less than a minute later with her Aunt's printout in her hand.

Paul looked up at her from the sofa. She was clutching the sheaf of papers to her bosom, a look of trepidation on her face.

'Hey you. Relax. It's only a diary, remember?' He patted the seat next to him, gave her a grin that was supposed to reassure her.

'It's not though, is it?' Her voice lowered as she herself lowered onto the cushions next to him. 'This is the reason for the warning.'

He looked hard at her, unable to fathom what she was thinking or feeling.

‘You want to read it out loud? We could take it in turns.’

‘Yeah. Okay.’ She placed the pile of paper on the table in front of her. Lifted up her mug and took a mouthful of coffee. Then grabbed the top sheet and held it up before her eyes.

Clearing her throat noisily, and trying very hard to keep from trembling, Kathy began to read.

Eighteen

Gail had surfaced from her non-dreams in a fury. The colonel was standing, facing out of the window with his hands clasped behind his back, ostensibly admiring the view outside, when she snapped suddenly upright, gasping and spluttering as if getting over a near-drowning.

‘What the fuck have you done to me?’

The colonel didn’t move. He remained both stationary and silent at the window. It crossed his mind momentarily to answer the girl. To offer either reassurance or explanation. But he let the moment pass. She was strong enough to come out from under hissing and spitting, so she was strong enough to handle this with the minimum of input from him. His attention wandered, once more outside. From here, the view he was treated to would have bored anyone else within minutes, perhaps seconds. For Andrew Marten however, the

minutiae of the scene held an endless fascination.

Opposite the hotel window stood a two-storey apartment block, obviously built in more optimistic times. It was, at best, less than half-occupied, he guessed. And that was another funny thing, wasn't it? He wasn't guessing. Somehow he knew. He knew exactly which apartments were taken and which still laid unclaimed. He only had to glance, just the once, and the clues stood out clear as day. Top row, second from right, and he could see the thick layer of dust laid down on the sill behind the curtainless window. The dust was simply icing on the cake. The fact that there were no curtains told the story well enough.

'I said...'

'I heard what you said. I simply chose to ignore you.'

He could see the history of each brick. At first he felt it must be an illusion, optical or otherwise imagined. Yet even as he imagined himself misled, the secret history gave itself up to him. He could see the hands that had placed each brick, pushing firmly into the mortar. Could feel the sweat running down the backs of these ghostly labourers. Feel the heat of the kiln where each and every brick had been fired.

'What did you put in me?'

'It doesn't have a name.'

‘Huh?’

He turned to face her finally. She was sat up on the bed, her legs straight out in front of her, fists clenching and turning in the sheets at either side of her. Her hair was tangled and hung about her face in loose strands. Her eyes glared angrily out at him.

Behind her, he saw Sylvester pause in the doorway, surveying the scene ahead of him. He’d obviously decided to let well enough alone, entrusting Gail to the colonel’s care. He switched his attention back to the girl.

‘I said...’

‘Yeah, yeah, the drug with no name. I heard you the first time. I simply chose to ignore you.’

For the first time in what seemed an age the colonel discovered he was smiling. This is how it was supposed to happen, he thought. This was much more like it. Elise’s death had disturbed him much more than he would ever have let on to the others. But already he could feel the guilt lifting from him, being dragged up and off his shoulders like a black shawl. He would never let himself get so careless again. That one unforeseen and very unexpected death had done more to undermine his resolve than any of the arguments he’d had with himself over the previous months.

‘It’s nothing that will hurt you, I promise.’

‘And I’m supposed to believe that?’

‘Well, perhaps not immediately, but you’ll find out soon enough, one way or another.’

She pushed a hand up through her hair, quite pointlessly, the strands simply rearranging themselves into another cloud of disarray.

‘Where are Tom and Jex?’

‘In the next rooms.’ The colonel pushed himself away from the window, starting toward the bed. ‘They’re fine. Fast asleep, I should think, but otherwise perfectly all right.’ He reached the end of the bed and, seemingly at a loss as to what to do next, sat down on the end of it.

She looked at him, drinking in every detail she could, studying him as one might a venomous snake. ‘And what do you intend to do with us?’

‘Everything we wanted to do, we have already done.’

As confused as she was, this served only to upset her even more. Frustration bloomed angrily inside her, and she felt the first wetness of tears in her eyes. ‘What did you do? Please tell me. Oh God, what did you...’

‘Hey kid, you okay?’

‘Jex.’ She threw herself up off the bed, arms out, launching at him. Her legs gave out the moment they hit the ground and she fell heavily into Jex and Sylvester, who had lunged through the door when he realised what Gail was up to.

‘You’ve got to give it a little while yet, Gail. The feeling will come back to your legs soon enough. Just take it easy for a bit, okay?’

‘Jex?’

‘I’m fine, Gail. Honestly. Tom too.’

He eased her back down onto the bed, the concern in his eyes badly hidden by the comforting tone of his voice. ‘You’ve got to rest up for a little while, love. When you’re ready, you can go next door and help Tom. He’s still fast asleep.’

‘Yeah. Okay.’ Her voice was resigned and weary, yet still suspicious.

‘I’m going to leave with these guys...’

A sudden start from Gail interrupted him. He could see the worry in her face. Worry didn’t cover it, he thought. She looked scared. Extremely scared.

‘It’s okay. It’s okay.’ He held up his hands, palms out to her. ‘I’m going to bring the Landrover back from the airport, that’s all. I need you to stay and take care of Tom. I’ll try to explain everything when I get back.’

He dropped to his knees in front of her, taking her hands in his own. ‘And when the both of you are up and about, you should find John. I think he’s going to need your help too.’ He looked up at the colonel, still perched on the edge of the bed. He jerked his head toward the door and the colonel, obedient puppy that he was, got up and left the

room, taking Sylvester with him.

When they were alone, Jex said, 'look, I know how you're feeling.'

Doubt in her eyes.

'Disoriented, confused, fed up and generally shitty. It *will* pass. I'll be back as fast as I can manage, but it probably won't be until the morning, no matter how many laws I break.'

She relaxed the tiniest bit.

'I don't think it's any use looking for bad guys where there aren't any. I don't think any of this is that simple.'

He'd run out of things to say. He had neither homily nor epithet to spare that would seem in any way appropriate, so he kept his mouth shut.

'I'll be okay, Jex, I suppose.' She looked at him with anything but certainty in her eyes. 'It's you I'm worried about. You'll be alone with those. Those...' She supposed she had meant to say "men", but somehow the word didn't seem all that suitable.

'I can't tell you not to worry, I know that. Because you'll worry any which way. Besides, I've made up my mind. I can trust these men so far, and we do need the Landrover back. So just wait here and try to be patient. That's the best I can do.'

She saw the apology in his eyes, but it didn't help. The last man who had asked her to wait was

laid up next door, to all intents and purposes unconscious, but just as possibly stone cold dead, for all she knew.

‘All right. Just get back quickly. In one piece. That’s all I’m asking.’

She lay down on the bed again and rolled away from him onto her side. Jex, taking the hint, left the room without another word.

Kinshasa airport was a little over two hundred miles distant, perhaps four or five hours away. Jex sat in the rear of the jolting Landrover with the colonel, who appeared to be sightseeing. Sylvester manned the controls in the driver’s seat while the enormous bulk of Carl, too large for anything but the front passenger seat, passed the time fiddling with the dashboard buttons. He’d exhausted the limited attractions of the cigarette lighter, the air-vent and the de-mister, and was now busy tuning the radio all the way across the dial and back again, switching wavelengths as the whim took him. He was beginning to get on Sylvester’s nerves.

Jex had begun to sweat almost as soon as he had got into the Landrover. He felt his stomach cramping, and then he was shivering uncontrollably. He couldn’t speak. His mouth was the only part of him which remained dry. The colonel stared placidly out at the passing scrub,

offering no comfort, no solace.

They travelled that way for an interminable time, their silence only disturbed by the squawks and wails Carl was wringing from the radio. Eventually, after the umpteenth sweep of the airwaves, Sylvester reached out a hand and placed it gently on top of Carl's own. Carl seemed to snap out of his reverie at the touch.

'Enough already, Carl. Please. It's starting to drive me nuts.'

'Yeah. Sorry.' He contemplated the dials again, and turned the thing off. 'Feel like I'm getting obsessive about everything. Know what I mean?'

'I guess we'll get used to it.'

'Hope so. I mean, it's not like I'm even that interested in the radio. But once I start on something, it's impossible to stop exploring it.'

'Yeah. That's obsessive.'

Sylvester tried to concentrate on the road ahead, but his gaze kept straying to the rear-view mirror, where he could see the ghostly-pale reflection of Jex grimacing back at him. The young man was obviously not having an easy time of it, and the colonel's daydreaming was doing exactly nothing to help him. He began to wish he'd squeezed Carl into the back seat with Jex. Perhaps his obsession could have been turned onto Jex's welfare. Two birds with one stone, he thought.

Now that Carl's fidgeting had abated, he turned his full attention back to the road ahead.

For Carl's part, he spent the time fighting his obsessive urges. He clasped his shovel-sized hands in his lap and stared out of the windscreen. Even the dusty road over which they sped threw up more than enough for him to concentrate on. As the road flicked past beneath them, so his stare hardened, to the point where he had to remind himself to blink. His hands clenched tightly. Small cords stood out along his neck.

Sylvester noted all this and more. For his part, being in the driving seat offered at least a small respite from the turmoil in his mind. But he wasn't looking forward to any future periods of inactivity, such as trying to sit quietly on a plane. He did his best to push these thoughts away from him. He had enough to concentrate on, surely?

The colonel's mind was wandering across its own internal landscape. Long ago he had trained it in the manner of Matteo Ricci, and the vast cityscape he now dreamed his way through was his only lasting treasure. Everything else was a shadow in comparison. He'd spent decades on this structure. Each building in his internal city housed its own specialised subjects. Memory was a gift to be treasured. The mind was, in the end, the greatest part of man, so he believed. Alzheimer's disease, in

is opinion, was the worst curse of mankind. A crueller affliction he could not possibly imagine. It was partly the fear of losing something he treasured so greatly that had been the force that had driven him for the past twenty years. He wondered how he was going to manage the coming years without those fears to face.

‘So what happens next?’

Jex broke into the colonel’s dreaming, and the city dissolved around him as he dragged himself slowly and reluctantly back to the real world.

‘To us or to you?’

‘Both,’ Jex said, shuddering from a sudden chill that only he could feel.

‘You’re going to have another hour or two of flu before it dies down. You’ll feel pretty tremendous afterward, though. Ready for anything. And the rest of us,’ the colonel continued in his smooth, even tones, ‘are going back to England for a brief respite, before we go our separate ways.’

‘I don’t really understand any of this,’ Jex whined softly.

‘I’d love to enlighten you, but to be perfectly honest it’s all new to us as well.’ The colonel found space for a smile and placed a comforting hand on the younger man’s shoulder. ‘Relatively new, at any rate.’

The colonel hardly expected Jex to be satisfied

with this answer but, although it fell short of the whole truth, it was the most he was willing to divulge to anyone until he was certain of all his facts.

Thankfully, Jex pressed him no further, and they spent the remainder of the trip in silence. The colonel returned to his window-gazing. The landscape continued its toil past his eyes. And then, glancing upward, he saw the first contrails in the sky.

‘Look up, guys,’ he addressed the two men in front. ‘Our gateway to the network.’ The beginning of the beginning, he muttered silently to himself.

PART TWO

BREAKTHROUGH

That's all you get for now. If you've made it this far then I'm going to presume you've enjoyed part one. The novel proper is available now, though for a while it may be a little hard to find in bookshops. If you wish to finish the story, I'm going to have to ask you for money. Sucks, I know, but then just getting the book this far has cost me a small fortune and I've got to claw back a little of it somehow.

If you'd care for the paperback edition then drop me a line at info@clivewright.com.

And lastly, thanks.
